

# Violence Against Women During the 1991 Ethnic Conflicts of the East Gonja District of Ghana

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## **Abstract**

*Armed conflict impacts negatively on society but women, more than any other vulnerable group, suffer most from the pangs of the violence that attend them. This study examines violence against women during the 1991 ethnic conflicts of the East Gonja District of Ghana. A qualitative approach entailing in-depth interviews and focus group discussions was employed to generate and analyze data for the analysis. Gender perspectives on conflict were employed as the theoretical underpinning of the study. The findings showed that violence against women was pervasive during the conflict and included physical violence characterized by body injuries, decimation of children, molestation of expectant mothers and internal displacement and emotional/psychological abuse. However, contrary to the literature, sexual violence was not a part of the experiences of women during that at conflict due the scale and socio-cultural beliefs of the warring factions. Hence, it concludes that the experiences of violence under conflict settings differ and must be understood as such instead of the resort to sweeping generalizations. It is recommended that a true reconciliation is needed to foster unity among the ethnic groups so as to pave the way for permanent peace and development. More importantly, counseling services and financial empowerment are required to enable the women take back their lives.*

**KEY WORDS:** Ethnic Conflict, Violence against Women, Gender, Armed Conflict Culture

## **Introduction**

Violent or armed conflicts result in numerous and varied degrees of effects on people and property as well as society at large. Rehn and Sirleaf (2002) explain that violent conflicts forcibly uproot hundreds of thousands of civilians every year, communities are being torn apart by war and intimidation, terror, murder, sexual violence and forced displacement leaving survivors without basic necessities of life. They observe that this may be a careful calculation by combatants and not often an indirect effect of war. In conflict situations,

women, while affected by the above are also particularly vulnerable to sexual violence even as they often become the remaining breadwinners when their lives and those of children are spared. The breakdown of law and order, characteristic of warfare, often results in wayward combatants taking undue advantage of the situation to perpetrate violence against women (VAW) and girls and thus violate their fundamental human rights (Moser and Clark, 2002). The victimized and surviving women are left with physical wound, social stigma and especially psychological trauma. Some of the victims may carry unwanted pregnancies while others may risk acquiring HIV/AIDS. Their husbands may divorce them and those who are not married may not find marriage partners in the societies where the chastity of women is tied to their eligibility for marriage.

In 1991, the seeming peace and tranquility of the East Gonja District was shattered when war struck. The inter-ethnic conflict that broke out between the Gonja and the Nawuri caused social upheaval with various ramifications. The conflicting claims regarding the relationship between the Gonja and Nawuri was cited as a plausible cause. The Gonja claim that after conquering what is now East Gonja, they settled the Nawuri on the conquered land and placed them under Gonja chiefs. By implication the Nawuri have no chiefs and therefore cannot have lands on their own. The Nawuri dispute this account, insisting that the relationship between them and the Gonja has not been one of conquest where there has been an overload and subjects. The Konkomba soon joined the conflict as allies of the Nawuri on slightly different grounds; that they (the Konkomba) had been over-taxed by the Gonja, their landlords (Awedoba, 2009).

In the first encounter in April 1991, the Gonja were victorious in driving out the Nawuri from the Kpandai area leaving behind a Gonja armed force which occupied the town. However, in June the same year, the Nawuri and their allies struck back fiercely leading to the withdrawal of the Gonja occupation force from Kpandai, a major town in that part of East Gonja. The Government of Ghana intervened by setting up the Justice Appiah Committee to investigate the causes of the conflict and make recommendations. The Committee completed its work in December 1991 but realizing the volatile nature of the area, it recommended immediate implementation of aspects of the Report (Brukum, 1992).

While government action was necessary and warranted, inarguably the work of the committee in their limited term could not unearth all the effects of the conflicts and definitely not enough for dealing with them. Above all, the Committee's task did not include a gender mandate yet from various studies, women were said to have been particularly targeted by combatants. Hence, this paper sought to examine the gender aspects of the conflict but with a focus on the particular situation of violence against women.

