

Rape as a Primary Weapon of Genocide

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The use of rape as a tool of genocide is examined with the perspective that it is not simply a cruel and vicious act, but one that is purposefully used to target the entire community. Rape is a weapon with massive psychological and physical repercussions beyond what is immediately apparent.

In a time where the public is constantly being bombarded by news stories of natural catastrophes, global economic crises, political unrest, and human rights violations on a grand scale, it is easy for a situation like Darfur, Sudan, to fall through the cracks. It seems as if Darfur has been relegated to the back burner, mentioned briefly by a few committees and government leaders, but shoved to the side as a small issue, and generally swept under the rug. Genocides seem like a thing of the past and the idea of mass ethnic cleansing is seen as barbaric, antiquated, and certainly not anything that belongs in the twenty-first century. However, the situation in Darfur proves the opposite: that genocide is not only a living reality, but also something that can be overlooked and brushed off to the side. Darfur is a genocide. There is little question or resistance to that claim as more and more stories leak out of Darfur and as more governments and organizations formally recognize it as such. However, the situation in Darfur encompasses more than what the general public assumes when the term “genocide” is used. Genocide is no longer limited to mass killing, rather, it involves the intent to eradicate a certain ethnicity completely. Those responsible for genocide in Darfur have found their weapon of choice: rape. Rape, far from being a random act of physical cruelty, has been honed and tweaked and refined to the point as to wreak unimaginable damage to those in the West, who are only familiar with it in a contained sense. When wielded with intentions of ethnic cleansing, the sexual abuse of the women of Darfur is not simply an unfortunate byproduct of war, but results in massive community and societal ramifications, in addition to incredible psychological and physical damage, all which make rape a weapon designed specifically to carry out genocide.

The situation in Darfur began in 2003 as a conflict between the “black Africans” that live in the Darfur region of Sudan and the Sudanese government. Two militia groups from Darfur attacked government troops, protesting the government’s lack of Darfurian representation in making economic decisions that affect the region (“Eyes on Darfur”). Rather than negotiating, the Sudanese government chose to continue the conflict by allying with the Janjaweed militia, outfitting them with weapons and other supplies, and offering each member of the militia one hundred dollars cash (Cheadle and Prendergast 75). The inclusion of the Janjaweed militia into the conflict enables the Sudanese government to claim that the fighting going on in Darfur is

merely a tribal conflict, nothing near genocide. However, it has become clear that the attacks on the villages and people of Darfur are organized and planned by the Sudanese government; both the Sudanese military and Janjaweed militia take part in systematic attacks geared toward eradicating the Darfurian people. Recent reports from Darfur and the surrounding regions show that more than 300,000 civilians have died from the conflict, and over 2.5 million displaced from their homes (“Eyes on Darfur”). The genocide in Darfur, though largely ignored by the media, has been an issue hotly debated in international circles, and still has not seen a firm course of action from the United Nations, United States, or any other government.

Genocide has been defined as “acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national ethnic, racial or religious group” (“Convention”) and is considered by Sadako Ogata, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, as the “most violent and pernicious forms of human rights violations” (Ogata). The term genocide brings about an almost universal shudder, however, it is easy to throw out the term “genocide” on a situation and move on without actually examining what genocide means, the ways genocide is carried out, and the powerful effects it has. The International Criminal Court, the tribunal created to deal with people that commit the serious crimes that has an international impact specifically genocide, crimes against humanity, and war crimes (“ICC at a Glance”), recently declared “rape, sexual slavery and trafficking, enforced prostitution, forced pregnancy, enforced sterilization and other forms of sexual violence and persecution as crimes against humanity and as war crimes” (Ward 195). This declaration by the International Criminal Court brings into the spotlight the reality of rape when it is used as a weapon of war and the devastating consequences that result. The term “mass rape,” in the context of the situation in Darfur, relates to the purposeful and intentional strategy of “widespread, systematic sexual violence and rape perpetrated intentionally against civilians” (Reid-Cunningham 279). Rape is not simply a byproduct of social and moral breakdown that comes with war, nor is it simply random acts of cruelty; it is one of the primary weapons one can wield in genocide.

