Ra/pe and War in the Democratic Republic of the Congo

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The eastern part of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) is home to some of the world’s most horrific documented cases of sexual violence against women. All forces involved in the conflict are actively engaging in heinous acts of violence. This essay attempts to understand why women and girls specifically are indiscriminately raped in the current conflict in the eastern DRC using the theoretical frameworks of opportunistic sexual violence, strategic violence, and patriarchal militarism. This research speaks to a relatively current debate that has emerged in feminist and political circles because scholars finally rejected the age-old ‘‘rapeandpillage’ just happen during war’ theory.

Feminist scholar, Carolyn Nordstrom, warns that “studies done on rape can constitute a form of violence in themselves if they are not done with care … we must take care not to reproduce systems of violence in speaking about them.” This essay attempts to remain constantly vigilant of Nordstrom’s warning, as well as conscious of a very real reflection on women’s lives and their realities. Their stories are not simply just words left on a page, devoid of any feeling or real connection to the faces they represent. Although it is painful and extremely exhausting to be emotionally and intellectually present when reflecting on the atrocities taking place in the Congo, I encourage the reader not to forget that this is reality.

The United Nations (UN) Commission on Human Rights report on contemporary forms of slavery prepared by McDougall defines rape as:

Rape should be understood as the insertion, under conditions of force, coercion, or duress of any object, including but not limited to a penis, into a victim’s vagina or anus; or the insertion under conditions of force, coercion, or duress, or a penis into the mouth of the victim.

Taking this definition a step further, I reconstructed the word “rape” as “ra/pe” to encourage a constant consciousness in the mind of the reader.
(and the author) of the horrors of rape and its effects on women, men, and the whole community. The division of the word is meant to serve as a visual reminder of the fact that “rape” is not simply another word; it is an atrocity that aims to destroy and objectify its victims. I reconstructed rape with a slash to represent the way this horror operates upon unequal distributions of power and agency, and how it forcibly separates a woman from her sense of self, security, and community. While I use the word rape throughout this essay, I also chose to honor the literature’s tradition of using the term sexual violence interchangeably with rape.

In their 2008 special report “Sexual Violence in the Democratic Republic of Congo,” editors Caroline Tosh and Yigal Chazan trace sexual violence in the DRC as beginning during the First Congo War (1996–1997) and continued to escalate into Africa’s First World War (1998–2003). It has thus reached epidemic proportions in the eastern part of the Congo with speculation that renewed fighting would worsen already dire conditions for women and girls. Amnesty International estimated its 2004 report, Lives Blown Apart: Crimes Against Women in Times of Conflict, that thousands of Congolese women have been raped, with a high occurrence of women and girls being raped at different times by different forces.

Perpetrators of sexual violence are members of all of the armed forces and armed groups that operate in eastern Congo. These include the former Congolese Rally for Democracy–GOMA (RCD–GOMA), which is a Rwandan-supported armed group that controlled large parts of eastern Congo during the war. RCD–Goma and its Rwandan allies have a number of adversaries including the pro-government Mai-Mai militia, Burundian, and Rwandan Hutu armed groups. Groups who fought for control over the northeast part of the country included the Congolese Rally for Democracy—Kisangani—Liberation Movement (RCD–ML), the movement for the liberation of Congo (MLC), the Union of Congolese Peoples (UPC), and the Front for National Integration (FNI) in the Ituri Region. Despite the presence of a variety of actors, however, the greatest perpetrator of sexual violence is the armed government forces, Forces Armées de la République Démocratique du Congo (FARDC). Fighters from many of the aforementioned armed groups were incorporated into FARDC through Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration (DDR) programs following the ceasefire agreement.

Sexual violence in the DRC has reached unparalleled levels of brutality and an utter disregard for the sanctity of the human body. In its 2002 report, Human Rights Watch recorded that women and girls
have been subjected to brutal and relentless gang ra/pes, by as many as 15 to 20 armed men. Following ra/pe, many women and girls require medical attention for prolapsed uteruses, severe vaginal tears, and obstetric fistulas. Many women and girls suffering from obstetric fistulas are socially stigmatized due to incontinence and infertility. As the Goma Film Project found in 2007, approximately two medical clinics in the eastern Congo are equipped to treat girls and women living with this condition.