The objective of this paper is to explore the nature of violence perpetrated against women in the conflict. Even though the entire communities suffer in armed conflict situations, reports on wars in the print and electronic media and even in academic research are in

most cases silent on the experiences of women in armed situations and often concentrate on the destruction of physical infrastructure and social amenities probably because of the direct cost to the state (Yahaya, 2007). Women do not constitute a separate and homogenous group. Women are the wives, mothers and daughters of men who make war and their lives are inseparable from those of their male relatives and neighbours. Both sexes are adversely affected by armed conflict but women are more vulnerable than all other social groups affected due to their subjugated position in society. Yet, women's voices about their plight in conflict situations have not often been heard (Rehn and Sirleaf, 2002). Women's particular location as non-combatants exposes them to various forms of violence that can be physical, social, economic, sexual and emotional, yet their experiences are often under reported or ignored. Therefore, there is the need to make an effort to find out specifically the implications and nature of violence against women during armed conflict from their own voices.

The main questions of concern are: Did women experience violence during the 1991 East Gonja conflict? What was the nature of the violence perpetrated against the women? What was the influence of the people's culture on sexual violence? Were women displaced by the conflict compelling them to seek refuge elsewhere? And what could be done to ameliorate or mitigate the negative impacts of the conflict on the women?

## **Literature Review**

### **Conceptualizing conflict and violence**

Social conflict includes all activities in which people contend against one another for any objective (Maclver and Page, 2007:64). Cockburn (1999) argues that violence and conflict are not the same. Conflict can be non-violent whereas violence by definition involves the use of force and this could be physical or psychological. The difference between them depends on the fact that conflict does not necessarily inflict physical or psychological harm on others, while violence does by its very nature. Negotiation can resolve conflict without resulting in violence. However, the failure to find amicable solution to a conflict can pave the way to violence (Yahaya, 2007). VAW refers to any act of gender-based violence that results in or is likely to result in physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion, or arbitrary deprivations of liberty, whether occurring in public or private (Cusack, 1999:31).

### **Theory and gender perspective on violence against women**

Ritzer (1995) argues that theories of gender oppression describe women's situation as the consequence of a direct power relationship between male and female in which the males have power which enables them to control, subjugate and oppress women. Ritzer explains that gender oppression is a by-product of patriarchy, an old institution which arrogates power to men and makes women second to the former. However, Jaggar (1983) argues

that women and men are equal in their social abilities. Despite this potential of women, men dominate women and oppress them, which Jaggar blames on patriarchy which is understood as male dominance of all institutions in society.

Rehn and Sirleaf (2002) express their view that VAW is a universal phenomenon. Women are victims of violence because they do not have the same rights or autonomy that men enjoy. Women are subjected to gender-based persecution, discrimination and oppression. Sarah (1998), points out that because excessive forms of VAW go largely unpunished, it tends to be an acceptable norm which is exacerbated during armed conflict as violence in general escalates. Sexual violence and rape are systematic and deliberate strategies of wars. Most authors analyse rape as an act of social or interpersonal violence (Turshen, 1999). Also, the view point of Machel (2001) is that no woman is exempt from violence and exploitation. During conflict, women and girls are attacked because they are related to adversaries, or simply because the women are at home when the enemy combatants arrive to fight. According to Rehn and Sirleaf (2002), the number of women casualties in conflict times cannot be overemphasized. The few deaths and injuries that are discovered in conflict communities are enough evidence to postulate that women encounter violence in conflict situations.

Rehn and Sirleaf (2002:16), postulate that men who have witnessed and perpetrated violence during war seem to continually act violently to their families in the aftermath of conflict. The violence remains in their minds in post conflict times and this traumatizes and frustrate them leading to aggression. The situation is aggravated by lack of jobs, shelter and life enhancing services. Rehn and Sirleaf (2002:37) observed that the “war-affected populations suffer traumatic stress disorders”. They further stated that several studies of the psychological state of conflict-affected populations and ex-combatants demonstrate that the experience of violence makes a deep impression or a manifestation on the human psyche.

Seifert (1995) observes that rape and sexual violence appear to be a universal and widespread characteristic of warfare. This is ignited by the general breakdown of law and order paving the way for sexual violence against women in times of conflict. For instance in Rwanda, the militias and the military defied state law and became unruly and undisciplined and perpetrated sexual violence against women (Turshen: 2001). According to the 2008 United Nations Report on Women in Conflict Situations, an average of 40 women are raped every day in south Kivu, Democratic Republic of Congo; between 20,000 and 50,000 adult females were raped during the war in Bosnia in the early 1990s; in Sierra Leone, between 50,000 and 64,000 women were internally displaced and suffered rape by combatants. Also, the Memorial Notes of the Rwandan genocide recorded a figure of about 500,000 women who were victims of rape during 100 days of armed conflict.

