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stereotype of 'weapon of war' and its
dangerous consequences

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Abstract:

The high levels of sexual violence in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), together with the stigmatizing media coverage that the African country has been subjected to, have shaped a vision of this phenomenon exclusively as part of a war strategy by the armed actors in the Congolese conflict. However, this discourse of rape as a 'weapon of war', and the overwhelming attention it gets from international audiences and donors, not only overlooks the high number of rapes perpetrated by civilians, but also has perverse consequences, such as encouraging serious discrimination against highly vulnerable populations and promoting the use of sexual violence as a bargaining tool by militias. The stereotype of the 'weapon of war' also hampers the prevention of this atrocity, as an inaccurate understanding of who the perpetrators are and the factors behind such abuses could lead to ineffective responses.

Keywords:

DRC, sexual violence, rape, Congo, weapon of war, torture, FARDC, armed groups, stigma, NGO.

***NOTE:** The ideas contained in the Framework Papers shall be responsibility of their authors, without necessarily reflecting the thinking of the IEEE or the Ministry of Defense.

Introduction: Congo, an eternal *Heart of Darkness*?

Rape as a strategy to achieve political-military goals in an armed conflict —as a 'weapon of war' —is a phenomenon whose history «is as long is as the history of warring itself»¹ and which goes beyond diverse cultures, ethnic groups and geographical areas. The Iliad, attributed to Homer —dated between the 8th and 6th centuries a. Chr.—, describes how this type of aggression was already a useful tool of war at that time². The tragedy that took place at the end of the Second World War, when hundreds of thousands of German women were raped by Soviet, French and British troops, or the 1.4 million victims of this type of aggression³ in eastern Prussia, Pomerania and Silesia during that conflict, confirm that the phenomenon has been inherent to wars, including those fought in Europe.

A conflict between Europeans, the Bosnia-Herzegovina war (1992-1995), together with the genocide in Rwanda (1994), marked a turning point with respect to this crime, which had previously been considered an inevitable consequence of armed conflicts. The massive use of rape for ethnic cleansing⁴ in these two countries⁵ finally forced sexual violence as a war strategy onto the international agenda. However, it was not until 2008 that the UN Security Council adopted Resolution 1820⁶ which opened the door for sexual assault to be considered a war crime, crime against humanity or genocide.

Despite this universality of sexual violence as a 'weapon of war', the Western media tend to accentuate its use in societies described as primitive, barbaric and

¹ ERIKSSON BAAZ, Maria y STERN, Maria, "Sexual violence as a weapon of war? Perceptions, prescriptions, problems in the Congo and beyond". Zed Books. Londres, Nueva York, 2013. p. 1-2.

² Quoted in FRIZZELL, Nell, "Cómo llegó la violación a ser reconocida como arma de guerra". Vice.com magazine, January 4, 2017. Available at <https://www.vice.com/es/article/kzea53/violacion-crimen-guerra> . Date of consultation: 12.11.2019

³ SHEEHAN, Paul "An orgy of denial in Hitler's bunker". The Sydney Morning Herald. 17 May 2003. Available at: <http://www.smh.com.au/articles/2003/05/16/1052885399546.html> Date of consultation: 12.02. 2018.

⁴ STIGLMAYER, Alexandra "The Rapes in Bosnia-Herzegovina". Remembering Srebrenica, 2017. Available at: <https://www.srebrenica.org.uk/what-happened/the-rapes-in-bosnia-herzegovina-alexandra-stiglmayer/> Date of consultation: 12.11.2019.

⁵ HRW, "Shattered lives, Sexual Violence during the Rwandan Genocide and its Aftermath", September 1996. Available at: <https://www.hrw.org/reports/1996/Rwanda.htm> Date of consultation: 12.11.2019.

⁶ Available at: <http://www.un.org/press/en/2008/sc9364.doc.htm> Date of consultation: 12.02.2018

hypersexualised, three features that have been attributed to African societies since colonialism and which shape «the media's imaginary construction of the African 'other'»⁷.

There is a country that constitutes the paradigm of how this type of violence has become a «dominant narrative»⁸ to the point of becoming a «characteristic and central feature of the discourse»⁹: the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), the African giant that suffered one of the most «abject colonialisms of the contemporary era»¹⁰. During this colonial period, millions of people were massacred, or died from exhaustion, torture or disease, mainly because of greed for the country's resources —first ivory and then rubber—from Leopold II, King of the Belgians, and from private companies that obtained concessions to exploit these natural resources.

These atrocities were reflected in images of Congolese adults and children with their hands and feet amputated for not having met the rubber collection quotas, «pictures of the shock» that as early as the beginning of the 20th century recognized the «Congolese horror»¹¹. At the same time, they set a precedent for the «simple and Manichean»¹² drama to which the complex reality of the DRC is still reduced today. The hell described in Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* helped to establish a narrative tradition where the background is always «atrocious suffering»¹³ and where the portrait of the Congo is painted in the colours of primitivism, backwardness and irrationality¹⁴.

⁷ SENDÍN, José Carlos, "La construcción imaginaria del otro africano por los medios de comunicación", *Pueblos Magazine*, 15.12.2002. Available at: <http://www.revistapueblos.org/old/spip.php?article138> Date of consultation: 15.11.2018.