Human Rights Watch observers and Doctors Without Borders have documented that women and girls are tortured before, during, and after the ra/pes take place, with estimates that as many as 30 percent of women are sexually mutilated. Women’s vaginas are tortured and mutilated with spears, machetes, sticks, broken bottles, and gun barrels. There are increasing occurrences of women being shot in the vagina following ra/pe. Other accounts of horrific brutality include the cutting off of breasts, clitorises, and vaginal lips with machetes and razor blades. Fathers are forced to ra/pe their daughters at gunpoint and sons forced to ra/pe their sisters and mothers; if they refuse, they will be killed. Incidents of cannibalism were reported, with mothers forced to eat the bodies of their ra/ped children and armed combatants eating the heart and liver of their victims.

Tosh and Chazan attribute the continuation of massive sexual violence to impunity and a collapsed and ineffective judicial system. Although laws with lengthy sentences were passed in 2006 to punish sex crimes, women and girls continue to be ra/ped while their perpetrators elude justice. Perpetrators go unpunished due to an underfunded judicial system where a victim must pay for court proceedings to bring the perpetrator to trial. In a region where families barely have enough to survive, the prosecution of a rapist is simply too high a cost to bear. In addition to the costs of prosecution, many women and girls fear reprisal ra/pes or violence, which prevent them from speaking out against their rapists. The nongovernmental organization, Enough, obtained information in a 2008 report that rapists have used intimidation tactics such as re-ra/peing women in revenge and cutting off the mouths and tongues of victims so they “won’t tell again.”

When victims are able to bring their rapists to court, harsh sentences are rarely imposed. Judges tend to display a discriminatory attitude toward victims, often finding the woman at fault for the ra/pe. Rather than use an expensive and weak judicial system, victims are led to reparations mediated by local authority officials and tribal leaders. These out-of-court settlements rarely recognize the rights of the victims or the gravity of the ra/pe.
Opportunistic, strategic, and patriarchal militaristic theories of sexual violence offer useful frameworks for understanding the horrific sexual violence during wartime. I will also introduce superstition as another motivation in understanding sexual violence in the DRC. In addition, I suggest that these theories that attempt to explain sexual violence are profoundly gendered. By gendered, I mean influenced, formed, and functioning on certain conceptions of women’s and men’s place in Congolese society.

Opportunistic sexual violence theory claims economic gain is the motivation for widespread sexual violence during wartime. This theory explores the relationship between sexual violence against women and the allocation of resources. Combatants use sexual violence as a means to ensure their own economic survival and establish control over lucrative resources. War, secessionist conflicts, and conflicts driven by ethnic tensions often place soldiers in economically desperate conditions. As a result of these conditions, combatants and soldiers are encouraged to loot resources during raids and post-combat operations, taking advantage of unequal power relations between women and men. The survival of rebel forces, militias, and militaries often depends on access to resources and material goods obtained through looting. In the often encouraged and condoned looting of goods, women are treated as another resource to be looted.

The assets stolen from women during war are not limited to immediate material goods but can also include mineral resources. Precious metals, oil, and diamonds fuel many of the African conflicts that are marked by massive sexual violence; these conflicts include Liberia, Sierra Leone, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Congo (Brazzaville), and Angola. Amnesty International, in its 2004 report Crimes in Conflict Against Women, also discusses the strategic, systematic, and deliberate use of rape to “drive out one group of people and empty the land of its settled population” in order to gain access to the land and its resources.

Economic desperation motivates much of the sexual violence in the DRC. Soldiers and rebel forces in eastern Congo live in notoriously squalid conditions. As a result of these impoverished conditions, soldiers and armed combatants use rape to steal women’s material and productive goods.

FARDC soldiers prey on local populations for survival. In their first-hand interviews with FARDC soldiers, Maria Baaz and Maria Stern discovered that soldiers are underpaid, if paid at all, and are among the poorest sections of Congolese society. Their monthly income ($20) is not enough to care for a family or cover lodging, food, and
medical expenses. The military and the police are both implicitly expected to fend for themselves. With scant economic opportunities, soldiers are trapped in a cycle of poverty and live off of the local people to ensure their daily survival. According to one RCD–GOMA soldier interviewed by International Alert, “Militias rape and pillage because many of them are not properly organized. The fighters wait four months to get paid. They’ve got nothing to eat, they have to cope as best as they can.” Like government soldiers, armed combatants’ rape of women and girls is motivated by economic conditions.

