Sexual violence in war – Civilians as battleground[1]

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During the last decade, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) has become a battleground involving civilians. Sexual violence has been and continues to be both a means and a result of conflict in the eastern DRC. This type of violence is often discussed by NGOs and advocacy groups, but has rarely been the subject of peace and conflict analysis. Symptomatically, women are portrayed as helpless victims, while perpetrators, often reported to be men, are depicted as rebellious monsters who are out of control. This not only reduces the analytical value but also hinders more effective measures to prevent sexual violence in war. Thus, the purpose of this article is to map at different levels why state and non-state actors use this type of violence in the eastern DRC against civilians. By understanding why soldiers and rebels commit sexually violent acts towards civilians, it may be easier to find preventive solutions to combat sexual violence in war.

Theoretical approaches to understanding sexual violence in war

Sexual violence is an umbrella term for coercive sexual abuse including, for instance, rape, mutilation of genitals to destroy reproductive capacity, and forced prostitution. The choice of such a wide term in this article is useful because the reports on attacks in the eastern DRC tend to be less than specific about the acts, and because the acts can involve other forms of brutality, of which rape is only one part. In addition, there is no reliable data on the various methods of sexual violence in the DRC. Sexual violence in war and conflict is often differentiated from that in peaceful situations as the motives can be linked strategically to the destruction of a population and entire communities. The rational use of sexual violence often has a strategic face that has several motivations mutually reinforcing each other.

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The theoretical approaches to analysis of sexual violence in war are mainly focused on gender perspectives. The genitals are both a weapon and a battleground, and men's and women's roles in the society are the target of the attacks. Although these gender approaches can be seen as relatively new and still being refined, whilst at the same time being mainstreamed in today's development debate, writers have for centuries discussed gender and gender relations. One of those is Thorstein Veblen (1899) in his classic *The theory of the leisure class*. He argues that ownership of goods appears to be one of the oldest and most common features of dominance among people in a society. Of particular relevance when discussing gender perspectives is what Veblen (1899: 52) claims is the oldest form of ownership, namely of persons and primarily of women. Veblen argues that women (and slaves) represent both a symbol of wealth and a way of accommodating wealth. This view correspond with Lévi-Strauss' studies (1969) of so-called primitive societies and their exchange culture where women are seen as a valuable commodity. Women are regarded as the 'property' or the possession of men in some African societies, resulting in their being perceived more as objects than as persons worthy of respect in their own individual right. This also makes them more vulnerable to attack as indirect representations of their men or symbols of their group.

Essentialism and constructivism are two main and conflicting approaches to analysing sexual violence. The essentialist assumption is that certain objects have timeless and unchangeable characteristics, no matter how they are defined. The constructivist approach, on the other hand, has a specific focus on how certain groups are targeted in war, where the sense of identity is of central consideration.

The essentialist Susan Brownmiller (1975) was one of the first to write about sexual violence in war. Brownmiller's (1975: 4) empirical focus is all women in the world and their structural vulnerability for becoming victims of sexual abuse in both peacetime and war. She claims that men's structural capacity for rape in combination with women's structural vulnerability to become victims of rape is as primary as the act of sex itself. However, in the war-zone, certain rules apply where men are not only men, but militaristic men, allowing the perfect conditions for men to express their contempt for women, according to Brownmiller (1975: 24). Within such a context, it is assumed that it will be easier for men to commit acts of sexual violence, which becomes a way of sustaining the patriarchal structure of the society. She argues that the perpetrators are ordinary men made unordinary by their admission to the exclusive male club: the military.

Brownmiller further argues that the rape of the 'men's women' is the ultimate humiliation and a symbol of the nation's defeat. In Brownmiller's deterministic understanding, wartime rape is perceived as a normal part of any war strategy.

Essentialist approaches have later come under substantial criticism from scholars. Perhaps the most devastating aspect is that essentialism supports a polarised framework where men are equated with war and aggression while women are inherently peaceful and nurturing (Strickland and Duvvury 2003: 9). But despite Brownmiller's limited nuances in the analysis of sexual violence, e.g. that men also are victims and women can be perpetrators, she started a debate among scholars in what has been perceived as a side effect of war: Rape.

