



# crisis states programme

development research centre



Working Paper no.21

## WOMEN IN WAR AND CRISIS ZONES: ONE KEY TO AFRICA'S WARS OF UNDERDEVELOPMENT

Victoria Brittain  
Development Research Centre  
LSE

December 2002

Copyright © Victoria Brittain, 2002

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system or transmitted in any form or by any means without the prior permission in writing of the publisher nor be issued to the public or circulated in any form other than that in which it is published.

Requests for permission to reproduce any part of this Working Paper should be sent to:  
The Editor, Crisis States Programme, Development Research Centre, DESTIN, LSE, Houghton Street,  
London WC2A 2AE.

---

## Crisis States Programme

### Working papers series no.1

*English version:*  
**ISSN 1740-5807 (print)**  
**ISSN 1740-5815 (on-line)**

*Spanish version:*  
**ISSN 1740-5823 (print)**  
**ISSN 1740-5831 (on-line)**

Development  
**DESTIN**  
Studies Institute



## **Crisis States Programme**

### **Women in War and Crisis Zones: One key to Africa's wars of underdevelopment**

Victoria Brittain  
DESTIN, LSE

#### **Introduction**

The impact of war on women, and women's role in peace-keeping are subjects that have fairly recently come towards the forefront of the international agenda, having traditionally been a non-subject. The UN published two reports in late 2002 linking the two questions. Many people have been working both in the UN and elsewhere – notably Amnesty, Human Rights Watch, The International Committee of the Red Cross, Oxfam, Save the Children, and many peace groups - on various aspects of this huge and complex subject in recent years.

The basic analysis of how seriously women are affected by today's wars, and how little input they have into the many international efforts being made on peace-making, is now widely accepted among the donors and international agencies which work in these areas<sup>1</sup>. But the challenge is to focus on the approaches that could lead to some new ideas about possible positive interventions, or new ways of seeing what's really happening in today's war zones. What follows is based on the work I have been involved with in recent years, partly under the auspices of the UN and also independently.

In October 2000, the UN Security Council passed Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security.<sup>2</sup> It underlined the vital role of women in conflict solution, and mandated a review of both the impact of conflict on women and their role in peace-building. Resolution 1325 has become almost a talisman for those involved, or outsiders interested in questions of women and war, and women and peacemaking. Hopes have been raised – particularly on the ground - of real change, though cynicism about the UN's real commitment to change is also widespread, given the very poor record of promotions of women. As a result of Resolution 1325, the UN commissioned a major report to be carried out under its aegis by the UN Department for the Advancement of Women (DAW) on behalf of the Secretary General. It sets out the record from all the UN organisations involved with aspects of war and peace, and makes many important recommendations<sup>3</sup>. The second report was commissioned by the UN's development fund for women, UNIFEM. It was to be based on the experience of women on the ground in a number of conflict zones, women who felt the daily impact of war, and peace efforts, on their lives. The team assessing this experience was headed by two women with extensive international work behind them, besides having been ministers and presidential candidates in their own countries: Elizabeth Rehn of Finland and Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf of Liberia. It was intended as an independent report that set out to elicit some sense of that trauma and the issues raised by the women themselves. I was part of that team during the research.

---

<sup>1</sup> See 10 page bibliography of Women, Peace and Security, UN October 2002.

<sup>2</sup> The Resolution referred to the commitments made at the UN Women's conference in Beijing in 1995 and the follow-up document in 2000 after the Special Session of the General Assembly: "Women 2000: Gender equality, Development and Peace of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century", which recognised the changing pattern of modern warfare that made civilians the primary casualties of war, and the impact of this on durable peace and reconciliation.

<sup>3</sup> Women, Peace and Security, UN October 2002

## The approach

In 2001 and the early months of 2002, we visited East Timor, Cambodia, the Balkans, Colombia, Palestine and a number of African countries - Rwanda, Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Somalia, Sierra Leone, Liberia and Guinea. All the delegations that went on these missions were quite small, usually just four or five people. We tried to organise it so that most of our interviews were with women. In one sense, the experience was a complete reversal of what had been my approach as a foreign correspondent, a war correspondent, for almost thirty years. For coherent and effective journalism, you need the big picture, and so the kind of people you must spend time with to get it tend to be the generals, the military intelligence chiefs, and the presidents, the people who make things happen. With some of these Unifem missions, especially where there was a significant UN presence, there was the same tendency for the UN leadership in country to try to impose its own filter on the situation; and an alternative diversion was sometimes where the two politicians had their own reasons for wanting to interview the powerful in the region.

