

Rape as a weapon of war in the Democratic Republic of the Congo

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Abstract

The Democratic Republic of the Congo has been appropriately acknowledged as “the rape capital of the world.” While the country has been trapped in conflict, the use of rape as a weapon of war has been rampant and unyielding. The sexual violence inflicted upon women has been nothing less than brutal and destructive, physically, socially, and psychologically. This paper analyzes the use of rape as a weapon of war in the Congo, taking into context the ongoing war, cultural and social situations that facilitate its existence, and the many consequences the victims are forced to endure. Drawing information from various academic journals, articles, and field research from international organizations, this paper paints a concise picture of the sexual atrocities occurring in the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

Keywords: Rape, torture, Democratic Republic of the Congo.

The Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) is accurately referred to as “the rape capital of the world”.¹ John Holmes, the under secretary general for humanitarian affairs for the United Nations has been reported saying, “the sexual violence in Congo is the

worst in the world. The sheer numbers, the wholesale brutality, the culture of impunity – it’s appalling”.² With more than five million dead, tens of thousands of women raped all within the past decade, doctors and activists have called it an “epidemic.” Michael Van Rooyen, director of Harvard’s Humanitarian Initiative, has had experience in international disaster zones. He says, “even in a wartime setting, Congo is unusual and exceptional.”¹ Such a reality is frightening and difficult to imagine, yet it is a reality many Congolese women have faced. This large-scale magnitude of sexual violence has potentially made eastern Congo the worst place on earth to be a woman. This paper will analyze various contexts and how they relate to rape in the Congo, specifically looking at war, poverty, and patriarchy, as well as the physical and psychological effects of sexual violence. For there to be any hope of change for women in the DRC, rape as a weapon of war must be addressed.

“Soldiers Who Rape, Commanders Who Condone”³ is a report by Human Rights Watch that documents the sexual violence committed by the military in the DRC. Their research, done in North and South Kivu, consisted of interviews with victims, witnesses, members of NGOs and churches, staff of international agencies, and representatives from the government. This study

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is crucial to understanding the methods and effects of rape by those in the armed forces and the unique culture of sexual violence it creates. Human Rights Watch reports that during the past fifteen years, “tens of thousands of women and girls in Congo have become victims of sexual violence.” In North Kivu alone there were 4,820 cases. The UNFPA “also reported that more than 65 percent of victims of sexual violence during the same period were children, the majority adolescent girls.” Children less than ten years old comprise an estimated ten percent of victims.³ Unfortunately, the conflict rages on, and hundreds of women continue to suffer every day as the war is being fought “on their bodies” as many rape victims have described the brutality endured during rape.³

Background

In order to gain a better understanding of rape as a weapon of war, it is essential to begin with looking at the conflict in which it occurs. Sadly, conflict has plagued the history of the DRC from when it achieved independence from Belgium in 1960 until today. Much of the conflict in the country today can find its roots in the aftermath of the Rwandan genocide in 1994. When the genocide ended, Rwandan Hutu militias, known as the Interahamwe, fled into Congo when the Tutsi’s took control of the Rwandan government. These militia groups used Hutu refugee camps in eastern Congo as bases for their ongoing attacks against Rwanda.

As a result, troops from the Rwandan Patriotic Army entered the Congo two years later in hopes of disintegrating the Hutu militias. At the same time, the Alliance des Forces Democratiques pour la Liberation du Congo-Zaire, an armed coalition under the leadership of Laurent Kabila and supported by Uganda and Rwanda, entered

the country to forcibly remove the dictator Mobutu Sese Seko from power. After much conflict and failed peace talks, Mobutu fled the country in exile in 1997. Laurent Kabila then rose to power as president of the DRC.⁴

A year later, Kabila cut relations with his Rwandan supporters, which sparked another conflict. This second civil war would become far more infamous than the first as neighboring countries got involved, which would brand this conflict as “Africa’s first world war”.⁵

In 2001, President Kabila was assassinated and his son Joseph rose to power. With his newfound authority, Joseph Kabila reversed a number of his father’s policies, replacing them with his own, some of which have been considered thoughtless and ineffective. Within the year the United Nations deployed a peacekeeping mission into the country known as the United Nations Organization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (MONUC), and political negotiations on peace proceeded, known as the Inter-Congolese Dialogue.⁴ As the United Nations got involved and talks occurred, neighboring nations involved in the conflict began to leave the country, as seen at the end of 2002. Angola, Namibia, and Zimbabwe withdrew from the country. However, even after the Pretoria Accord was crafted in July 2002, many armed forces associated with the Rwandan genocide remained in the Congo. As Human Rights Watch reported, the Rassemblement congolais pour la démocratie, a group many consider to be a proxy of the Rwandan government, and the Rwandan army still occupy large parts of eastern Congo.⁶