The genocide in Rwanda and the war in former Yugoslavia jet-started the constructivist debates on sexual violence as a weapon of war. Allan (1996:28) argues that there exist certain constructed ideas about masculinity as a symbol of power and dominance and femininity as the contrary. When sexual violence in war is used a symbolic transaction between perpetrator and victim takes place whereby the perpetrator becomes masculinised by empowering his or her identity and the victim feminised by victimising his or hers. This perception is in sharp contrast with the essentialist view where women and men have a static identity of femininity and masculinity respectively. Skjelsbæk (1999: 7) argues that women are seen as the traditional transmitters of culture because of their role in the family and the society. Thus, targeting women is not an attack on the individual victim but rather on women's cultural role. The idea is that sexual violence will break down the social fabric of a society and hence break down resistance. As Skjelsbæk (2001:228) states, the feelings of shame, fear, guilt and taboo are precisely what make sexual violence so effective, by silencing the victim. Surviving such an act can be perceived as a destiny worse than death because the victim's suffering is prolonged and reinforced and can deter the person from returning to a normal life (Vetlesen 2005:197). Rational thinking should be that the perpetrator feels shame about the act, but the reaction is often that it is the victim who feels shame.

The Great Lakes conflicts and the wars and conflicts in the DRC from 1996 onwards can be seen as what Prunier (2009: 358) terms 'the last gasp of the dying order of the cold war'. The fall of the Berlin wall and the removal of apartheid in South Africa created a readiness in the Central African region to deal with the injustice, both real and imagined, of the past. 'Democracy' was imposed by the West as in

the Weberian model, but in practice for many Africans meant going back to a discourse of tribes, regimes, economic networks and states, according to Prunier. Instead of the narrow interpretation of the state as the central actor, Bøås and Dunn (2007: 31) emphasise the centrality of identity and belonging in explaining today's warfare in Africa, issues that traditional political science has not addressed. The debate on identity and belonging to land and other resources in the eastern DRC has led to devastating effects of real and perceived marginalisation and poverty, according to the authors. Seeing yourself as 'autochthonous' or 'a son of the soil' and your counterparts as 'allochthonous' or 'strangers' can result in a struggle over the resources. They argue that this struggle should be seen in the context of the unfinished nation-building under Mobutu in the postcolonial state.

The danger of categorising people as 'owners' or 'aliens' is that extremely violent measures can be legitimised. Vetlesen (2005: 174) states that measures taken against the 'out-group' are not seen as morally bad or neutral, but entirely good and legitimate. The pre-existing gender inequalities in the DRC might increase the brutality towards female members of an out-group, as they are not only outside the moral universe of the perpetrators but also as having a lower status than the men in the out-group.

Sexual violence in the DRC

In the following section on combatants' motivation for committing sexual violence, three levels are discussed: macro, group and individual. These levels will of course interact and it is important to see the dynamics at work. The context of the combatants also have a considerable impact on motivation, as do the forms of violence in the socio-economic environment. Portraying perpetrators as 'sick' or 'abnormal' is clearly insufficient as sexual aggression is more likely linked to social and environmental variables.

All parties in the second war (1998–2003) in the DRC are alleged to have used sexual violence, including the UN peacekeeping forces (MONUC), the Congolese national army (FARDC) and the police (PNC). This analysis will mostly focus on the FARDC as well as some of the main warring groups. The groups that will be discussed are the Forces Démocratiques pour la Libération du Rwanda (FDLR) – consisting of former *genocidaires*, Hutu refugees and Congolese Hutu recruits – and the Mayi Mayi, community-based fighters who initially defended local territories against foreign invasions. The Interahamwe, mostly consisting of Rwandan soldiers and the militia

initially responsible for planning the Rwandan genocide, are central actors in the Kivus and will also be discussed. However, international observers and the Congolese often use the label 'Interahamwe' when referring to refugees, former rebels and their families, as well as Rwandan political opponents forced to flee.

The individual level – the spoils of war?

Foot soldiers in the FARDC and members of militias are often uneducated and illiterate young men (Thakur 2008: 11). In addition, the individual combatants receive far less economic remuneration than their leaders, which in turn gives scope for personal exploitation of the local populations. Some of the soldiers were forced into the militias, while others volunteered, due to extreme poverty and lack of alternative financial income. For these men, the gun becomes a source of income, as well as increased power and social standing. Civilians thus provide the soldiers with a livelihood.