⁸ AUTESSERRE, Séverine, "Dangerous Tales: dominant narratives on the Congo and their unintended consequences", *African Affairs* 111, 9.02.2012. Available at: <http://publish.illinois.edu/internationalhumanrightsworkshop2013/files/2013/07/autesserre-2012-dominant-narratives-on-the-congo.pdf> Date of consultation: 15.11.2019.

⁹ GARCÍA MINGO, Elisa, "Cuando los cuerpos hablan, la corporalidad en las narraciones sobre la violencia sexual en la República Democrática del Congo", *Revista de Dialectología y Tradiciones Populares*, volume LXX, p 161-186, January-June 2015. Available at: http://www.lolamora.net/images/stories/documentos/2016/rdc_narrativas.pdf Date of consultation: 20.11.2019.

¹⁰ Op. cit. 9, p. 4.

¹¹ Ibid. p.5.

¹² STEARNS, Jason, op. cit. 9, p. 11.

¹³ Dunn K.C. 2003. *Imagining the Congo: The international relations of identity*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan. Op. cit. 9, p. 11.

¹⁴ Ibid. p.11

The development of the post-colonial Congo reinforced this trend. After the fall of Mobutu Sese Seko's dictatorship, the DRC ended the 20th century trapped in two successive wars between 1996 and 2003, when the Sun City agreements put an end only on paper to a conflict in which the NGO International Rescue Committee estimates that 5.5 million people died. Since then, the Congo has been an example of failed post-war reconstruction. Not only do the inhabitants of the region have never know peace, but 130 armed groups¹⁵ are still active in the Kivu region.

Thus, recent historiography portrays the post-colonial Congo as an eternal *heart of darkness* in which «the barbarity of the colonizer is prolonged, and the country is described as a continuum of death and torture»¹⁶. This discourse focus on three dominant narratives in the media and activist discourse; namely, «a primary cause of violence, illegal exploitation of mineral resources; a main consequence, sexual abuse of women and girls; and a central solution, extending state authority»¹⁷.

These narratives have had positive consequences, such as putting Congo on the agenda of the international community. However, the fact that what is described above is often all that is said about that country has imposed an extreme simplification of a complex conflict in which the attention that the international community has given to these three arguments has led to the oblivion of the «other causes, consequences, and solutions [of the conflict]»¹⁸. In this context, rape as a 'weapon of war' has become the «synecdoche of Congolese horror»¹⁹.

Rapes in the Congolese conflict: from reality to show

«It started in 1998. Our agents [from the Olame centre of the Congolese Catholic Church] who were travelling through South Kivu began to encounter villages from which the entire population had fled. When they arrived, little by little, women and girls began

¹⁵ "Congo, Forgotten. The Numbers Behind Longest Africa's Humanitarian Crisis". New York University Congo Studies Group, August 2019. Available at [https://kivusecurity.nyc3.digitaloceanspaces.com/reports/28/KST%20biannual%20report%20August%2012%20\(1\).pdf](https://kivusecurity.nyc3.digitaloceanspaces.com/reports/28/KST%20biannual%20report%20August%2012%20(1).pdf) Date of consultation: 20.11.2019

¹⁶ Op. cit. 9, p, 11.

¹⁷ Op. cit. 8, p. 3.

¹⁸ Op. cit. 8, p. 3.

¹⁹ Op. cit.9, p. 9.

to come out of the woods. Practically all of them had been raped. This could not be a coincidence: these aggressions were used to destroy women, physically and psychologically, and through them, families and entire communities. In the Congo, women are the foundation of the economy»²⁰.

Mathilde Muhindo was one of the first activists to raise the alarm about how Rwandan and Burundian fighters involved in the DRC war were using rape as a 'weapon of war'. Although the late 1990s were probably the worst years regarding these atrocities, the world remained blind to what was going on in the Congo. In 2002 only, when Human Rights Watch published the report *A War Within a War*²¹, the international community opened its eyes to the use of sexual violence in the conflict in the African country.

This report described not only sexual assaults, often gang rapes, of girls and women between the ages of five and 80, but the practice of sexual slavery and tortures such as putting sticks or guns into their vaginas or shooting or stabbing their genitals. Many times, those who suffered these aggressions were killed, or died from the wounds. Rape also led to unwanted pregnancies and/or HIV/AIDS infection, as well as severe fistulas²² that left survivors incontinent in urine and/or faeces. This medical problem increased the stigma of being raped. Almost always, these women were then rejected by their spouses and communities. Their rapist, meanwhile, enjoyed the most scandalous impunity.

In 2009, US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton put these facts on the television screens once and for all by visiting eastern Congo and defining what happened there as «one of the greatest atrocities of humanity» before revealing the US intention to allocate \$17 million to fight sexual violence in the DRC²³. The following year, the UN Special Envoy for Victims of Sexual Violence in Conflict, Margot Wallström, also travelled to North Kivu, where she declared her capital, the city of Goma, «the rape capital of the world» and the DRC «the worst country in the world to be a woman». From then on, «eastern Congo and rape were inextricably linked for most foreign audiences»²⁴.

²⁰ Author's interview with Mathilde Muhindo Bukavu, 02.26.2017

²¹ Available at <https://www.hrw.org/reports/2002/drc/Congo0602.pdf> Date of consultation: 22.11.2019

²² Vaginal fistulas are abnormal openings that connect the vagina to another organ, such as the bladder and/or rectum.