Throughout the following years, despite the peace agreements that were signed and international peacekeeping groups that intervened and provided assistance in the name of diplomacy, fighting still waged on,

especially from a rebel group led by Laurent Nkunda. General Nkunda claimed his goal was to protect the Tutsi ethnic group in the Congo from the Hutu extremists who fled into the country after the Rwandan genocide in 1994. Even the largest UN peacekeeping mission failed in 2008 to protect the atrocities committed not only by the rebel groups, but also by government troops and homegrown militias, such as the Mai Mai. The involvement of various groups only adds to the complexity of the conflict as well as the number of attacks on civilians. While some progress has been made, as seen with the arrest of General Nkunda in 2009, the population still lives under the uneasiness and lingering threat of being attacked.⁵

Unfortunately, the war still rages on as the vast amount of rare and valuable natural resources in the Congo enable the militia groups to continue their efforts in the regions of fighting. Such incredible reserves of resources, such as diamonds, gold, coltan, and cassiterite, are one of the primary reasons many of the ethnic militias are still in the country. In "The Trouble With Congo," an article published in *Foreign Affairs*, Autesserre writes about what has fueled the involvement of the many different ethnic militias in the conflict, and how the conflict has been able to persist. In regards to the fighting over these valuable minerals, he writes, "access to resources means the ability to buy arms and reward troops, and thus to secure political power; political power, in turn, guarantees access to land and resources".⁷ While so many resources appear to be up for grabs, people will continue to die. It is important to consider the West's dependence on such minerals that, in turn, make them so valuable. Many of these minerals are used in the manufacturing of the variety of electronics that are used daily. If such a need did not

exist, would the minerals be fought over for such a high price?

Enough Project is an American-based organization whose mission is to bring to light crimes against humanity being committed around the globe. Their extensive research has uncovered many of the underlying causes of the conflicts of the day. In the Congo specifically, they have investigated the pivotal role these "conflict minerals" play and how their existence is perpetuating the crisis. Many of the buyers of these resources are located in Europe and Asia, such as Thailand-based Thaisarco and the Malaysia Smelting Corporation, which both happen to be the world's leading tin smelters. Purchase of the minerals by international companies feeds money into these armed militia groups controlling the extraction areas in the Congo. With the money they are able to buy more weapons and equipment, increasing their control as well as their power within the conflict.⁸

Autesserre adds that during this war, "over a thousand civilians continue to die in Congo every day, mostly due to malnutrition and diseases that could be easily prevented if Congo's already weak economic and social structures had not collapsed".⁷ In addition to that startling statistic, Kristof of *The New York Times* said it is estimated that more than 6.9 million people have been killed in the ongoing conflict in the Congo since 1998.⁹

With a foundational understanding of the conflict raging on in the DRC, we can then address the basic components of rape and how it has been seen in the country. What is important to know is that rape and other forms of sexual violence were first "noted in cross-border hostilities in 1991 but became more frequent in 1994 in the context of regional conflicts stemming from the Rwandan genocide".¹⁰ While wartime rape is nothing new to the Congo, it has

only increased dramatically over the past decade. Therefore, such knowledge about rape is essential in grasping the bigger picture of the different ways rapes are committed, not to mention how rape is legally defined, in order to gain a greater understanding as to how sexual violence in conflict has continued to exist.

Rape and War

First, we will begin with how rape is described according to the International Criminal Court (ICC). Rape is considered a crime against humanity and is composed of four elements. The first describes the perpetrators' invasion of an individual's body "by conduct resulting in penetration, however slight, of any part of the body of the victim or of the perpetrator with a sexual organ." The penetration can be done by "any object or any other part of the body." Element number two states that "the invasion was committed by force, or by threat of force or coercion," which could have been caused by several factors. Some of these factors include detention, duress, violence, and psychological oppression, among others. The third and fourth elements explain that the sexual acts committed were done so "as part of a widespread or systematic attack directed against a civilian population," and that the perpetrators were aware of these intended motives.¹¹

While these elements are pivotal by providing the legal qualifications of rape, especially as agreed upon on the international scale, there is one other essential fact that must be understood. Mullins examines the nature and implications of sexual violence in armed conflict in his study called "We Are Going to Rape You and Taste Tutsi Women."¹² He looks particularly at the sexual violence that occurred during the Rwandan genocide in 1994, gaining information from testimonies given at the

International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda. Though the location of this research is a different country, the use of rape is similar to that of the Congo. The effects are equally as haphazard and devastating. In his study of rape, Mullins makes this point: "rape itself is infused with gendered power dynamics; scholars have long acknowledged that rape is as much about power as it is about sex."¹² What can so easily be assumed is that rape is solely driven by the desire for sex. And while that desire may play a part in influencing an individual to commit rape, the drive for power is equally as influential, if not more so in some cases.

