

Mirror images in the Congo: sexual violence and conflict

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Sexual violence is arguably one of the most challenging human rights violations to address in peace and security work. There is no vaccine to prevent it; there is no 'cure' for its effects. Girls and women are dying from the violence, and its long-term emotional, psychological and physical effects are profound and far-reaching.

One of the starkest current examples exists in the Democratic Republic of Congo ([DRC](#) [1]). Over a decade of successive conflicts throughout the country has created conditions which leave many vulnerable: lack of accountability by the armed forces and the police; civilians often trapped in the fighting between militia groups and military forces; extreme poverty. This in turn has led to fractured families and communities. Widespread prostitution, especially child prostitution, is largely led by high levels of unemployment: it is DRC's shadow economy. Children are being sold into prostitution to provide the only accessible income for their marginalised, displaced or poverty-stricken families. There is very limited access for Congolese citizens to justice or health services. In many regions, schools don't function properly, or are too expensive, or inaccessible.

As DRC's experience shows, war magnifies and exacerbates the everyday violence that girls and women live with in times of peace. [UNFPA](#) [2] estimates that one in three women will be beaten or raped in her lifetime. Women and girls are often ostracised if they have been abused or exploited, especially if pregnant or with child, and are traumatised with the cumulative psychological impact of conflict and its concomitant factors.

“Fighting violent conflict – an online conversation.” To join in the discussion on issues surrounding resolution 1325, see OpenDemocracy's “women making a difference” [blog](#) [3]

War and rape

During conflict, children and women face the constant threat of rape, sexual exploitation, trafficking, and forced pregnancy, as well as the violence and instability that affect their entire community. In Bosnia and Rwanda, as in many other conflicts, rape was used specifically as a weapon of war. In [Rwanda](#) [4] it is estimated that at least 250,000 women and girls were raped during the genocide of 1994.

Sexual violence has long been considered a “by-product” of war. Rape may be treated as a reward for soldiers. In lieu of salaries, looting and raping is often seen as legitimate payment for those involved in the fighting. In most conflict settings, children and women are subject to [sexual violence](#) [5] by military forces, by police and security officials, local leaders, fellow refugees or displaced persons, or members of the host community. There is also considerable evidence that children and women endure sexual exploitation and abuse at the hands of international peacekeeping forces or humanitarian aid workers.

In the midst of conflict, sexual victimization of children and women has even more dramatic consequences. There are estimates that two in three women who were raped as part of the genocidal violence in Rwanda are HIV positive. We also know that many women and girls bore children as a result of these rapes: a UNICEF survey conducted amongst women who survived rape in Rwanda found that 35% of 304 rape survivors had become pregnant after being assaulted. In addition to the dire psychological impact of becoming pregnant from rape, women who carry their pregnancies to term have extremely high rates of maternal mortality and infant mortality; those who pursue unsafe abortions suffer similarly shattering consequences.

Post-conflict chaos

Most importantly, and often forgotten, is the fact that the end of conflict does not signal an end to violence [6] for children and women. Post-conflict periods are characterized by rapid increases in prostitution and a rise in domestic violence. Prostitution leaves girls and women extremely vulnerable to HIV and other sexually transmitted infections. In the struggle to survive economically, exchanging sex for food, money or protection may be the only available option.

In post-conflict chaos, traffickers thrive on vulnerable targets. After the break-up of the former Yugoslavia, trafficking [7] to and from the Balkans increased: girls and women desperate to find work are trafficked out of Bosnia while other girls and women are imported by traffickers to service sexually the large military and peacekeeping presence.

There is overwhelming evidence of a substantial increase in domestic violence in post-war settings. In Cambodia, in the mid-1990s, 75% of women were victims of domestic violence, often at the hands of men who kept the small arms and light weapons that they had used during the war.

Many donors and agencies want to be seen on paper to be doing something about sexual violence, but rhetoric does not necessarily match reality. In DRC there is a plethora and possibly a confusion of agencies, fora and donors who are interested in “doing something” about sexual violence, but there is no real coherent strategy on the part of the humanitarian community. A patchwork of regional and national initiatives exists: some are well thought-out, but not implemented – rhetoric and no reality; some are quietly implemented, but not replicated in other regions – reality without rhetoric. So a collaborative approach is needed, with the UN, NGOs, and local and national authorities working together.