²³ Op. cit. 1, p. 89

²⁴ Op. cit. 8. p. 14

How many women have been raped in this African country? No one knows. A statistic from the American Journal of Public Health²⁵ raised the number of Congolese women who had ever been raped to more than 12 per cent and at least 434,000 who had suffered such assault during 2006. According to this data, every hour 48 women were raped in the DRC at that time. Doctors without Borders claims that in some areas of the Kivu region, three out of four women have been raped²⁶.

These figures may even be underestimated as many attacks go unreported but, even so, the accuracy of Clinton's and Wallström's statements is questionable. First, because while the country deplores intolerable rates of sexual violence, it is not the only case and may not even be the worst state regarding this crime in the world. The figures for countries like South Africa can be used to illustrate the above. In this country, the number of rapes reported to the police alone is around 50,000²⁷ every year while humanitarian organisations estimate that 40% of South Africans will be raped at least once in their lifetime²⁸.

Statistics on rape in the Congo are based on extrapolations, a method that poses serious problems in a country whose last census dates from 1984 and which does not even have its entire population registered. However, above of this possible inaccuracy in the data, the opinion of the Congolese should be considered when considering the desirability to define Congo as the «rape capital of the world». Prominent DRC activists consider that associating their country with sexual violence is «stigmatizing»²⁹. The anthropologist Elisa García Mingo, whose thesis is about the women of Eastern Congo, corroborates the negative consequences of this type of discourse, since these well-

²⁵ Estimates and Determinants of Sexual Violence Against Women in the Democratic Republic of Congo. American Journal of Public Health (AJPH), 08.30.2011. Available at: <https://ajph.aphapublications.org/doi/abs/10.2105/AJPH.2010.300070> Date of consultation: 11.20. 2019

²⁶ Doctors Without Borders. 2014. La emergencia que no cesa. Sufrir en silencio en República Democrática del Congo. Barcelona. Barcelona: Doctors Without Borders. Summary available at <https://www.msf.es/actualidad/republica-democratica-del-congo-la-emergencia-que-no-cesa> Date of consultation: 11.15. 2019

²⁷ Rape statistics in South Africa, Africa Check. June 2016. Available at: <https://africacheck.org/factsheets/guide-rape-statistics-in-south-africa/> Date of consultation: 11.16.2019.

²⁸ MIDDLETON, Lee "Corrective Rape": Fighting a South African Scourge". Available at: <http://content.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,2057744,00.html> Date of consultation: 11.16.2019

²⁹ Interviews conducted by the author with activists such as Julienne Lusenge, president of Sofepadi, lawyer Belinda Luntadila, and the late journalist Solange Lusiku, respectively in Kinshasa and Bukavu, between November 2016 and February 2017.

meaning slogans together with an often out-of-context informative treatment have ended up reducing Congolese women to «mere rapeable bodies»³⁰.

«One day, while I was attending a congress in Belgium, an unknown young woman came up to me and when she saw on my accreditation that I was coming from Eastern Congo, she said 'Courage' and then asked me if I had been raped. My answer was 'Yes and no, I have not been raped, but I feel assaulted every time one of my countrywoman is raped' (...) everywhere I go, I carry the rape with me. We Congolese woman have been sold with that face of rape that is like a new slavery. That demoralizes me» said the late journalist Solange Lusiku, editor of the newspaper *Le Souverain*³¹

This anecdote shows the extent to which "Congolese" is assimilated to "raped woman", an association of ideas that not only deprives these women of their role as «agents of change», but also, by reducing them exclusively to the role of victim, «symbolically locks them up in that condition»³².

The fact that the DRC has become the collective Western imagination in the country of sexual violence has other consequences. For example, Congo has ended up hosting a veritable "information" tourism of rape³³, practiced by journalists, activists, movie stars and representatives of international organizations who pilgrim to the DRC to hear the story of the attacks by the survivors.

An almost obligatory stop for those who practice this "tourism" is a visit to one of the two best known hospitals that treat patients who have been raped in eastern Congo, the Panzi in Bukavu, run by surgeon and gynaecologist Denis Mukwege, Nobel Peace Prize 2018, and the Heal Africa in Goma. Often encouraged by good intentions, these visitors are so numerous that aid workers on the ground have ended up finding their presence and the parade of strangers through these two hospitals «appalling»³⁴.

«Stories of rape must, it seems, feature pictures of victims in order to attract readers. The often-intimate representations of injured bodies and suffering are composed in a way that would be quite unthinkable if those depicted were survivors of sexual violence

³⁰ Op. cit 9. p.25

³¹ Interview with the author, Bukavu, 27.02.2017

³² Op. cit. 9, p. 24-25.

³³ Op. cit. 1, p.6. The authors define it literally as "rape tourism".

³⁴ Op. cit. 8, p. 13.

in most countries in Europe and the USA. Who would even ponder the idea of letting journalists and other visitors into a hospital ward in New York or Stockholm with women waiting for, or just recovering from, surgery for rape-induced genital injuries, and urge them to speak and retell their stories to complete strangers?»³⁵.

This appropriate consideration gives an idea of the racist tinge of such "tourism" and the treatment of rape survivors in the Congo. One of its deplorable features is that women and girls who suffer such assault are often deprived of the right to be protected from unwelcome visits and from having to «relive the trauma of rape by telling their story over and over again»³⁶. By contrast, these rights are often enjoyed by Westerner women who suffer sexual violence.