In the DRC, Pratt and Werchick conducted a three-week assessment, "Sexual Terrorism: Rape as a Weapon of War in Eastern Democratic Republic of Congo," on the sexual terrorism that is so prevalent in this region. They found that not only is wartime rape a common reoccurrence in the Congo throughout the many conflicts it has endured, there are also different categories of rape committed by virtually all the armed groups and militias involved. From their research they found that sexual and gender-based violence increased concurrently due to its effectiveness as a weapon of war. Together, these acts could "subdue, punish, or take revenge upon entire communities."¹⁰ Though such statistics are often difficult to prove, the research done by Pratt and Werchick revealed that the victims of sexual violence range in age from four months to 84 years.¹⁰

"Women's Bodies as a Battleground," a study done by International Alert in the province of South Kivu, identified four types of rape through interviews with victims and even some members of the armed forces involved in the conflict. The four types are "individual rape, gang rape, rape in which victims are forced to rape each other, and rape involving objects being inserted into

the victims' genitals." Individual rape occurs when a victim is raped by one perpetrator. Of those interviewed, slightly over twenty percent had endured this type of rape. Gang rape, which 79% of the women interviewed had been subjected to, occurs when a woman is raped by at least two men, simultaneously or one after the other. Some victims of gang rape have said that in between rapes, the attackers would "clean" the woman by inserting the end of a rifle that had been wrapped by a soaked cloth into the woman's vagina. Forced rape between victims is pretty self-explanatory. Usually occurring after a gang rape, the perpetrators would force family members to have incestuous sexual relations with one another. Sons were forced to rape their mothers, fathers their daughters, and sometimes brothers and sisters were forced to commit sexual acts. The fourth type identified, rape involving the insertion of objects into the genitals, included some objects such as bananas, rifle barrels, pestles covered in chili pepper, bottles, and sticks. More often than not, the victims were tortured and murdered during or after the rape. Around 70% of rape survivors who partook in the study said they had been tortured during the rape, especially when they attempted to fight back. Some were beaten, had their genitals mutilated or burned, or were wounded by machetes. After being raped, some attackers killed the women by firing shots into their vaginas.¹³ There is clearly no single way to commit rape. Unfortunately, the more types of rape there are, the more victims there will be.

Rape and Poverty

So what creates this kind of environment that allows such atrocities to be committed, especially with seemingly minimal accountability? The most obvious answer would be the war that has ravaged this country for over a dec-

ade. Further analysis opens our eyes to see that so many other factors playing a role in the perpetual use of rape in the Congo. This conflict has created dire circumstances within the country that have also perpetuated the existence of rape as a wartime weapon. The widespread effects of poverty on the population have created a culture of desperation. For instance, in the eastern parts of Congo, the war "has ravaged this region intermittently since 1996 [and] has destroyed the local economy." As a result, women who are the providers for their families must continue "going to the fields to cultivate, to the forest to make charcoal, or to markets to trade their goods even though doing so puts them at risk of sexual violence."¹⁶ During these times of war, women are especially vulnerable. The burden of survival has fallen upon them, as they struggle to keep not only themselves but also the rest of their families alive. The lack of economic infrastructure and social development in the country only furthers this impoverishment of women, especially in semi-urban and rural areas.¹³

In South Kivu, for example, the position of women in economic terms is described as the "feminization of poverty," which is worsened "by the lack of any policies or mechanisms for women's advancement." All of these factors greatly increase a woman's vulnerability as well as help to legitimize gender-based violence.¹³ This subordinate view of women fuels the use of rape as a weapon of war and magnifies the devastating effects it has on women, not just physically but socially and psychologically, all of which will be discussed in more detail later on.