Rapists steal women’s goods, livestock, food, rations, and savings, following or in the course of sexual violence. Combatants target women and girls in their homes or those who are going about their daily business, such as walking to the market, school, home, or tending to their fields. International Alert documented numerous incidents of rape and looting during months marked by the busy harvesting of coffee, cassava, and bananas. Ra/pes also took place the day before major market days. Women en route to the market to sell their harvested goods were ra/ped on their journey and their goods were stolen.

The productive and reproductive labors women engage in on a daily basis make them a prime target for militias and military groups. Women’s reproductive labor is key to the survival of guerrilla troops. Combatants in the DRC exploit women’s reproductive capacities to ensure their survival. Rapists abduct women and keep them as slaves in their camps, forcing them to work as sex slaves who provide domestic and agricultural services. In addition to being expected to sexually service the men of the camp, women are forced to cook, clean, gather firewood, wash and mend clothing, farm, fetch water, and carry arms and ammunition. A number of women recall their abduction as particularly humiliating because they were kept naked for up to months at a time and gang ra/ped at all hours of the day and night.

This theft and extreme violation of women’s productive and reproductive labor is profoundly gendered. Opportunistic sexual violence in the DRC is gendered because women perform the majority of the work, both inside and outside of the home. Although they lack formal claim to economic resources, women possess a significant amount of access to these resources. Women are responsible for all of the reproductive labor within the home and for a great majority of the productive labor, which takes places in fields and villages. These responsibilities make women a prime target for attack by the economically impoverished militiamen and FARDC. In conflict-rife eastern DRC, women are targeted in massively greater numbers than men due to their access to resources in the formal and informal
economy; men’s major income comes from military or militia involvement. Soldiers and armed groups have the power, both physically and culturally, to rape and engage in opportunistic sexual violence against women and girls.

Complementary to an economic understanding of the motivation for sexual violence, the strategic violence theory recognizes that soldiers use sexual violence to accomplish strategic objectives. These objectives may include but are not limited to: genocide, inciting terror, and retribution for perceived past wrongs. According to the strategic violence theory, rape during wartime is a weapon of war, and not simply a byproduct of it.

Rape is a weapon, which terrorizes a population and encourages that population to flee, allowing combatants to occupy and gain control of an area previously inhabited by a civilian population. Rape as a weapon of inciting terror was found in the use of sexual violence in the Sierra Leone civil war. In her article, “Variation of Sexual Violence During War,” Elisabeth Wood discusses how women and girls were targeted for sexual violence “as a means of sowing terror amongst the population.”

The fulfillment of strategic objectives motivates sexual violence in the DRC. Soldiers use rape as a means of sowing terror and instilling fear in communities. When armed combatants rape women and girls, the rapists destroy not only the personal security of the victims, but also the security of the community because women’s bodies physically and symbolically provide the backbone of their communities. As militias and armed groups pursue their strategic objective of control over lucrative natural resources and land, new grievances between groups develop. These groups use sexual violence to terrorize and force communities to accept their control or to punish them for supposed loyalty to other forces.

In addition to inciting terror, sexual violence is also a means to accomplish genocide. Genocidal rape is an assault against the victim with the aim of undermining a community’s sense of security and cohesion. Soldiers and combatants engage in sexual violence against women because women’s bodies physically and symbolically represent their community, state, and nation. By raping women, combatants and soldiers figuratively rape and dilute the community and nation.

Soldiers in the DRC have used rape as a means to accomplish genocide. Combatants who engage in genocidal rape do so with the aim of the total destruction of communities through the bodies of women. While genocidal rape does not account for all of the sexual
violence in the Congo, there is a clear ethnic dimension in some areas and cases of the DRC. According to Amnesty International, armed groups purposely singled out women and girls in the Ituri region, an area rife with inter-ethnic violence. Women in this region were targeted for ra/pe solely because they were of Hema, Lendu, or another ethnicity.