The lack of respect for these people is not limited to the physical invasion of their privacy at a time of particular vulnerability, but also the narrative treatment of their stories has too often degenerated into a «violence-pornography theatre»³⁷ characterized by the great «corporeality»³⁸ of descriptions focused on the physical consequences of the violation. This discourse, which revolves around the idea of "destroyed vaginas", has its own stereotyped phrase repeated *ad nauseam*; the one that alludes to the fact that "women's bodies have become a battlefield".

The accounts of the attacks are therefore often extremely detailed on the surgical treatment to reconstruct the victims' genitals. However, these narratives are a good example of the «strategy of victimicy in relation to rape»³⁹ because, contrary to what could be concluded from many narrative products about sexual violence in Congo, the majority of Congolese women who have to undergo genital surgery have not been raped. Only 0.8 per cent⁴⁰ of fistula cases in that country are the result of sexual assault, the rest result from traumatic delivery.

This reality is less striking, but no less difficult for those who suffer it. However, the suffering of obstetric fistula victims is often not told. Many journalists are still competing

³⁵ Op. cit. 1, p. 92.

³⁶ Ibid. p. 92.

³⁷ Op. cit. 9, p. 5.

³⁸ Ibid. p.5.

³⁹ Op. cit. 1, p. 99.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

to outdo each other by reporting «the most barbaric gang rape scenario»⁴¹, a trend that results in the most brutal cases being presented as the norm. In the interest of making their stories and reports more spectacular, some reporters tell atrocious stories of survivors who were attacked years ago, a crucial aspect that is not always made explicit. In this way, sexual violence in Congo is presented as a spectacle where survivors are treated «as objects whose sufferings are there to be consumed by Western audiences»⁴².

Rape in the Congo, a weapon of war in all cases?

A society contaminated by warmongering: the civil rapists

The «appropriation of the suffering»⁴³ of the Congolese women whose result are journalistic accounts of «the mass culture that turns horror and tragedy into cheap thrills»⁴⁴, together with the success of this type of story in international audiences and donors has contributed significantly to push the discourse of the 'weapon of war' to the Olympus of indisputable truths. Thus, many journalists, activists and humanitarians describe sexual violence in Congo as a still photo from the past in which the evolution of the phenomenon in recent years does not seem to have made a dent.

That unchanging picture ignores in many cases significant figures which denies the headline/slogan of the 'weapon of war', especially the steady increase in rapes perpetrated by civilians. If in 2004, the year after the official end of the war, they constituted less than 1% of the total⁴⁵, in 2008 the percentage was already 38%. In

⁴¹ STEARNS, Jason, "Are we focusing too much on sexual violence in the DRC? Congo Siasa, 12.14.2009. Available at: <http://congosiasa.blogspot.com/2009/12/are-we-focusing-too-much-on-sexual.html>. Date of consultation: 11.20.2019

⁴² Op. cit. 1, p. 92.

⁴³ Op.cit.9, p. 21.

⁴⁴ Ibid. p. 22

⁴⁵ Figures available at <https://www.oxfam.org/en/press-releases/new-report-shows-shocking-pattern-rape-eastern-congo> Date of consultation: 29.11.2019

2013, a United Nations Population Fund spokesperson stated that 77 per cent of the attacks they had recorded had been perpetrated by civilians⁴⁶.

Who are these civilians and why are there so many rapes in the DRC if they are not already in many cases part of a war strategy? Almost certainly, some of them are former combatants. In regions such as North Kivu, almost half the men (43%)⁴⁷ fought in the Congolese armed forces (FARDC) or have been involved in armed groups. Enrolled voluntarily or by force, some of these men were child soldiers and became adults with an ideal of warlike masculinity, being forced to kill and rape, or at least seeing others do so.

This exposure to violence and the internalisation of their normality is a legacy of the conflict, and one of the reasons why rape continues at stratospheric levels in Congo. A World Bank study⁴⁸ on ex-combatants describes some of the consequences of this legacy. One of them is that 44% of former military or militia members surveyed said they enjoyed seeing their victims suffer while almost one in ten described combat as sexually exciting. These former combatants «not only got used to violence, but over time began to enjoy it and developed a need to be increasingly cruel». One in ten of these men had also been raped, in many cases by their own commanders.

With the virus of violence already inside, the demobilized combatants then returned home without having benefited from any rehabilitation. In this way, they brought their trauma to their families and neighbourhoods, a legacy of violence that, for one in four of these people, has resulted —always according to the World Bank— in serious post-traumatic stress disorders.

Former combatants are not the only civilians who rape, or the only Congolese traumatized by the war. The entire population of eastern Congo has been and is

⁴⁶ WOLFE, Lauren, "Unarmed and Dangerous, with civilian rape on the rise, the war on Congo's women comes painfully, pervasively home", Foreign Policy, 07.03.2014. Available at: <https://foreignpolicy.com/2014/03/07/unarmed-and-dangerous/> Date of consultation: 30.11.2019.

⁴⁷ Gender relations, sexual and gender-based violence and the effects of conflict on women and men in North Kivu Provinces of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Final Report 2014, Promundo and Sonke Gender Justice, p. 26. Available at: <https://promundoglobal.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/12/Gender-Relations-Sexual-and-Gender-Based-Violence-and-the-Effects-of-Conflict-on-Women-and-Men-in-North-Kivu-Eastern-DRC-Results-from-IMAGES.pdf> . Date of consultation: 12.01.2019.