Another ripple effect of poverty is that armies are unable to adequately pay their soldiers. This creates a build-up of frustration and restlessness among soldiers in the camps as they wonder how they will provide for their families or anyone else who is

dependent upon them. In an article about rape in the DRC titled “Rape and War in the Democratic Republic of the Congo”, Carlsen uses theoretical frameworks to help understand why women and girls are raped so indiscriminately in this conflict. She writes, “economic desperation motivates much of the sexual violence in the DRC. Soldiers and rebel forces in eastern Congo live in notoriously squalid conditions.”¹⁴ With such limited options, soldiers result to using rape to steal whatever goods the woman may possess. These combatants may go months with very little pay, and thus may have no choice but to fend for themselves in order to compensate insufficient wages. This creates a terrible cycle of poverty as they find themselves stealing from local people just to survive each day, which in turn causes the locals to fall deeper into poverty, hindering economic development for the region. A member of the Congolese Rally for Democracy-GOMA, one of the many armed groups operating in the Congo, stated in an interview with International Alert that “fighters wait for months to get paid. They’ve got nothing to eat, they have to cope as best they can.”¹⁴

These dire economic conditions greatly influence not only the occurrence of rape in general but also the frequency with which it occurs. For instance, countless incidents of rape and looting documented by International Alert took place “during months marked by the busy harvesting of coffee, cassava, and bananas. Rapes also took place the day before major market days.” The day before the major market days are when the women would travel to the market with all their goods they planned to sell, thus making them ideal and vulnerable targets for hungry and needy soldiers. Though there are many motives for rape, as many as there are perpetrators, the poverty within the armed

forces plays a significant role in its existence. In no way does this justify committing these sexual crimes, but it is important to consider that if such depraved circumstances were to be non-existent, the use of rape as a weapon of war could look drastically different in the DRC. In other words, improving a soldier’s access to basic necessities and allowing them to look after their families could be incredibly beneficial and contribute to civilian protection.³ Removing the depravity these soldiers live in might remove the need for them to loot, which creates the opportunities for them to rape as well.

The sexual violence that occurs in this context falls under one of the major theories on wartime rape known as the opportunistic theory. According to this theory, the primary motivation for sexual violence in wartime is economic gain. It “explores the relationship between sexual violence against women and the allocation of resources.” As mentioned earlier, many soldiers involved in the war are grossly underpaid and underfed. This creates a kind of depravity that results in men using sexual violence in order to acquire and control resources to survive. Looting is encouraged as men thrive on the power advantage they have over women.¹⁴ Conflict creates desperate conditions where men rape women to sustain themselves to continue fighting. Oftentimes, it is through women that food and resources are acquired the easiest for there is little risk of retaliation. Rape is not so much about sex as it is the power of men to get what they want in order to survive another day.

Rape and Patriarchy

An additional factor to consider would be the cultural view of women. As stated earlier, the effects of poverty greatly increase the subordination of women. But what must also be considered is how women are viewed in

the context of their society. Culturally, their inferiority is furthered “by the persistence of customs, practices, and legislations that discriminate women.” Furthermore, these customs and practices “constitute an obstacle to women in getting access to property, education, modern technology and information.”¹³ Women are denied the necessary tools and resources that would not only benefit their individual well-being, but also that of their communities and provinces. From his research in Rwanda Mullins writes,

Taken together, the cultural and structural research on rape establishes that within a civilian context, sexual assault is organized and regulated within a social order, as it reinforces male beliefs about sexual privilege and access.¹²

This view of women within the cultural context is important in how it relates and shapes these beliefs about the sexual privilege of males. Mullins also points out “when women are property, women are plunder. Women have historically been considered spoils of war.”¹² Women are dehumanized to the point of being considered property. Such a mindset can, therefore, easily justify the abuse and violation of women for they are considered either less than human, or something that is owned and can thus be used however the owner desires. If women were viewed in a more positive, human light, how would these beliefs of sexual entitlement change? Again, the cultural view of women does not justify raping them, but it provides a helpful insight as to why men are able to commit such atrocities against women. How men view women significantly shapes how they treat women.

Such a patriarchal view towards rape is exemplified in the patriarchal militarized theory. Carlsen describes this theory succinctly in that the sexual violence occurring during wartime is “motivated by the desire

to exert control and power over women and men who are perceived as feminine.” The rape that occurs during conflict “is a by-product of a system of patriarchy where power relations are hierarchal and motivated by masculinity.”¹⁴ Rape serves as a type of reminder of the women’s place in society and men’s power over them.

As a result of this patriarchal society prevalent in the Congo, wartime rape is also very strategic. In “Explaining Wartime Rape”, Gottschall analyzes historical and ethnographical societies in which rape has occurred. In this article, the strategic rape is simply explained as “a tactic executed by soldiers in the service of larger strategic objectives.”¹⁵ There is a deliberate intention behind rape that transcends the physical into the psychological and sociological. Human Rights Watch provides further insight into this systematic use of rape, addressing that it was “used by all sides to deliberately terrorize civilians, to exert control over them, or to punish them for perceived collaboration with the enemy.”³ In this sense, rape is used as a mechanism to instill fear and terror into the minds of civilians, to discourage any interaction with the enemy.