Rape is also used as a strategy by combatants to frustrate their enemy or opposing group in a bid to have victory over them on the battlefield. Captured women may lose their freedom, birth rights and in some cases are forcefully used as sex partners and

subjected rape by adversary soldiers with the deliberate intent of humiliating the men of an opposing group and defeating their masculinity (Enloe, 2000:109). Of course, this is not only a perception because in most conflicts as well as in times of peace, the reality is that men, compared to women, tend to perpetuate rape by forcing themselves on women (Zarkov, 1999) Hence, a gender perspective on VAW is necessary for reaching a deeper understanding on the effects of conflict. This paper discusses the types of violence and how this violence adversely affects women. It explains why it is appropriate to use the perspective as a basis for theorizing. The propositions made by Rehn and Sirleaf (2002) and Seifert (1995) help to buttress this point.

### **Culture, women and conflict**

Culture refers to the social heritage of a people – those learned patterns for thinking, feeling, and acting that are transmitted from one generation to the next, including the embodiment of these patterns in material items (Hughes and Kroehler, 2009 :41). Culture can also be said to be the total shared way of life of a given people which comprised their mode of thinking, acting and feeling and which is expressed, for instance, in religion, law, language, art and custom, as well as in material products such as houses, clothes and tools (Kneller, 1965:4). According to Lindsey (2002), women are likely to be vulnerable in all conflict times if they are perceived as symbolic bearers or custodians of culture and ethnic identity as well as the producers of the future generations of their communities. In such situations women may be vulnerable to attack or threats from their own community members for not being able to conform to these roles as a result of conflict. Byrne (1995) argues that women and girls might be the most likely victims of armed conflict. This is either directly as fatalities and casualties or indirectly through the breakdown of family and community structures. The construction of identities of women in their gendered roles as mothers, guardians and transmitters of the culture to the next generation implies that they are vulnerable to violence in conflict times. These socio – cultural roles of women exert enormous pressure on them in peace times and are being exacerbated in conflict situations. The traditional roles they perform explain why they are affected directly or indirectly in conflict times.

It can be deduced from the views of Rehn and Sirleaf (2002) that women do not enjoy equal status with men in some societies and during armed conflict; a pre – existing culture of discrimination is often exacerbated. Sexual violence against women on the basis of racism, ethnicity, religion or political affiliation is prominent in analysis of sexual violence such as rape during conflict situation. For instance, the perpetration of rape in Bosnian conflicts has some cultural connotation. It was particularly designed to drive women from their homes or destroy the possibility of women been able to reproduce children within and ‘for’ their community (Copelon 1995:205). Women suffer from violence by men because the total way of life is evolved by men living together as a social unit determining standard for virtue and honour (Agyeman, 1993)

The concept of virtue and family honour as a cultural demand further objectifies women. This explains the need to protect a woman's chastity or virginity for the reputation of her family and for the successful arrangement of a girl's marriage. According to Turshen (1998), the political economy of rape during armed conflicts in Rwanda and Mozambique revealed that rape was pervasive because of women's identity as society's reproducers of future generation.

Most women try to enforce their claims of chastity by asserting that they have 'behaved in an appropriate manner, as upright wives, original daughters, good mothers and virtuous widow' (Jefremovas 1999: 382). In view of this cultural determinant, bearing an illegitimate child (outside marriage) classifies women as loose, frees the family from any responsibility to provide for her and protect her, and also carries considerable social stigma against her family (Jefremovas 1991:383). In this context, surviving rape and bearing the rapist's child means loss of family support, community's respect and livelihood. This compels women to conceal their experiences of sexual assault if it is possible for them to do so (Turshen, 1998). The victimized women are mostly reticent; they do not speak about sexual violence or report incidents of sexual abuse when victimized. This may be so because, many times, when such a crime becomes known, they can be ostracised or treated with contempt (Ekeyor, 2002)

