



# policy BRIEF

## Protecting Children Born of Sexual Violence: *A New Report to the Humanitarian Sector*

*R. Charli Carpenter, Ph.D.*

### SUMMARY:

*Children born of sexual violence and exploitation in conflict zones represent a particularly vulnerable category of war-affected children, but their needs have been understudied by researchers, and underserved by the humanitarian sector. In a recently released report entitled, “Protecting Children Born of Sexual Violence and Exploitation in Conflict Zones: Existing Knowledge and Practice Gaps” which was based on a series of consultations with humanitarian practitioners, R. Charli Carpenter, an affiliated faculty member of the Ford Institute for Human Security, makes several recommendations to the international organizations engaged in the protection of war-affected children. She suggests undertaking a multi-country study to report on victims of wartime rape and their children born as a result, providing assistance to survivors of gender-based violence and new mothers in conflict zones, as well as ensuring that children in this category are not falling through the cracks of existing programs.*

*Dr. Carpenter also proposes that awareness of the issue should be raised within the context of advocacy of children’s human rights without exposing specific children through the programming initiatives designed to reach them.*

[T]his category of war-affected child has not been effectively mainstreamed into humanitarian advocacy and programming, compared to others such as child soldiers, separated children, or HIV-AIDS orphans.

Sexual violence is endemic in conflict-affected areas, and children are often born as a result. From Darfur to Bosnia, East Timor, and Sierra Leone, tens of thousands of children have been born as a result of mass rape campaigns or sexual exploitation in conflict zones in the last decade alone. The anecdotal record suggests these children are deeply affected by the social upheavals that brought about their conception, as well as their treatment by society on the basis of their biological origins.

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- *environmental security and public health.*

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Recognizing that the first line of protection for children affected by armed conflict is often the humanitarian community operating in emergencies, researchers associated with the University of Pittsburgh's Ford Institute for Human Security undertook in 2004-2005 a set of consultations with humanitarian practitioners to assess the existing state of knowledge and practice with respect to protecting and responding to the specific needs and vulnerabilities of these children. These consultations were funded by the National Science Foundation and took place in New York, Geneva and Pittsburgh between December 2004 and March 2005. They included participants from major humanitarian agencies as well as a few local NGOs with field expertise in these areas. The research team particularly sought the advice of practitioners currently working in child protection and/or gender-based violence.

The results of this study are outlined in a report recently released by University of Pittsburgh's Graduate School of Public and International Affairs, entitled *Protecting Children Born of Sexual Violence and Exploitation in Conflict Zones: Existing Practice and Knowledge Gaps*. Generally, the research team found that humanitarian practitioners agreed that children born of wartime rape and exploitation are appropriately understood as especially vulnerable in conflict-affected areas. The conversations echoed much of what is known anecdotally about the risks faced by children born of war. In particular, participants in the consultations discussed these children's vulnerability to social exclusion and stigma from the societies into which they are born. This underlying risk factor is described as being connected to other sets of vulnerabilities: physical and psycho-social health, access to resources, risk of separation, abuse or neglect by caretakers, and early childhood mortality, including as a result of infanticide.

At the same time, many participants were hesitant to *label* these children as a particularly vulnerable category, and almost none were able to point to specific programs in place explicitly designed to address their unique needs. While this does not mean that no such initiatives exist, it is clear that a concern for this category of war-affected child has not been effectively mainstreamed into humanitarian advocacy and programming, compared to others such as child soldiers, separated children, or HIV-AIDS orphans.

Indeed, a number of debates arose in the context of discussing this issue with humanitarian practitioners. Participants in the focus groups were divided on the questions of (a) the merits of specifying "children born of war" as a particularly vulnerable category versus seeking to reach them within the context of other categories of concern already recognized on the humanitarian agenda, (b) which children, from a programmatic or advocacy perspective, would be included in such a category and (c) whether specific programs for such children might do more harm than good, given the possibility that greater visibility could exacerbate the stigma they face or create backlash from other conflict-affected groups. Practitioners were especially concerned about initiatives that would single

out children born of rape and exploitation through the creation of special centers or programs.

While the report concludes by recommending serious fact-finding regarding children born of war, as well as the development of programming that targets their specific needs and vulnerabilities, such research, advocacy and programming in this area must pay careful attention to the concerns raised above.

Many of the humanitarians emphasized the lack of clear data in this area on which to base policy. The report calls for international organizations engaged in the protection of war-affected children to undertake a multi-country study to report on victims of wartime rape and their children brought to term as a result. Such a study was envisioned by Graca Machel's 2000 *Review on the Impact of Children in Armed Conflict*, and has been called for in a number of other international documents relevant to women and armed conflict, including the Independent Experts' report on *Women, War and Peace*, the Secretary General's Report to the Security Council on *Women, Peace and Security* and the International Committee of the Red Cross' *Women and War* study. The consultations suggest that longitudinal data should be gathered in multiple country contexts, disaggregating these children from the larger vulnerable populations in which they are embedded, in order to gauge the general vulnerabilities of the population and distinguish those from context-specific factors that might mitigate the stigma associated with such children. The population of concern for such a study might be expanded to include not only rapes but also children fathered as a result of sexual exploitation by enemy forces, occupation forces, peacekeepers or humanitarian workers themselves.

Second, the report suggests that the immediate protection needs of infants in regions such as Darfur might be improved by providing adequate reproductive health and post-natal services for the conflict-affected populations as well as long-term psycho-social and economic assistance. In addition, the stigma against older children might be counteracted through rituals similar to those being used in reintegration programs. Until further data has been gathered, the research team advises against efforts by donors or the concerned public to create special orphanages or projects designed exclusively to reach these particular children and their mothers. Rather, the best means of aiding this population in the short term is to provide adequate assistance to survivors of gender-based violence and to new mothers in conflict zones, and to make certain that children in this category are not falling through the cracks of existing programs for children. Any such efforts should proceed with a clear understanding of the local context and drawing, as far as possible in the best interests of the children, on indigenous cultural resources.

Finally, the report argues that a means should be found to raise awareness of this issue within advocacy on children's human rights

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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*without* exposing specific children through programming initiatives designed to reach them. The absence of specific programming for these children should not serve as a rationale for humanitarians to avoid paying close attention to these children's particular vulnerabilities in planning for emergencies, conducting needs assessments, and evaluating whether aid is reaching the most vulnerable. To do this effectively, much greater awareness and sensitivity must be raised within the context of humanitarian work to the needs of both the children born of sexual violence and exploitation and their mothers.

A full copy of Dr. Carpenter's report is available at [http://www.fordinstitute.pitt.edu/docs/papers/Protecting\\_Children\\_Report.pdf](http://www.fordinstitute.pitt.edu/docs/papers/Protecting_Children_Report.pdf).