In Enloe's studies (2000: 117) 'recreational rape' is argued by military officials to happen when soldiers are not sufficiently supplied with sexual partners. This type of sexual violence or services is often linked to prostitution. However, in the eastern DRC women and girls are kept as personal slaves for sexual services without payment as these soldiers are said to be too poor to pay for prostitutes (Wood, forthcoming). The soldiers are often separated from their families in Uganda, Burundi or Rwanda and need to find other sources of sexual satisfaction. A large number of women have been abducted and kept as slaves to provide sexual, domestic and agricultural services in the DRC (International Alert 2005: 46). Sexual violence thus represents a form of 'economic rape'.

This phenomenon, however, is not sufficient to explain the extreme violence witnessed by many observers in the east. Baaz and Stern (2008: 58) interviewed several FARDC soldiers with recent experiences in the Kivus to investigate their motivations, justifications and explanations for forms of violence that are perceived by the Western media as 'barbaric'. My intention is not to generalise these soldiers' experiences to all soldiers in the conflict-prone areas, but the study represent a rare insight into the minds of soldiers in the DRC. In the DRC, policemen and soldiers are often referred to as 'thieves' (*miyibi*), which represents a deep dissatisfaction among the public towards the security apparatus. Baaz and Stern (2008: 75-76) found that many of the soldiers indirectly explained their motives for committing severe human rights violations, such as sexual violence, as a livelihood

strategy and an expression of suffering and frustration in relation to neglect and poverty. To understand this view we need to take some steps back and see what the soldiers interviewed thought of as 'an ideal soldier' in relation to their actual situation. According to the majority of the soldiers interviewed, the ideal soldiers were those who followed orders and were disciplined according to the military codes. Instead of the 'macho' culture of the military, the soldiers emphasised dignity, respect and humility as important for the 'good soldier'. The Règlement Militaire (RM) in the DRC states that rape is not allowed and that if the soldiers have sexual needs, they should masturbate (male sub-lieutenant, age 25, cited to in Baaz and Stern 2008: 75). Taking other people's women is thus not accepted in the RM and was also confirmed by the majority of the soldiers interviewed as inappropriate behaviour in their perception of a good soldier.

However, there was a great sense of dissatisfaction and frustration among the soldiers towards their leaders and superiors. The Congolese soldiers belong to the poorest section of society and their theoretical monthly salary of US$ 10-20 is rarely paid. In addition, the mortality rate among soldiers' children remains high and school enrolment is practically zero. Order, discipline and respect for the military leaders were hard to maintain when the latter neglected the soldiers' basic rights – or those of their families – vis-à-vis salary, medical expenses, funeral expenses, and so on. When Baaz and Stern (2008: 77) asked the soldiers about sexual violence towards civilians, the soldiers rationalised this behaviour as an indirect result of poverty and neglect. Poverty and neglect lead to such violence because they felt the need to violate the RM in order to make ends meet, but also the resulted feelings of frustration and anger. The following is a sequence with two male corporals from Baaz and Stern's studies (2008: 77):

> **Male corporal A**: Yes, it is anger [*kanda*], it is creating, the suffering [*pasí*] is creating… You feel you have to do something bad, you mix it all: sabotage, women, stealing, rip the clothes off, killing.
>
> **Male corporal B**: You have sex and then you kill her, if the anger is too strong [*soki kanda eleki, obomi ye*].
>
> **Male corporal A**: It is suffering [*pasí*] which makes us rape. Suffering. If I wake up in the morning and I am fine, I have something to eat, my wife loves me [*mwasi alingaka ngaí*], will I then do things like that? No. But now, today we are hungry, yesterday I was hungry, tomorrow I will be hungry. They, the leaders/superiors [*bamikonzí*] are cheating us. We don't have anything.

