

**SPECIAL PAPER BY YANG AMAT BERBAHAGIA
DATIN SERI DR SITI HASMAH BINTI HAJI MOHD ALI
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COMMITTEE ON THE ADVANCEMENT OF RURAL AND ISLAND
WOMEN FOR ASIA PACIFIC (RSC-AP)
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"IMPACT OF WAR ON WOMEN AND CHILDREN"

It used to be that in war, the combatants, mostly men, are killed. Some combatants are women, especially in paramilitary and guerrilla units. A combination of ideology and women's liberation made many women eager to fight. Many women felt that the war was not only about a more equal distribution of wealth and land between the rich and poor, but also about equality between men and women.

2. A disturbing trend is the growing number of children being used as combatants. In countries where children grow up in war conditions, violence has become a part of their daily lives. They are encouraged to join the military and to hate the enemy. They are inducted to become warriors, for being a warrior means being a real man. In the transition from boy to soldier he internalises the value-system of militarism and accepts the outcome of militarisation, that is the ability to kill the enemy. In some wars, children, including girls, are systematically brutalised and forcibly used as soldiers to terrorise other children. Once conscripted the children's loyalty was maintained through drugs and violence. If they try to escape, they are punished by branding and amputation.

3. In today's war more than 75% of all casualties are non-combatants. Modern warfare as seen in recent history engages weapons of mass destruction. They include nuclear, biological and chemical weapons as well as advanced conventional munitions and their delivery systems. All types of missiles can be launched from

land, air and sea, including from submarines that are thousands of miles away which reach their targets with incredible accuracy.

4. In Baghdad I visited a bombed out shelter in which more than 500 children were killed. In many places, a variety of land mines are planted by opposing factions of an armed conflict. These land mines don't injure or stop armies but they certainly injure individuals. Long after the combatants have made their peace, these concealed abominations continue to terrorise people struggling to return to normal lives. Radioactive materials in warheads such as depleted uranium have caused leukemia, congenital anomalies, stillbirths and missed abortions.

5. No one counts the number of deaths nor estimates gender proportions, but it seems plausible to assume that when a war reaches the civilian population and is brought to people's homes, more women and children will be killed or maimed than before. They also are exposed to abuse, torture, psychological trauma, imprisonment and separation from their families.

6. If they are not killed, the most predominant image of women in war is that of a victim of sexual exploitation. In nearly all wars we know, rape has occurred. The UN Human Rights Commission has estimated that for every 100th pregnancy during a conflict, rape has been committed. However, these figures do not give a full picture, as they do not include rapes which did not lead to pregnancy, rapes which led to pregnancy which was followed by abortion, and rapes followed by killing or death.

7. Rape is not the only form of sexual violence which occurs in war. Recent accounts of war showed that women were forced to serve as prostitutes over extensive periods of time or live as husband and wife with soldiers and were threatened with death if they attempted to leave.

8. The wars in the former Yugoslavia introduced sexual violence as a political act and a weapon of war. In the ethnic cleansing process, rape was not only a

catalyst for deporting non-Serb inhabitants, but was also a genocidal means of destroying the biological basis for a given nation's culture, either by a forced pregnancy or by inhibiting her from having children in the future. For the individual woman, the feeling of not only bearing the enemy's child but also nurturing it for years to come, may be life-long torture. Sexual exploitation in warfare has also taken on new dimensions with the increase of HIV and Aids amongst women impacted by war.

9. Female-related diseases are often left untreated in situations of war, because male combatants are accorded priority. Diseases may be the result of rape, malnutrition, and extreme work loads. In general, the hardship of a conflict and prolonged stress can release endorphins which decrease pain but also suppress certain immune responses, leading to greater vulnerability to various diseases.

10. When war ends, the post-conflict life is another major challenge for women. Women constitute the majority of the world's refugee population. According to the UN High Commissioner for refugees, between 70% and 80% of today's refugees are women and children. Recent estimates revealed that at least 2 million Arab children are refugees, and nearly 4 million are displaced. Whether as internally displaced persons (IDPs) or refugees, women seem to be more vulnerable to both economic and sexual exploitation than men. When they do get work in a new country it is usually for performing menial tasks. For many women the solution may be to sell their bodies. For many men, the distress of the refugee situation coupled with the changing roles of women may lead to feelings of helplessness and despair that result from their own inability to take care of their families, and from having witnessed their family members being raped, tortured or killed. Studies of refugees indicate the use of domestic violence as a way of re-establishing control and power. For other men it may mean passivity and deep depression.

11. War is expensive, and poverty is a common characteristic of post-conflict countries. Resources spent on warfare deprive children of developmental rights and opportunities in health, education, social welfare and basic human needs. One of the

dominant struggles for women was how to cope with extreme poverty and to stretch meager resources so as to reduce their **children's** sufferings. While the shooting has stopped, the war is not over; the hunger of the siege has been replaced by the hunger of poverty.

12. Economic sanctions imposed on countries ravaged by war worsen the socio-economic plight of the people. Questions have been raised about the wisdom and the effectiveness of sanctions as a tool of international law enforcement. I would like to relate the impact of the decade old comprehensive economic sanctions that have been imposed on Iraq. In March this year I lead a group of 10 women from socially active NGOs to Iraq to observe first-hand the effects of the economic sanctions on the life of the Iraqi people. We witnessed the humanitarian effects of such prolonged sanctions on a country that has undergone a preceding ten year conflict.

