

Book Review

War's Offensive on Women: The Humanitarian Challenge in Bosnia, Kosovo, and Afghanistan

Julie A. Mertus

Bloomfield, CT, Kumarian Press, 2000, 157 pp.

In *War's Offensive on Women*, Julie A. Mertus—a professor of international human rights law who is especially interested in women's rights in Bosnia, Kosovo, and Afghanistan—discusses war and its effects on women. Her intention was to reach an understanding of the dynamics of conflict and to make humanitarian organizations, as well as the political, academic, and international public, more sensitive to misfortunes brought about by conflict. She also describes the international legal framework for the protection of human rights, including women's rights. The book is one a series of volumes that arose from the Project on Humanitarianism and War, which began in 1991 as an independent initiative by fifty parties, including UN agencies and governmental and non-governmental associations.

All conflicts after the close of the cold war have been characterized by disregard for basic human rights. There are many examples: persecuted Kurds, genocide in Cambodia and Rwanda, food shortages in Somalia, all forms of suffering in the Balkans, from Croatia and Bosnia to Kosovo, relocations in the North and South Caucasus, and the pre-election pillaging in East Timor. Crises in some parts of Afghanistan, in the Sudan, and in Libya have lasted for decades.

Humanitarian agencies, accustomed to providing food, medical help, shelters, and other crucial services have had to face the fact that the civilians that they are providing aid to are not casual victims of violence, but often intentional targets of military and political strategies. This is an undeniable fact, the author notes, especially for women and girls within such targeted populations. They have been subjected to forced relocation, detention, and execution, because their men have gone to war. However, claims the author, women are no longer passive victims of violence. The refugee experience is a mobilizing experience. Women become engines of resistance and key actors in resolving problems within their communities. The study of the dynamics of

humanitarian actions has been based on inductive methods, primarily on interviews with persons involved in conflicts—with aid workers, and with local and government officials. The book analyzes humanitarian efforts to protect and aid women, during the actual rendering of aid and in post-conflict reconstruction. New methods by which the inhabitants of regions in conflict, humanitarian organizations, and international law processes correspond and alleviate the effects of war on women are likewise analyzed. Special emphasis is placed on the cases of Bosnia, Kosovo, and Afghanistan.

The first chapter presents analytical instruments used to treat the problem of gender and describes the different war experiences of men and women. The author reminds us that today 40 to 50 million people have become homeless, 75 to 80 per cent being women and children. In times of war and peace, they are expelled because of internal and regional fighting, disregard for human rights, and discrimination on the basis of political opinions and activities, and on religion, race, and ethnicity. Natural disasters are also a cause of relocation and poverty. As expelled persons and refugees, women are less mobile and more susceptible to physical violence because of their reproductive function. The author highlights the fact that rape has been a strategy of war throughout history, used to display triumph over men who have been unable to protect “their” womenfolk. Rape is an effective weapon of war.

The study suggests a useful approach to analysis of aid and protection efforts, which would include examination of the needs and roles of women and men. The author lists the key concepts that such an approach should include. The first concept asks for a “gender approach” toward the social difference between men and women, a difference that is learned and changeable, and varies within and between cultures. The next concept calls for the use of a “gender perspective,” which would recognize, understand, and utilize knowledge of gender differences in the planning, application,

and evaluation of programs. Special gender needs apply to raped women and to men who suffer specifically because of their gender. Analysis of gender applies to men, women, and the social, economic, and cultural forces that determine their status. The remaining concepts pertain to violence based on differences in gender, to violence against women, and finally to the human rights of women.

The second chapter deals with the situation of women in the armed conflicts in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, and Afghanistan. Islam is the prevailing religion in all three areas; however—as the author notes—whereas Afghanistan is identified with Islam, most Bosnian Muslims and Kosovar Albanians identify more with their European roots than with their Islamic ones. This is especially true for the majority of the Muslim Albanians in Kosovo, who regard themselves more as Albanians than as Muslims. A short survey of the situation in all three areas follows. Several aid models were applied, yet most failed. The author analyzes successful and unsuccessful approaches. Many aid workers did not recognize the social differences between men and women, their diverse health requirements, and the need to distribute appropriate sanitary products to women. Also many attempts by non-government organizations to revitalize the small-sector economy resulted in failure, because personnel who engaged in the programs were ill-equipped to deal with economic revitalization. And no project included a much-needed preliminary study of broad economic reconstruction. There were also oversights in legal protection of registration and attainment of status. For example, raped women could attain refugee status, but did not apply for it because they did not desire to relive their experiences. Furthermore, social norms prevented them from reporting the rapes they suffered. Non-government organizations also employed local women, but these women were excluded from decision making and the formulation of projects. The text illustrates many examples.

The third chapter deals with the legal framework of policy and practice. International human rights and humanitarian and refugee law have provided the framework for dealing with gender in humanitarian crises. The author analyzes the development of two key fields that are important for those providing aid: the legal definition of refugees, and international recognition of violence based on gender as a question of human rights. One aim of the analysis presented in this chapter is to offer information to humanitarian organizations that provide protection and aid so that they can become more sensitive to the issue of gender and react more efficiently and justly.

The final chapter identifies contemporary trends within

humanitarian organizations that have become aware of the problems of gender. It also offers suggestions for further actions. The basis of the analysis has been interviews with the personnel of non-governmental organizations, of the UNHCR, of the UN Office for Human Rights, and of other governmental and non-governmental organizations. The author identifies eight trends and gives her suggestions for each of them. She calls the first such trend “creating a policy and strategy of gender,” which incorporates and supports initiatives among women in developing countries, understands the present and potential role of women in developing countries, increases women’s participation in creating, applying, and evaluating projects, and supports special women’s projects linked to overall development. The second trend involves greater organizational awareness of gender and human rights, while the third relates to the integration of gender in agency activities. The fourth identified trend includes program initiatives in relation to gender, such as involving women in programs, using information from refugee women in educational programs for female victims of war, especially in those coming from women themselves, and improving conditions and overall security in refugee camps. The fifth trend speaks of greater support in international activities towards stimulating change. The sixth important trend is the development of terminology. Humanitarian organizations are continuing the debate over the use of the terms *women* and *gender*, which the author states are not synonymous terms. Her book insists on use of the term *gender* in order to focus awareness on the differing social roles of men and women, and hence on their different needs and interests. Furthermore, the term *gender* includes both men and women. The seventh trend speaks of tension between agency policies and operative disturbances. Agency policies toward gender are a constitutive part of the reality in the field. Often the policies of humanitarian organizations mutually conflict with actions undertaken. The author recommends including local women in local offices and giving them responsible positions. The eighth trend is characterized by increasing intermediation. Humanitarian organizations are becoming more active in intermediating problems of gender.

Women are becoming increasingly organized in dealing with issues in all aspects of life. The experiences of both women and men are integral to the creation of humanitarian policies and programs. Some organizations are beginning to learn from their mistakes and are starting to develop instruments that pose questions about gender. Agencies are becoming aware of the needs of the local population, and they are including local women and men in the creation of

their projects. One of the most important changes, as shown by the analysis, has been a greater sensitivity among aid groups to the perspective of gender. Such a perspective takes into consideration the way in which various roles, possibilities, and strivings among men and women affect their needs during humanitarian crises.

Refusing to take on the role of victims, women supported by international humanitarian laws and international mediation networks are now organizing themselves for survival during war and reconstruction in peacetime. Whenever women have an influence on humanitarian activities, the established network results in a change of power relations between men and women and in the establishment of equality over the short term. Yet the author concludes that this change in the relationships rarely leads further to institutional changes.

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