The relative frustration among foot soldiers can result in what Wieviorka (2005: 150) argues is an aggressive human reaction towards unfavourable and frustrating situations. Male corporal A's statement on suffering as a factor in rape and killings recalls Rosaldo's (1993) studies of the Ilongot head hunters in the Philippines. The Ilonget men had a tradition of head hunting after losing their beloved ones. The men's anger and suffering after losing their wives resulted in killings. When Rosaldo lost his own wife he was able to understand this cultural phenomenon.

Notable in this conversation is that male corporal A fuses his role in the public sphere as a soldier with his role as a private male civilian at the household level. The element of 'my wife does not love me' was found in the majority of the conversations about rape and other forms of sexual violence in the study by Baaz and Stern (2008). Central was that the male soldiers felt that this lack of love was caused by their condition of poverty and that they could not fulfil their role in the family as the head and the provider of their family's basic needs. Further, the male soldiers expressed fear and suspicion that their wives would find other men in order to make ends meet. The women were depicted by these men as unreliable and opportunistic. The soldiers interviewed mixed these gender discourses about their women with a rationalisation of their violent behaviour towards other women.

One contextual aspect that needs to be taken into account is the availability of natural resources where soldiers in the DRC operate. One of Weinstein's (2007: 7–12) intriguing findings is that rebel groups that operate in areas of vast natural resources are more likely to employ a high level of indiscriminate violence. Rebel soldiers who have a low commitment to the group are seen by Weinstein as consumers seeking short-term benefits from their involvement, as opposed to highly committed individuals investing in their future. The 'consumer soldiers' are termed opportunistic, rebellious, their participation being seen as involving lower risks and an expectation of immediate rewards. This, according to Weinstein (ibid.), can be detrimental to the local population where the lack of social and political ties resulting in a short-term orientation encourages soldiers to loot, destroy property and assault civilians indiscriminately. These approaches by rebels will in Weinstein's perception increase resistance among civilians as well as retribution by other armed groups, which lapse into a spiral of violence. What is increasingly witnessed in the eastern DRC is the tendency of warring groups to outbid each other in extreme violence.

Former child soldiers in the eastern DRC (interviewed in Bukavu, 6 April 2008) argued that their primary motivation for joining militia groups was day-to-day survival. In addition, the children were exposed to a type of military training consisting of violent physical attacks and killing family members. These two factors are bound to have a devastating effect on civilians in the area.

The group level: sexual violence as a weapon?

To broaden the analysis of sexual violence in the eastern DRC, sexual violence as a weapon of war will now be discussed. As a weapon of war, such violence is usually associated with official encouragement from military leaders or politicians and often associated with identity politics, as in genocide cases or conflicts over ownership rights. These violent acts often involve publically displaying rape in the local society, with the double effect of maximising the humiliation of the victim and spreading fear among the population. The humiliation of the victim and his/her family can destroy the social support that they enjoyed. Thus the warring group has successfully managed to destroy the life of their perceived enemies and made future reconciliation more difficult. The fear component uses the victim's body as a means to restrain resistance towards the warring group by sending out an unpleasant danger signal.

The development of identity politics as in the politicisation of ethnicity has been used by many: the FDLR, the Interahamwe and the Mayi Mayi to create political legitimacy; but also by the refugees as well as by the Congolese armed groups (Thakur, 2008:18). The key identity conflict is situated in the Kivus, where the Kinyarwanda live, and involves Congolese of Rwandan origin with mixed ethnicity. Within the Kinyarwanda category there is a further differentiation between the Banyarwanda living in North Kivu and the Banyamulenge in South Kivu. For the last 50 years the Kinyarwandans' citizenship has been contested, and during the second war in the DRC, their identities were manipulated for political reasons by local and regional actors and they were portrayed as 'victims' along precarious Hutu-Tutsi identity lines. Their identities were also manipulated by rival groups such as the Mayi Mayi, who have portrayed them as 'allochthonous' inhabitants or 'strangers' and themselves as the 'autochthonous' or 'authentic' Congolese citizens (ibid.). The Mayi Mayi's feeling of 'indigenous' identity was meant to differentiate themselves from the Banyarwanda and Banyamulenge, who were considered to be foreign.

