NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (http://ncronline.org)

Not counting women and children

Nicole Sotelo | Oct. 29, 2009

Sosan's husband tried to electrocute her. He tried to poison her. She escaped to one of the six shelters in Afghanistan. But in a country where women are not allowed to live without a male, she could not leave the shelter until she married again, according to a recent United Nations report. Shelters are full and the rise in domestic violence cases is not solely due to cultural beliefs and governmental policies but is also tied to U.S. aggression.

While violence against women has always been part of war lore, it wasn't until the second-half of the last century that people began collecting statistics on the topic. The studies reveal a gruesome pattern: violence from the battlefield boils over into violence in the home due to post-traumatic stress disorder and the learned violence of war. If there was already violence in the home, it often escalates during internal or international conflict.

A United Nations report this year noted that the presence of war in Afghanistan was one of the contributors to the rise in violence against women. The United Nations Development Fund for Women notes that 87 percent of women in the country experience domestic abuse, regardless of employment, education level or marital status.

This trend toward rising interpersonal violence during wartime, however, is not limited to Afghanistan.

A study done by the Iraq Psychologists Association found that of 2,500 families interviewed, 91 percent of children faced more aggression at home than before the U.S.-led invasion in 2003. Of these, nearly 38 percent were reported to have had severe hematomas after beatings by their parents.

In 2006, the U.N. reported 27,000 reported rapes in just one region of the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Multiply that by the rest of the country and the number of years the fighting has endured and you are left gasping at the possible statistics.

The numbers are equally shocking in the United States. Soldiers who come home from fighting abroad bring the war with them. Whether it is Vietnam, Iraq or Afghanistan, the battlefields change from forests or deserts to United States' bedrooms. The Miles Foundation reports that military families in the United States have a two to five times higher domestic violence rate than the general population.

While certain rapes have begun to be counted by international bodies as war crimes, interpersonal violence remains largely unaccounted in official wartime statistics, despite the fact that war and increased interpersonal violence are intricately related. We are more likely to count the man who was hurt in the streets, but not the woman wounded behind closed doors, despite the fact that both are war-induced tragedies.

For example, this month the Iraqi Human Rights Ministry released a report that shows 85,694 of its country's people were killed from 2004 and 2008 as a result of the U.S.-led invasion and 147,195 were wounded during the same period. **Other estimates** [1] have arrived at much higher numbers.

All of the estimates, however, fail to take into account the women, children and sometimes men whose lives are

lost as a result of war-induced domestic and interpersonal violence. It can be difficult to obtain these numbers, but it must be tried. When something isn't counted, it often becomes invisible.

We have our own version of this in Christianity. We have often failed to take account of women and children. In the Gospel of Matthew it twice states that food blessed by Jesus fed 4,000 and 5,000 men, "not counting women and children." Additionally, until recent years, the lives of women as ministers, deacons, priests and bishops in the early church had been written out of church histories. When we write women and children out of history or scripture or wartime statistics, we not only forget them, but we also often fail to take actions that would address their situations. Out of sight, out of mind.

October marks Domestic Violence Awareness month, a time for reminding ourselves of the existence of interpersonal violence and recommitting ourselves to peace in the home and in the nations. Whether the crimes are committed in the streets or behind a home's closed doors, isn't it time that we begin counting the women and children who are victims of war?

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