But essentially on these missions I was to find out how different it is to operate without a set agenda, without photographers, or tape recorders.<sup>4</sup> So, when we arrived at a meeting, we let the local women set the agenda, and listened as they talked to us about their own experiences, and asked us about what we had seen and heard in other places. The result of that unstructured way of working was that we gained an immense and complex amount of information, much of it painfully intimate. Although as a foreign correspondent in many war situations, I had believed myself to be very aware of looking at what was happening to civilians, to orphaned children, to displaced people and others without power or voices, I now began to understand just how much I had had to filter out of that kind of information - it was too difficult to process, I couldn't use it in my work for a mainstream newspaper. So, even in the places I thought I knew well as a newspaper correspondent, I found that when I returned, without deadlines, without my own agenda, and just listened to people on the ground, I saw a different picture.

## The findings

One of the most striking things about our travels was how similar our findings about women's experience were in many places, despite the huge differences in cultures and in the character of the wars we were looking at. The wars going on in, say, Colombia and Palestine, are, obviously, very specific to those regions and those histories in the way they are prosecuted - they are very much *sui generis* - although with the obvious link of US foreign policy providing hardware and expertise to the more powerful side. Both of these conflicts are quite different in character to the Balkan wars of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, or the wars of Central and West Africa. These, together with other African wars that I've studied over the years such as Sudan and Angola, have much in common. Of course, in terms of the outside world's interest, understanding, and response, there are huge differences between these various Third World wars and, for instance, the Balkan wars, which the West found so easy to identify with.

---

<sup>4</sup> While having no record except notes made either during the interviews or more often immediately afterwards makes the accurate recording of information more challenging, this informal method of discussion proved essential in allowing women freedom to speak about very difficult experiences, and made them feel less a sense of being exploited by outsiders coming to get the victims' stories for the interviewers' own purposes. This resentment about "people coming to get their PhDs on us" was frequently brought up by women.

### The circle of reinforcing negative factors

What is common to all is a circle of linked negative factors all reinforcing each other, creating a downward spiral and increasing the particular vulnerability in women's lives. Only a break in this spiral will eventually offer a chance of change. At whatever point a person enters the spiral, it is always moving on and down. I identify five elements in this spiral, constantly reacting on each other and forcing it further and further down. They are: displacement, psycho-social health and HIV, economic impoverishment, the destruction of education, and sexual violence. For many reasons, of which the most important is women's low status in every society we studied, though physiological factors are also important, the impact on women caught up in this spiral is more acute than it is for men.

Take **displacement** first: of course, the specifics are different if you're looking at Palestine, where people have been displaced for fifty years, or Angola, where it has been twenty-five years, compared to Colombia or the DRC. In the latter, on the whole, people have been displaced for much shorter periods but have suffered such displacement very frequently. So the same family may have been uprooted five or six times in as many years.

There are 34 million refugees and Internally Displaced People (IDPs) in the world. Of these, 80 per cent are women and the children that they are responsible for.<sup>5</sup> So immediately it is obvious that the impact of displacement, as a factor of war's impact, is vastly different than it is for men who tend to be more actively involved in the military groups pursuing conflict and less involved with their dependents.

The links between displacement and **psycho-social health**, and between displacement and **HIV/Aids** are stark. Yet, curiously, little research has been done on this, despite the volume of research that is carried out on Aids around the world and the obvious links between HIV/Aids and war<sup>6</sup>. But such research would have to be done in Africa, and the interest in African wars is small compared to the interest aroused by wars elsewhere. Yet it is clear, even from the briefest discussions with people on the ground, that the link between war and violence and HIV/Aids and the dislocation of a woman's family set-up is evident. Warfare sets in motion a catastrophic chain reaction that brings in all these devastating consequences. Moreover, women are more physiologically prone to HIV/Aids than men, especially when sex is violent or non-consensual. So the massive increase in the numbers of women who are suffering from Aids and/or are also war victims in one way or another is a major area of concern, which needs far more attention than it is getting.

The third factor in this relentless downward spiral is **economic impoverishment**, with a clear link to displacement as well as to the health factors already mentioned. Emblematic of the utter economic breakdown that follows today's wars and continues in post-war societies, is the selling of a family's children. In Afghanistan, for example, as is well known, the phenomenon exists that when there is absolutely nothing else in your family, except for your five children, you sell one. As we discovered on the ground, the same thing has happened in the DRC and in Cambodia. It is particularly dramatic in the eastern DRC where the economic situation of women who have been displaced there is so utterly devastated, and their experience so generalised. When you listen to a woman explaining how she chose between selling her six-year-old and her five-year-old, it is impossible to calculate the kind of psychological horrors that have happened to that person or what kind of psycho-social help

---

<sup>5</sup> UNHCR 2001, in, Women Peace and Security, UN 2002

<sup>6</sup> Alex De Waal, *Fucking Soldiers*, Index on censorship, Volume 31 4/2002

might be appropriate. This horror is what comes on top of everything else that's happened - the loss of her family, of her husband, of her home, of any means of livelihood, and so on. She then has to make this kind of choice. The economic consequences of war are particularly serious for women from rural areas, especially in Africa, because there women tend to be the breadwinners. They do most of the agricultural work. So, by the very nature of such civil wars as the area has seen in recent years, families, women and children in particular, are severed from what had been their land and their only source of livelihood. They are made utterly bereft, on an unimaginable scale. The situation is bad enough for urban refugees, but in the rural areas such fundamental disruption means that women and their dependants have come absolutely to the end of the road.