⁴⁸ Sexual and Gender-Based Violence in the Kivu Provinces of the Democratic Republic of Congo: Insights from Former Combatants. World Bank Group, 09.2013. Available at: <https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/handle/10986/17852> Date of consultation: 01.12.2019.

exposed to the conflict and therefore has been educated in that model of aggressive masculinity whose ideal is to be « be dominant over the weak or vulnerable in order to get what they want — whether that is power, money, or women's bodies»⁴⁹. To this disastrous socialization must be added the emotional devastation of the population in the eastern region of the country. The statistics speak for themselves; in North Kivu, 50% of the population claims to have lost a family member in the conflict. Twenty-five per cent deplore the death of a child and an identical percentage —one in four Congolese in that zone— have been wounded in the fighting. The result of all this pain is that as many as two out of three people in North Kivu Province claim to have «lost the ability to love and care for others»⁵⁰.

In this society psychologically ill due to its painful history, another factor helps justify the women's choice as the primary victims of worst form of violence, including sexual one: the discriminatory gender norms and roles widely accepted by both men and women. In a gender equality profile prepared by the Swedish embassy and the EU in Kinshasa, the DRC ranked 144th out of 148 countries. Discrimination against Congolese women in all areas —health, education, access to economic and political rights and justice—⁵¹and beliefs such as the one that men have a "right to sex" even if women refuse —a "right" supported by 62% of North Kivu women and 48% of North Kivu⁵² men— contribute to justifying sexual assaults. Equally revealing is the fact that almost a third of the men questioned stated that women «sometimes want to be raped», and that a woman sexually assaulted «may enjoy it»⁵³.

In addition to these male chauvinist beliefs, there are other traditional ones that are no less misogynistic, such as the belief that having sex with a virgin confers power, good luck and even cures HIV/AIDS, a superstition behind the rape of young girls. Impunity, which has timidly begun to decline in recent years, furthermore, leaves rapists the way open to perpetrate their crimes.

⁴⁹ WOLFE, Lauren, "Unarmed and Dangerous. With civilian rape on the rise, the war on Congo's women comes painfully, pervasively home", Foreign Policy, 03.07.2014. Available at: <https://foreignpolicy.com/2014/03/07/unarmed-and-dangerous/> Date of consultation: 12.03.2019

⁵⁰ Op. cit. 47, p. 25.

⁵¹ Available at: <https://www.lauradavis.eu/wp-content/uploads/2014/07/Profil-genre-2014-RDC.pdf> Date of consultation: 5/12/2019

⁵² All data in this paragraph are from op. cit. 47.

⁵³ Ibid, 53.

As can be deduced from the above, rape in the Congo is also an extreme manifestation of gender violence, as corroborated by another fact: the high number of sexual aggressions within the couple, another reality absent from the accounts of this drama, as it does not correspond to the stereotype of the 'weapon of war'. Among of the raped women who participated in the American Journal of Public Health study cited above, 22.5% did not report being attacked by a combatant, but by their husband or partner.

Perhaps even more surprising is that the dichotomy of woman victim and man perpetrator is not always a faithful representation of the reality. In a survey⁵⁴ of mental health in eastern Congo, 41.1% of female respondents said they had been involved in war-related sexual violence against other women, while 10% had assaulted men. As the presence of women in the FARDC and the militias is in the minority, these percentages indicate that most of these women perpetrators were civilians, a characteristic that again corroborates the fact that «the interpretation of sexual violence only as an effect of war is not sufficient to recognize that today this violence occurs essentially among civilians and should, in part, be understood by analysing the socio-cultural context, the ideologies linked to gender (masculinity and femininity) and the position of women in the economic, social and political spheres»⁵⁵.

Combatants who rape: the «forward panic»

The increasing number of rapes among civilians is not the only fact that denies that sexual violence is always used as a 'weapon of war' in Congo. Some specialists in security, politics and gender, such as Maria Eriksson Baaz and Maria Stern, consider that «the occurrence of sexual violence in warring contexts does not necessarily imply that sexual violence is construed as strategic, or is encouraged by military (...) reducing rape in a warring context to a function simply of strategy, encouraged by military commanders, accords too much rationality and intentionality to wartime violence»⁵⁶.

⁵⁴ JOHNSON, Kirsten et al. "Association of Sexual Violence and Human Rights Violations with Physical and Mental Health in Territories of the Eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo", JAMA, 08. 04.2010, vol 304, nº 5, p. 553.

⁵⁵ DOUMA, Nynke y HILHORST, Dorotea, Fond de commerce? Assistance aux victimes de violences sexuelles en République Démocratique du Congo, Disaster Studies, Occasional Papers 03, p. 65.

⁵⁶ Op. cit. 1, p. 65.

These authors reached this conclusion after interviewing more than two hundred FARDC officers and soldiers. The soldiers' testimonies, they say, «suggest that the SGBV [sexual gender-based violence] has not been used as an explicit military strategy, in the sense that soldiers have been ordered to rape. While conducting our research, the soldiers were always asked whether they had ever received orders to rape. Their answer was always no»⁵⁷.

