

Shaming the Enemy? The Use of Gender Based Violence as a Weapon in Darfur Conflict

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Received date: December 26, 2018; Accepted date: January 09, 2019; Published date: January 18, 2019

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Abstract

Since the eruption of the ongoing conflict in the Darfur region of western Sudan, systematic physical and sexual violence against women is being used as a weapon. This heinous act has proven to be a very destructive weapon in the conflict, as it has been very effective in terrorizing people, demoralizing them and breaking their will. Gender-Based Violence (GBV) has devastating effects on the lives of the victims, as they suffer lifelong stigma and discrimination leading to their rejection by their communities. This paper describes the problem and the factors contributing to its escalation and the health, social-cultural and psychological impacts of GBV on the victims. It also discusses possible measurements that can be carried out by different concerned parties to stop all human rights violations especially GBV.

Keywords: Darfur; Sudan; Gender-based violence; Janjaweed; Stigma

Abbreviations GBV: Gender-Based Violence; IDP: Internally Displaced Person; NGO: Non-Governmental Organization UN: United Nations; CBO: Community Based Organization; PTSD: Post Traumatic Stress Disorder

Background

Introduction

Darfur conflict: The conflict in Darfur region of western Sudan started in February 2003, when two rebel groups, the Sudan Liberation Army and the Justice and Equality Movement attacked the Sudanese army outposts and police stations, claiming that the region has long suffered from discrimination along ethnic lines, marginalization of the African tribes from the central government power, and uneven distribution of the national wealth [1].

The government started arming the Arabic nomadic tribes to proxy fight the rebellion which was dominated by African tribes [2]. The unleashing of the well-armed Arab militias, known as the Janjaweed (a devil on a horse), led to a large-scale humanitarian crisis. The militias attacked civilians' villages, mainly of Fur, Masaleet and Zaghawa African tribes, accusing them of supporting and hosting the rebels. The militias have become notorious of brutal killings, burning of villages, kidnapping, and rape. Attacks on the civilian population by these militias, sometimes in conjunction or collaboration with the Sudanese army, have resulted in widespread death, disruption and human rights violations. The crisis has affected an estimated 3.76 million people in Darfur [3]. The total number of deaths between February 2003 and August 2005 is estimated to be 400,000 [3]. Around 1.85 million Darfuris in the region were displaced and 220,000 Darfuri refugees sought shelter in neighboring Chad [3]. It is also believed that a huge unknown number of Darfuri women were subjected to different forms of gender-based violence, one of the most under-reported forms of

human rights violation being conducted in Darfur conflict, as the victims are always either too scared or too ashamed to report or seek help [4].

Gender-Based Violence (GBV) as a weapon of war in Darfur

In Darfur conflict, systematic rape and sexual violence were used and still being used as a weapon. It has been an ongoing part of this conflict and is still widespread. The militiamen believe that the best way to humiliate their enemies is to torture, rape and sexually harass their women [5]. This sexual violence has proven to be a very destructive weapon in the conflict, as it has been very effective in terrorizing people, demoralizing them, breaking their will and driving them away [6]. According to the International Displacement Monitoring Center, sexual violence and abuse of women and children by the Janjaweed and other militias, criminal gangs, and bandits, still, continue in Darfur. They defined gender-based violence against women and girls as "rape, gang rape, attempted rape, serious assaults and beatings" [7].

The majority of sexual violence incidents happen in rural areas where security measures are weak. It has been estimated that 82% of the GBV cases occur while women are outside populated areas searching for firewood, working in their fields, fetching water in river beds or wells, or traveling between villages to go the market or to retrieve their family's belongings in an abandoned village [4].

Although the vast majority of sexual violence cases remain unreported, the NGOs have documented many incidents and testimonies from women who claimed to be raped or sexually assaulted [7]. In one of these reports, women from Hasa Hisa camp for internally displaced persons in Zalingei, West Darfur, reported up to 35 sexual violence incidents per week during the rainy season, when farming activities begin [7]. According to a report by Doctors without Borders (MSF), the organization's doctors treated almost 500 rape victims in numerous locations in South and West Darfur between October 2004 and the first half of February 2005 [4].