One of the things people in Colombia frequently told us about rural refugees and about some of the women who had been displaced many times was that, for many of them, particularly the indigenous minorities, their identity is bound up in the land from and on which they have traditionally lived. This is true too in many African situations. So, as well as the economic disruption, there's an invisible psychological disruption also taking place.

Then, as another element of the downward spiral that I have been describing, comes the loss of **education**, everywhere. The impact of this reversal is profound. World Bank and Unicef studies in Africa have shown that an extra year of schooling reduces fertility by 10%, while a 10% increase in girls' primary enrolment can be expected to decrease infant mortality by 4.1 deaths per 1,000, and family incomes increase by an estimated 15% for each additional year of schooling. This is unravelling in every war zone. In Palestine for instance, where education, including for girls, has for 50 years been the pride and hope of even the most deprived families and made them exceptional in the Arab world, the destruction of opportunities for education with the Israeli policy of closures in response to the second *intifada*, is a kind of warfare and collective punishment against civilians, and women and girls are the first victims. The very first thing that happens to a community in the kind of economic crisis that results from war – whatever that war's particular character - is that there's no more money for the girls to go to school. Then, with the loss of education and the loss of the possibilities of future autonomy that it gives girls and women, the entry into the sexual violence trap becomes that much more likely, that much harder to escape.

Such **sexual violence** against women includes rape, sexual slavery, prostitution, trafficking and domestic violence<sup>7</sup>. (This difficult area has a direct relevance to the UK. Any one of these sexual violence manifestations is often a key reason for a woman to seek asylum in the West. Yet, as anyone who has dealings with the Home Office knows, these are not factors that figure in the kind of decisions it makes. In any event, it is almost impossible for women to explain these realities in a UK context where such horrors are so little understood. I get referrals from lawyers who are trying to deal with these cases, particularly in regard to Sierra Leone where in fact there is excellent documentation. Physicians for Human Rights have produced a chilling, thorough report on sexual violence in Sierra Leone, which revealed, among other things, that 94% of displaced households had experienced sexual assault.<sup>8</sup>)

The whole question of sexual violence is very difficult to research, even for women researchers, and often there's a real ambivalence in writing about it. On the one hand, there is a kind of prurience and sensationalism about some reporting – usually by men - which contributes to the dehumanisation of people who have already suffered terrible brutality; on

<sup>7</sup> The War Within the War in Eastern Democratic Republic of Congo, Human Rights Watch, 2002

<sup>8</sup> War Related Violence in Sierra Leone, Physicians for Human Rights, 2002

the other hand, these realities are so profoundly disturbing that one doesn't actually want to know about them. Many women researchers who work in this area have told me how difficult they've found it to focus on writing up reports of such atrocities, or interviewing those who have experienced them.

Indeed, the more deeply one explores the area of women and war, the more questions, rather than answers, emerge. For example, one phenomenon that is clearly new, growing, and coming more and more on to the international agenda, with concerned reports from the UN and changes of the law in the European Union to combat it, is trafficking<sup>9</sup>. This has become a major issue for Eastern Europe, especially in Kosovo, in Colombia, in Cambodia, to mention just some of the places we visited and where a mafia economy has grown up in the aftermath (or continuing) of war. After the easy profits of gun-running and drug smuggling, comes the trafficking of women. The way that women in the Balkans are actually auctioned – testimonies have described them as being stripped naked and forced to walk around on a tabletop - is almost impossible to imagine in its degradation and is a poignant example of how the powerlessness of women is exploited in a situation where social taboos have been eroded by war. It is undeniable that war transforms people's sense of right and wrong, changes the old norms of what is perceived as legitimate behaviour, but there is a profound moral question of why.

### ***Rape as a weapon of war, then and now***

Another issue that has slowly coming on to the agenda as an aspect of war is the issue of rape as a weapon of war. But how much is this new? What has changed in today's wars? Historically, in biblical times and in the times of the Greeks and the Romans, women were taken as booty to be sex slaves and were raped in moments of triumphalism, as shown in numerous great works of art. The raping of women was a type of revenge against the men on the other side and was accepted as normal. One recent book that looks at this without attempting to normalise it, (as others did at the same period, see below on Japan) in relation to the end of the Second World War, is Anthony Beevor's on Berlin<sup>10</sup>. He writes about how the rape of German women by Russian soldiers changed from a sort of temporary triumphalism to a more vicious and deliberate carrying out of revenge as the weeks went on.