Women’s bodies, as symbolic representations of their communities, make them an even easier target for sexual violence. Soldiers and armed combatants achieve their strategic objectives like genocide, inciting terror, and punishment through the abuse of women’s bodies. By violating women, in their most sacred physical and emotional spaces, they are able to effectively target communities and instill fear by attacking the women who are the backbone of those communities.

Providing another motivation for sexual violence during wartime, the patriarchal militarism theory proposes that sexual violence during wartime is motivated by the desire to exert control and power over women and men who are perceived as feminine. Sexual violence during war is a by-product of a system of patriarchy where power relations are hierarchal and motivated by masculinity. Ra/pe is then an extension of everyday misogyny, a violent enforcement of the patriarchal hierarchy between men and women. This relationship between ra/pe, misogyny, and patriarchy is manifested in the military and its exercise of power.

In her research, Cynthia Enloe names the military as a masculine institution because it is mostly composed of men and practices androcentric policies. The military’s chief objective is to maintain power hierarchies within, among, and outside of states and non-state actors. Through this enforced system of power over states and non-state actors, the military reinforces, supports, and re-creates patriarchal gender relations. Additionally, in its enforcement of state and non-state hierarchies, the military legitimates violence as an accepted conflict-solving method. This legitimization allows for misogyny and violence against women during peacetime and wartime.

Misogyny is most clearly manifested in militarized ra/pe, which occurs in structured and power-ordered relationships. Most ra/ pes that occur during wartime are not necessarily orders from above, but are often orchestrated, encouraged, or at least condoned by commanders and individuals of small units. In the act of ra/pe, the male combatant rapist imposes some understanding of enemy, soldiering, victory, and defeat on the woman ra/ped.

The patriarchal military apparatus is directly responsible for sexual violence in the DRC. Commanders allow sexual violence to become endemic and often encourage it as a reward for battle or for
boosting troop morale. According to soldiers’ testimonies, fighters were “expected” to rape or their food rations would be withheld or reduced. Child combatants are especially forced to engage in rape, as commanders use sexual violence to continue their quest of brutalizing and desensitizing abducted children.

There is a direct connection between military forces and rape. Many rapes occur following the conclusion of military engagements and in the course of looting; displaced women are particularly at risk in these situations. Armed combatants have attacked and raped women they have discovered in their fields. According to a BBC 2008 news article, even UN peacekeepers in the Congo were accused of rape and child exploitation.

The patriarchal militarism theory accurately assesses women’s status as second-class citizens as playing a key role in combatants’ motivations for sexual violence. Since women are perceived as inferior to men, their injuries are not given the same societal concern that is awarded to men. As a result of this, women are strategically easier targets to attack than men. Their societal construction as inferior to men, along with a weak judicial system, also helps explain the massive impunity that has plagued the Congo.

While isolated to specific cases, superstitious beliefs are playing a role in some instances of sexual violence in the DRC. Some combatants believe that sex with prepubescent or post-menopausal women can give them strength or protect them from injury or death. Lisa F. Jackson, a filmmaker who interviewed combatants in the Congo, commented that some combatants believe rape “gives them power before battle.” Additionally, there is a commonly held superstition that sex with a young girl can prevent combatants from contracting HIV or even cure them of the infectious virus. In certain areas of the eastern DRC, there is a widespread belief that raping women who are either pregnant, breastfeeding, or of the Pygmy ethnicity will confer magical power and invincibility on the rapists. Rape is also believed to neutralize the magical powers of elderly women, the holders and administrators of the traditional initiation rites of the Mai-Mai. Reported by International Alert, RCD and RPA forces engaged in the targeted rape of elderly women to neutralize the perceived strength of Mai-Mai militiamen.

Using a gendered analysis, the social construction of women helps explain sexual violence motivated by superstition. Women’s bodies are targeted because they literally hold and provide access to superstitious practices. Combatants seek to destroy the power these practices convey through the physical destruction of women’s bodies.
In order to address sexual violence in the Congo, policies must take into account opportunistic, strategic, militaristic, and superstitious motivations. Conflict will continue in the eastern DRC if the formal economy remains collapsed, women's bodies are used in the fulfillment of strategic objectives, and women are socially constructed as men's inferiors. Peace will be realized when women are no longer constructed as a threat that needs to be physically policed, but instead rightfully recognized and respected as powerful members of the community and nation.

RECOMMENDED READINGS


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