

NOBEL LAUREATES GATHER IN QUEBEC TO CAMPAIGN AGAINST RAPE

GLORIA GALLOWAY

It is a crime that is perpetrated against the most vulnerable members of the world's most broken societies – one that destroys the lives of its victims and rips apart the fabric of communities.

Sexual assault is increasingly being used as a weapon of warfare, especially in clashes that are tribal or ethnic in nature. For that reason, Jody Williams decided it is time the issue was confronted head on. "There has always been rape in war, yes," says Ms. Williams, the Nobel Peace Prize winner for her work to eradicate land mines. "But using it specifically as a tactic of war seems relatively new and on the scale that we're seeing it in the Congo, in Darfur, Rwanda, Bosnia, Burma."

Ms. Williams, an American, was joined in Montebello, Que., on Tuesday by two other female Nobel peace laureates – Mairead Corrigan Maguire of Ireland and Shirin Ebadi of Iran – to talk about rape in conflict zones. They invited more than 100 women from around the world to join them, many of whom have experienced sexual violence.

"It's something we all feel uncomfortable talking about," Ms. Maguire said. "But we really have to face this as perhaps the worst form of violence next to actually killing someone."

What it does to victims

In April of 1992, Bakira Hasecic was at home with her husband and two daughters, aged 13 and 18, in their town of Visegrad in Bosnia when a knock came at the door.

It was Veljko Planincic, the local police chief, who was also her next-door neighbour and a fishing buddy of her husband. Also known by the nickname "Goodtimes," Mr. Planincic was an ethnic Serb and an Orthodox Christian. Ms. Hasecic and her family are Muslims. The attempts of the non-Christian Bosnians to establish independence from Serbia had left the neighbours at war.

Mr. Planincic arrived with 15 other men. Ms. Hasecic knew all but two of them, she said.

The men demanded money and she gave it to them. But it was not enough. They forced her 18-year-old daughter into a bedroom where, as the family watched in horror, one of the two men she did not know raped the girl before their eyes.

Mr. Planincic and others held a rifle at their heads and warned them not to move but Ms. Hasecic would not sit still. She ran to the bedroom and jumped on the back of the rapist. The attackers pulled her off.

“I cannot believe a human being could rape a neighbour, especially in such a small town where everybody knows everybody,” she said, the tears forming gentle lines over the bridge of her nose.

As the man climbed off the daughter, he smashed his rifle butt into the girl’s head, fracturing her skull. She survived.

But the family was held under house arrest and both Ms. Hasecic and the girl were repeatedly raped in the following weeks by the Serbs who occupied their village.

Ms. Hasecic’s sister was even less fortunate. Her home was turned into a rape camp by the Serb forces and she died there after repeated sexual assaults.

“Gang rapes were used as a strategic weapon of ethnic cleansing,” said Ms. Hasecic.

““Whatever they could kill, rape, plunder, they did it.”

What it does to communities

Rape is a tool of ethnic cleansing: Forced impregnation dilutes ethnic bloodlines.

But it is also an effective method of causing the societal breakdown of an opposing tribe or clan. In Sudan, for instance, the Janjaweed Arab militia are “raping women of different ethnic communities to destroy the fabric of the community,” said Jody Williams.

“If you rape one woman in a village, you are certain to destroy that family because the husband will, 99.9 per cent of the time, divorce her.

“If you rape enough women in that village, you destroy the society in that village. If you rape enough women in enough villages of a certain ethnic group, you destroy it.”

It is easy, and it is effective, she said. It is carried out both with the tacit consent of military leaders and by men for whom the rules of society have been overwritten by the violent world they inhabit.

“Where the traditional values or traditional ways of treating each other as humans break down then people start to do things they wouldn’t have done normally,” said Ms. Williams. “And that is part of the horror of war that is frequently overlooked, ignored, not talked about because it’s too uncomfortable.”

Rape is a most effective tool when women traditionally do not stray far from their homes and their crops. It leaves them untouchable in the eyes of their society, outcast and alone.

And sometimes it leaves them pregnant with the child of the enemy, or with a virus like AIDS.

Wangu Kanja of Kenya was raped in 2002 as she walked home from work in Nairobi. It was an act of ordinary thugs, not soldiers. But she started a group for victims that has ended up ministering to the many women were assaulted as a result of the political unrest of 2008.

Women and children are routinely the victims of tribal warfare, said Ms. Kanja. While the men are out fighting, they are not home to protect their families. For the rapists, she said, "It's a win situation. For them it's a victory."

Countries where it happens most

Going back to the earliest human record, invading armies have made sexual prey of the women and children in the lands of their conquest.

But in recent years these assaults have increased as military organizations condone and even encourage attacks as an effective tool of war.

Here are some of the global conflict zones where rape is or has been widespread, as reported in a brief completed in September 2010 for the Bonn International Centre for Conversion, an international agency focused on peace and development.

Democratic Republic of the Congo: Rape has been used as a military strategy, particularly by the Forces Democratique de liberation du Rwanda in retaliation against the DRC government. The victims are often told they are being punished for collaboration. Rapes are deliberately committed in front of witnesses, often family members, and gang rapes are common. Last year there were nearly 15,000 new cases of sexual assault reported in the DRC.

Sudan: Rape has been a constant tool the Janjaweed, an Arab militia that has been in conflict with Darfur rebel groups since 2003. Women are continually under threat and gang rapes are frequent. Some experts suggest it is a form of ethnic cleansing. Women who report the crime are often punished themselves.

Nepal: The armed conflict that raged between the Communist Party of Nepal and pro-government forces between 1996 and 2006 produced many rape victims, most of them young girls. The majority of the assaults appear to have been committed by government security services who acted with impunity.

