

## THE POLITICS OF WAR AND HEALTH

There can be no more significant political decision that will guarantee poor health and reduce life expectancy than the one to go to war. The recent Lancet article<sup>1</sup> reporting on the differential impact of the war in Iraq as compared to the pre-invasion period highlights most effectively the health costs of power exercised through politics. The findings of a cluster sample survey showed that the risk of death was estimated to be 2.5 fold higher after the invasion, thus refuting claims made that the invasion had rendered Iraq a safer place than it had been under Saddam Hussein.

Indeed it is now recognised that in modern conflicts between 85% and 90% of casualties are amongst civilians and it is women and children who bear the brunt of the impact. This is as true in Iraq as in other recent wars or acts of genocide. As well as being “accidental” victims of war however – ie collateral damage, women and girls also face specific acts of attrition in the form of rape and sexual assault as a means of exerting power and control over subjugated communities. This has been described as the “malevolent nadir of human behaviour”<sup>2</sup>. For example, after piecing together the available evidence from more than 400 known cases of pack rape in Iraq, the women's refuges are of the combined view that about 80% were perpetrated by American-controlled mercenary groups. The health consequences of rape are obvious but include traumatic injuries, sexually transmitted infections including HIV/AIDs and long term psychological problems.

The political decisions that lead to war or genocide take place within a context that glorifies war and perpetuates a view that it is an acceptable means of dealing with conflict. This in turn is linked with current views about what constitutes acceptable and appropriate masculine behaviour in a patriarchal society. The understanding and significance of gender is therefore of vital importance in understanding politics and health. Where men dominate the landscape of political life, it is more likely that war will be used as a means of resolving national or international conflicts. By contrast, research indicates that the severity of violence decreases as domestic gender equality increases.<sup>3</sup>

If you wish to work with the Politics of Health Group on this or any other public health issues please contact Debbie at [contact@pohg.org.uk](mailto:contact@pohg.org.uk)

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<sup>1</sup> Roberts L. et al (2004) Mortality before and after the 2003 invasion of Iraq: cluster sample survey. Lancet online, October 29<sup>th</sup> 2004-11-08

<sup>2</sup> Donohoe M. (2004) War, rape and genocide: never again, Medscape Ob/Gyn and Women's Health 9(2).

<sup>3</sup> Caprioli M. and Boyer M. (2001) Gender, violence and International Crisis. Journal of Conflict Resolution 45 (4), 503-518