Eriksson Baaz and Stern also refer to a multiplicity of factors to explain what drives these military men to rape if not by order of their hierarchy. Among these reasons, they cite the concept of «forward panic»⁵⁸ a state of mind that can arise in the conditions of extreme tension and fear of war resulting into an atmosphere of hysteria and spirals of uncontrollable violence that push combatants to commit atrocities not directed at any strategic end. Some military personnel interviewed by these two authors alluded to this state of mind with the expression «spirit and craziness of war»⁵⁹.

«War is crazy, it destroys the minds of people. Some people just go crazy. Rape is a result of that too, especially the bad rapes. It gets too much [...] Also, a lot is because of drugs. If you take drugs, drink, or other things – it is not good. And many, many [...] most take drugs».

The testimony of this FARDC captain concerned the widespread use of drugs. Other military men justified the aggressions by expressing strong feelings of humiliation, mistreatment and victimization. It should not be forgotten that FARDC troops not only live in misery, often because of the corruption of their commanders, but are also unpopular in a population against which they have a long history of human rights violations. The Congolese soldier occupies the bottom of the social pyramid and, for the reasons mentioned above, often has very conflictive relations with civilians. This feeling

⁵⁷ ERIKSSON BAAZ, Maria y STERN, Maria, *The Complexity of Violence: A critical analysis of sexual violence in the Democratic Republic of Congo*. SIDA Working Paper on Gender Based Violence, 05.2010, p. 15. Available at: <http://www.diva-portal.org/smash/get/diva2:319527/FULLTEXT02> Date of consultation: 12.10.2019.

⁵⁸ COLLINS, RANDALL: *Violence: A Microsociological Theory*, Princeton, NJ, and Oxford: Princeton University Press. Op. cit. 1, p. 78–81.

⁵⁹ Op.cit.1, p. 83.

of humiliation and disrespect by civilians makes these military men more prone to commit violence»⁶⁰.

Conflict-related rapes in the DRC in the context of the conflict also does not take place in such a way that one might think that committing sexual assault was the only or the main purpose of the combatants. It is known that «a great deal of the sexual violence in the DRC is combined with and linked to pillage and looting in various contexts: in the homes, of women working in the fields or on their way to and from market places. However, in many cases, pillage and looting in the DRC are not only combined with sexual violence, but also with other forms of violence such as killing, beating, abduction, etc»⁶¹. In the case of the soldiers who participated in the above-mentioned investigation among FARDC soldiers and officers, their miserable living conditions were one of the reasons cited by the respondents to justify their outrages, including looting and rape.

Eriksson Baaz and Stern, the authors of the study, conclude that gender-based violence in the Congolese conflict committed by security sector personnel should therefore be understood more as the result of a combination of all the above factors than as a strategy resulting from orders from a hierarchy. A similar conclusion can be drawn from the study among World Bank former combatants, where only 13 per cent of respondents claimed to have received orders to rape.

In addition to this absence of orders, other characteristics of the Congolese conflict confirm the non-strategic nature of at least a good part of the cases of sexual violence in that African country. For example, in the Congo, despite ethnic tensions between Congolese and Kinyarwanda (the Rwandan language) speakers —assimilated with "Rwandans" or "Tutsis" even if they are Congolese nationals— rape has not been used as an instrument of ethnic cleansing and has tended «to be committed against any woman, regardless of political or ethnic affinity with the perpetrator»⁶². This lack of a concrete profile of the victims is illustrated by the actions of armed groups such as the Mai-Mai, who are responsible for the bulk of sexual violence in the communities that these militiamen claim to protect from "the Rwandans".

⁶⁰ Ibid. p. 81.

⁶¹ Op. cit. 57. p. 34.

⁶² Ibid, p.14.

Therefore, given the evolution of the phenomenon in the DRC, «a growing body of literature suggests that the prevailing journalistic and activist accounts of the nature of rape in the Congo are often incomplete, and, in many cases, simply wrong. While no one disputes that armed men engage in rape against civilian populations, the story of who is raping whom turns out to be significantly more complicated than the popular narrative suggests»⁶³.

As in the past, while sexual violence in Congo «is often used to humiliate and intimidate, this humiliation and intimidation is much less strategic and far more complex than a combat strategy for further political/military gain»⁶⁴. Perhaps it is worth asking whether rape in the African country has not become a «systemic fact»⁶⁵ in a society sick with violence.

The consequences of the "weapon of war" discourse

Rape as a tool and the hierarchy of misfortune

The 'weapon of war' speech is not harmless. Its consequences are often serious and, among the most worrying, is that armed groups, well informed about the attention this phenomenon attracts abroad, began to perceive rape as an effective «bargaining tool»⁶⁶ at the beginning of this decade. In most cases, the militias simply threatened to rape; in others, they carried out their threats, as in August 2010 in Luvungi, North Kivu, when 387 civilians were raped by the Mai-Mai Sheka. According to various sources, the members of this armed group received orders to rape the women, instead of beating them and looting their property as they used to do, because they wanted to draw the attention of the international community so that states and international organizations

⁶³ SEAY, Laura, "Do We Have the Congo Rape Crisis All Wrong?". The Atlantic, 24.05.2011. Available at: <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2011/05/do-we-have-the-congo-rape-crisis-all-wrong/239328/>. Date of consultation: 12.06. 2019.