Oxfam International and the Harvard Initiative teamed up to investigate this catastrophic use of sexual violence in the DRC. They conducted a study at Panzi Hospital, one of the major hospitals in the Congo that cares for victims of sexual violence, interviewing survivors about what they had endured. This study adds great insight into the culture of sexual violence in the Congo and the disastrous implications it can have upon the individual and community levels.

During their study, they found that “[rape] is strategically used to shame, demoralize and humiliate the enemy. By systematically raping women and girls, armed groups assert power and domination

over not only the women, but their men as well.”¹⁶ This use of rape sends a powerful message to the men of the community of which the rape victims belong. Mullins writes that rape is an assault on the husband’s or father’s masculinity. As a result of these “long-standing patriarchal value systems, both the men and the women simultaneously experience the destruction of their ability to enact enforced gender norms.”¹² It highlights their inability to protect their women from attack, essentially calling into question the men’s usefulness and masculinity. What this study also revealed collaborates with this idea. They found that sexual violence “is used by the opposing force to signify the weakness and inadequacy of the men in the targeted social grouping or community. These men absorb this message, perceiving their inability to protect women against assault as their own final humiliation in war.”¹⁶ Rape sends a psychological message to men through the physical brutalization of women.

In order to understand how significant the message rape sends to men, the societal implications of rape in the Congolese culture must be realized. The stigma attached to rape is incomprehensible. The men are humiliated as their masculinity is called into question by their inability to protect their women. Unfortunately, the consequences women face are much more devastating. Since rape is so highly stigmatized, victims are often abandoned by their spouse or are unable to be considered for marriage. Many are ostracized by their community, forced to leave their homes and families with an unbearable burden of shame on their backs. As a result, women are left homeless and isolated, many shunned by their own husbands. Furthermore, as this stigma disintegrates families and disturbs community life, social and cultural bonds are at risk of being de-

stroyed as the effects of the stigma live on.¹⁶ Through her examination, Carlsen found “women’s bodies physically and symbolically provide the backbone of their communities.”¹⁴ So as women are forced to leave, communities lose reproductive power but also the symbolic significance that motherhood provides, whether it is the role of raising the children or acquiring resources for the household. Wartime rape has clear ripple effects that extend far beyond the victim herself.

Unfortunately, not only are communities at risk of disintegration but cultures themselves are also in danger. A group of researchers from the Harvard Humanitarian Initiative surveyed the victims of sexual violence at Panzi Hospital in Bukavu, located in the South Kivu province. In the article, “Surviving Sexual Violence in Eastern Democratic Republic of Congo”, they analyzed the demographics of rape survivors and the physical and psychosocial consequences experienced in the eastern region of the DRC. According to their research, “mass rape is used during cultural and ethnic cleansing as a means of polluting bloodlines and forcibly impregnating women to produce ‘ethnically-cleansed’ children.”¹⁷ Through the rape of women, “soldiers split the familial atoms of which every society is composed.” The enemy may impregnate these women, they may suffer physically and psychologically, their families may abandon them, or they may die. All of these could “degrade the ability of a culture to replenish itself through sexual reproduction.”

There is also the notion of “genocidal rape [which is] designed, whether with full consciousness or not, to annihilate a people and a culture.”¹⁵ Continuing with this notion, Carlsen points out “genocidal rape is an assault against the victim with the aim of undermining a community’s sense of secu-

rity and cohesion.” She goes on to say that combatants who rape are aware of the physical and symbolic representation of women’s bodies not just in their community, but in their state and nation as well. Thus, by way of raping women, “soldiers figuratively rape and dilute the community and nation.”¹⁴ When rapes from differing ethnic groups result in pregnancies, the offspring is no longer of one ethnicity and culture but two. One ethnic group could eventually start to dissolve as mixed offspring are produced from mass rape. This is very strategic, as it can wipe out entire groups without over time without firing a single gunshot. The passing down of the culture and heritage of the group will start to slowly fade as fewer “pure” children are born.

In addition to the strategic rape theory, the feminist theory can also be applied in light of this patriarchal society. Feminist theory takes into account the gender inequality and gender roles that could be used to explain the provocation and use of rape. While there are many distinct genres of feminist theory, the one that seems to be most applicable is that of socialist feminism. Looking specifically at the feminist models of rape, Martin, Vieraitis, and Britto look at how gender equality and rape rates are related. In their article, “Gender Equality and Women’s Absolute Status”, the absolute status of women together with gender equality is highly influential in the presence of rape in a society. In addition, they emphasize “the unique role of women as a class within the economic structure.”¹⁸ In other words, a woman’s status, both socially and economically, plays a significant role in their victimization of rape.

