

UN International Day for the Elimination of Sexual Violence in Conflict 19 June 2022

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“Words are not that important when you recognise intentions” – ‘City of Beasts’ (2003), by Isabel Allende

I don’t fully agree with Isabel Allende on the importance of words. As a criminologist (aka social scientist) words have always been crucial in communicating, telling stories, building up arguments and communicating meanings; sharp words if carefully chosen can defeat even the stronger opponent. Nonetheless, words are sometimes not enough to describe, capture and convey the horrors and atrocities of war including sexual violence.



On 19th June 2015 the United Nations General Assembly opted for 19th June of each year (International Day for the Elimination of Sexual Violence in Conflict) to commemorate and condemn the use of sexual violence as another tactic of war as well as to honour victims and survivors of sexual violence around the world. Also, this day provides a good opportunity to praise the work of human rights’ defenders, advocates and activists working to end

conflict-related sexual violence, often under hostile, threatening and challenging circumstances. I am certain that in times of post-Covid-19 economic recession, rising inflation, European socio-political order reshuffling and an ongoing war in Ukraine there will be voices asking: why should I care? My view is that we should care because conflict-related sexual violence is a phenomenon mirroring wider socio-economic and political pathologies and importantly because it constitutes gross violation of fundamental human rights such as the rights of dignity, privacy, speech, freedoms.

Sexual violence often emerges during periods of intense political turmoil, security crises and it is commonly employed, albeit not always acknowledged, as a tactic of torture, humiliation, intimidation, and subjugation. The costs and aftermath(s) of conflict-related sexual violence (which can encompass myriad forms of sexual abuse including abduction, sex trafficking, forced marriage) are complex and long-term. Trauma is a good word to use here: whole countries and communities live and breathe with severe psycho-social consequences and socio-cultural, racial, gendered, collective, community traumas resulting from conflict-related violence (e.g. women and girls becoming pregnant during conflict,

Gender in this context once again plays an important role: women and children are the most vulnerable and therefore the first group of civilians targeted during armed conflicts. Think, for example, Rwanda's massive scale of genocidal sexual violence perpetrated against Tutsi women (and men but to a lesser extent) in 1994, in what is considered one of the worst genocides in history. Or we can rethink sexual violence against women taking place during brutal military dictatorships such as the ones in Argentina and Chile during the 1970s and 1980s. Or perhaps we can recall systematic sexual violence taking place during Turkish invasion and occupation of Cyprus in 1970s or Smyrna catastrophe in 1922? Not to mention other conflict-related sexual violence legacies in Vietnam, Sudan, Ethiopia, Iraq, Serbia, Bosnia-Herzegovina and recently in Ukraine. It is important to reiterate and stress here is that sexual violence in these contexts does not result so much from sexual desire (although it can be opportunistic) but from hatred and it is therefore purposefully used as a key tactic of sexual terrorism and wartime tool to control, disempower and dehumanise.

The next question should naturally be: how do we prevent conflict-related sexual violence, do justice to victims/survivors and hold perpetrators accountable? In relation to post-conflict gendered and sexual violence responses, there have been some serious humanitarian efforts and socio-legal developments the last decades such as the establishment of transitional justice processes, the International Criminal Courts or else the



reconciliation courts hearing survivors' testimonies, enabling a restorative justice-inspired dialogue, delivering sentences and facilitating healing and closure. Frankly, I cannot think of any types of mechanisms that would be most effective in relieving the pain of victims. I am wondering whether forgiveness (in a religious or not sense) is even feasible within these dehumanised and demoralised contexts.

Conflict-related sexual violence is another example proving that the personal is political and global. In terms of remedies, it is important to help women and girls (and all victims) who have witnessed and been subjected to conflict-related sexual abuse to get access to relevant services and regain their hope, agency and trust to themselves and society. In order to achieve that, there is a need to seriously rethink about socio-cultural, economic and political order, systems, and structures (corruption, globalisation, inequalities, dictatorships) that foster phenomena like conflict-related sexual violence. Essentially, the key message of this day should be as simple and loud as that: sexual violence in all different forms and shapes is a serious form of abuse and crime against humanity. Isabel Allende is right in that respect: intentions are important and as long as intentions remain human-focused, there is light at the end of the tunnel.



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