⁶⁴ Op. cit. 57, p. 57

⁶⁵ DICKINSON, Elizabeth, How can we explain the rape epidemic in Congo? Foreign Policy, 11.05.2011. Available at: <https://foreignpolicy.com/2011/05/11/how-can-we-explain-the-rape-epidemic-in-congo/> Date of consultation: 12.2019.

⁶⁶ Op. cit. 8, p.16.

would put pressure on the Congolese government to negotiate with them, «which is exactly what happened»⁶⁷.

The «overwhelming focus on sexual abuse against women and girls»⁶⁸ in Congo has paradoxically not only catalysed its use by some armed groups but also had other perverse consequences. The first is the discrimination it has caused in extremely vulnerable populations, whose inhabitants have suffered massive human rights violations as summary executions, massacres, non-sexual torture, forced recruitment of adults and children, to name but a few examples, which are not receiving appropriate care and support. Only one of these atrocities, sexual violence, receives the attention it deserves for its survivors⁶⁹.

«During off-the-record interviews, Congolese and foreign aid workers regularly complained that they cannot draw the attention of the media and donors to horrific events that have no sexual dimension. They also complained that they receive more money than they need to treat victims of sexual abuse, while they lack funding to implement other crucial projects»⁷⁰.

Perhaps the best example is health care. In Congo, the high amounts of funding for the fight against sexual violence have led to a bias in access to medical care, a right that the Congolese State has largely delegated to international NGOs. The tendency to preferentially finance cooperation projects with the aim of treating rape survivors exclusively, rather than strengthening the national health system, has turned false allegations of rape into a survival strategy for the most destitute Congolese, aware that this is often the only way⁷¹ to obtain free medical care.

The lack of rigour of some media and the poor transparency of some activists has aggravated this discrimination, for example, in the case of women suffering from fistulas. Heal Africa hospital reported that in 2011 only 3% of the fistula cases treated in this health institution were caused by sexual assault, while of 350 women operated on

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Ibid. p.15.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Op.cit.8, p.15.

⁷¹ Op. cit. 57, p.61.

the same year at Panzi hospital, only one had to be operated on as a result of a rape⁷². The rest of the women undergoing gynaecological surgery had suffered complications in childbirth. Since many cooperation projects have survivors of sexual assault as their sole beneficiaries, patients suffering from obstetric fistulas are often presented in statistics as victims of sexual violence and treated «clandestinely»⁷³.

It is undeniable that this strategy opens the path to these patients to access to free treatment but, at the same time, it prevents their problem from becoming visible, a prior step to get more attention and funding for this serious obstetric complication. In this as in other cases —socio-economic aid, training programmes, education scholarships for their children— the implicit message sent to Congolese women is that, in order to access basic services, they must present themselves as victims of rape. In recent years, growing criticism of this system has led some donors to start funding inclusive health care projects for the entire population, including of course victims of sexual violence⁷⁴.

As we can see, the discourse of the 'weapon of war', by focusing exclusively on the survivors of this crime, has led to a hierarchy of misfortune, even among the victims of sexual violence themselves because, among them, it is to be deplored the invisibility of one category —men and boys—which constitutes at least 4 to 10% of cases⁷⁵.

The injustice of relegating these people to oblivion also has unexpected consequences for the prevention of this scourge. Describing sexual violence as a women's problem is counterproductive because it «prevents constructive engagement by men» in an issue that concerns them and not only as perpetrators. The near denial of abuse to men and boys, coupled with their exclusion from many assistance projects, further prevents the breaking of «cycles of trauma and violence»⁷⁶ in Congo.

To prevent further attacks, it would also be necessary to focus not only on sexual assaults but also on the other abuses with which they the sexual abuse is often

⁷² Op. cit. 55, p.10.

⁷³ Ibid. p. 46.

⁷⁴ In 2017, the author had the opportunity to visit several health centres in North Kivu, run by the NGO Cooperazione Internazionale, where 200,000 Congolese were receiving free health care, including survivors of sexual violence.

⁷⁵ Op. cit.8, p.15.

⁷⁶ Op.cit. 57, p. 14.

associated. «SGBV [Sexual gender-based violence] can neither be understood nor effectively countered if approached and studied in relative isolation. It has to be seen in a context where grave human rights violations occur daily»⁷⁷.

The commercialization of rape

Criticism of assistance to survivors is not limited to the discrimination it causes among vulnerable populations, but also to its limited impact, especially in the light of the large economic allocations made for this purpose, a shower of millions that is not unconnected with certain aberrations, including the presence of NGOs «essentially interested in obtaining funds»⁷⁸.

Since 2010, following the aforementioned visits by Clinton and Wallström, the announcement of generous donations and the possibility of obtaining funding relatively easily for victim assistance made eastern Congo a preferred destination for humanitarian organizations. Between 2010 and 2013 alone, funding from some international donors (USAID, EU, DFID, and SIDA) exceeded \$86 million, not counting bilateral funds or donors such as the World Bank⁷⁹. Hundreds of NGOs then settled in the region with their expatriate staff and hired local personnel. Since then, the phrase «No viol, no job»⁸⁰ has become popular in Bukavu, the capital of South Kivu, to describe how assistance to victims has become an economic driver and, in some cases, a form of profit.