Or take the case of the Vietnam war twenty years later. I was a very junior correspondent in Saigon, and, unlike the majority of my male counterparts, I used to write stories about the situation of Vietnamese orphans and urban displaced families, victims of US bombing. Yet I never wrote a single thing about rape, it never entered my head as an aspect of this war.<sup>11</sup> Only when I started to research this area nearly 30 years later did I read some of the testimonies of American soldiers returning from Vietnam. They described their standard operating procedures or 'SOPs'. On going into a village, they would take a number of girls and rape them in front of everybody as a deliberate attempt to terrorise the whole village. They did it publicly, and it was, as they say, "standard operating procedure". It was not until they returned to America and experienced the anti-war movement beginning to undermine their sense of the normality of what they had done in the war zone, that they began to question its morality.

---

<sup>9</sup> In 2000 the General Assembly adopted the UN Convention against Transnational Organised Crime including a Protocol against trafficking.

<sup>10</sup> *The Fall of Berlin*, Anthony Beevor, Viking/Penguin

<sup>11</sup> In, *War Torn*, Random House 2002, nine American and Australian women wrote an account of their time in Vietnam as war correspondents without mentioning this issue either, even with hindsight. The book gives a good insight into how desk editors impose their metropolitan agendas on young journalists.

### *Rape as a war crime*

Why is it that now rape has been accepted as constituting a war crime rather than as a banal side effect of war? Has there been a significant change in consciousness? What is different now? The recognition of rape as a war crime came out of the war in Bosnia<sup>12</sup>. I believe that there were some political reasons in the West for judging the rape of women in Bosnia by Serbs as an atrocity, and not wanting to hear about rapes by other parties in the war. But why was the rape of women in war then recognised as a war crime in a way that it hadn't been before in so many wars? One of the reasons, I think, was that the women involved were white, European, nearby, and attracted major Western media interest. But there was also an important political agenda (though one that was not shared by a few key British policy makers at the time) that required the demonisation of Serbia, the former Yugoslavia, and its political option. The reality coincided with a political imperative that made it useful to bring this out in the mainstream Western press that was not interested in its suppression. This is not to allege conspiracy, but just a reminder of how the media is a vector of the kind of waves of thought that are acceptable, or rather accepted, in one context and not in another for reasons of geo-politics. Compare the acceptance of rape as a war crime in Bosnia with what happened to the 'comfort women' of Korea, the Philippines and Japan itself at the hands of the Japanese army in the Second World War. It did not suit Western policy-makers in the early 1950s to acknowledge Japanese atrocities towards women just as they were grooming Japan as a new democracy to join the international community.

The Tokyo International Tribunal that was organised in 2000 by Japanese, South Korean, and Filipino NGOs was a fantastic feat of organisation, which documented evidence and testimony with great precision and in impressive detail. Yet it did not impinge on international or western consciousness in the way that it should have done. Why? Was it too far away in time or place, too foreign? It is not just the historical distance between the contemporary experience of Bosnian women and the world war experience of Asian women that makes the difference, as can be seen if the awareness of the Bosnian rape camps is compared to that of the use of rape in Rwanda's genocide. These two rape campaigns were happening at exactly the same time, yet one had virtually no international impact. Of course, you cannot judge one as worse than another, but the disproportion in how the two affected our consciousness; of how one was an issue worthy of extensive media treatment and the other apparently not, is interesting for what it says about our attitudes. Racism is a significant factor. (In the Asian case it is significant that the cases of Dutch comfort women – ie Europeans – was taken up immediately after the war.)

Racism is a factor too in the pressure, or lack of pressure, for justice for women victims of sexual violence. There is a vast literature, especially out of post-apartheid South Africa, giving widespread recognition of the need for justice as a prerequisite for reconciliation in profoundly traumatised societies such as all of those visited for this paper.<sup>13</sup> But the area of sexual violence has not been identified as a key to such reconciliation and rehabilitation of a society. Eastern DRC (see note 4) would be an ideal place to try such an approach, having the combination of historical atrocity and vibrant civil society that made the Tokyo Tribunal such a key historical event. In the case of the DRC the HIV/Aids catastrophe which is part of the

---

<sup>12</sup> International Criminal Tribunal for Yugoslavia, see Celebici, Akayesu and Furundzija judgments 1998, Foca 2001

<sup>13</sup> Antjie Krog, *Country of my skull* (Random House, 1999); Kader Asmal, Lousie Asmal, Ronald Suresh Roberts, *Reconciliation Through Truth: Apartheid's Criminal Governance* (Cape Town and Johannesburg, David Philip Publishers, 1997); Martin Meredith, *Coming to Terms* (Oxford: Public Affairs Ltd, 2001); Mahmood Mamdani *When Victims Become Killers* (Princeton, 2001).

rape epidemic's effects means that the work can not wait 50 years as the victims will be dead long before that.