Bosnia and Herzegovina: The Bosnia Serb militia is widely reported to have committed rapes during the civil war of the 1990s. There were rape camps where girls and women were brought to be sexually assaulted. Women were taken as sexual slaves. Fathers were forced to rape daughters and brothers to rape sisters.

East Timor: During the Indonesian occupation of East Timor between 1975 and 1999, there were reports of rapes committed both by the Indonesian military forces and by the Timorese militias. Women were taken as sex slaves, especially if they were known to be supportive of

independence or married to a member of a pro-independence group.

How to stop it

There have been three resolutions of the UN Security Council since 2000 that call on parties in a conflict to protect women from sexual violence and urge countries to bring perpetrators to justice.

But Jody Williams says there has been no consistent enforcement.

“We have all these resolutions at the UN. They are fine. But if you don’t try to get states to actively implement them, they are just words on paper,” said Ms. Williams.

The Nobel Women’s Initiative, of which Ms. Williams is a member, sees the solution in prosecution.

It argues that

- Impunity must be ended for sexual violence
- Money must be provided for medical and legal services
- A survivor-centric approach must be adopted for all programming
- The UN Security Council resolutions that aim to protect women and children from sexual assaults in conflict zones must be enforced
- There must be reparations for survivors
- Reporting of sexual violence must be standardized
- Prevention must be enhanced

Bev Oda, Canada’s International Development Minister, said she raises the issue with foreign governments at every opportunity – especially in situations where the countries are receiving Canadian aid.

On a tour of Sri Lanka, Ms. Oda said she was invited to visit a police station at a refugee camp where rape victims could report the crimes. And it quickly became apparent that the police did not speak the same language as the women who had been assaulted.

“When I pointed it out to the President of Sri Lanka, he happened to have the chief of police in the same building so he brought him in and told him it was not acceptable,” said Ms. Oda.

But “here were these victims who are living in tents and getting [no more than the] the

necessities of life, not knowing what their futures are, being told that there is access to redress,” she said. “However, when they go there [to the police station], there’s no one there who can appropriately help them.” theglobeandmail.com

Ending sexual violence in armed conflict

By Suzana Vukic

“My next door neighbour – a police officer at the time – Veljko Planincic, forced his way into our home, accompanied by about 20-30 individuals – members of the JNA (Yugoslav National Army).....one of these men...raped my older daughter (18) in a bedroom in front of my husband, myself, and my younger daughter (15). After this, they busted her head with the butt of a rifle....”, recounted Bakira with great difficulty.

“...I was taken (and raped) from May 21st, 1992 onwards – the first time at the local police station, the second time at a local high school, and the third time at an institute for women and children with intellectual deficiencies. I survived Golgotha. I witnessed slaughter, killings. I was raped and sexually violated numerous times....”

Bakira Hasecic, president of the Sarajevo-based association Women Victims of War, was describing some of the horrors that she and her family lived through during the Bosnian war when Serb forces overtook her town, Visegrad, in eastern Bosnia, ethnically cleansing its majority Bosniak (Bosnian Muslim) population. She addressed journalists, parliamentarians and stakeholders at a breakfast meeting and panel discussion following an international three-day conference hosted by the Nobel Women’s Initiative – “Women Forging a New Security: Ending Sexual Violence in Conflict.” It was held in Montebello, Quebec from May 23-25.

Six Nobel peace laureates joined forces in 2006 to create the Nobel Women’s Initiative. Three of them – Jody Williams, Mairead Corrigan Maguire, and Shirin Ebadi, were at last week’s conference. The others – Betty Williams, Wangari Maathai, and Rigoberta Menchu, could not be present. These incredible women sought to use the strength and power of the Nobel Peace Prize to promote women’s groups and causes on a global scale, working towards peace, justice and equality.

The conference focused on the devastation faced by women around the world in situations of armed conflict. Sexual violence is being used increasingly as an effective war strategy in places like Sudan and the Democratic Republic of Congo. Over 120 women from all over the world were present. Some, like Bakira, have survived unspeakable forms of rape and shared their stories. Other women from various government and non-governmental organizations, including media, were there to offer their input on strategy. A number of concepts were discussed as methods of putting an end to sexual violence in warfare: offering adequate support to survivors; fighting for justice; and banishing the concept of impunity.

By chance, I learned one week prior to this event that Bakira would be coming to Canada for the conference. I made plans to go down to Montebello and meet this amazing woman in person. It was impossible to attend the conference, already booked beyond capacity. However, through some glitches that arose, I ended up with the privilege of picking up Bakira at the airport and driving her to Montebello. I also replaced her interpreter Wednesday afternoon at the conference and accompanied Bakira to the breakfast meeting in Ottawa on Thursday, May 26.

Bakira is an incredibly strong and resilient woman. This is what made her become a Bosnian army fighter the minute she and her family could escape their tormentors. But regardless of how tough she is, it's still very difficult for Bakira to tell her story. Yet she does it every chance she gets. The world must not forget what happened during the Bosnian war.

Bringing war criminals to justice has become Bakira's mission. On Wednesday morning, she made a speech at the conference highlighting Bosnian Serb war criminal, Ratko Mladic – one of the three architects of the Bosnian genocide who remained at large (at that point). She asked for everyone's help in bringing this man to justice.

The following morning while driving to Ottawa for the meeting, I got a call informing me of the astounding news of Mladic's arrest the previous evening. I had the honour of being the first to announce this incredible news to Bakira, to her absolute delight. I was also blessed with the privilege of standing by Bakira's side and interpreting for her at the meeting while she made the announcement of Mladic's arrest, news which was greeted by the audience with a solid round of applause.

Bakira ended her announcement and the story of her personal suffering with a request to everyone present to do everything possible to seek the arrest of war criminals being harboured in Canada.