

Acknowledgments

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Editorial

Sexual violence in fragile settings: Practice, policies and research

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Sexual violence is a widespread human rights violation and a public health problem happening across all continents and societies.¹ The devastating physical and psychosocial health impacts sexual violence has on individuals, families and communities require timely and quality survivor-centred responses for victims and survivors as well as robust and long-term prevention efforts. Despite a growing body of evidence-based standards and guidance on how to effectively prevent and address sexual violence and survivors needs, including in conflict and other humanitarian contexts,^{2,3,4} less is known about what is needed and wanted by specific groups of survivors whose realities and narratives are under-researched, and about the particular characteristics of certain settings where their experiences of violence and survival are situated.

This journal issue focuses on some of these less-visible and less-studied individual and collective experiences I am choosing to call “fragile realities”. The issue adopts a broad understanding of “fragility”, conceived as the wide range of experiences encountered by

populations who are exposed to risks and vulnerabilities in environments where systemic social, political, and environmental challenges intensify, and in contexts marked by a loss of trust between communities and the systems that provide health and psychosocial support.⁵ The articles centre the voices, silences, and experiences of a broad range of populations of survivors in conflict, post-conflict, and displacement settings, as well as in chronic crises and contexts of natural disasters across a range of geographical areas – from Rwanda to Haiti, from Italy to Tunisia, from Colombia to Japan, among others.

This special issue contains six articles. The first three adopt an intersectional approach to analyzing the realities and needs of groups of survivors that lie at the interface of systems of power imbalance based on gender, age, social status, sexual orientation, gender identity and gender expression: children conceived in genocidal rape; victims of sexual exploitation and abuse; and lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, queer/questioning plus (LGBTIQ+)ⁱ populations in conflict settings. The authors shed light

ⁱ Different versions of this acronym and terminology around LGBTIQ+ populations are used in this issue. The journal has chosen to leave the terminology authors used.



on the lived experience and expertise of these populations and suggest relevant recommendations to inspire competent and creative practice and evidence generation.

Based on 30 months of ethnographic research in Rwanda, Loes Loning's article on children and youth conceived in sexual violence centres the voices and agencies of children conceived in rape during the genocide, and critiques those discourses that reduce their experience and identities to mere "legacies of violence". An under-researched group, children conceived by rape in war often remain unacknowledged and underserved also within humanitarian interventions programming. While calling for more child-centred research and programmes, Loning's article illustrates fascinating insights into the work with children by grassroots organizations in the country and delves into these youths' own understanding of their lives and realities.

The cross-sectional study by Mackenzie Maskery and al. on Peacekeeper-perpetrated sexual exploitation & abuse (PP-SEA) in Haiti examines communities' micronarratives to investigate the relations between PP-SEA and satisfaction with life (SWL) among Haitian community members. Authors highlight how the unexpected findings point to the complexity of the association between PP-SEA and SWL in the Haitian setting and call for additional research on transactional sex in the country to further inform context-relevant interventions that meet the needs of SEA survivors and their families.

Patricia Ollé's article focuses on the realities of another group that has been surrounded by "loud silences",⁷ i.e., populations with diverse sexual orientations, gender identities, gender expressions and sex characteristics (SOGIESC) in conflict settings. Ollé's article provides an articulate and comprehensive overview of the current evidence on sexual violence against LGBTIQ+ people in conflict across the globe. Arguing that a limited understanding of sexual violence perpetrated against this diverse community has direct implications on the

scarcity of accessible and competent responses for victims, the author calls for urgent recognition and action around this issue by the international community, and for agendas to be survivor-centred from a diverse SOGIESC perspective.

The final three contributions in this issue address a range of "fragile" settings, each characterized by unique legislative and societal systems that hinder survivors' access to comprehensive survivor-centred responses in different ways.

Wenqin Zhang et al. conducted a review of the current literature and international guidelines for humanitarian practitioners on the topic of mandatory reporting of sexual violence in humanitarian settings. The authors delve into the intricate nature and challenges that arise from mandatory reporting for health and other practitioners as they strive to provide survivor-centered responses. The article emphasizes the need for additional research to deepen the understanding of the implications of mandatory reporting and inform evidence-based comprehensive guidance for humanitarian personnel.

The two other articles are authored by members of women's organizations and activist collectives in Italy, Tunisia and Japan, and provide insights into the transformative role of feminist networks in tackling violence against women and girls in these countries over the last decades. Both contributions situate sexual violence within a "continuum",⁸ where rape and other types of sexual abuse are extensions of structural systems underpinned by everyday gender-based discriminations and inequalities against women and girls and most marginalized groups.

In their article on the policies and practices that tackle violence against women in Italy and Tunisia, Souad Gharbi and the other members of LeNove feminist research group describe the extent and nature of gender-based violence against women and girls in both countries, and advocate for sufficiently-resourced multisectoral systems and measures to both respond to and prevent such violence. In



illustrating how feminist movements have been the drivers of societal change for women's and survivors' rights on both sides of the Mediterranean, the article draws particular attention to the role of women's activism in shaping effective intervention models such as anti-violence centres, which offer empowerment-based support to women and girls throughout the whole cycle of violence, as well as promising preventive approaches to addressing harmful social norms around masculinity and perpetration.

Finally, in their text on gender-based violence in times of disaster in Japan, Reiko Masai and Yukie Suzuki from Women's Net Kobe critically analyze two major earthquake and tsunami disasters in Japan, in 1995 and 2011, from a gender perspective. Through a gendered reconstruction of these historical events as commented by the narratives of women, gender-based violence victims and women's groups, the article pleads for the adoption of gender-competent disaster management approaches that can effectively address this "emergency within the emergency" and ensure that women's leadership is fully incorporated into decision-making. The authors also invite us to learn lessons from past failures and call for long-

lasting and resourced structural reforms which can be effective in responding to gender-based violence both in times of disasters and in "normal" times.

The wide thematic and geographical scope of this journal issue has large potential for inspiring reflective and transformative policy, research and practice towards addressing sexual violence more deeply and structurally in a range of contexts. While the authors emphasize that it is crucial to put the diversity and complexity of survivors from specific groups and settings at the core of prevention and response interventions, they also highlight the importance of adopting non-categorical and non-homogenizing approaches to responding to violence and trauma which transcend conventional labels and preconceived assumptions.⁹ This issue also emphasizes the significance of critically examining and unsettling the systems of power that perpetuate and recreate violence and discrimination for women and girls and oppressed communities and groups, and calls for policies and interventions to adopt a profound and structural approach to sexual violence prevention and response efforts.

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