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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Women victims of sexual violence in armed conflicts in the Democratic Republic of Congo



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Available online 5 August 2015

KEYWORDS

Women;
Armed conflicts;
Sexual violence;
Sexual health;
Human rights;
Democratic Republic
of the Congo

Summary

Context. – The conflict in the East of the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) is one of the most deadly conflicts that there has been since the Second World War. The main author has been working in South Kivu for ten years now. During the course of her numerous assignments, she has been confronted with particular situations of women who are victims of sexual violence and the consequences of rape. The current gaps in the provision of care for victims include a lack of healthcare infrastructure, an insufficient number of psychotherapists, and challenges associated with socio-economic reintegration.

Method. – This study is based on sexual health counselling and on a survey done on women who are victims of rape in rural environments and who are being cared for in the Panzi hospitals of reference in South Kivu.

Results. – The article presents the situation as a whole, a study of three illustrative cases and recommendations for an improvement in care. Sexual health and reproduction form an integral part of the improvement of life in general and are possible only if human rights are respected.

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Introduction

Every night in the East of the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), groups of armed men divide up into groups of

three to five, go into villages, forcibly enter homes, where they take women and young girls, rape them in series of four, five, and even ten people at a time. Some of these armed groups mutilate female genital organs with guns, bayonets, pieces of glass, wood or hot plastic, or any other blunt object. Other groups sometimes lead their victims into the forest and use them as sex slaves for days, months, and even years. This scourge affects men, women and children, but we shall concern ourselves here just with women, and more specifically women who are victims of sexual violence in the armed conflicts in South Kivu, in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC).

DOI of original article:

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.sexol.2015.06.003>.

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<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.sexol.2015.06.002>

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The main author of this article has been working with women who are victims of sexual violence in this region of the DRC for ten years now. These women are abducted and may be exchanged between various different combatants or aggressors and used for the pleasure of these men as sex slaves. The victims are sometimes little girls less than 5 years of age, who are also raped, and men are sodomised or obliged to rape members of their own families.

As Coordinator and President of the Association "action pour enfants oubliés" (action for forgotten children) (APEO), we have had the opportunity to conduct research among women who are victims of sexual violence (VSV), in collaboration with the local authorities, physicians who manage the various different hospitals, social workers from the humanitarian community.

What do they talk about?

In the cases of interest here, the sexual violence is committed with the aim of wiping women out and thus destroying the growth of a population in order to monopolise the riches of the occupied region. A woman's body is regarded as a battlefield, a means of humiliating the community who takes her in. The debasement of women is a deliberate strategy intended to erode family, community, national and international ties. