



**GENDERHOPES**  
WORKING TO END GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE

## **Interview of the Month – August 2013** **Lauren Wolfe, Director of Women Under Siege Project**

***GenderHopes: Your report on journalists and sexualized violence has been cited as groundbreaking. What originally led to your involvement in the fight against sexualized violence in conflict?***

Lauren Wolfe: I was the senior editor of the Committee to Protect Journalists. An attack on CBS correspondent Lara Logan, a CPJ board member, in February 2011 focused my attention on sexual attacks on journalists. I began exploring the issue, putting out feelers to journalists all over the world—have you ever been sexually assaulted in the course of your work or heard about such a case?

A woman in West Africa replied that she had a story about herself, a story she found so difficult to tell because of stigma and the psychological effect attached to rape. Slowly, over weeks, the woman told me what happened to her. She had only ever told one person before, her doctor.

Armed members of a rebel group gang-raped her in the course of her reporting. She then witnessed a superior officer shoot one of her attackers after he had come upon the scene. But she chose not to tell her editor for fear it would harm her own reputation. She could not report the attack to police, she believed, because they would not take it seriously—they may even mock her or solicit a bribe. She felt empty, terrified, and traumatized. Years later, she still did. She spoke only on condition that her name and other identifying details, including her country, be withheld.

This was my introduction to the dark fear women feel after rape—how it can haunt your being and work for years, as for this woman. It also showed me how painful it can be to continue to live and work in the same place where such a horrifying attack occurred. This woman's story became the springboard for what has become my life's work: documenting and sharing stories of sexualized violence in conflict.

***- Can you tell us more about the objectives of the Women Under Siege project for which you are the Director?***

The suffering of women in war is rarely front-page news—our project is

putting it there.

- **Lack of analysis:** Both the UN and the WHO have identified a lack of analysis of how sexualized violence is used as a weapon of war. We are filling that gap with in-depth reporting and analysis on conflicts from the Holocaust to Bangladesh to the Democratic Republic of Congo to Syria.
- **Clarifying what's happening:** We've identified 10 reasons sexualized violence is used as a tool of war in Congo alone.

By better understanding what happened in terms of sexualized violence in previous conflicts, we can move to stop it in the next. Moving such a huge, untold history to the forefront in the media finally gives attention to a history and experience that has long been suppressed. We can't fix what we don't see.

WMC's Women Under Siege is uniquely using journalism to create change in a specific area. As a journalist, I believe that revealing problems is the first step toward making the world better. For instance, in terms of Syria, there are very few doctors equipped to deal with the psychological and medical fallout of sexualized violence and torture of women. Documenting this has led to multiple practitioners reaching out and asking how they can help.

Much of the project focuses on victim-blaming. Here's why: Women have very little incentive to come forward. There is often no medical care (and certainly no psychological care) offered in war zones or even conflict-free areas. Police have been known to re-rape, bribe, or make fun of rape survivors globally. Husbands have divorced or cast-out women from Syria to Sudan to Guatemala when they've discovered their wives have been raped. Girls and women are considered "impure" or "ruined" after rape, causing them to commit suicide or become depressed.

Victim-blaming—or re-victimizing those who have already been violated—is literally killing women around the world. [Here's a good piece on that](#). If we can make this known, we can hopefully move to end it.

***- Can you give some examples of the types of atrocities women in crisis zones are experiencing?***

In war, women's bodies are used to send a message to the enemy: We can conquer you, humiliate you, control you. I don't know that that's terribly different from the way men who violate women think about us in peacetime. Rape is an act of power and control. [Here's an op-ed](#) I wrote about this idea with Gloria Steinem. From the piece:

“The use of sexualised violence on the streets of Britain or America is the result of the cult of masculinity – some men become addicted to it and feel they have no identity without it. This cult is a drug pushed by gangs and the culture of wars in order to make men act violently and risk their lives against their own self-interest as human beings. That's why what happens with gangs on the streets of your cities and ours most resembles what happens in wartime. Sociologically, psychologically and practically, the gangs of London and New York may be different in degree, but not in kind. We can only uncover and cure this wound to humanity – especially to the female half of humanity, whose control and subjugation is the most basic requirement of the cult of masculinity – if we report on and pay attention to the victimiser, not just the victim.”

So atrocities toward women become central in proving dominance. Those atrocities range from gang rape to survival sex in which women are forced to trade sexual acts for food, to sexual slavery and increased domestic violence in refugee populations, where men tend to take out frustration on women.

***- In your opinion, what are the main countries of concern at present?***

Syria, DRC, Afghanistan, Sudan, Burma, Egypt, India, Mexico...the list goes on and on. I purposefully listed both countries technically at war and those that aren't. Women are at high risk of sexualized violence in countries like Mexico, where there is no “war” as traditionally defined, but where factions are using women's bodies to exert control.

***- Have you seen examples where measures have been successfully taken to reduce sexualized violence?***

There are small steps that have been taken in refugee areas that seem to lighten the risk of sexualized violence—such as making sure IDP camps have enough lighting and that women don't have to leave the camp to find firewood/food and face the risk of rape.

I've also seen examples of good recovery efforts, such as in Bosnia, where women's groups organized support networks for survivors of rape to come together and speak about what happened to them in a kind of group therapy that I've been told was very helpful.

Also, in regard to particular groups learning *not* to commit rape, there are examples of forces training their troops to avoid such tactics of war. See some examples [here](#).

***- A lot of your recent work has focused on rape of women in Syria. What were the findings of your investigations?***

We have the first and only live crowd-sourced map of sexualized violence in a live conflict (Syria). We are literally putting these stories on the map, giving us a snapshot of what might be happening to women (and men) so we can move to stop it and help survivors. We are partnered with Columbia's Mailman School of Public Health. See this piece, which has our last data numbers (which are pretty close to the breakdowns presently, but I haven't published later stats than this yet).

- **Some findings:** We've logged more than 210 reports of how rape is being used as a tool of war against both women and men by both sides, although the majority of the alleged crimes are being carried out by government forces. More than 20% of the women in our reports are found dead or killed after rape—shows we're losing evidence daily.
- **Number of women and men affected:** Those 200-something reports contain potentially thousands of women and men who have been violated (i.e. most reports contain much more than a single victim).
- **Purpose:** Our hope is that our documentation may one day be used toward evidence if there are war crimes trials. Also used to help pinpoint where survivor services needed.
- **Effectiveness:** Has made a huge difference in media coverage vs. writing traditional stories about rape, and led to promises of greater humanitarian funding from at least one government.

Figuring out what's truly going on in Syria is extraordinarily difficult. There are so many barriers to accessing the truth, from literal lack of access to the country to propaganda and rumors that are spread on the Internet. But there are ways to get close to the truth. We do our best. We can network with sources on the ground and understand the military's movements and the context in which these stories occur.

***- What impacts have you seen these crimes having on the women involved?***

The consequences are extremely far-reaching. People tend to think that sexualized violence only affects women, but it tears apart communities and entire societies for generations after the war ends.

We've seen the fallout of such sexualized violence and ethnic cleansing in many

countries. In Rwanda, for instance, women have told researchers that they have found it hard to love or provide for their children of rape. Communities have shunned raped women in Darfur, and I met women in Guatemala who were raped 30 years ago and still haven't told their husbands because they fear being cast out. What kind of society is this creating when women are living in such pain and silence?

Look at what's happening in Syria right now. So few women are willing to speak about rape because they are terrified they will be divorced or even killed. Yet we know rape is being used as a weapon in this war. (More about this [here](#).) What is this doing to a generation of women, not to mention their children and the men who are in their lives?

***- Is there a way that the women and men reading this interview can make a difference?***

There are not enough resources or attention given to women's suffering in war. In a war like Syria's, groups like the Syrian-American Medical Society are offering doctors and psychologists to treat victims—they are doing great work. But they need the funds to continue to do this. So donating to places that give direct assistance is great. (Also, as a nonprofit, we require funds to keep our documentation going. You can give to fund our project [here](#).)

Everyone can work to lighten the shame and stigma of rape. We can all do our best to honor women who have been brutalized, to listen to them, to help them get medical and psychosocial assistance, and to respect what they have suffered. Whether we live in an affected area or not, we are all on this planet together. When some of us suffer, we all do. I believe we have to extend our caring to wherever it is needed—whether that comes in the form of money, research, outreach, or simply listening to people who have been traumatized and long silenced.

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For more information about Lauren Wolfe's work, please visit the [Women Under Siege Project](#).