

Obstacles at every turn: justice for victims of sexualized violence

As though the many cases of mass murder and abuse around the world weren't bad enough, such crimes against humanity are often accompanied by widespread sexualized violence. And while it can be very difficult, even in this age of international human rights treaties and the International Criminal Court, to bring to justice those responsible for large scale murder and abuse, taking legal action against perpetrators of sexualized violence can present even greater challenges.

We can all be guilty sometimes of failing to properly acknowledge the problem. Friends of mine – dedicated human rights activists – describe how, given the scale of the violence they deal with in the course of their work, sometimes the easiest or indeed the only option is to begin by counting the dead and identifying corpses, just so they can make a start somewhere. In these cases they don't get around to talking to victims of sexual violence, who are often left traumatized long after the actual physical and psychological abuse occurred, to record these experiences or to work with the victims to bring the perpetrators to justice.

Sexualized violence is also a problem in Germany, where every year around 7,500 cases of rape are recorded, with many more instances going unreported. The German media prefers to focus on rape in India, giving detailed reports of incidents such as the recent rape of two 15 year old girls in Uttar Pradesh. Patriarchal violence in its purest form, undoubtedly. But journalists also need to look at the caste system and the discrimination of Dalits, the 'untouchables', as one of the causes of the rising levels of violence.

Violence in conflict regions such as Sri Lanka is another cause of great concern. During the final stages of the fight against the Tamil guerilla in 2009 hundreds of women were raped. Gruesome pictures emerged in Channel 4's documentary No Fire Zone of female journalist Isaipiriya who was brutally murdered during the conflict. Even after the civil war had been won by government forces, bands of soldiers continued to commit violent crimes against women in Sri Lanka. Women were kidnapped from refugee camps at night and stopped at army checkpoints where they were abused. Such crimes are also a common occurrence in Colombia, where thousands of women have been subject to sexualized violence in the past years. ECCHR is currently working with regional partner organizations to take action on cases in Sri Lanka and Colombia.

But our progress is slow. The danger facing affected women and their representatives is simply too great. Again and again, we hear reports of women's' rights activists, particularly in rural areas, being subject to persecution and rape on account of their work.

The global summit taking place this week in London is long overdue. Under the leadership of the otherwise often and justifiably maligned British Foreign Office, delegates will work on a protocol for the documentation and investigation of sexual violence in conflict regions. Steps in the right direction. Encouraging signs are to be found also in the most recent report by Fatou Bensouda, the Chief Prosecutor at the International Criminal Court, who will hopefully soon press charges in connection with sexual violence for the first time in the court's history. But Western countries are in no position to feel self-righteous or complacent. To this day, victims of mass rape by soldiers of the German Wehrmacht and Imperial Japanese Army are denied compensation while the perpetrators have never been brought to justice. And all too recent history reveals that British and US soldiers were inflicting torture of a sexual nature on detainees in Iraq.