The consequences of GBV

Victims of GBV suffer short and long term consequences. The impacts of their experience ruin their lives and negatively affect their wellbeing. These effects vary depending on the type of GBV the woman was subjected to, which can be very brutal. In the same previously mentioned, MSF reports the writers stated that “Almost a third (28%) of the victims reported that they were raped more than one time, either by single or multiple assailants. In more than half of the cases, physical violence was inflicted beyond sexual violence; women are beaten with sticks, whips or axes. Further, some of the raped women were visibly pregnant at the time of the assault, sometimes up to eight months. In one case, the rape provoked a miscarriage” [4].

Such experiences can lead to serious psychological, health, and socio-cultural impacts:

- **Health impact:** Victims of GBV can suffer physical injuries inflicted during the assault by sticks, whips, and axes and can sustain damage to their genitals and reproductive organs as the Pharaonic circumcision-widely practiced in Sudan-makes the penetration extremely brutal [8]. Rape can also result in acquiring HIV and sexually transmitted diseases [8]
- **Socio-cultural impact:** In Sudanese communities, victims of GBV suffer stigma and discrimination leading to their rejection by their communities and households without financial means for survivals [4]. They are seen as worthless and are not allowed to seek treatment and they have no prospect of marriage. If they get pregnant, the pregnancy is considered illegitimate and the children born of rape are not accepted and stigmatized [8]. Though abortion is illegal and culturally unaccepted, some women try clandestine abortion which carries a lot of risks and can be life-threatening and some abandon or refuse to nurse their children. Pregnant women who report to police get arrested and punished for illegal pregnancy [4]
- **Psychological impact:** GBV survivors are prone to various psychological consequences, ranging from sleep difficulties and psychosomatic problems to depression and post-traumatic stress disorders. A survey conducted in 2005 showed that one-third of females IDPs living in camps in South Darfur met the criteria of major depressive disorder and two third expressed symptoms of depression [4]

Discussion

Since the future of Darfuri people looks gloomy as the conflict continues with no hope of reaching a settlement in the near future, the human rights violations against the Darfuri women and the systematic use of physical and sexual violence against them as a tool in this conflict have to stop. Some measurements can be carried out to stop all those human rights violations especially GBV and some remedies can be suggested to alleviate the suffering of its victims:

- **Political action:** The international community should exert more pressure on the Sudanese government to fulfill its promises about disarming the Janjaweed militia and to address human rights violations especially the issue of GBV by detaining and prosecution of perpetrators, providing more security to the IDPs, and not prosecuting and punishing the rape victims. Such kinds of actions seem to work. Recently, after a tremendous pressure from the international community and human rights group, the Sudanese government started to track down the perpetrator and bring them to justice, but many activists claim the governmental efforts are not

enough, bearing in mind the well-known fact that the governmental police fear the Janjaweed militia and avoid confronting its men

- **Humanitarian action:** A lot of work needs to be done by UN agencies, NGOs, CBOs, and local communities to protect and help GBV victims in Darfur:
- **To prevent future violence:** To address the issue of the women being attacked while gathering firewood, some NGOs promoted some effective solutions, which included introducing fuel-efficient stoves, launching firewood patrols (involve both civilian police and troops from the African Union Mission in Sudan) and the development of alternative fuels [9]
- To involve tribal and religious leaders in campaigns to advocate against the GBV and create a code of conduct among the warring parties to stop using GBV as a tool against each other
- **To help the victims:** it is very important to provide treatment and care to GBV victims especially the ones suffering from psychological trauma (e.g. PTSD) and physical injuries with a focus on those who are not willing to seek help on their own. Another important aspect is providing shelters and medical care for the children of rape who might be a burden for their mothers and families. These organizations can also participate in helping GBV victims reintegrate into their communities and live normal lives by assisting them in finding jobs and encouraging them to go to schools

Summary

Gender-based violence has been part of the on-going armed conflict in Darfur since the beginning. It has been systematically conducted and used as a weapon by different warring factions. Physical and sexual violence against women has lifelong devastating effects on its victims and all parties involved in the conflict should adopt prompt actions to stop these human rights violations. These actions can include applying political pressure upon the government and the militia. Humanitarian actions to prevent future incidents and to help the victims can be planned and implemented by the UN agencies, CBOs, and NGOs. Also, the involvement of the local tribal and religious leaders to advocate against GBV is an important step toward eliminating its use as a weapon in the conflict.

Competing Interests

The author declares that he has no competing interests.

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