The stories that surface out of the Darfur genocide are ones that have a similar structure: attacks on villages begin before dawn as government aircrafts drop bombs, killing the still sleeping village inhabitants, then escalate as government troops, together with the Janjaweed militia, set upon the village, killing, burning homes, looting livestock, and killing the inhabitants (Cheadle and Prendergast 76). A closer look at these attacks reveal a well planned system to ensure each attack meets its genocidal goal; the men are murdered, the women brutally raped, and any survivors driven into the desert (Cheadle and Prendergast 76). The rapes, for the most part, are not sexually motivated – that is often the last thing on the perpetrators’ minds. Femke Zeijl, an award-winning journalist for the *New Internationalist*, a publication reporting on issues of global justice, states that “rape is inherent in the nature of war: it is never about sex, but about the power and military culture of violence” (Zeijl). The power of the Janjaweed militia and the Sudanese military is clearly exerted as they use rape to terrorize the population (Human Rights Watch 5) in addition to pursuing “military, territorial, social, and political gains during war” (Reid-Cunningham 280). When used strategically, rape becomes a practical tool to instill fear into communities, ensuring compliance and submission in the population, while encouraging them to leave their homes (Reid-Cunningham 281). With the populations sufficiently cowed and eager to flee from their villages, the Janjaweed and Sudanese military have an easy path to

continue their destruction; killing the fearful who are unable or too defeated to defend themselves and destroying their homes so that the villagers have no place to return to. Together with the knowledge that their physical homes are no longer there, the people's reluctance to return is further exacerbated by the remembrance of traumatic events that took place in those locations (Reid-Cunningham 281).

Though inflicted primarily on women, mass sexual abuse during war has a heavy cost for entire families, communities, and countries. Because women are massive contributors to any country, no matter its economic status, brutality committed against women "destabilizes populations and destroys bonds within communities and families" (Ward 181). In every culture, women play a major role in providing for families, maintaining family structures, community structures, so an attack focused on women in particular effectively severs community, cultural, and family bonds. In a culture where families and communities are vitally important, the strength of villages, towns, cities, states, and eventually, a nation, is built largely upon the strength of the women. When a horrific violence like rape is targeted at the women, it "drains a country's existing resources and handicaps women's ability to contribute to social and economic progress" (Ward 2).

Rape is a gender issue, though perhaps not in the way most expected. Gender inequality during peacetime does have weight in this issue and opens the way to the use of rape during war. If a society has an unequal attitude and low regard for women as a regular paradigm, this contributes to, and is exacerbated, by the introduction of war. Women become vessels by which messages are sent and their bodies are seen as the "ways and means of war" (Ward 178). Because of this practice of using women's bodies to make a point, mass rape is often employed as a weapon against men, not necessarily the women themselves. Women are often gang raped in front of their families, in full view of their sons, husbands, and fathers, who have hidden themselves to prevent being killed, but are still within eyesight of the atrocities. The crime is committed in this way with the hope that brutalizing the women will draw the men out of hiding, however, if the men stay hidden, simply watching and hearing what happens is enough to emasculate and induce feelings of helplessness in any man. Tribal structures can also be upset because the male leaders "lose authority when they can't protect the women" (Kristof and WuDunn 83). When tribal structures are torn apart, communities shatter and are scattered without anything to unite them, thus leading to the destruction of their way of life.

Gender issues ultimately lead to social issues created by rape that may not be immediately apparent, but have long-lasting effects, as "rape is an enormous taboo in Sudan" (Zeijl). Social bonds within communities are often broken as families and friends are forced to witness gang rapes, inducing shame on the part of the victim as well as the powerless onlookers. In addition, raped women are shunned from the rest of the community, seen as tainted and worth very little, if anything at all (Zeijl). Doctors Without Borders, a nonprofit organization that played a key role in bringing the Darfur situation to the international spotlight, reports that many rape victims are excluded and forced to build their own homes outside the family compound ("Crushing Burden" 5) and are isolated from their communities. Societies are fractured and divisions created when the women and children that are victimized by rape are rejected and seen as outcasts. Women and children touched by this kind of sexual abuse have been "tainted by 'the enemy'"

(Reid-Cunningham 281) and reduced to pariah status. This kind of alienation and isolation is what awaits the victims of rape in Darfur.

In one case detailed by the Human Rights Watch, a sixteen year old girl that was gang raped was kicked out of her family's home and her pending marriage broken off because she was now unclean and disgraced. Husbands reject and abandon their wives. Families blame daughters for bringing disgrace on the family. Stories such as these are the norm – women rejected because they were subjected to wartime rape, and communities and relationships severed as an added result (Human Rights Watch 12). The rejection of women is further incited if the woman becomes pregnant as a result of rape. A further breakdown of relationships result: families are loath to accept daughters and wives that are pregnant with “tainted” children, often abandoning the women and the babies that result from rape. These babies are often abandoned by their mothers “due to the attitudes within the community” (Human Rights Watch 13), and have little, if any, chance for survival. The women are reluctant to raise these children, but stand little chance of having a family of their own, as they are now rendered untouchable and unclean by the violence forced on them. The cultural stigmas surrounding rape ensure that the perpetrators are granted success in their intentions by causing isolation, dissension, and alienation within Darfurian family and community structures.