The way in which victim assistance has been approached over the years has facilitated irregularities. For example, the management of projects by figures, where funding was granted on the basis of «X victims assisted during period x of time» has been behind the competition among some organizations to identify and enrol victims in their assistance projects that were later considered their «property». Humanitarian actors interviewed on this issue used terms such as «force» and «abduction» to describe how

⁷⁷ Ibid. p. 56

⁷⁸ Op.cit. 55 p. 9

⁷⁹ Ibid. p. 38.

⁸⁰ QUILLARD, Marion, "Que celles qui ont été violées lèvent la main" Revue XXI, 20.04.2016. English version available at: <https://www.groene.nl/artikel/all-those-who-have-been-raped-raise-your-hand> Date of consultation: 11.10. 2019.

some organizations recruited «their women» in the villages to take them to shelters in urban areas «in order to provide the organization with the possibility of presenting them to donors». According to one aid worker's testimony, an NGO director presented his wife, sisters and neighbours as victims to «justify funds»⁸¹.

«The strangers would come to us to organise a discussion in a school or church and afterwards they would ask their representative to target the women who had been raped» A practise which still shocks Mathilde Muhindo from the Olame centre: 'Do you think it's normal that a woman who has been raped raises her hand in public to say: "Me, I have been raped!" I do not know how it is in France, but this is not normal to me'»⁸².

Without going to such extremes, many projects to assist survivors are based on a short-term and merely «curative»⁸³ approach that does not solve their problems of socio-economic and community reintegration. Furthermore, the fight against sexual violence in Congo devotes much funding to its consequences but little to its causes. To cite one example, «the budget devoted to sexual violence is twice the amount consecrated to security sector reform activities and is slightly less than half of the Peacebuilding Fund, which are clearly two themes aimed at the prevention of sexual violence»⁸⁴.

Conclusions

The discourse of sexual violence as a "weapon of war" has become a dominant narrative about this atrocity in Congo. This kind of story has certainly had the virtue of putting the DRC conflict on the international agenda, but it has also had undesirable consequences. Among them, the assimilation of the concept of "Congolese" with that of "raped woman", an association that has locked the women of that country in the status of eternal victims.

The overwhelming attention devoted to this phenomenon abroad has had other unexpected effects, including catalysing the use of rape as a bargaining tool by armed

⁸¹ All quotes in this paragraph are from op. cit. 55, pp. 49-50

⁸² Op. cit. 80.

⁸³ Op. cit. 55, p.10.

⁸⁴ Ibid, p. 40.

groups in some cases. Another consequence of the main international focus on sexual violence—which leaves aside other terrible human rights violations in the DRC—is that the way in which victim assistance has been approached has led to serious discrimination in extremely vulnerable populations. Perhaps the best example is the trend to reserve access to free health care only for survivors of sexual assault.

On the other hand, the "weapon of war" theory ignores the increase in sexual violence perpetrated by civilians in the Congo. This is partly a legacy of the conflict but is in turn due to impunity and cultural and socio-economic aspects such as discriminatory gender norms that normalize these abuses.

The unfailing attribution of sexual violence to the conflict also ignores studies among combatants in the DRC, which indicate that not even all sexual assaults committed by military or militiamen are ordered by a hierarchy or are strategic in nature. This is indicated by data such as those from a World Bank investigation among former combatants, in which only 13 per cent of them claimed to have received orders to rape.

The discourse of the "weapon of war" therefore hampers the prevention of sexual violence because it prevents a better understanding who the perpetrators are and what the other reasons are for a systemic problem in a society traumatized by decades of conflict. Hence, without relinquishing the moral imperative to care for rape survivors, it is urgent to devote more attention to the causes of this phenomenon and not just the consequences. This requires the adoption of a holistic vision that analyses this scourge in a context of massive human rights violations and with a gender approach that considers all the terrible abuses that Congolese women and girls suffer on a daily basis. It is also essential to assist men and boys who have been raped, a category often neglected and excluded from victim assistance projects, in order to break the cycle of trauma and violence

The prevention of sexual violence in the DRC also requires studying and working with the perpetrators—armed men or civilians—to understand the factors underlying this phenomenon.

The international community has so far adopted a charity approach to addressing sexual violence in the Congo, whose main economic effort has been directed towards funding short-term, curative assistance to victims. However, this approach, criticized for its little impact on the reintegration of survivors and on the prevention of this drama, has proved to be an easy and cheap⁸⁵ alternative to the necessary real political action. This would involve, among other measures, requiring the Congolese State to take far-reaching steps to consolidate peace and deepen security sector and justice reforms. One aspect is urgent: the training and professionalization of FARDC members, whose miserable living conditions should be dignified. Both conditions are indispensable for improving the conflictive relations between the military and civilians in Congo.

Consistent with this necessary change in approach by the international community, priority should be given to long-term interventions that will bring about a paradigm shift in Congolese society, particularly regarding gender relations. Achieving this goal — which is largely dependent on education and investment in women's leadership— will not be possible without requiring the DRC authorities to take steps to end the extreme vulnerability and deprivation of human, economic, political, familial and social rights suffered by women and girls in that country.

One vital aspect that is often overlooked is promoting the access of Congolese women to post of political power that have hitherto been virtually denied to them. This political empowerment would enable women in the DRC to participate in state decisions and thus take steps to improve their condition and alleviate the terrible violence they have suffered particularly severely during decades of conflict.

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⁸⁵ PRUNIER, Gérard, op.cit. 9, p. 20.