## **Research Methods**

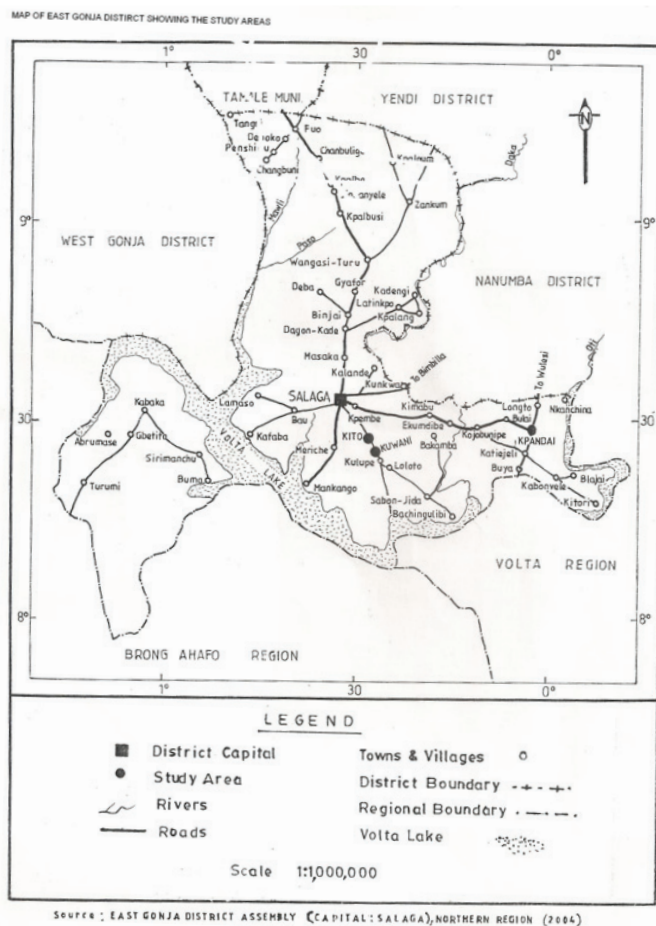
### **Study Area**

The study was conducted in the East Gonja District of the Northern Region of Ghana. It shares boundaries with many Districts such as the West Dagomba, West Gonja, Kete-Krachie, Nanumba and Atebubu districts of Ghana (Demuyakor, 1992). Three communities were purposively selected for the study. These are Kuwani, Kpandai, and Kito, which are settlements of Konkomba, Nawuri and Gonja respectively and are also the three main ethnic groups involved in the 1991 armed conflict discussed in this paper.

Kuwani is a Konkomba community situated on the Salaga – Sabonjida feeder road. It is about eight miles from Salaga and two miles away from Kito. Kito is a Gonja village six miles away from Salaga and on the Salaga to Sabon-jida road. It is dominated by the Gonja with hardly any other ethnicities. Kuwani and Kito share a major resource, a dam, which is a main source of water, sited between the two communities. The two communities also interact economically through petty trading and farming on the same stretch of land. In the case of the third community, Kpandai, it is a Nawuri community but also home to people of diverse ethnicities. It is about 48 miles to the South-East of Salaga.



**Fig 1: Map of East Gonja Showing the three Study Communities among others**



### Research Design

The study design was descriptive involving the use of qualitative tools. Both primary and secondary data were gathered. The primary data were obtained from the study area while secondary data were gathered from the review of documented materials such as review of books related to the topic. Participants were purposively selected from each of the three communities. In each community, the chief’s household was the first source for collecting data. This was done because chiefs’ households have mostly been the targets and sources of traditional conflict. The palace often bears the pangs of traditional aggression. The selection of the three communities and the number or size of respondents (15 women) interviewed was in accordance to Bamberger’s (2002) assertion that in dealing with qualitative studies the size of the population does not matter but the quality of the work

is of foremost importance. In-depth interviews were conducted during the collection of primary data. This was found to be the most appropriate tool as almost all respondents were illiterate or semi-literate and could not read the research guide and write their responses independently. Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) were also conducted in each village to complement the in-depth interviews. Each FGD consisted of 6 women. The respondents were purposively selected for both the interviews and group discussions. This implies that only women who were available or present in the respective villages when the conflict happened and were willing and ready to be interviewed or participate in FGDs were considered for the exercise. The responses were recorded, transcribed, coded, analyzed and presented as tables, narratives and anecdotes.