### *Power relations*

All these questions are fundamental both in any consideration of the impact of war on women, the possible introduction of more women into peacemaking institutions at a level where they could be effective in forcing change, and new initiatives. They raise profound issues about power relations between men and women and about the way that power relations change in wars. There's no question that, far from all being victims, some women are empowered by the emergency situation of war. But usually this is temporary; those who are most obviously empowered are the women who choose to be guerrillas. Some of the interviews I carried out with former guerrillas in Colombia are heartbreaking in the way they point to the contrast between how much responsibility the young women had as guerrillas and how completely they were then disregarded by their own movement, by any peace process or by the wider society subsequently. There's a parallel with what happened to the heroic women of the FLN in the Algerian liberation struggle nearly half a century before. Exactly the same process took place. They were extremely useful while they were planting bombs, but then afterwards it was, 'Please get back into the kitchen'. Women in Britain after World War 2 had the same experience. Power relations had not been fundamentally changed by war.

However there appears to be a different trend where numbers of women have been in exile, the most obvious recent example is East Timor. In East Timor's first election in 2001, 27 per cent of those voted into parliament were women, which in that conservative society is extraordinary. One of the reasons for this, I think, was that such a large group of women among them had been in exile, in Australia particularly. When they returned in the interim period, their self-presentation had taken on that Australian confidence - 'What do you mean, why can't I run this committee?' and so on. Such an attitude was so at odds with the society from which they'd come that, while it may have startled and shocked people, it compelled them to give way before it. It was a real phenomenon but whether it was temporary or not and whether, when elections are held in five years' time, it will be different, we don't know. It's worth reflecting too that the ANC - another liberation movement with a history of many cadres formed in exile - surprised even many of its own members when it came into power committed to a progressive policy of retaining 30 per cent of parliamentary seats for women. Does this also owe something to influences coming from exile?

I hardly need say that, on all our visits to vastly different places, we found no women in power anywhere, no women in charge of UN operations, guerrilla movements, in governments. Occasionally some woman minister would be produced for us, but with no real hold on power or anything near it.

Yet there is certainly a paradox within the UN. So many of the men with power felt obliged to say, not only to us but to others dealing with these questions, 'I really wish my agency was headed by a woman - I hope that when the next person comes to do my job, it will be a woman'. This happened so consistently that I wondered why so many found it necessary to repeat it so often. It's something to do with the societal pressures that produced resolution 1325. The same kind of process - window-dressing perhaps - is happening in peacemaking, in situations where there's a big international input. In the peace processes of both Burundi and the Democratic Republic of Congo, the international community insisted on the presence of a fairly large group of women. There was a lot of self-congratulation in the international community about this but, in both cases, the high-profile international peace-making did not



end the war, and the women concerned were often disillusioned. It seems to be a complete illusion that if you just insert some women into a peace process, everything will suddenly be different. Exactly the same illusion was held about Afghanistan in the post-Taliban period too, with results for women that have been, so far, very meagre.

### ***Militarism and commercialism***

There are two other factors that need to be taken into account in looking at the male/female dynamics in war and in peace-making. One is the general rise in militarism across the world, which is a male dominated arena. Militarism, as spearheaded by the commercial and political powers in the US, currently has two major strands that will have a major impact on women's lives – the so-called War on Terrorism (including the probably war on Iraq), and the development of the grotesquely expensive and ineffective National Missile Defense system. War and the preparations for it are seen as a simple solution to the huge fault lines that have developed across the globe. In a market-oriented culture, women, in many places, are already just a commodity. And the way that the trend to the militarisation of societies joins forces with the most brutish and naked commercialism, the way that these imperatives come together, will have further devastating consequences for women. One example of this emerged from a recent case in West Africa, where, to their credit, the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) and Save the Children produced a report on the sexual abuse of refugees by their local personnel in the camps that they were administering.<sup>14</sup> The situation was widely known, but, so challenging did the top men find the report, that the leadership of UNHCR disavowed it, and the respected consultant in charge was dropped.

What the report doesn't show, however, is how this operates as a question of power, inherent in the set-up in which such camps have to operate. If you are a women refugee, and you haven't got the physical strength to knock in the poles to make up the hut you've been allocated, you are going to have to ask for help. And if commercialism has become so rife within whatever social fabric is left after warfare has wreaked its havoc, the only thing to sell is yourself to get those poles knocked in, to get the food rations that are your right as a refugee -- never mind to get the aluminium for your roof. You will have sex with the man who hands out the food, the man who has the poles, and the man who has the roofs. This has become so normal, so blatant, that it has become an international scandal and was drawn to our attention in more than one camp in West Africa. But how to address the powerlessness at the root of it?