Dr. Nutt of War Child Canada examines the unsettling challenges many women and girls face in the Congo. In her article, “Living in Fear”, she points out, in the Congo, as with many other countries in the world, the society is largely male-dominated.¹⁹ Thus, in

this patriarchal society, women are treated as less, which could facilitate an environment that allows men to treat women harshly with little reprimand. Socialist feminists refer to this sexual hierarchy that gives women further disadvantage.¹⁸

This subjugation of women creates a clear pathway for men to exploit and abuse women. Baron and Straus produced an article called, “Four Theories of Rape: A Macrosociological Analysis”, that provided incredible insight regarding the feminist theory and rape. They point out that men are able to use the fear of rape and rape itself as a means of establishing and maintaining their status and power in the system of gender stratification already at play in society. Furthermore, “rape is more likely to occur in societies where women are regarded as the sexual and reproductive possessions of men.”²⁰ In societies such as these, men are able to maintain their power and privilege by means of threatening sexual violence or by the forcible acts themselves.

The main points behind the feminist theory on rape are that it serves as a means of exercising power and dominance over women. Under this theory, Gottschall explains, “rape in war, like rape in peace, is identified not as a crime of sexual passion but as a crime motivated by the desire of a man to exert dominance over a woman.”¹⁵ In a war setting, the dominance of men and weakness of women is further exemplified. It is an exercise for soldiers to overpower women, to remind them of their place, and to force them into submission. More often than not, women have no choice but to endure. In a subcategory of this theory, known as the pressure cooker theory, the socialization of men in these patriarchal societies ingrains in their minds this need to not only dominate women, but to distrust and despise them also. Soldiers who are

“rapists ‘vent their contempt for women’ while enforcing and perpetuating patriarchal gender arrangements from which all men benefit.”¹⁵ In this case, it is not so much a message to men as discussed earlier, but about exemplifying the domination men have over women by physically overpowering them and abusing them.

It may not be about a woman in particular, but instead may be about releasing frustration upon women. Such contempt for women may arise from men being forced to fight away from their homes and their families, risking their lives, while women are able to stay behind. But only the soldiers themselves know the roots of such disdain. Most scholars who have analyzed rape, “especially militarized rape, de-link rape from biologically ‘natural’ sex drives and (re)frame it as an act of violence and aggression that builds up upon sexist discourses at play in society.”²¹ In essence, these theorists argue,

Rape in war is deemed as a result of a conspiracy, not necessarily conscious but still systematic, of men to dominate and oppress women. While men may fight on different sides and for different reasons, in one sense they are all warriors on behalf of their gender – and the enemy is woman.¹⁵

Again, women are seen as objects, forced to bear the brutalization of men’s frustrations, usually stemming from this conflict that has raged on for far too long. Women are taken advantage of in their weakness, suffering the consequences that these men will feel themselves. Instead, men are able to walk away in satisfaction for their anger released while women are left scarred, humiliated, and physically damaged.

Physical and Psychological Effects of Rape

So far the social effects of rape in conflict have been described, but the physical and

psychological effects make it all the more traumatic. In her article, Carlsen discusses the documentation retrieved by Human Rights Watch and Doctors Without Borders that found that “women and girls are tortured before, during, and after the rape takes place, with estimates that as many as 30 percent are sexually mutilated.”¹⁴ It seems that in such horrific attacks of sexual violence that is distinctive of wartime, physical and mental scarring are both present. For instance, International Alert found that in their sample of survivors interviewed, an overwhelming majority of 91%, “suffers from one or more rape-related physical or psychological problems.”¹³