### **Women's Experiences of Violence During the Conflict**

According to Rehn and Sirleaf (2002), history is reticent on VAW in conflict situations. Women are humiliated in public by being stripped naked while the others of the opposite sex watch. Violence includes using guns to puncture their wombs, torture in front of their relations, forcing of rifles and other harmful objects into their vaginas, beating of pregnant women, inducing miscarriages and ripping of foetus from wombs. Also, women are being kidnapped, blindfolded and beaten publicly (Rehn and Sirleaf, 2002). Lindsey (2002) observes that domestic violence is pervasive during peace time and it becomes aggravated during and post conflict times. Reasons accountable for the higher incidence of violence or sexual abuse include the availability of light weapons, the violence male family members experience during armed conflict and the absence of jobs, and basic social amenities may frustrate men and lead them to VAW.

Machel (2001) argues that the deployment of security officers in conflict zones should have been advantageous to the vulnerable group because they provide security. However, the negative repercussions are also numerous. Police and other civilian officials often take advantage of women's socio-economic powerlessness even when they are in custody. Others are taken advantage off during conflict and displacement to offer sex in exchange for material support such as food and clothing. There are situations where women have been sexually assaulted and tortured as a form of interrogation. In some instances, women who become sex workers as a result of conflict, are routinely arrested and forced to have sex with security officers. The bodies of women become part of a barter system, a form of exchange that leads to the purchase the basic needs of life without using money but women's bodies as medium of exchange (Rehn and Sirleaf, 2002; Fetherston, 1995).

The wars and conflicts of northern Ghana are often treated as men's wars. Men are seen as combatants who suffer casualties at the battle front. However, as noted above, women also are often targeted by enemy factions as ransom, spoils of war and bearers of combatants. Although women are often not combatants or on the battle front, such targeting often leads to physical, sexual and emotional harm. Women's bodies are targeted



sexually, as the gendered repercussion of wars and conflict. In this section, I present and discuss women's experiences of violence during the war.

### **Sexual Violence**

Respondents were asked whether they experienced sexual violence or rape during the time of the conflict and how such phenomenon relates to culture. The respondents were unanimous that no one among them was sexually harassed or raped. They were also not aware of any reported rape case(s) by combatant(s). Only one respondent in Kpandai explained that her friend told her that she had been sexually harassed by a fighter but she was not raped.

The responses of the Konkomba community (Kuwani) reveal the following:

In Konkomba tradition it is a taboo to sleep with a woman during war whether in the room or outside. Our tradition taboos us to forcibly sleep with a woman. Anyone who has sex with a woman by force will be charged to pay money and fowls to pacify our gods to cleanse the land. In our tradition, if you sleep with a woman during war, you certainly will lose the war. Our elders say: a man must be clean before embarking on war. If he is impure, then he is bound to lose the war. Purity we believe fortifies a combatant or warrior

The respondents were asked during Focus Group Discussions if there were aware of incidents of rape and/or sexual harassments of women by combatants. The respondents in Kpandai gave the following answers:

In our tradition, we believe in juju but it only works for us when we are pure spiritually and we are also right. We do not get access to women during war time to have sex with them because sex is a dirty act and it makes us impure. The consequence of sex during war time is that it nullifies our entire juju and makes us spiritually weak. A combatant can be called upon at any time to the battle field, if he is in a state of impurity, he cannot answer the call because he can die at the battle field. We do not force women to sleep with them because the sin is equal to murder. Rape is equal to murder in the tradition of Nawuri. Any man who rapes a woman is charged to pay a sheep, goat, two hens, pot of pito and money to the chief. The woman who is raped is sent to the outskirts of the town by her colleagues women who will strip her naked and bathed her before she will be cleaned. The raped woman will be made to carry a gun during the time of the bathing to signify that she commits a sin equal to murder. The animals will be slaughtered and the blood poured on the woman to cleanse her (spiritually) and the land

Also, during FGDs in Kito the following response was given to the same question:

In Gonja tradition, we do believe that we have traditional medicine known as juju which helps us to fight and this juju abhors numerous things including sex during a time of conflict when we are supposed to make use of it. Any man who forcibly has sex with a woman in our community is made to offer animals such as sheep, goat and fowl which will be killed to pacify the gods of the land so that calamity like drought and soil infertility will not happen in the community. During conflict, we invoke the help of our gods and ancestors to fight. The gods abhor impurity such as having sexual intercourse with our wives and outside sex. Therefore we avoid sex entirely in order to please our gods so that they will give us strength to fight. Sleeping with women in conflict times is forbidden let alone forcing women to sleep with them when everybody is busy fighting

The responses from the FGDs and interviews indicate that there were no reported rape cases during the 1991 inter-ethnic conflict in East Gonja. According to the respondents their socio-cultural norms served as sources of protection for women against rape in their communities during the conflict situation. The respondents were of the view that their traditions forbade combatants to have sexual intercourse with their wives let alone other women when in combat. Engaging in sexual exploits was believed to go against their spirituality. It was said to spoil their protection as would break and dull the potency and cover of their protective medicine, juju. According to them, combatants must be pure and clean in order to be covered by the spiritual protection they employ during war. Customarily, sexual intercourse is considered a “dirty and impure act,” hence indulging in it would defile the combatant and their protection.