Working with survivors

If women and children are encouraged to report the violence they have suffered and seek care, this can help change attitudes which allow rape to happen in the first place. Breaking the silence challenges the stigma that so many survivors of rape experience. In DRC, some local initiatives reach out to women and girls in this way, and help to ensure that cases of rape are properly documented.

The stigma attached to survivors of sexual violence means that they often feel that there is no one to turn to – but the impact of sexual violence needs to be mitigated through post-rape care, including access to health care, psychosocial care, safety and whenever possible access to legal redress. Women’s groups are important in helping survivors, but they need support. These groups offer a community network for survivors and can provide information. If girls and women feel that there is a social network to turn to for help they are less inclined to avoid seeking treatment.

Far too often victims of rape are victimized again by the shame [8] and they lose family and community. Girls and women, especially those who have survived sexual violence, need educational and economic opportunities, so they are not forced to turn to prostitution. Access to income-generating and micro-credit schemes [9] can help in rehabilitation and reintegration back to communities. Sadly the same myths and victim-blaming that exist in the larger community also exist among health care workers. Challenging these biases is critically important. In DRC, training for health workers is being piloted on a small scale, on care and support for rape survivors, which is designed to challenge attitudes as well as to provide technical guidance on the physical treatment of rape.

Sexual violence has devastating health care consequences. In DRC, one of the UN agencies' primary responses has been the provision of support to hospitals, to provide the best possible care to girls and women suffering from fistulae and sexually transmitted infections, including HIV. Ensuring that health care to survivors of rape is provided in a non-judgmental manner is a vital part of this intervention.

On its fifth anniversary, openDemocracy asks, “what has UN Resolution 1325 achieved?” Other articles in the debate include:

Srilatha Batliwala [9], “Women transforming power?”

Lesley Abdela [9], “1325: deeds not words”

Jeremy Greenstock [9], “Illuminating gender – 1325 and the UN”

Elisabeth Porter [9], “Women and security: ‘You cannot dance if you cannot stand’”

Maj Britt Theorin [9], “Women among paper tigers”

Nicola Johnston-Coeterier [9], “When women and power meet”

The risk of HIV

The risk of exposure to HIV increases dramatically during sexual violence: an observational study in South Africa showed a 30% higher risk of HIV transmission during rape compared to consensual sex. Multiple assailant rape and high HIV and sexually transmitted infection prevalence rates among perpetrators of rape also raise the risk of infection. UNAIDS [10] conservatively estimates that military personnel are 2-5 times more likely to be HIV positive than the general population, and many perpetrators of rape in conflict appear to be members of the military forces.

The treatment of rape victims is complicated in conflict situations. For example, PEP (Post Exposure Prophylaxis) is a short term anti-retroviral treatment used to reduce the likelihood of HIV infection after potential exposure. It is only effective if provided within 72 hours of the exposure and if a full 28 day course of anti-retrovirals is taken, which poses a significant challenge in conflicts. Women and children must be encouraged to seek care as quickly as possible and it can be best to provide the full 28 day course of medicine in one visit, so survivors do not have to return several times to the clinic for treatment. Counselling also needs to be provided in conjunction with PEP, which is an important part of a holistic response to sexual assault survivors. Prevention of HIV is perhaps one of the most meaningful actions the humanitarian community can take to minimize the harms done to women and children who are raped.

Social and political transformation

Sexual violence happens as a result of power imbalances, and is deeply rooted in inequality and discrimination. To stop rape, the unequal status of women and children, especially girls, in relation to men must be addressed.

Further, sexual violence happens in conflict because it is allowed to happen. Until perpetrators are held accountable for their crimes, the violence will continue. It is critical to bring about an end to impunity. We need accountability for perpetrators.

In Sierra Leone and East Timor efforts are underway to provide technical assistance for the involvement of children in truth and justice-seeking mechanisms. Initial steps have also been undertaken to establish a closer relationship and a *modus operandi* with the International Criminal Court. A more concerted effort could be made to apply such experiences directly to cases of sexual violence. The importance of post-conflict truth and justice seeking mechanisms has increased in recent years, and is likely to continue to do so, especially as the Rome Statute [11] of the International Criminal Court has come into force. A stronger involvement in and development of the expertise of humanitarian and protection agencies in this area is urgently needed.