### **Wars of underdevelopment**

When we look at today's wars, we are looking at something that has a completely different shape from the wars in our history books, even the more modern wars like the second world war and Vietnam, and so on. In those wars, major armies confronted each other; large numbers of young men got killed for the sake of an idea, an ideology - anti-fascism, anti-communism or whatever. Similarly, there were the liberation wars in which Algerians, South Africans, Angolans, etc., - mostly men but not entirely – fought against technologically and militarily superior powers. Yet they were still, as before, fighting for an idea and they were fighting a recognisable war. But the wars I've been looking at over the past year are completely different in their style from this kind of template. Although they are in all other respects utterly dissimilar, in wars as different in character as between, say, Colombia and Sierra Leone, the essential fact is that civilians, and specifically women, are now targets.

---

<sup>14</sup> UNHCR/SCF-UK, February 2001.

In DRC, for example, we met women who had been living completely naked in the forest for two years because they had no way of getting anything at all; literally everything had been taken from them, down to the very clothes on their bodies. The dehumanisation of women that is implied in that beggars belief. It is different from what has gone before in modern times, though the older wars of conquest which led to nation-forming in Europe had some of this quality. Similarly, the experiences of some Sierra Leonean women that we met in Guinean refugee camps were undermining the fabric of their society as it had been. One described to us how the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) fighters had made her dance around her husband, as if she was doing a traditional wedding dance, as they cut off his limbs, piece by piece. This is just a tiny picture of the extent to which the dehumanisation of women has become a norm, routinised. What happens to societies that degrade and dehumanise women in this way? Turning women into objects – worse than objects – that testify to the denial of any and every human quality is a really dramatic way of unpicking a society.

These modern wars are often characterised as wars over resources, or ethnicity, or religion. “Greed or grievance” has become a buzz phrase, but it does not give a sufficient framework. Just to take the African wars, if you look at Sudan, Liberia and Sierra Leone, Angola, you will be told that they are about diamonds, about oil, about timber, about ethnicity. These are certainly motors in their continuation. Yet I think it’s more helpful to think of these wars as a different phenomenon. They are what I call wars of underdevelopment. Take the way that UNITA<sup>15</sup> has acted in Angola, or the way that the RUF developed in Sierra Leone, or the Congolese Rally for Democracy (RCD) in eastern DRC; in all cases, they travelled far from their origins in a nationalist idea. In the case of both UNITA and the RUF, their actual practice on the ground became the most primitive kind of fascism imaginable. Yet their communications and propaganda, put out in the Angolan case by people in Lisbon, and in the Sierra Leonean by RUF people in London, use a sophisticated discourse that completely masks the true character of their forces and what they are actually doing within their respective societies. This indicates that, at one level, the leaders know that what they are doing is completely unacceptable. The leaderships know they are deliberately unpicking, unravelling, the whole fabric of society, in order to maintain their grip on power and resources.

### **Policy issues**

The only way that we can begin to understand these wars is by systematically listening to women on the ground, because they are the key to breaking the cycle. Recognition that what happened, and is still happening, to them, is utterly unacceptable to modern global society, is a prerequisite for justice, the end of impunity, and a rebuilding of broken societies. The breakdown of institutional norms governing behaviour within society, which the wars of underdevelopment show so clearly, can only be challenged by outsiders. The UN has made efforts to do this in many circumstances, but has not been very successful, for reasons largely to do with existing power relations both within the organisation and in the wider context.

No men in power, in the UN or anywhere else, will take on the challenge of placing sexual violence at the centre of programmes of reconciliation, though it would *not* be impossible to, say, make eastern DRC a public example of how international justice for the tens of thousands of women victims there could be a force for societal transformation.

---

<sup>15</sup> National Union for the Total Independence of Angola.

Such an acknowledgement could be accompanied by a legitimating of sexual violence as a valid reason for women being given refugee status, which would mean new training and new guidelines for immigration staff in Western Europe.

As part of a programme for addressing this vast and complex question, there is a need for new initiatives on a very big scale to tackle the widespread psychosocial desolation of women that is the unacknowledged effect of these wars. In a different context one very successful community based programme has been in place in Gaza for a decade and shows that original initiatives are indeed possible. The Gaza Community Mental Health Programme has managed to harness large numbers of men with credibility in their community from a past as political prisoners, as well as young women, to train as social workers and therapists. The results, in a conservative and traumatised community where mental illness was a taboo until very recently, are surprising and impressive.

Other related areas where targeted programmes on women could be important for reconciliation and peace building are in the areas of education, HIV/Aids, and land reform. Detailed suggestions are beyond the scope of this paper, but all relate to the priority of confronting women's impoverishment in the aftermath of war, and the now widely accepted idea that women are the key to reconciliation. Also related is the formulation of policies by donors to protect the temporary gains in women's empowerment so often noted during wars and lost thereafter. For all initiatives in this area to be successful they would have to be framed in a way which avoids the vogue of believing that market forces are capable of delivering services to the vulnerable. Partnerships with African scholars who offer insights into their own societies are one way of deepening the needs analysis and seeing new ways forward in these domains. International organisations could form partnerships/think tanks with African universities or independent African intellectuals, some of whom, precisely because they do habitually listen to the grassroots, know well beyond the superficial. (Some are in fact already doing this: a recent consultancy I did for DFID in DRC had a team that was half Congolese academics.)

