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Male rape: the last human rights taboo?

In 2011, the Observer reported that male rape during conflict was "endemic", prompting the UN to change its definition of rape. So why are NGOs still ignoring the problem?

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Male rape is in a state of hearsay: people speak of it but few seem to be dealing with it directly. Photograph: Roberto Schmidt/AFP/Getty Images

Sexual violence and rape have long been woven into the fabric of conflict and viewed as an instrument of torture; from the Democratic Republic of Congo to Rwanda, and most recently, Syria. While women and girls face increased risks, sexual violence against men is both more prevalent than one assumed and almost never reported.

There is a disconcerting disparity between how various aid organisations and NGOs are dealing, or are failing to deal, with the issue. On a macro-level, organisations may not be aware of what they're looking for and may not see how male rape fits into the bigger picture. It may come as a surprise that the UN only changed its own definition of rape to cover male victims, in 2011; this followed the publication of an article in The Observer.

NGOs at a micro-level, some of whom are already working with male survivors – the Refugee Law Project for instance – face major obstacles, such as acquiring funding and carrying out field work or accessing survivors in remote areas. The author of the aforementioned article spoke to Chris Dolan, the director of RLP, who claimed that one of the project's donors refused to provide future funding if 70% of the client base wasn't female.

Despite the fear of losing funding, the pervasiveness of the problem (academic Lara Stemple writes that male sexual violence has been used as a weapon of war from Chile to Iran, Kuwait to Uganda) means that the humanitarian community needs to challenge perceptions of rape, improve understanding and create awareness.

Before beginning to assess male rape in any conflict zone, the scope of the violence must be acknowledged. Failure to do this can lead to "an incomplete understanding of how gender is socially constructed within communities," says Emily Cody, programme officer for the [African Centre for Justice and Peace Studies](#) in Uganda. Her own [research](#) work has involved male rape in the DRC. "This means that the gains of any intervention aimed at tackling violence – be it for men or women – will be short lived and illusory, and conflicts may be addressed through false narratives."

Another way to avoid "false narratives" could be to rethink how literature and policies are written. "Policymakers need to de-gender war rape and see it for what it is," says Augusta DelZotto, co-author of the 2002 paper '[Human Rights](#)' Last Taboo?'. Part of her paper included research into 4,076 NGOs that dealt with wartime sexual violence; it concluded that only 3% referenced male experiences in their literature. Ten years on and some of the larger organisations are making significant progress in highlighting the issue – such as Médecins Sans Frontières (Doctors Without Borders) – but there are still clear weaknesses, where men are being mentioned only as a passing reference.

[War Child's webpage](#) dedicated to sexual violence in DRC, states "[c]harities on the ground there are also seeing an increasing number of young boys who have been the victims". Though this is recognising the issue exists, it's simply an observation. There is no mention of men throughout the rest of the blurb, which concludes by describing the effect of sexual violence on victims: "[t]here's a real stigma and sense of shame around the women who have been raped".

The example of War Child's literature reflects how male rape is in a state of hearsay: people speak of it but few seem to be dealing with it directly. The use of female pronouns too in literature, combined with the fact that any NGOs that are trying to work with men, as well as women, are also pinpointing men as perpetrators, means that they may be making it harder for themselves to access male survivors, who may also find gender-neutral pronouns isolating.

Accessibility poses a plethora of problems on a practical level too. Those working with female survivors already struggle with issues such as remote areas, low resource environments and reluctance to be open about their experiences – all of which can hamper evidence-based research needed. So when it comes to men, such problems will only be more pronounced.

Cody indicates that an approach to tackling reluctance is not complicated but may take up a lot of resources. "For protection officers this could include recognising physical symptoms of male sexual assault as well as increased sensitisation to gender based violence against men," she says. "Survivors may initially obfuscate the assault or describe it alongside other acts of violence; part of working with survivors is knowing when to listen and which questions to ask. They may classify their victimisation in different ways, and capturing these narratives will take time."

Taking such an approach to 'mapping' narratives can help ease constraints on evidence-based research that may be restricted by external matters out of the NGOs' control. Mobile phones and SMS are another example of how mapping can be carried out; they offer opportunities to build systems which can be used by victims to report sexual violence or to get advice, but this poses risks such as messages being intercepted, particularly in countries affected by conflict or corruption.

By 'mapping', and by avoiding drawing up "false narratives" about conflict and appropriations regarding men in the context of rape – through rethinking how their literature is written and how they understand war – NGOs can lay the foundations for a successful model for dealing with male rape. "The risks of revealing trauma without any

concrete structures in place to help survivors recover may outweigh any emotional benefit from reporting trauma that then goes unrecognised by NGOs and other organisations, re-traumatising male survivors and reifying the idea that men cannot be victims," warns Cody.

Taking these approaches to dealing with the issue of male rape, and attempting to challenge perceptions, are only small steps in relation to the bigger picture, but they're steps in the right direction.

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