These sharp distinctions have caused severe political tension and resulted in violent attacks on enemy groups. The identity manipulations by both sides have helped fuel violence over the control of the territory and resources in the eastern DRC. Women are targeted by the warring ethnic groups and often sexually abused in the most humiliating ways. Making women's bodies a battleground is seen by many as the most effective means of destabilising and breaking down resistance to the enemy. Such forms of sexual violence could be used as a means of inflicting terror at the most humiliating way and make in particular women unable to return to their families.

However, it is worth noting that not all ethnically based conflicts create a common ground for sexual violence as a weapon of war. In fact, Wood's studies (2006) of ethnic conflicts show that sexual violence can be limited or practically non-existent, as in the case of the Israel-Palestine conflict, the Tamil Tigers in Sri Lanka and the The Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) guerrillas in Colombia. In other cases, such as the genocide in Rwanda and the war in Bosnia-Herzegovina, ethnic distinctions have been used to legitimise sexual violence.

The gynaecologist Denis Mukwege from the Panzi hospital in South Kivu has worked on rape-related cases for more than a decade. In this period, he has built up information on the damage inflicted and gathered the testimonies of abused women. After considering nearly 30,000 cases of sexual violence in the South Kivu, Mukwege has concluded that sexual violence is a strategic and systematic operation in the area on a massive scale.[2] In 60 per cent of cases the perpetrator or perpetrators 'marked' the women – for example, by cutting – in a particular way to indicate the identity of the responsible militia group. It was also a strategic method in the way that both physical damage and psychological trauma converged to maximise the suffering of the victims, through, for example, publically displaying the rape and damaging the women's reproductive capacity. In many of the cases, it is a massive operation as whole villages were attacked, and systematic in that victims of sexual violence were targeted according to sex and age. It is worth noting, however, that Mukwege only receives female victims, so information on how and why male victims are sexually abused is still scarce in the area.

2 Dennis Mukwege, at a seminar organised by Norwegian Church Aid, 2 December 2008.

The macro level: reaching political goals?

At the macro level, sexual violence can be a leadership strategy to control areas and is signalled through the chain of combatants. Sexual violence can thus be seen as a necessary war effort; and/or when the leadership signals that it will not be punished it can be perceived as acceptable behaviour. To make sexual violence a macro-level approach the military superiors must be seen as legitimate authorities so that soldiers will agree to carrying out acts of extreme violence towards civilians (Wood, forthcoming).

Strategic measures are taken by the armed groups in the DRC to demonstrate their power and to persuade the government and the international community that they have the capacity to inflict serious damage (Thakur 2008: 15). Severe violations of human rights can be a way of accessing the bargaining table, usually without any fear of punishments. Militia groups must first represent a threat to security to the Congolese government, supported by the international actors, for them to negotiate demands. According to Thakur (ibid.), the most significant strategy used by the armed groups is attrition – wearing down civilians in order to achieve a certain power and social control over local communities. Thus, the greater costs a group can inflict, the more likely it is that the group represents a threat to future security, and hence the more likely it is that the national government and the international community will yield to their demands.

More than a century of oppression under brutal and elite-based regimes has excluded generations of Congolese citizens from economic development and political participation. In Reno's analysis (2005: 151) the exclusion serves as an instrumental function for the creation of and participation in rebel groups. The rebels may recognise that further violence will not bring peace and economic development, but they may conclude that joining an armed group is better than becoming victims and that they will enjoy personal economic gains from violent uprisings. Combined with foreign interventions and new channels of trade there are greater opportunities to ignore local demands and social constraints that would otherwise inhibit means of accessing resources. The atrocities in the DRC were perhaps more a result of the political elite's mismanagement over the years, resulting in generations of young people growing up in a socially excluded environment. Decades of these experiences are likely to cause political, social, economic and moral breakdown among the public (Bøås 2001: 719).

The FARDC and the PNC in the DRC have in some reports (for example, Ertürk 2008) been stated as being major perpetrators of sexual

violence. Although the statistics should be viewed with caution, it is evident from the analysis about of personal motives for committing sexually violent atrocities that these are related to feelings of neglect and impoverishment from the Congolese state. Hence, there is a moral breakdown on the part of those who are there to protect civilians from these atrocities. When the juridical institution fails to punish perpetrators and the impunity continues, there is perhaps an even higher level of moral breakdown, as the violence is being normalised throughout the FARDC in the most violent regions of the DRC. For the other armed groups in the DRC, a macro level strategy of sexual violence would depend on the link between recruits and their leaders, thus a dynamic between the individual, the group and the macro level.