The UN Secretary General himself has a historic chance to harness the pro-women insights and energies revealed in the DAW report, to which he wrote the forward, by appointing women in his own staff in New York and across the world in high UN positions, especially in peace-keeping. A dramatic series of such appointments to create a critical mass could change the dynamics of many processes, including national appointments of women, despite the obvious tendencies in the opposite direction: for the system to co-opt, and to appoint a particular kind of woman.

## **Conclusions**

Important questions of national and global power struggles underlie not only the underdevelopment described, but also the de-development process that has become so obvious, and ominous, in the latest round of these wars, especially in Africa, with particular impact on women. (Much of the official optimism in the international community about their various peace processes is simply window-dressing: disingenuous or dishonest.)

But where there is an educated or even semi-educated population, wars of this nature could not take such a hold. It's similar to what Amartya Sen says about famine – full-scale famine does not happen if there is an educated population and a functioning democratic system. So with these wars.

Part of the problem in exposing and making comprehensible the true nature of many of these wars is that not enough is known about the social fabric of these different places, and that is how the powerful warlords like it. In general, we in the international community don't pay enough attention to what is really going on, we don't listen well, except to the huge array of mostly foreign human rights activists, who step into the information vacuum. This is an industry, very well funded, its staff very well educated. They work extremely hard, and a lot of the material that they produce is very good. But the end result of this work, and the places that are chosen for it, can also mislead, and we need to be aware of that. As I said earlier about Bosnia, nowhere is politically neutral, propaganda is a key part of any war. Any researcher's approach to a highly complex and difficult situation will also depend on the political baggage he or she carries. Such an individual is not a *tabula rasa*; he or she will, for their own reasons, be inclined to believe, say, him and not her, this churchman and not that politician or this army man and not that government official. Yet the weight of an organisation like, for instance, Human Rights Watch or Amnesty, in placing its stamp of authority on a particular interpretation of a situation, is enormous. That very weight and clarity can distort our understanding of these different, highly complex interactions. And that weight can then become a factor in itself, skewing the internal dynamic of a delicate and explosive situation.

I don't want to belabour the point, but what I want to emphasise is, there is so much we don't know. A massive de-development of huge sections of the world is happening now, out there at the margins, that we don't see. Much is written by outsiders, and even more is theorised about these different wars. But the one element that is truthful to the reality, that cannot be gainsaid and must be heeded, is the experience of women living through these wars and their aftermath. Unless we can find ways of reflecting this in the wider world, we will never understand these wars; we will never be able to explore ways of helping to break the cycle. The Palestine struggle for a country has gone on for fifty years; Colombia is now about to embark on another cycle that could last a further twenty-five years. All the African wars that I've mentioned have gone on for two, three or sometimes even five decades. There is no indication that these societies can be put together again, but if they are, it will be by women, not by men, brutalised both by conflict, and by the struggle for power.

