

Engaging men and boys

Sexual violence in areas and times of conflict is one of the facts of war that we have become aware of over the years, and in places like Rwanda rape of women was clearly used as a weapon of war.

I have interviewed many survivors of the genocide and heard first-hand accounts of how women were abused.

For example, one woman told me that after being raped she asked the perpetrator: why didn't you kill me? He laughed in her face and said, I have, and any child you bear. She later discovered that she was HIV positive following the rape, and then understood what the rapist had told her.

Such violence against a woman is totally unacceptable. It is an abuse of power; it is immoral and it is contrary to the teaching of every religion. That a man feels at liberty to act in such an aggressive and cruel fashion confronts us with a huge challenge.

For the perpetrators of such acts, it is somehow seen as acceptable to treat the women of the perceived enemy in such a manner. It is, therefore a heavy responsibility on religious teachers to speak out and help boys and men re-assess their values and attitudes and beliefs.

This is particularly challenging when in a conflict zone every effort is made to destroy the enemy, and break their spirit: if the men cannot defend their women, then their masculinity is questioned.

But, even worse, if a man is subjected to rape, then not only will the men of his community question his masculinity, but so will the women:

- If you cannot defend yourself, how can you defend me?
- If you have been raped, are you truly a man, or are you a woman?
- I cannot live with such a person as my husband

What has religion to say into such a situation?

As faith leaders we have responsibilities towards the vulnerable, whoever they are.

Faith leaders do have the potential to influence and mobilise people that no-one else has.

Faith leaders have a duty to speak out, to take action in protection of the vulnerable and in defence of victims. To influence militia groups who hide behind the pretence of religion, and military leaders who use sexual violence as a weapon of warfare.

Faith leaders of all faiths can and must stand together, and declare that religion is not an excuse for abuse and it is not a barrier to collaboration. No-one of any faith should be subjected to the indignity of sexual violence.

The rape of men is one of the darkest secrets of war

Male rape is endemic in many of the world's conflicts. As a secrets of war, it is one that is so well kept that it exists mostly as a rumour... and usually denied by the perpetrator and his victim.

Yet every now and then someone gathers the courage to speak of it.

Eunice Owiny worked for Makerere University's Refugee Law Project (RLP) helping displaced people from all over Africa work through their traumas. This particular case, though, was a puzzle. A female client was having marital difficulties. "My husband can't have sex," she complained. "He feels very bad about this. I'm sure there's something he's keeping from me."

Owiny invited the husband in. For a while they got nowhere. Then Owiny asked the wife to leave. The man then murmured cryptically: "It happened to me." He reached into his pocket and pulled out an old sanitary pad.

"Mama Eunice," he said. "I am in pain. I have to use this." Laying the pus-covered pad on the desk in front of him.

During his escape from the civil war in neighbouring Congo, he had been separated from his wife and taken by rebels. His captors raped him, three times a day, every day for three years. And he wasn't the only one. He watched as man after man was taken and raped. The wounds of one were so grievous that he died in the cell in front of him.

It's not just in East Africa that these stories remain unheard.

One of the few academics to have looked into the issue in any detail is Lara Stemple, of the University of California's Health and Human Rights Law Project. Her study *Male Rape and Human Rights* notes incidents of male sexual violence as a weapon of wartime or political aggression in countries such as Chile, Greece, Croatia, Iran, Kuwait, the former Soviet Union and the former Yugoslavia.

Twenty-one per cent of Sri Lankan males who were seen at a London torture treatment centre reported sexual abuse while in detention.

In El Salvador, 76% of male political prisoners surveyed in the 1980s described at least one incidence of sexual torture. A study of 6,000 concentration-camp inmates in Sarajevo found that 80% of men reported having been raped.

Dr Chris Dolan first heard of wartime sexual violence against men in the late 1990s while researching his PhD in northern Uganda, and he sensed that the problem might be dramatically underestimated.

Keen to gain a fuller grasp of its depth and nature, he put up posters throughout Kampala in June 2009 announcing a "workshop" on the issue in a local school. On the day, 150 men arrived. In a burst of candour, one attendee admitted: "It's happened to all of us here." It soon became known among Uganda's 200,000-strong refugee population that the RLP were helping men who had been raped during conflict. Slowly, more victims came forward.

Jean Paul was at university in Congo, studying electronic engineering, when his father – a wealthy businessman – was accused by the army of aiding the enemy and shot dead. Jean Paul fled in January 2009, only to be abducted by rebels. Along with six other men and six women he was marched to a forest in the Virunga National Park.

"You are all spies," the commander said. "I will show you how we punish spies." He pointed to Jean Paul. "Remove your clothes and take a position like a Muslim man."

Jean Paul thought he was joking. Once naked, two rebels held him in a kneeling position with his head pushed towards the earth.

The commander then began. The moment he started, Jean Paul vomited. Eleven rebels waited in a queue and raped Jean Paul in turn. He bled freely: "Many, many, many bleeding," he says, "I could feel it like water." Each of the male prisoners was raped 11 times that night and every night that followed.

After nine days he found a way to escape and seizing his moment, he crawled through the undergrowth "slowly, slowly, slowly, slowly, like a snake" back into town.

Two years later, despite his hospital treatment, Jean Paul still bled when he walked. Like many victims, the wounds were such that he was supposed to restrict his diet to soft foods such as bananas, which are expensive, and Jean Paul could only afford maize and millet. His brother kept asking what's wrong with him. "I didn't want to tell him," Jean Paul said. "I feared he will say: 'Now, my brother is not a man.'"

Because there has been so little research into the rape of men during war, it's not possible to say with any certainty why it happens or even how common it is – although a survey in 2010, published in the *Journal of the American Medical Association*, found that 22% of men and 30% of women in Eastern Congo reported conflict-related sexual violence.

Eunice Owiny said: "There is a married couple. The man has been raped, the woman has been raped. Disclosure is easy for the woman. She gets the medical treatment, she gets the attention, and she's supported by so many organisations. But the man is inside, dying."

International human rights law leaves out men in nearly all instruments designed to address sexual violence.

The UN Security Council Resolution 1325 in 2000 treats wartime sexual violence as something that only impacts on women and girls.

Ignoring male rape not only neglects men, it also harms women by reinforcing a viewpoint that equates 'female' with 'victim', thus hampering our ability to see women as strong and empowered. In the same way, silence about male victims reinforces unhealthy expectations about men and their supposed invulnerability.

Female rape is significantly underreported and male rape almost never reported.

Before receiving help from the RLP, one man went to see his local doctor. He told him he had been raped four times, that he was injured and depressed and his wife had threatened to leave him.

The doctor gave him a paracetamol.