Post-conflict, establishing the rule of law is critical. Certain measures can achieve a more comprehensive and far-reaching sense of justice: national law reform; support for the establishment of a judicial system in conformity with international human rights standards; gender and child rights training for judges, lawyers, police and social workers. In North Kivu, a province in Eastern Congo, social workers have been trained to assist with the reintegration of rape victims into communities and to help transform attitudes that blame victims for what has been done to them. Women's groups are vital: they can provide a safe place to encourage rape survivors to speak out, which can serve as a bedrock for changing social attitudes about sexual violence.

The tacit acceptance of rape as an inevitable part of war contributes to its continued and growing use during conflict. This notion must be challenged at every opportunity – sexual violence during conflict is common but certainly not inevitable. To ensure that children and women are protected from violence, rather than further victimised by it, the humanitarian community can engage with armed group leaders to secure their commitment to greater protection for civilians, including protection of women and children from sexual violence, and mechanisms to monitor and hold violators accountable, as well as promoting the empowerment of women and girls and encouraging their leadership in transition periods and their participation in political decision-making.

UN Security Council Resolution 1325 [12] calls for gender equity in the transition to peace, and the humanitarian community has a role to play in making this a reality.

A challenge that goes to the heart of the humanitarian community

Meanwhile, the humanitarian community itself is not immune to the problem of sexual violence. Reports surfaced in February 2002 of sexual exploitation and abuse committed against beneficiaries in particular in West Africa, by humanitarian aid workers and peacekeepers.

In response, a Task Force [13] on Protection from Sexual Abuse and Exploitation in Humanitarian Crises was established. It made recommendations that aim to eliminate sexual exploitation and abuse by humanitarian personnel and the misuse of humanitarian assistance for sexual exploitation, which range from increasing the numbers of women delivering food

assistance, to setting up reporting mechanisms for beneficiaries to report abuse, to increasing beneficiary awareness of their rights and entitlements.

Six core principles for a code of conduct on sexual abuse and exploitation were developed. A Secretary General's Bulletin in October 2003 incorporated these principles into UN Staff Rules and Regulations and set out a code of conduct for all United Nations staff, including those in separately administered organs and programmes, consultants, and implementing partners. It clearly defines sexual exploitation and abuse and prohibits UN staff from engaging in such acts.

In 2004, however, a major scandal blew up in DRC that seriously undermined the credibility of the United Nations Peacekeeping mission here (MONUC [14]). After a series of ad hoc responses on the part of the UN Mission, an Office was established to address incidents of sexual exploitation and abuse, investigate them, train personnel and develop policies for other peacekeeping missions. The record in Liberia and Haiti also came under scrutiny and it is now recognised that civilians have been sexually abused and exploited as far back as the UN presence in Cambodia in 1992.

For further information read:

UNFPA State of World Population Report 2005: Chapter 7 – Gender-based violence: a price too high [15]

In DRC, some 63 UN personnel, civilian and military as well as UN Police have either been repatriated on disciplinary grounds, summarily dismissed or suspended without pay pending a final decision. Major challenges remain, such as what to do about “UN babies”, children fathered by UN personnel. The bottom line is that victims need to be assisted and children [16] fathered by UN personnel taken care of. The exact policies and procedures are still under discussion.

For new personnel, training and local awareness of their working context are strong preventative measures. However, sexual exploitation and abuse by UN personnel does continue and much work remains to be done. Standards need to be fully integrated into all organizations and all UN personnel and troop-contributing countries need to be clear regarding their responsibilities and duties. Effective mechanisms for making complaints and investigating claims of abuse must be developed and these standards must be backed up by clear systems of accountability in order to be effective.

Such requirements are not new. The echoes are considerable for anyone who has worked in conflict-affected societies. This suggests there is no ‘quick fix’. Beyond the UN system, many emerging challenges require further attention, from the link between trafficking and conflict, to the particular vulnerabilities of girl soldiers to sexual violence and exploitation, to strengthening national and international legal systems to better hold individual perpetrators accountable. Nothing short of comprehensive understanding and action to combat sexual violence will do.

Source URL:

http://www.opendemocracy.net/democracy-resolution_1325/congo_2964.jsp

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[2] <http://www.unfpa.org/> target=_blank

[3] <http://www.opendemocracy.net/openblogs/blog/1325women/> target=_blank

[4] <http://www.womenwarpeace.org/rwanda/rwanda.htm> target=_blank

[5] <http://www.womenforwomen.org/rarrape.html> target=_blank

[6] <http://www.amnesty.org.uk/svaw/vaw/conflict.shtml> target=_blank

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