Atrocities have a profound impact on women due to the weaponization of sexual and gender-based violence.

Mass atrocities impact men and women differently. While both male and female victims of mass atrocities suffer immensely, women face unique and profound vulnerabilities because of the weaponization of sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV). This brief will draw connections between SGBV and mass atrocities and advocate for an atrocity prevention framework that accounts for the gendered dynamics of mass atrocities. But first, it is important that mass atrocities be defined and explained.

Mass atrocities are “large scale and deliberate attacks on civilians. These attacks include – but are not limited to – genocide, crimes against humanity, and many war crimes, all of which are defined under international law,” in addition to ethnic cleansing, which is not defined under international law.1 When considering these it is crucial to note that SGBV is included under the definitions of mass atrocities, specifically as a crime against humanity. The Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court notes that “rape, sexual slavery, enforced prostitution, forced pregnancy, enforced sterilization, or any other form of sexual violence of comparable gravity” constitutes a crime against humanity. The inclusion of SGBV as a mass atrocity means that women, as the primary victims of SGBV, face unique risks. However, it provides an opportunity to combine atrocity prevention and SGBV prevention methods.

Atrocity prevention constitutes those actions that “decrease the likelihood of atrocities before those atrocities occur.”2 To date, most atrocity prevention action has existed in the form of national or international human rights and humanitarian law that is focused on causing change at high levels in the target governments or groups.

The primary example of this is the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) framework that was established in 2001 by the International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty (ICISS), and exists of three core pieces: 1) The responsibility to prevent, 2) the responsibility to react, and 3) the responsibility to rebuild.

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1 Allyson Neville, FCNL, “Preventing Genocide and Atrocities: Cause for Hope Despite the Challenges”, April 2016.
This brief will focus on the responsibility to prevent, and how it can be combined with programming and research designed to combat SGBV and increase the efficacy of atrocity prevention policy, advocacy, and programming. Specifically, what can the atrocity prevention community learn from research on SGBV programming and early risk assessment, and how can existing frameworks be improved to reflect knowledge gained?

Risk-Assessment Frameworks

Risk-assessment frameworks delineate the process of evaluating potential risks that may be involved in a projected activity. In the case of atrocity prevention, risk-assessment frameworks evaluate the potential risk of genocide or mass atrocities in a state. Currently, risk-assessment frameworks do not consider gender-specific indicators, but rather focus on broader indicators. Two of the most famous networks that conduct genocide risk-assessments are Barabara Harff’s Genocide Prevention Advisory Network (GPAN), and Gregory Stanton’s Genocide Watch. Both frameworks will be considered here to make a note of those indicators that are already included and deemed effective.

GPAN: Risk Assessments 2015: Potential State Perpetrators of Genocide and Politicide

The GPAN Risk Assessment is designed to indicate whether a country is at a low, medium, or high risk of genocide or politicide. The model is focused on five significant risk factors: “state-led discrimination against any ethnic or religious minority; exclusionary ideology held by a ruling elite; minority elite or contention over elite ethnicity; type of polity, autocracy vs democracy using a 20-point scale; and past use of genocidal policies.” While this framework is specifically designed to analyze the risk of genocide or politicide, both fall under the category of mass atrocity and as such many of the indicators are the same. The framework determines a Risk Index Score that highlights those countries most at risk of genocide or politicide.

Genocide Watch: Countries at Risk Report 2012

Genocide Watch uses a “Ten Stages of Genocide” method, based on GPAN’s analysis of risk indicators and developed by Gregory Stanton, to identify those countries at risk of genocide. This framework pushes the GPAN Risk Assessment further by specifically identifying which stage of the genocidal process different states have reached. The 10 stages include: classification, symbolization, discrimination, dehumanization, organization, polarization, preparation, persecution, extermination, and denial.

While these frameworks provide a useful and important starting point for identifying genocide risks, they have limited applicability due to their narrow focus on genocide. These frameworks must be adapted to respond to new research and concerns in the field, and expanded to account for a wider range of mass atrocities. Defining SGBV as a war crime, a crime against humanity, and a tool for genocide mandates that indicators demonstrating discriminatory practices against women be included in risk-assessment prevention frameworks. Gender-specific indicators have proven to be correlated with the level of internal conflict that a country experiences, and have the potential to be a useful indicator of mass atrocities.

For example, a United Nations International Research and Training Institute for the Advancement of Women report, A Site for Sore Eyes: Bringing Gender Vision to the Responsibility to Protect Framework, has proposed several potential indicators that could be included in risk-assessment frameworks. These include both economic and political indicators, such as female literacy rates, the percentage of women in parliament, barriers to women accessing land or credit, and many others. In addition, one scholar found that, in the cases of Nigeria and Burundi, data from the Global Gender Gap Report of the World Economic Forum more accurately predicted the likelihood of genocide than the Risk Index Score developed by Barbara Harff and Ted Gurr at GPAN. This indicates that the inclusion of gender-specific indicators could increase the efficacy of general and atrocity-based risk assessments.

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Rape During Violent Conflict: The Case of the Democratic Republic of the Congo

Scholars have identified rape as a means of systematic violence in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). The systematic use of rape as a violent tool is an atrocity. Rape and other forms of gender-based violence (GBV) are not byproducts of the violence, but rather an integral tactic used to destroy communities and gain power. Rape, the most common form of GBV in the DRC, occurs at every level of society and is uniquely used as a signaling tool. Attacks on individual women are seen not only as attacks against individuals, but also as attacks against the community and the men ‘responsible’ for the woman.