Considering that such results from rape are as numerous as the women who survive them, the most prevalent will be discussed. One of the most common injuries are fistulas. The Economist published an article titled, “Atrocities Beyond Words”, that discussed the existence of rape in Congo and its devastating consequences. This article reports that in the eastern region of the DRC, rape attacks are believed to be one of the primary causes of fistula cases.²² Fistulas, as described by Dr. Nutt, occur when the walls between the vagina, rectum, and bladder have been destroyed, leaving the victim with practically no control over her bowels. Such devastating damage can only be undone by “exhaustive and painful reparative surgery,” which strikingly few women have access to since there are so few gynecologists in the Congo trained in the procedure.¹⁹ Furthermore, “women suffering from this have to wear sanitary towels constantly or in most cases, because of the poverty in which most of them live, just a piece of cloth.” Not only that, but women with fistulas are often forced to live apart from their communities because of the horrible smell of their excrement.¹³ An incredible stigma accompanies

women with fistulas due to the incontinence and infertility they cause.¹⁴

Another health concern for victims to consider is acquiring HIV from the rapist. An estimate from UNICEF says that the HIV infection rate in Congo may be as high as twenty percent of the population.¹⁹ International Alert reports an estimated 60% of combatants involved in this Congo conflict are HIV-positive.¹³ For women, this statistic is frightening and is certainly not in their favor. Every time they are raped, they have a 60% chance of acquiring a death sentence and the stigma that comes with it. So not only do they have to suffer through the social isolation from the rape, if they get HIV, they will then have to endure that alone.

In Oxfam International and the Harvard Initiative's survey of survivors being treated at Panzi Hospital in Bukavu, a number of other physical symptoms were mentioned. Through their analysis, a number of women experienced "pelvic, lumbar, and abdominal pain as well as reproductive abnormalities such as infertility and premature labor and delivery." Concerns about infection, especially with HIV, were also expressed.¹⁶ Amnesty International provided more specific physical trauma reported by rape survivors. Many of the women they interviewed suffered from infection with HIV and other sexually transmitted diseases, uterine prolapses (the descent of the uterus into the vagina or beyond), fistulas and other injuries to the reproductive system or rectum, often accompanied by internal and external bleeding or discharge, urinary or fecal incontinence, a broken pelvis, infertility, psychological trauma and difficulties in maintaining normal sexual relations, difficult pregnancies and births, and prolonged menstrual periods accompanied by severe pains.²³

The brutality these women's bodies are subjected too is unreal. Many are forced to

live with the physical consequences for the rest of their lives, unable to get access to the proper medical care they are so desperate for. As a result of the conflict, the health-care infrastructure in the east region, where most of the conflict occurs, is practically destroyed, leaving less than 50% of rape victims with access to basic medical facilities, reports Human Right Watch.³ Thus, victims are left with little hope but to endure the unbelievable amount of pain from their injuries, many of them life threatening. However, death has many faces. The Economist reports that some women have "been murdered by bullets fired from a gun barrel shoved into their vagina."²² The savagery of these acts is difficult to comprehend. The sheer violence of these rapes proves that not only is the conflict being waged on Congo soil, but also on the bodies of the Congolese women. And while the land will one day recover from the degradation that has occurred, many women will never experience such relief.

Not only are physical symptoms a concern but also the psychological impacts that result from such a traumatic experience. Again referring to the study done by International Alert, "almost all (91%) of the interviewees claimed they were suffering from behavioral problems." The most common ones being fear and shame, but insomnia, memory loss, anxiety, aggression, self-loathing, sense of dread, excessive sweating, nightmares, and withdrawal into themselves were also mentioned.¹³ More specifically, Harvard Humanitarian Initiative reports that from their interviews with survivors, 26% of the women expressed the continued anxiety they experience about the sexual violence they had been subjected to. Those who had been gang raped or kept as sexual slaves "were 1.6 times more likely to report psychological symptoms" than the women who

were endured a single instance of rape.¹⁷ As can be expected, gang rapes and sexual enslavement imply repeated rapes, which increases the magnitude of the psychological trauma that can result.

Aside from the feelings of anger, shame, anxiety, and sadness, “many women also suffered significant losses such as the death of family members, spousal abandonment and loss of personal valuables as a result of the attack.”¹⁶ The fact that these women are living in a country of war must not be forgotten. In war, family members are killed, possessions stolen, the daunting feelings of uncertainty are ever-present, only to add upon the trauma from sexual violence. In some cases, the psychological distress from rape is not limited to the women who are violated. According to *The Economist*, rapes were “committed in front of families or whole communities; male relatives forced at gunpoint to rape their own daughters, mothers or sisters; women used as sex slaves forced to eat excrement or the flesh of murdered relatives.”²² It is hard to imagine how disturbing it must be when fathers are forced to rape their daughters or brothers their mothers, especially before an audience of the whole community. Without adequate support and counseling, the emotional scarring of such events could cause major devastation for those forced to participate. The fabric of the family is disintegrated, as those involved are haunted by insurmountable feelings of guilt and shame. Entire communities are torn apart, unsure of how to recover from what they had all just experienced. As mentioned earlier, the stigma attached to sexual violence only furthers the separation, which only makes things worse.