State failure – where the state can hardly provide any form of security and development – can been seen as a major factor contributing to the rise of violent non-state actors. These actors are seen generally as lacking discipline in the way they conduct war, as they rarely have any education in aspects of international law that prohibit war crimes. Wood (forthcoming) argues that combatants follow orders if they have had a certain socialisation process and training in techniques used in warfare. Further, if the goal of an armed group is to govern in the future over a population, it is less likely that the leaders will tolerate mass rape of the same population. But the irregular warfare strategy in the DRC has made small units operate more or less independently of their leaders. This may imply that even if the leaders did not want their soldiers to use sexual violence against civilians, they might not be able to stop them. In addition, Wood (forthcoming) argues that in order to regulate soldiers' sexuality, social norms that exist in peacetime must be replicated and internalised in the group. This implies that there must be a strong commitment to the organisation that the soldiers fight for, which entails that they sacrifice everything, including a private life. Wood[3] argues that if the rebel group is reliant on voluntary linking with the local population, they are much more restrained in the use of abusive violent means. However, the case in the eastern DRC is that they are reliant on the local population, but through coercion. Here, raping and looting often go together. Wood argues that the lack of aspiration to govern means that there are fewer reasons to restrain sexual violence in the absence of state-building activity. Thus, there seems to be a slight correlation between the failure of a coherent state and widespread sexual violence by rival warring groups.

3 Personal conversation with Elisabeth Wood on 29 May 2008 at PRIO, Oslo.

Concluding remarks

The situation in the eastern DRC is devastating in terms of the widespread incidents of sexual violence in this war. However, the available literature on this subject tends to represent non-state armed groups as barbaric monsters out of control, and women as passive victims. This is at best erroneous and at worst will make the circle of violence continue despite international engagement. An article in the *New York Times* exemplifies this simplistic representation of sexual violence in the DRC: 'There used to be a lot of gorillas in there, but now they've been replaced by much more savage beasts' (Gettleman 2007).

Instead, sexual violence is committed by individuals and must be understood in terms of these individuals' contexts and goals. Researchers should be aware that individuals' motivations can appear irrational, and categorising these incidents as 'lust' or 'hate' can seem to artificially separate mutually excluding forms of rational behaviour. At the individual level, there seems to be a mixture of feelings, combined with constructed ideas about men and women's role in the society that motivated sexual violence against civilians. Further, the rebels in the eastern DRC are rarely equipped with sufficient means of survival and groups like the Interahamwe have been there for more than a decade. The groups prey on civilians and in particular target women because of their productivity and abduct them as a livelihood strategy. There is also reason to assume that sexual violence against these women happens because the rebels need 'normality' in an unfriendly environment. Many of these men have never had the chance to experience a 'normal' life with a wife and children, and their morality is weakened in terms of taking other men's women. Notably, this action is often a serious offence in peaceful circumstances.

There is also reason to believe that sexual violence is used as a weapon to terrorise people into fleeing from certain areas or as a power tool to scare people into submission. Although few, if any, of these groups are strong enough to win the war, there are conflict entrepreneurs everywhere in the east, profiting from the lack of control over resourceful areas. The failure of the neopatrimonial state system has contributed to this eruption of violence, as has the lack of control over more remote areas, which both foreign and national actors profit from – at the cost of the civilian population.

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A. Former member of Mundundu 40[4], age 17.
B. Former member of Mundundu 40, age 18.
C. Former Mayi Mayi soldier, age 15.
D. Former Mundundu 40 soldier, age 19 .

Victims of sexual violence in the South Kivu region. Group discussion with translator in Bukavu, 3 April 2008.

A. From Nindja, age 35.
B. From Nindja, age 28.
C. From Kalehe, age 33.
D. From Buniakiri, age 36.
E. From Walungu, age 27.

4 Mundundu 40 is in alliance with the Mayi Mayi, but is constantly changing its ideology. Translator: Ingeborg Eikeland, local coordinator in the Pentecostal Foreign Mission of Norway (PYM). Fluent in Swahili, French, English and Norwegian.