For the individual, the act of rape itself is used as a mechanism to “cleanse” the Darfurian women. The perpetrators often consider the women to be “ethnically cleansed” through the assault (Reid-Cunningham 281) and for those that become pregnant, their children are seen as Arab children. Victims were told that the perpetrators would rape them again and again in order to “change the color of their children” (“Crushing Burden” 1). This is a sinister, yet cleverly designed weapon – the women bear children that are not of their own ethnic group, and because of the trauma they have become victim to, are often not able to bear children afterwards, so their own bloodlines die out while their perpetrators' bloodlines live on. One ethnic group dies out; the other one thrives through violence.

However “clean” the Darfurian women may now be because of what the Janjaweed and Sudanese army have done contrasts sharply with the reality of how the women are left after they have been raped. The physical ramifications that the women are left to deal with are truly staggering. As a result of dealing with so many cases of injuries inflicted by sexual abuse, medical workers working with rape victims now consider vaginal destruction as a crime of combat. During the abuse, the Janjaweed are “deliberately inflicting conditions of life calculated to bring about the group's physical destruction, imposing measures intended to prevent births” (Reid-Cunningham 280). As a result, major bodily damage is done to these rape victims, frequently presented in the form of a “traumatic fistula – tissue tears in the vagina, bladder and rectum” (Ward 109). Those that do not die as a result of their injuries or are not beaten to death following the rape (Reid-Cunningham 283) face infertility, serious injuries to the reproductive system, and complications associated with miscarriages and self-induced abortions arise (Ward 190). Other injuries that can occur are internal bleeding, incontinence, and infection, specifically with sexually transmitted diseases. The risk for contracting HIV is extremely high for the women subjected to rape, especially if there was one more than one attacker (Human Rights Watch 12). In a place where antiretroviral medications are not readily available and people with HIV largely

avoided and alienated, contracting HIV often spells out a death sentence – exactly what the perpetrators of rape intended.

Since the Sudanese government denies the fact that rape as a genocidal weapon even exists within the country, there is a gaping lack of action to stop the violence against women. In the situation of a hostile government, rape simply goes unchecked and often escalates, since perpetrators never have to face repercussions for their actions. Should the victims become pregnant, the perpetrators have the last laugh in this situation as they are guaranteed impunity for their actions, as well as the satisfaction of seeing their victims punished for crimes committed against them. In many areas of Sudan, pregnancy can only result from consensual sex (Zeijl), thus, the vast majority of these women that are found pregnant are accused of adultery, and punished according to the law and traditions of their country. Women who report being raped to the authorities are often arrested, fined, or even beaten for their “adultery,” a vicious cycle that leads to the satisfaction and encouragement of the perpetrators, and more silence and shame in their victims (“Crushing Burden” 7). This kind of impunity keeps the use of genocidal rape under the radar and barely addressed, adding to the continued eradication of the Darfurian people.

For those that would say that rape is a minor issue compared with more pressing matters of the politics involved in the Sudan issue, it must be understood that rape is part of the core that drives the matter. It is because of the rape, among other crimes, that is happening in Darfur which necessitates the response of the international community. Journalists Nicholas Kristof and Sheryl WuDuun report that rape is likely one of the largest human right issues of the twenty-first century. They demonstrate in the book, *Half the Sky: Turning Oppression into Opportunity for Women Worldwide*, that rape is “used systematically to terrorize certain ethnic groups. Mass rape is effective as slaughtering people” (Kristof and WuDunn 83). Because of the nature of the kind of rape being employed in the Darfur conflict, it is becoming an incredibly effective mechanism to divide communities and destroy the people – not just women, but their families as well. The slaughtering of civilians is equally as devastating as the destruction of their tribal structures, society, and physical bodies, not to mention the alienation and division of communities that genocidal rape causes. Rape is a tool that effectively and ruthlessly eliminates ethnic groups, and thus, fits perfectly and insidiously within the definition of genocide.

As women are obviously an integral part of every community, no matter what language, culture, or geographical location, a strategic attack launched specifically against women cuts a community, and thus villages, and states and nations, off at its knees. Founder of Doctors Without Borders, Bernard Kouchner, finds that “progress is achieved through women” (qtd. in Kristof and WuDunn xx) and the United Nations Development Programme concurs making a direct link to empowering women and increasing economic abilities for all (Kristof and WuDunn xx). A tool designed to destroy women, both physically and socially, prevents the success and prosperity of a community, culture, and ethnic group. This is well planned on the part of the Sudanese government and Janjaweed militia, whose aim is to destroy this particular ethnic group. Rape is often a fate worse than death because of its far reaching consequences for both the individual and the community (Reid-Cunningham 283), and so must be seen as an integral part of the Darfur genocide. It is to be hoped that the international community will direct attention to

the devastating effects of rape so that this genocidal madness can be stopped and a culture rebuilt.

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