Women in the DRC live with fewer rights and privileges than their male counterparts. Specifically regarding GBV, women who are raped have little to no legal recourse. While laws prohibiting rape exist, significant barriers to accessing the justice system and corruption in the justice system have meant that “there have virtually never been any convictions for rape.”

Perpetrators of rape and other acts of GBV are fulfilling an ‘expected’ and accepted role; the DRC’s militarized society has established the idea that masculinity and violence are tied, and the military has provided an outlet for men to gain prominence by using violent action to establish their masculinity. This system contributes to and reinforces the acceptance of GBV, specifically rape, in the DRC. Changing the pattern of rape demands changing the narrative.

Mass Rape and Genocide in Guatemala

Guatemala experienced a civil war from 1960 – 1996, during which the state, as a ‘counter-insurgency’ measure, conducted a genocide against the Mayan population. Perpetrators of the genocide used widespread and systematic sexual violence including, but not limited to rape, sexual slavery, and torture. Following the end of the civil war, the Commission for Historical Clarification was established to document human rights abuses. The Commission identified 1,465 cases of GBV, including the selective rape of human rights defenders, and mass rape.

In this case, the genocide was acknowledged and top officials were tried on charges of crimes against humanity. In addition, civil society established a Tribunal of Conscience for Women Survivors of Sexual Violence that pushed for accountability for the crimes and allowed women to share their experiences from the conflict.

Understanding Gender-based Violence in South Sudan: a community participatory response

South Sudan has faced periods of extended violence and insecurity since its independence in 2011. Throughout this time, GBV has been one of the most pervasive forms of violence. In South Sudan, research has shown that both men and women accept GBV. To determine this, researchers conducted verbally-administered surveys at seven sites in South Sudan. Their questions sought to determine the frequency of GBV, as well as attitudes about the violence.

The research concluded that many people were aware of GBV and intimate-partner violence that was occurring in their communities. In addition, the research shows broad support for the ideas that “a woman should tolerate violence in order to keep her family together,” and “there are times when a woman deserves to be beaten.” The broad acceptance of GBV by both men and women indicates that in order to decrease GBV, attitudes surrounding GBV must be altered. This discovery led to the suggestion that GBV programming should focus on understanding and addressing the tolerance of violence and be focused on changing the attitudes and beliefs of younger generations.

It is important to note that GBV in this context does not qualify as a mass atrocity because it is not “part of a widespread or systematic attack directed against any civilian population.” However, understanding and combating the mindsets that allow GBV to exist in day to day life is crucial to ensure that communities are prepared to respond in case a group seeks to use GBV as a tool against a civilian population.

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On the Ground Action: Gender Sensitive Protection in Chad

The peacekeeping mission MINURCAT: United Nations Mission in the Central African Republic and Chad implemented gender sensitive protection in Chad for refugees and internally displaced peoples (IDPs) that assisted in ensuring protection and the prevention of violence and other threats. While there was relatively little evidence of SGBV in Chad, it was deemed an area of risk and thus gender-sensitive protection and prevention measures were introduced in refugee and IDP communities.

The peacekeeping action in Chad included introducing the Detachment Integre de Securite (DIS), a UN sanctioned security actor that was tasked with maintaining rule of law in refugee and IDP camps. The DIS proved instrumental in reaching out to and providing protection to women in camps by having 10% of its 1000 personnel force be female. This was crucial because women were not allowed to talk to strange men, which obstructed them from accessing resources that could be provided by male DIS officers. The female DIS officers, however, were accessible to women at places considered to be traditionally female, such as at wells and in homes by wearing civilian attire. Female DIS officers were often the first to hear about cases of SGBV and were able to implement responses quickly because they were better able to communicate with the female population in the camps.

Mercy Corps in Niger: Inviting Men to Husband School

In rural Niger, Mercy Corps is changing the narrative about what it means to be a “man” by inviting men to attend husband school. The goal of the program is to strengthen homes and communities by developing a more equitable breakdown of labor within the home. This leads to stronger and healthier households and communities. How does this relate to SGBV or mass atrocities? By inviting men to participate more in their daily lives at home, Mercy Corps is challenging toxic masculinities that support the notion that the only way to prove oneself is through violence or other “masculine” activities. Instead, men are learning that providing for their families by supporting their wives is a healthy and beneficial way to be a man.

Recommendations

Atrocity prevention frameworks and sexual and gender-based violence programming must become better integrated to increase the efficacy of atrocity prevention efforts, especially with regard to women. Case analysis demonstrates an acceptance of SGBV in many at-risk countries that must be combatted through a diverse program of changes.

- Genocide atrocity frameworks are being employed to identify places at risk of genocide for targeted prevention efforts. These frameworks can be applied to mass atrocities more broadly by developing and including gender-specific indicators of discriminatory practices against women in risk-assessment frameworks.
- Provide gender-specific training to peacekeepers and UN and governmental personnel in high-risk areas. In addition, peacekeeping and governmental forces should include women to increase women's ability to access security forces.
- Many women throughout the world are living in positions where they are deemed “less than” their male counterparts. This contributes to an acceptance of SGBV. International agencies should focus on addressing inequitable norms and practices that place women at increased risk of suffering from mass atrocities.
- Women’s roles in society cannot be changed without addressing the roles that men serve within the same societies. Dangerous perceptions of masculinity are a contributing factor to SGBV. Toxic masculinities that contribute to the acceptance of SGBV must be combatted and replaced so that prevention of SGBV is a goal supported by communities in full.
- While prevention of mass atrocities, specifically SGBV is the ideal, it is crucial that following acts of SGBV women have a safe and secure way to ensure their future safety and the safety of others around them. This can be provided through prosecution of perpetrators, but that requires that barriers for women seeking to access the legal system be removed.