

Sexual violence in war: still ubiquitous, still going unpunished

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Today the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom in The Hague is marking the 100th anniversary of the first Women's Peace Congress. In the midst of the First World War more than a thousand women from around the world gathered in The Hague – in spite of all obstacles – to protest against the various governments' insistence on violence as the only response to international conflicts. The participants also objected to the particular injustices inflicted on women in times of war: the “odious wrongs of which women are the victims in times of war, and especially against the horrible violation of women which attends all war”.

Sexualized violence in armed conflict – a problem that is just as acute today. It is true, as pointed out by Beate Rudolf, director of the German Institute for Human Rights speaking this week in Berlin, that there have been a series of important international agreements and national laws on the protection of women following on from the Human Rights Conference in Vienna in 1993 and the World Conference on Women in China in 1995. Human rights now also encompass women's rights. In many parts of the world courageous women – including the forced prostitutes or, more accurately, sex slaves abused by Japanese soldiers in the Second World War or survivors of conflict in Yugoslavia and Rwanda – have broken the silence on mass injustices. And sexual violence in armed conflict is now defined as a war crime and a crime against humanity under international criminal law.

But look closer at any war zone and alongside murder, plunder and torture you'll still find evidence of rape and sexual slavery at every turn. This is particularly true in Colombia, where the latest figures show that on average a woman is raped every half hour and every one and a half days a rape is committed as part of the country's ongoing armed conflict. And those are just the official figures. Women's rights organization Sisma Mujer says that over 80 percent of rape cases are never recorded. What the figures clearly show, however, is that the sexualized violence occurring as part of the civil war springs from the general structural discrimination against women in Colombia.

Part of a strategy to repress the civil population

In response, ECCHR together with [Sisma Mujer](#) and the Colombian human rights organization [CAJAR](#) submitted [a criminal complaint to the International Criminal Court](#) in The Hague this week. Sexualized violence in Colombia amounts to a crime against humanity and is patently not a mere ancillary effect of the conflict. Abductions, rapes and sexual slavery all form part of the military strategy to repress the civil population.

One of the most sobering aspects of the two years of work that went in to the criminal complaint was that we already knew from reports by Amnesty International and Colombian organizations that tens of thousands of women were and continue to be subjected to sexualized violence. We also knew that the violence particularly affects black, indigenous and internally displaced women, i.e. those women who are already most vulnerable and most subject to discrimination. The problem is the lack of official state data – despite years of work and research by our partner organizations in Colombia. Almost no files, crucially, are available from state prosecutors and courts.

Investigations are rare in Colombia in cases of rape. When they do occur, criminal proceedings are taken only against individual perpetrators. This needs to change. When this kind of mass violence is taking place, responsibility is borne by military superiors. Where those in charge fail to prevent the crimes of their subordinates, criminal action must be taken against the superiors. Prosecutors at the court in The Hague should begin investigating the liability of senior military figures as soon as possible to end impunity for rape in Colombia. While peace negotiations are looking promising and figures are sinking for other conflict-related crimes, the number of sexualized crimes continues to rise. For too long, those waging war have gotten in to the habit of using violence as a means to every end. Changing this is not just a job for The Hague. There needs to be a change of direction in Colombian justice with one clear message: sexualized violence shall no longer go unpunished.