It is clear that the psychological implications resulting from rape undeniably add to the strategy of its use as a weapon of war. Amnesty International acknowledged that

“[rape] is the universal weapon deployed to strip women of their dignity and destroy their sense of self”.²³ While other family or community members could be affected, it is women who bear the full impact of it all. Women alone are forced to suffer the stigma and humiliation. They alone feel the indescribable pain as their bodies are ruthlessly violated, and oftentimes left permanently damaged. They are cast out from the very support systems that are crucial in such times of crisis, with minimal access to medical attention that could potentially restore their bodies, and even save their lives. Apart from ending this horrendous conflict, the stigma associated with rape must be obliterated. Isolation only aids the enemy, destroying communities and those who are forcibly cast out. The emotional and tangible support that comes from family and community members is pivotal if any sort of healing is to be achieved, both psychically and psychologically.

Conclusion

With such a topic as this, it can be easy to get lost in statistics or try to separate ourselves from the gruesome reality than so many women face on a daily basis. In an attempt to put a name to facts, a personal account can help connect the processing of the mind to the feelings of the heart. Martin Bell, UNICEF UK Ambassador for Humanitarian Emergencies traveled to eastern Congo and produced a report about children caught up in the war. With many case studies of personal testimonies, Bell uncovers how children have been so dramatically affected by one of the worst crises to hit the African continent.

One of his case studies is of a fourteen-year-old girl named Martha (not her real name) who represents one of tens of thousands of women who have been raped during this conflict. This is her story:

[Martha] comes from a religious family in North Kivu Province. When she was 13, her mother sent her to buy a dress for her own baptism. On the way home, and as darkness fell, she was attacked and gang-raped by some people from her neighborhood. As a consequence of the rape, she gave birth to twin boys born 28 days prematurely. They lie beside her in an incubator at the Heal Africa Hospital in Goma. At first, she hated them. But for the moment, she says, she loves them. She is one of many victims of rape receiving care and counseling at the hospital. The chief surgeon, Dr. Kasereka Lusi, says: 'It's a terrible experience. They all become mad, really furious mad. They would rather be dead than live like this. At first they see the child as the enemy within. They try to smack it and kill it. To heal them, you need the whole community to counsel them to accept the baby'.²⁴

Martha was so young when her body was violated and her mind permanently scarred. Her childhood was ruthlessly taken from her, as she was forced to experience things no fourteen-year-old girl should ever have to know. For the rest of her life she will bear the marks, both physically and mentally, of the traumatic experience to which she was so brutally subjected. This epidemic of rape must end. It must no longer be seen as a strategic weapon of war, enabling soldiers and combatants to steal from the women they violate so they may live to fight another day. It must no longer be used to break up families and communities. Genocidal rape committed against rival ethnic groups must no longer be tolerated.

While writing about the brutality they endure is one thing, experiencing it firsthand is a whole other story, one that many of us are fortunate to never have to experience. That does not mean, however, that we cannot stand up for these women or give ear to their cry for help and justice. It begins with being educated. Awareness is the first step towards change. Learning about this crisis

and the plight of these women affected will better enable and empower us to establish methods of prevention in the affected areas of the Congo. As Freely and Thomas-Jensen of the Enough Project wrote in their article, "Getting Serious About Ending Conflict and Sexual Violence in Congo", protecting women in the Congo goes hand-in-hand, essentially, with peacemaking and prevention. Since, in this context, rape is used as a weapon of war, the war itself must be brought to an end. Doing so "will ease the suffering of women and girls and, if sufficient resources are made available, enable women and girls to participate in the healing and reconstruction of the families, communities, and country."²⁵ Policies on the local and international level must be enacted, therefore, to bring this complex conflict to a conclusion. Human Rights Watch produced a report titled, "The War Within the War", in which they provided recommendations to the various national and international groups involved. To the government of the DRC, for instance, they recommended putting an end to "providing any financial or military assistance to armed groups in eastern Congo whose members have committed serious human rights abuses." To the United Nations, further investigations of the human rights violations and reports to the Security Council to bring to justice those responsible for such violations.⁶

This paper was written in the hope of bringing to light the atrocities long hidden in the darkness of ignorance and apathy. The rape occurring in the Congo was discussed in relation to the war, poverty, and the patriarchal system evident in the country's culture. Effects of rape on both the body and the mind were also emphasized in order to bring greater understanding to the devastation sexual violence is capable of. No woman deserves to experience the horror the

Congolese women have known. Awareness, then, must lead to action for a better world to be possible. No country should ever be known as “the worst place on earth to be a woman.”

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