



Women in War: Conditions of Women as Combatants or as Victims

Introduction

Even though it is possible to have the impression that war is traditionally a male domain, this view is not correct as women have always been seriously affected by it. Not only that women suffer as civilians, they also participate as combatants. Women are present in armies all over the world, being it in the US official army or in various rebel militia groups (which must not be overlooked because vast majority of armed conflicts nowadays consists of civil wars), amongst whom Kurdish women can be named. It is nonetheless necessary to recognize that most women experience wars and their destructive effects outside direct combat. Those include shortage of food, inaccessibility of healthcare and sexual violence. Some of the problems which women face in the conditions of armed conflicts will be discussed in this paper.

Women as combatants

It might sound surprising, but female soldiers are not news appearing only in several last decades. Women were joining the army or navy officially or often in disguise throughout the history. Nevertheless, their presence in armed forces is more frequent since the World War II. During this conflict, women served as nurses (which was also common in the past), drivers, technicians, in anti-aircraft gun crews and held positions in logistics. However, not all countries make it possible for women to participate in direct-combat roles, for example the USA made women eligible to serve in front line combat just recently, in 2013. Women can join the army in most countries all across the continents, including Nepal, Pakistan, Canada, France, Germany, Russian Eritrea or Libya. They can serve in direct combat for example in New Zealand, Israel, Norway. The percentage of female members of the military is not negligible: e.g. in China it is about 7,5%, 10% in Russia and up to 30% in Eritrea.

Arguments against female presence in close combat are often presented. Some opponents claim for example that men tend to protect women and are therefore less effective in the fighting. Israel Defence Forces prohibited women serving on such positions as a result of experiences when male soldiers, who witnessed a woman wounded, showed uncontrollable, instinctive protective aggression. This negatively affected the unit's performance. On the other hand, presence in such positions can help to strengthen perception of women as equal fellow fighters.

Women in the military face many problems, including petty ones as well as very serious. It can be for example low-quality clothing or necessity to use clothes produced for men, which do not fit to women. Another problem can lie in the fact that army medical practitioners do not have experience with treating women and can lack some medical instruments. Female soldiers in the field can be put in uncomfortable situation also when they are assigned to units consisting only of men, sharing together small closed space. It can leave them with no privacy, where everything is exposed, including bodily functions. Those problems listed still count amongst those less serious, which can be overcome. Persons joining the army naturally have to count with certain discomfort as there are limited possibilities to fulfil the soldiers' needs, such as privacy.

However, the serious problem of sexual harassment and sexual assault, needs to be addressed as it is widespread in the majority of countries' militaries. Women are often regarded as inferior soldiers by their mates and superiors. Even in countries strongly enforcing women's rights, such as the EU member states or the USA, they struggle with discrimination based on sex in the military. While in other areas such discrimination is condemned, it remains prevalent in the military. Sexual harassment is frequently met with tacit acceptance from the superiors. It was even reported by female members of the US army that they were told that "they were there because the soldiers needed some distraction." Regrettably, female soldiers are often sexually assaulted by their fellow fighters and even raped by them. These women therefore need to beware not only of the enemy, but also of members of their own side. Several reported that they had to carry a weapon primarily in order to defend themselves against rape by other soldiers.

Women as civilians

Most women suffer as victims of war, without participation in combat. Cruelty of war affects all people; however it is necessary to mention the impact on women. They struggle with shortage of food, particularly in traditional societies where women have the responsibility to feed their families. Moreover, as male members of the family are often recruited to the army, they must take over also their responsibilities. Women are left to take care of children and household and support the family financially. This can represent a really serious problem as in some cultures women are not educated and do not traditionally participate on the labour market. They lack the necessary education and skills to find a job, moreover, they are often regarded as "ineligible" to do so and employers are unwilling to accept them. Widows, who lost their husbands in war, meet the same problem. These women and their families sink into poverty. Some females are then forced by the circumstances to resort to prostitution as practically the only way to ensure some income to cover the basic needs of their families. It is almost unnecessary to mention the devastating psychological effects.

Women and children are put in danger also because of disrupted infrastructure. They must often walk long distances just to collect water. (It is important to note that this is not only case of African countries, for example the inhabitants of Sarajevo during the civil war faced very similar obstacles.) Medical centres tend to be difficult to access as a result of lack of connection, which prevents women from obtaining the crucial care during childbirth, besides other cases when medical aid is important (diseases etc.) This problem can be further aggravated by the fact that healthcare institutions might be occupied with treatment of soldiers, leaving them with limited capacity to provide civilians with healthcare needed.

However, it seems that the most serious problem women (and, moreover, sometimes also children) face is sexual assault. Unfortunately, rape has always been present in wars and has long been regarded as one of the spoils of war. What particularly needs to be addressed is the use of rape as a weapon, which is considered a crime against humanity under international law. Nevertheless, use of rape as a war tool remains widespread. One of the saddest examples nowadays is the Democratic Republic of Congo, where tens of thousands of victims appear every year. This country is afflicted by protracted civil war and rape, which often occurs here, is shocking not only because of its prevalence, but also due

to its brutality. Victims are often gang raped, raped with objects, mutilated or even left dead.

Research shows that rape is systematically used in war for many reasons. Those include the aim to humiliate the enemy and to retaliate. It is also used as a means of psychological warfare as it creates widespread fear, contributes to disintegration of the society and makes it more controllable. In extreme, it can be also part of genocide, as one of the ways to destroy a targeted group. In some armed conflicts, soldiers also commit rape in order to terminate pregnancies or because they believe that it would give them a "magic power." Even if sexual assault is not used as a part of strategy, it is in some cases widespread because soldiers feel that they are allowed to do so (and this consent can be more or less official) and let loose their sexual needs, which they would not otherwise do in civil life.

Current protection

It is the international humanitarian law which regulates the conduct of armed conflicts. The most important documents are the Hague Conventions and the Geneva Conventions (1949) and their Additional protocols (1977). In Geneva Conventions, important rules applying to protection of civilians are set out. Those include prohibition of torture, murder and holding hostages. The problem is that just one article of the four Geneva Conventions and the second Additional protocol apply to internal armed conflicts. This is very unfortunate, because experts claim that up to 95% of armed conflicts nowadays are civil wars. One of the steps that might be taken would therefore be promoting more detailed codification of rules of internal armed conflicts in treaties. The International Criminal Court is entitled to try the perpetrators of crimes against humanity or war crimes, including systematic rape. In the past, important decisions leading to punishment of criminals were taken by the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda and the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia.

Further reading

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