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Rape in Darfur

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In every conflict zone in the world, women bear the brunt of the burden. The situation in Sudan is no exception.

During a recent fact-finding mission to Darfur, I saw firsthand the scars of war, evidenced by refugee women's painful stories as they shared with me the harsh realities of their day-to-day lives. No one I met said that she herself had been raped, but they talked about many they knew who had been; it was clear that discussing sexual attacks on others was a way for them to talk about their own ordeals without becoming doubly victimized by the intense stigma and lost honor associated with rape in this part of the world. Despite the taboo of discussing it, rape is a matter of course in Darfur.

Women in the camps I visited asked for better security so that they could search for firewood and gather food for their families without fear of being brutalized or killed. If you can't give us that, they said, at least give us an alternative source of fuel so that we can avoid being attacked out in the fields. As they know all too well, in Darfur, hunting women has become a sport.

No one, it seems, is interested in giving Darfurian women so much as a solution to the problem of collecting firewood, never mind a place at the negotiating table. While the world is outraged by reports of atrocities against women and the use of rape as a tool of war, women's basic needs are ignored by actors on all sides -- the rebels, the Sudanese government and the so-called civilized Westerners involved in the negotiations.

This lack of regard for women marks the ultimate obscenity in the midst of a sustained killing spree that is better characterized as greed-o-cide than genocide; a massacre of complex dimensions that includes not only ethnic and religious components but also pure money lust -- contrary to popular belief, the killing does not break down strictly along sectarian lines.

The rebels in Darfur want money. They will let Darfurians, especially innocent women and children, bleed for the cameras to advance their agenda. Photographing these starving, dehydrated refugees has become a fund-raising method for heart-hardened nongovernmental organizations (NGO). Meanwhile, the Sudanese government could today pull back the janjaweed, who are doing the raping and killing, if desired. But the horror continues. Both sides exclude women from the discussion of achieving security. While many in the West push sanctions, in reality this would raise the possibility of all-out civil war, and millions would die. In Sudan, nothing is as it seems.

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The inability of men to look at the whole package and the needs of women increases the number of women and children that will die in the ongoing conflict. The tragic bottom line is that women are worth literally one-half, or even one-quarter of their male counterparts in terms of blood money. Women's worth must be highlighted to alleviate their urgent plight. Even Darfurian women who escape into neighboring countries are double victims with little recourse. In Cairo and other refugee destinations, for instance, women who have fled Sudan are subject to further gender-based persecution and violence. And as in so many parts of the world, women's voices simply do not carry weight.

We in the West like to think the terrible events unfolding in Darfur cannot continue on our watch, but they do. Every day women are being raped and dying for firewood. Yet when they try to speak up, their voices are silenced from all sides. We will remain complicit in their suffering until we recognize that women are the focal point around which everything is centered. They are the key to unlocking international security issues. If women were equally valued and their basic needs met, it would stem the movement of people across borders currently causing security nightmares. This is where the seeds of terrorism are sown.

Women also play a crucial role in solving the environmental degradation and societal inequalities that spawned the conflict in the first place. As Swanee Hunt writes in the current issue of Foreign Affairs, in her piece titled "Let Women Rule," "the world could use more sway and less swagger." Her words ring especially true for Sudan. However, if the men at the negotiating table pursue their current course, without valuing or including women, evil will continue to prevail in Darfur.

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