This finding contradicts the views of Rehn and Sirleaf (2002) and Seifert (1995) that rape and sexual violence appear to be universal and widespread characteristics of all conflicts. Seifert (1995) observes that the general breakdown in law and order is perhaps responsible for sexual violence in times of conflict. It is also a war strategy of combatants to adopt rape in order to demoralise their enemy to have victory over them (Enloe, 2000). Surprisingly, this tactic of war was not reported by the women as being used by the combatants of any of the warring sides. It is, however, significant to note that Rehn and Sirleaf (2002), and Seifert (1995), made their observations and propositions with regard to rape by taking into consideration large scale and long term conflicts which were fought in countries such as Liberia and Sierra Leone and yet generalized into all situation.

The socio-cultural background of the traditional society which were characterized by religious beliefs, taboos, and cultural beliefs and practices as stated by the respondents shielded the women against sexual violence and rape. This is an important finding that overturns the commonly held view and research finding that sexual violence and rape is characteristics of war and conflict. Although sexual harassment and rape and indeed all forms of VAW are unacceptable globally, yet it has often been used in war and conflict situations. Sexual harassment and rape have often been used as part of the trophies

and spoils of war and conflict. Yet, in this particular case, it is the cultural traditions and beliefs which saved women from such heinous crimes. The respondents explained that combatants do not only use physical strength and weapons to fight but invoke the assistance of deities, gods and ancestors, who have stringent conditionalities, one of which is abstinence from sexual intercourse.

According to Gyekye (2003:162)

The ancestors are believed to be interested in the welfare of their descendants and ever willing and ready to help them and to treat them favourably. In this connection they are also believed to take keen interest in the moral conduct of the human society and to serve as custodians of the traditional moral order, having helped to create that order themselves. It is the belief of the African people that their ancestors have the power to punish those of their earthly kinsmen who break the traditionally sanctioned code or fail to fulfill their moral obligation to their relatives, while rewarding those who conform their lives to the traditional code.

It could be noted from the above that African traditional society consists of women and men whose ancestors are ever present in their consciousness. They have always honored their ancestors by preserving their cultural creations and practices and by celebrating their memories. African traditional societies revere their ancestral gods and deities and in return expect them to come to their aid and protect them in their time of need (Gyekye, 2003: 61). At the same time, they expect the wrath of the gods and deities when offended. It is this fear and respect that kept the combatants from using women as the spoils of war during the 1991 East Gonja War.

### **Physical Violence**

The respondents were asked whether they experienced physical attack during the time of the conflict. Most of them answered affirmatively. A respondent at Kito stated that:

A man used the head of the gun to hit my shoulder when I refused to offer my male child to him to kill. The child was forcefully snatched from me and killed in my presence. I experienced too much pains on my shoulder up to date (Interview)

A respondent at Kpandai explained: "I was not physically attacked, but my old lady was flogged and injured because she refused to run away when the Gonja warriors arrived in Kpandai." In Kpandai, a respondent expressed her view on the question of physical attack in this manner: *I was neither attacked nor injured, but I am aware of some women who sustained injuries as a result of gun shots and some even died during and immediately after the conflict.* Another respondent in Kuwani expressed her view by stating: *I know of a woman called Nijuba who was shot and killed. I was not attacked but I fell and injured my leg when I*

was running into the bush to escape death. FGDs at Kito confirmed the complaints expressed above by respondents. The respondents narrated the following:

The Konkomba warriors disturbed us. They killed our male children and our husbands, after which they conveyed us to their settlement as war captives. They told us that they wanted to finish with our men so that they would marry us. That old woman sitting there had her spectacles seized and she could not see afterwards. One of the Konkomba combatants said: the woman did not do anything wrong and so they should return her spectacles to her. The Konkomba threatened to kill the man if he did not stop with his pronouncement. Some of us were pregnant and we were beaten mercilessly with the belief that we might have been carrying male babies in our stomach. They threatened to punch our stomachs with guns or cut them open with knives to find out what we women were carrying. But they did not pursue that dangerous plan. It was only God who saved the pregnant women.

