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THE CONVERSATION

Violent crime as old as the Bible: Boko Haram uses rape as a weapon of war

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Some of the 700 women freed from Boko Haram. EPA/Nigerian Army

Days after Nigerian security forces freed 234 women from Boko Haram's stronghold in Nigeria's Sambisa forest it was reported that at least 214 (91%) of them were pregnant.

The women were among nearly 700 rescued from the Islamic terrorist group in operations and have been taken to safe camps in Borno State where they will be offered medical and pre-natal care and counselling. It is not yet known whether any of the 230 girls kidnapped by Boko Haram from their school in the town of Chibok in April 2014 were among them.

Most of those kidnapped by Boko Haram are from Christian homes, but were reportedly forced to convert to Islam. Women and girls were also forced into marriage, and there are reports of people being sold into slavery. Amnesty International estimates that more than 2,000 women and girls were abducted by Boko Haram in 2014.

To many, forced marriage and sexual slavery are viewed as rape, situations in which the victim has no choice but to submit time and time again to unwanted sex. People in such appalling circumstances run the risk of physical violence, torture, sexually transmitted diseases and death. Women have the added risk of pregnancy, and all of the attendant problems of mental adjustment to unwanted children and the health issues associated with giving birth in far from ideal conditions, with little medical aid and being cut off from family.

Shameful weapon

Sexual violence is often used as a weapon in conflict, as a military or terrorist tactic. There are references to it in the Bible's Old Testament as either a reward to the victors or as a punishment to the men of the vanquished nation. More recently, systematic organised rape has been used as an intentional tactic of terror or revenge, from Nazi atrocities against Jewish women, and Japanese rape of women in Nanking, to the standard operations of the American GIs in the Vietnam War and the sexual enslavement of Algerian women by Muslim revolutionaries in 1997.



Chibok girls have now been missing for more than a year.

EPA/Hannibal Hanschke

The United Nations has recognised rape in war as a war crime in its own right and a universal issue affecting men and children as well as women. In 2014, the Global Summit to End Sexual Violence in Conflict was held in London, with the intention to agree practical steps to tackle the use of rape as a weapon of war. The agreement was to address the culture of impunity for such crimes and to hold perpetrators to account, while ensuring survivors of sexual violence in conflict are supported.

It is difficult to imagine, however, how such worthy goals can be achieved when rape in general is a secret crime – surrounded by shame and blame – and rapists are so rarely prosecuted and convicted. If figures from the UK are accurate, only 15% of victims report a rape, and a very small number of these reach a conviction. When we consider that the victims of sexual violence in the UK do, at least in theory, have recourse to investigative processes, a legal system and a support system – and still we have a low number of perpetrators being held to account – how much more difficult must it be for victims of rape in war to attempt to receive justice and support?

Survival strategy

How will the victims of Boko Haram cope with their unwanted pregnancies and babies born of conflict? Rape victims still suffer from the culture of blame that is endemic, even in so-called enlightened societies. Campaigns, such as those in the UK, that tell women not to get drunk or walk home alone do nothing to communicate to potential perpetrators that their behaviour is unacceptable and will be punished.

How much more difficult it is to overcome stigma in societies in which women are seen as property and are stoned or whipped for having sex outside marriage? The girls in Nigeria, taken from places they thought safe and subjected to the nightmare of rape, have returned to their homes as women, with children they would not have chosen to conceive.

There are multiple examples of such cases we can draw on to advise them. Odeth Katengwa studied the victims of genocidal rape in Rwanda and agrees that women with children of rape face challenges associated with social stigma, lack of psycho-social resources and disclosing paternity.

Women do report that embracing their motherhood is the most positive way forward, and can even provide the only reason to live. Such attitudes, or the guidance towards them, appear to be essential in the recovery of survivors of genocidal rape.

For now, it is essential that these women are provided with the ante and postnatal care they need. The UN Population Fund is doing its best to arrange this, together with counselling and psycho-social support.

But it is unclear how the women will be re-integrated into their communities, which may be in areas with little access to the things we take for granted. For now, we must do our best to remember that rescue is not the end of the nightmare for the women of the Sambisa Forest and their children born of rape.



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