### Working Papers in Series (up to August 2003)

- WP1 Crisis States Programme, 'Concept and Research Agenda' (April 2001) – *Also available in Spanish*
- WP2 Crisis States Programme, 'Research Activities' (April 2001)
- WP3 Crisis States Programme, 'States of Crisis in South Asia' (April 2001)
- WP4 Crisis States Programme, 'Research in Latin America' (April 2001) – *Also available in Spanish*
- WP5 Crisis States Programme, 'South Africa in Southern Africa' (April 2001)
- WP6 Dennis Rodgers, 'Making Danger a Calling: Anthropology, violence, and the dilemmas of participant observation' (September 2001) – *Also available in Spanish*
- WP7 Hugh Roberts, 'Co-opting Identity: The manipulation of Berberism, the frustration of democratisation and the generation of violence in Algeria' (December 2001) – *Also available in Spanish*
- WP8 Shaibal Gupta, 'Subaltern Resurgence: A reconnaissance of Panchayat election in Bihar' (January 2002)
- WP9 Benedict Latto, 'Governance and Conflict Management: Implications for donor intervention' (February 2002) – *Also available in Spanish*
- WP10 Jo Beall, 'The People Behind the Walls: Insecurity, identity and gated communities in Johannesburg' (February 2002) – *Also available in Spanish*
- WP11 Jo Beall, Owen Crankshaw & Susan Parnell, 'Social Differentiation and Urban Governance in Greater Soweto: A case study of post-Apartheid reconstruction' (February 2002) – *Also available in Spanish*
- WP12 E. A. Brett, 'Liberal Theory, Uneven Development and Institutional Reform: Responding to the crisis in weak states' (July 2002)
- WP13 John Harriss, 'The States, Tradition and Conflict in North Eastern States of India' (August 2002)
- WP14 David Keen, 'Since I am a Dog, Beware my Fangs: Beyond a 'rational violence' framework in the Sierra Leonean war' (August 2002)
- WP15 Joseph Hanlon, 'Are Donors to Mozambique Promoting Corruption?' (August 2002)
- WP16 Suzette Heald, 'Domesticating Leviathan: Sungusungu groups in Tanzania' (September 2002)
- WP17 Hugh Roberts, 'Moral Economy or Moral Polity? The political anthropology of Algerian riots' (October 2002)
- WP18 James Putzel, 'Politics, the State and the Impulse for Social Protection: The implications of Karl Polanyi's ideas for understanding development and crisis' (October 2002)
- WP19 Hugh Roberts, 'From Segmentarity to Opacity: on Gellner and Bourdieu, or why Algerian politics have eluded theoretical analysis and vice versa' (December 2002) – *Also available in French*
- WP20 Jonathan DiJohn, 'Mineral-Resource Abundance and Violent Political Conflict: A critical assessment of the rentier state model' (December 2002)
- WP21 Victoria Brittain, 'Women in War and Crisis Zones: One key to Africa's wars of under-development' (December 2002)
- WP22 Apurba Baruah, 'Tribal Traditions and Crises of Governance in North East India, with special reference to Meghalaya' (March 2003)
- WP23 Giovanni M. Carbone, 'Emerging Pluralist Politics in Mozambique: the Frelimo-Renamo Party System' (March 2003)
- WP24 Francisco Gutiérrez Sanín, 'Fragmentación electoral y política tradicional en Colombia – piezas para un rompecabezas en muchas dimensiones' (March 2003) – *English version forthcoming*
- WP25 Francisco Gutiérrez Sanín, 'Los tiempos de las involuciones democráticas' (March 2003) – *English version forthcoming*
- WP26 Manoj Srivastava, 'The Dynamics of achieving 'Power' and 'Reform' as a Positive-Sum Game: A report on the preliminary ethnographic explorations of the politics-governance nexus in Madhya Pradesh, India' (March 2003)
- WP27 Francisco Gutiérrez Sanín, 'Criminal Rebels? A discussion of war and criminality from the Colombian experience' (April 2003)
- WP28 Luis Eduardo Fajardo, 'From the Alliance for Progress to the Plan Colombia: A retrospective look at US aid to Colombia' (April 2003)
- WP29 Jean-Paul Faguet, 'Decentralisation and local government in Bolivia' (May 2003) – *Also available in Spanish*
- WP30 Maria Emma Wills & Maria Teresa Pinto, 'Peru's failed search for political stability (June 2003)
- WP31 Robert Hunter Wade, 'What strategies are viable for developing countries today? The World Trade Organisation and the shrinking of 'development space' (June 2003)
- WP32 Carlos Medina & Hermes Martínez, 'Violence and drug prohibition in Colombia' (August 2003)

The aim of the Crisis States Programme (CSP) at DESTIN's Development Research Centre is to provide new understanding of the causes of crisis and breakdown in the developing world and the processes of avoiding or overcoming them. We want to know why some political systems and communities, in what can be called the "fragile states" found in many of the poor and middle income countries, have broken down even to the point of violent conflict while others have not. Our work asks whether processes of globalisation have precipitated or helped to avoid crisis and social breakdown.

### **Crisis States Programme collaborators**

#### ***In India:***

Asia Development Research Institute (Patna, Bihar)  
NEIDS, North-East Hill University (Shillong)

#### ***In South Africa:***

Wits Institute of Social & Economic Research (WISER)  
Sociology of Work Workshop (SWOP)  
Department of Sociology  
(University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg)

#### ***In Colombia:***

IEPRI, Universidad Nacional de Colombia  
Universidad de los Andes  
Universidad del Rosario

### **Research Objectives**

- We will assess how constellations of power at local, national and global levels drive processes of institutional change, collapse and reconstruction and in doing so will challenge simplistic paradigms about the beneficial effects of economic and political liberalisation.
- We will examine the effects of international interventions promoting democratic reform, human rights and market competition on the 'conflict management capacity' and production and distributional systems of existing polities.
- We will analyse how communities have responded to crisis, and the incentives and moral frameworks that have led either toward violent or non-violent outcomes.
- We will examine what kinds of formal and informal institutional arrangements poor communities have constructed to deal with economic survival and local order.



**Director: Dr James Putzel**  
**Administrator: Wendy Foulds**  
**Editorial Assistant: Jonathan Curry-Machado**

Development Research Centre,  
Development Studies Institute (DESTIN),  
LSE, Houghton Street, London WC2A 2AE  
Tel: +44 (0)20 7849 4631 Fax: +44 (0)20 7955 6844  
e-mail: [csp@lse.ac.uk](mailto:csp@lse.ac.uk)