The women said that some of them still feel bodily pains as a result of the physical assault on them by the combatants. A close examination of the experiences of the respondents shows that the combatants inflicted untold hardship on the women. This violates the United Nations Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women of 1993 which says that: Any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women... (General Assembly Resolution. A/48/49/1993).

### **Emotional and Psychological Harm**

Examining this definition carefully and applying it to the conflict areas under study, there is no doubt that this form of violence was meted out to the women, during the time of the conflict. The women were subjected to physical harm and threatened with harm which had psychological implications for the targeted women and even those not directly targeted as they lived their lives wondering what was going to happen next. Many watched while their husbands and other family members were shot and killed or beaten to death. The tragedy of killing of their male children and threats to rip babies out of the stomachs of pregnant women was traumatic. During the investigations for this analysis, those whose children were seized and killed in their presence could not narrate their bitter experiences without weeping. Up to the time of the investigation the women were still grieving and bitter about their experiences. This means that they may need counseling to heal their psychological wounds.

Women were also humiliated by the ways that they were handled by combatants. Old women were mishandled in front of their families, mothers were mishandled in front of their children and young women were mishandled in front of their peers. These were

humiliating and traumatizing. Assessing the impact of armed conflict on women Rehn and Sirleaf (2002:9) made the following observations:

Knowing all this did not prepare us for the horrors women described. Wombs punctured with guns, women raped and tortured in front of their husbands and children. Rifles forced into vaginas in front of their husbands and children. Pregnant women were beaten to induce miscarriages. Fetuses ripped from wombs. Women kidnapped, blind folded and beaten on their way to work or school. We saw the scars, the pain and the humiliation. We heard accounts of gang rapes, rape camps and mutilation. We also heard of murder and sexual slavery. We saw the scars of brutality to the extreme that survival seemed for some a worse fate than death.

### **Internal Displacement**

According to the International Organisation for Migration (2012), internally displaced persons refer to:

Persons or groups of persons who have been forced or obliged to flee or to leave their homes or places of habitual residence, in particular as a result of or in order to avoid the effects of armed conflict, situations of generalized violence, violations of human rights or natural or human-made disasters, and who have not crossed an internationally recognized state border.

Rehn and Sirleaf further argue that another form of VAW is displacement. The consequences of it include disintegration of families, social organisation and reciprocal community labour networks. Displaced women may lose access to the means of production. Date-Bah (2003:133), also observes that “displacement and the increase of violence contribute to the overall feeling of insecurity, uncertainty, and isolation, thus breaking social structures and community support mechanism.”

The majority of the respondents were internally displaced as they had to flee from real or potential enemy attack. They flee from their communities, the conflict-afflicted areas to perceived areas. Many flee with just the cloths on their backs. In migrant they had to start live afresh often without the support of family and friends. A respondent at Kito explained: *I had run to Salaga to escape death*. The FGDs confirmed this claim. Respondents said they emigrated to Salaga. They spent three days and three nights in the bush trying to get to Salaga. The following narration was made:

On Saturday, early morning, we were in our rooms when we were stoned out of the rooms and our houses destroyed. We the women were all gathered under a big tree. Our men also shot guns but they run out of bullets because they were not prepared for the war. Most of them

were killed and the few who were lucky managed to escape. After that they (Konkomba) told us (women) to get up and go away. We told them that we could not go because we were afraid of being killed on the way to Salaga. They later stopped us and were searching us, because they thought some male babies were with us. Our baby boys were seized and killed. We could not withstand the atrocities, therefore we ran into the bush. Some of us spent three days and three nights in the bush before we finally got to Salaga. In Salaga, some of us did not have relatives; therefore we entered people's houses and unannounced that we were seeking for accommodation, protection and security. It was indeed a sad event

In Kuwani the respondents said they fled to the bush to hide. The women revealed the following during FGDs:

Some of us (women) were afraid and weak and could not fight. We ran into the bush with our children and the disabled people among us. We were only suffering at that time. We lost all our belongings as they were burnt. It is only unfortunate that human beings do not eat grass otherwise that was what we would have depended on in the bush. We ate raw cassava because we had no cooking utensils to cook. We did not have matches to use to help us roast the cassava. We also ate all the yam seedlings of our men and they could not get some to farm during farming season. Some of us were bitten by snakes and stung by scorpions. Reptiles also worried us a lot because we were sleeping with them in the bush

In Kpandai, the FGDs revealed that respondents emigrated to Lungi (a village near Kpandai) because of general insecurity in their native land.