13. Despite the oil-for-food programme and humanitarian aid introduced in 1996, we are convinced that the development process in Iraq has been interrupted or even halted by the sanctions. Her people suffer from insufficient food and health care, unsafe water, poor sanitation and inadequate infrastructure. Mortality in children has doubled, especially from preventable diseases such as diarrhea and respiratory infections. Maternal mortality too has risen because of anemia and inadequate drugs as well as equipment for proper care during pregnancy and delivery. Old diseases such as malaria, tuberculosis and other infectious diseases are re-emerging because of the lack of resources for adequate preventive measures as well as drugs and facilities for their treatment. A significant number of children are dropping out of school because children are required to work to supplement the family income. Schools are in deplorable conditions. Infrastructure is severely damaged with daily electricity cuts, and deteriorating quality of water and sanitation standards. Families share homes on an 8-hour shift. The lifestyle of the people have changed with many young couples postponing marriages because weddings are too expensive and performing the obligatory Haj is out of reach to many Iraqis. A whole generation of innocent Iraqi children are being brought up and are learning about life in an unhealthy social and psychological environment which does not

nurture their development. There are already evidence of juvenile delinquency, depression and intense hatred for the west.

14. Five major conferences on women have gone by, the last being the Beijing + 5 review held in New York in June 2000. The 1985 Nairobi conference was the first time that feminist reflections, concerns, and vocabulary concerning peace were made explicit in a major UN document. At the fourth world conference on women in Beijing in 1995, the theme of gender, peace and conflict was even more central and at least three sections of the Beijing platform for action deals with peace and conflict.

15. Leading the Malaysian delegation, I had raised the issue of inadequate international responses to the war in Bosnia-Herzegovina. At best they were incapable of intervening sufficiently early in conflicts. At worst, there was confusion about mandates as well as no careful assessment of the crisis situation and the probable effects of intervening including that on gender relations.

16. It is hard to determine the effects of these world conferences on women and peace. In the period 1975 to 2000, the world has seen violence flaring up or being perpetuated in many countries. Even as I speak people are killing each other in the trouble spots of today. Countries are spending money on war when they should be building their economies, educating their children and providing health care to mothers. Protecting against a soldier-portable wide-area smart mine costs USD 297,000 - which would buy three million packets of oral rehydration therapy for diarrheal illnesses. To buy a land mine costs USD 3 to USD 10 but to remove one costs USD 300 to USD 1000. Over half the nations of the world still provide higher budgets for their militaries than for their countries' health needs. Twenty-five countries spend more on defense than on education, and 15 countries devote more funds to military programmes than to education and health budgets combined.

17. Peace remains elusive because the agenda for women and peace has not always been considered a priority. Approaches have often been political - which

means that women's issues, concerns, experiences and life conditions have not been given as much attention on the international agenda. Warfare is a system and as such it pervades our lives and affects every aspect of society from the structural to the interpersonal. It is not limited to combat only. In most instances, women become directly involved in warfare only after crucial political decisions have been made, after weapons have been distributed and the war has started. At this point they do not have the power to change the situation. They enter in a situation of powerlessness in order to defend themselves.

18. It is time for women to insist that their voices be heard in the decisions that create war, the conduct of war and in post-conflict situations. An increase in the female voice creates a potential for different concepts of security, disarmament and world order. Women's morality is associated with an emphasis on love relationships dominated by an ethics of care and on how their decisions would affect the community at large. Promoting creative and non-violent conflict resolution strategies is seen as more important than developing new and more sophisticated forms of weapons. Women's way of thinking brings hopes for a more peaceful world because they bring values, and thus a better opportunity for lasting peace. The achievements of women's NGOs in promoting peace and in providing rehabilitation in Lebanon and Palestine, are examples of how women in their multiple roles as activists, mothers, community leaders, professionals, widows and breadwinners can be active agents for peace in conflict situations.

19. It is a woman's human right to participate and be represented in political decision-making regarding issues of peace and conflict. Empowerment of women is not only important in its own right but is also an essential part of peace-building in general. The UNESCO culture of peace programme states that empowerment of marginalised voices is an essential part of peace-building. Building the culture of peace entails unlearning and questioning the codes and institutions of the cultures of war. It also means opposing all types of injustice and discrimination as well as replacing violence and enemy-images with inter-cultural understanding, solidarity and respect for human rights.

20. In conclusion, I would like to reiterate that when armed conflicts occur, children and women are the principal victims. Too many children and women have experienced the horrors of total war, where combatants use weapons indiscriminately to terrorise civilians, impose their will and achieved their selfish ends. Accidental distinctions of race, class or ethnicity are cynically manipulated to determine who will live and who will die. Children are killed, maimed, orphaned or separated from their families. Boys are forced to bear arms and commit violent acts themselves. Girls and women are exploited and sexually abused. It is children and women who suffer the most when schools are closed, clinics destroyed, fields sown with landmines, and markets virtually bereft of goods. Those who survive the killing fields may die later for lack of food, water or basic medicines. Those who survive even that -but witness killing, maiming, burning and looting or experience lengthy separations from their families - may be traumatised for years to come.

21. In accordance with the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action that calls for equal representation of women at all decision-making levels, I urge all national and international institutions including the media to actively seek and include women's voices in all stages of the mediation and negotiations of the peace process, including the responses to armed conflicts, efforts to sustain peace, capacity building and promoting a transformed view of power, security and participation. Only with due regard to values can we clarify the humanitarian responsibilities of all parties to protect children and women everywhere from the impact of armed conflict.
