

Silent No Longer

Reintegrating Female Rape Survivors in Post-Conflict Society

PIPS White Paper 9.1: *Executive Summary*

Layla Abi-Falah, Research Fellow
Elizabeth Sutterlin, Research Intern

Mass rape during conflict fractures communities, which contributes to broader instability and impedes post-conflict reconstruction. Social stigmas against rape lead to the abuse, exile, and humiliation of female rape survivors, preventing the inclusion of many women in the peace and reconstruction process.

To achieve long-lasting peace and stability, the United States should prioritize the reintegration of female rape survivors into society. This paper proposes empowering norm entrepreneurs, establishing education-mediation campaigns, and expanding primary healthcare facilities, which respond to the needs of the community, family, and individual.

Mass Wartime Rape Obstructing Post-Conflict Reconstruction

Although there are many well-known obstacles to post-conflict reconstruction, mass wartime rape is an impediment to stability that has received insufficient attention. Female rape survivors face rejection, exile, and abuse from their family and community after their rape due to cultural stigmas and beliefs. This social reaction in turn cripples the community, as a significant portion of the population is unable to participate in the reconstruction process. Therefore, in post-conflict society, the exclusion of survivors impedes not only gender equality, but also long-term stability and peace.

The Ripple Effects of Mass Wartime Rape

The effects of mass wartime rape extend beyond the individual female, destabilizing the community and posing a significant obstacle to post-conflict reconstruction and long-term stability.

- *Continued suffering of female survivors.* The violent nature of wartime rape causes many negative health consequences: the contraction of HIV/AIDS, fistulas, reproductive abnormalities, genital mutilation, unwanted pregnancy, and psychological trauma. Rape survivors face isolation, exile, and abuse by family and the greater community due to strong

stigmas against rape. This abandonment can lead to homelessness, poverty, and other economic hardships.

- *Breakdown of the family unit.* Men—including fathers, brothers, sons, but particularly husbands—are indirect victims of rape. Due to their inability to perform their role in the family, many men see the rejection of rape survivors as justified.
- *Destabilization of the community.* Because of the cultural stigma, women who were once an integral part of the community are rejected, exiled, abused, or even killed. The loss of these female community members results in overall communal instability, cementing the power of rape as a strategic weapon of war.

Mass Wartime Rape and Instability

The exclusion of female survivors from post-conflict reconstruction perpetuates societal instability, increasing the potential for state failure. Women have led efforts to create a dialogue of peace and build essential infrastructure. However, mass wartime rape can prevent women from reassuming leadership positions during the reconstruction process and beyond. The United States is uniquely positioned to create sustainable peace through improved post-conflict reconstruction for conflicts marked by mass rape.

Some female rape survivors who have suffered familial and communal abandonment may engage in activities that further contribute to state weakness and failure. For example, women who are raped can be radicalized into joining terrorist groups. Additionally, economic and emotional dependency can drive some survivors to join the drug trade or turn to prostitution.

U.S. Response to Mass Wartime Rape and Female Participation

In 2000, the United States led United Nations Security Council (UNSC) in drafting Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security, which highlighted the impact of armed conflict on women and acknowledged the role of women in post-conflict environments. The Women, Peace and Security Agenda laid the foundation for a new U.S. policy framework regarding women and security, captured in the U.S. National Action Plan and initiatives such as Safe from the Start. These policies represent a first step towards limiting the destabilizing effects of mass wartime rape. The following policy would build on these initiatives to further mitigate the effects of mass wartime rape on post-conflict reconstruction.

A Three-Tiered Approach to Reintegration for Survivors

Implementing a three-tiered reintegration program at the communal, familial, and individual levels would increase the likelihood that rape survivors can reenter society and positively influence the

reconstruction process. The policy is based on a comprehensive analysis of successful reintegration processes of rape survivors in post-conflict societies, which experienced mass rape.

The Community Level: Empowering Norm Entrepreneurs

Empowering political and social leaders to oversee reintegration efforts gives legitimacy to and increases community support for the process. They can use their influence to create an environment that encourages rape survivors to return and feel welcomed, but also to advocate for the necessity of accepting these women back into society. While a norm entrepreneur can be a single person, the role can also be played by a group of influential leaders. A coalition of local leaders and elites—both male and female—can focus on identifying positive, local communal norms that would in turn allow for the reintegration of female survivors in society.

The Familial Level: Establishing Education-Mediation Campaigns

Redefining cultural understandings of rape and educating families about the nature of rape as a tool of war allows women to receive the support they need to recover and ultimately reintegrate. Through these campaigns, rape is no longer understood to be a sexual act, but a politically motivated form of torture. This definition removes blame usually placed on the survivor and male relatives. Forums for education-mediation campaigns can take on many different arrangements, including familial mediation and guided group counseling for both male relatives and survivors, directed by local leaders such as norm entrepreneurs.

The Individual Level: Expanding Primary Healthcare Facilities

The creation of an all-encompassing, community-level female medical care facility for the entire communities' female population avoids stigmatizing women who seek treatment due to rape. Addressing the health effects of rape can facilitate reintegration or prevent exclusion in the first place. Unlike the previous tiers of this reintegration program, this stage must begin during conflict to affect the post-conflict outcome for survivors.

- *HIV/AIDS testing.* Women are less likely to be rejected by their husbands and families when they can prove they were not infected with HIV/AIDS or other STIs.
- *Pregnancy and reproductive autonomy.* Reintegration is more likely when women can conceive with their husbands after rape. Therefore, clinical services to rape survivors must include surgical care to reverse any physical damage to reproductive organs. Additionally, because labor and delivery can be detrimental to a woman's health, primary clinical healthcare must include effective emergency contraception to prevent unwanted pregnancies from rape.

- *Trauma counseling.* In addition to physical healthcare, psycho-social counseling is necessary to combat the trauma of wartime rape. Social workers and counselors partner with primary health facilities to offer these services.

This three-tiered reintegration program presents a path towards both the reintegration of rape survivors and the reconstruction of destabilized families and communities affected by mass rape. The policy outlined above has the potential to be applied to current and future post-conflict reconstruction efforts in which mass rape has been used as a tool of war. Although current U.S. policy presents a first step in mitigating the effects of mass wartime rape, a three-tiered reintegration program targeting the community, family, and individual level will allow policymakers to face post-conflict reconstruction holistically.