We women took our children to the bush for several days before we emigrated to Lungi with the permission and invitation of their chief. Even though we were readily welcomed by the people, the situation was unbearable for us. The people shared their accommodation, food and clothing with us for a short period of time and we had to fend for ourselves afterwards. Some of us further migrated to other places such as Bimbila and Tamale. We did all kinds of manual work as refugees in order to survive. The salary earners among us especially the men agreed to share their monies with us so that we could afford to buy basic necessities such as salt, kerosene and matches. We stayed in Lungi for about three months before we moved to Kpandai after our men conquered the town.

The women suffered several setbacks during the period of displacement. According to International Alert (2002), women in situations of migration cannot get access to wage



labour and traditional work groups because of force separation, divorce and death. Because they were strangers in the new environment, it became very difficult for them to adapt and that was why they returned to their communities as soon as relative peace was restored. The respondents in Kito said: *We could not pay our rent, light bills and water bills in Salaga that was why we are back to Kito to live with the Konkomba. If we could survive in Salaga we would not have returned to this place.*

## **Postulations and Conclusions**

The proposition made by Rehn and Sirleaf (2002) that the magnitude of violence suffered by women during armed conflict is overwhelming has been corroborated by the primary data. Under such dire circumstance, domestic violence was also on the ascendancy which confirms the proposition of Rehn and Sirleaf (2002) that men who have witnessed and perpetrated violence during war seem to continually act violently to their families. Violence was indeed pervasive in the communities affected by the armed conflict.

One distinct aspect of the conflict was that there was no any rape case. The investigations revealed that there was no incidence of rape in the communities during the times of the conflict. The women unanimously reported that there was no rape, indicating a contradiction to the proposition of Seifert (1995) that rape and sexual violence appear to be universal and widespread characteristics of warfare. One can postulate then that in a small scale, localized ethnic conflict, combatants are regulated by the socio-cultural dictates of their traditional beliefs and practices. Seifert (1995) might be right to propound that rape is a universal characteristic of warfare taking into consideration the type of conflict she had researched. In the sense that the literature review confirms the proposition of Seifert on her view of sexual violence such as rape during the times of armed conflict. The ideas and views gathered on rape by Seifert (1995) emanated from the studies of large scale violent conflicts which have features of political violence, rebel activities and ethnic cleansing, in countries such as Liberia, Burundi, Sierra Leone and Democratic Republic of Congo.

## **Recommendations**

### **Trauma counseling**

Trauma counseling is necessary in the sense that the conflict traumatized the survivors, especially women. The majority of the respondents demonstrated that the trauma they went through was still present. Many of them wept during narration of their experiences especially those who watched or witnessed the killing of their husbands and children. The women showed signs of trauma and depression. Government agencies such as the Department of Social Welfare and also religious bodies could initiate free counseling services to the women.

### **Enhancement of women's employment opportunities**

Many of the respondents said they were unemployed or engaged in menial, low-earning jobs in order to raise incomes to take care of their families. The women could be trained and equipped with knowledge and skill to engage in micro and small scale business ventures, such as sewing and knitting. Non-governmental and governmental agencies could collaborate to support the women. A long-term solution to women's employment and under-employment could be the promotion of women's and girls' education. Women and girls could be incentivized to venture into traditional and non-traditional areas and stay long enough to be able to improve their employment opportunities, earning levels and general wellbeing.

### **Relief Aid**

The women who lost their means of production and sources of livelihoods could be given temporary respite through the provision of material aid. This should enable them take care of themselves and families as they train and organize themselves to recover from the trauma and material losses. For such largely agrarian communities, agricultural inputs such as pesticides, improved seeds and farm implements will go a long way to help in their return to productive work.

### **Need for further research**

Further research could be undertaken in small and large communities characterized by armed conflict in order to compare and contrast the influence of culture on combatants with regard to rape in order to authenticate the finding of this study which stipulates that culture of respondents restricts combatants to perpetrate rape.

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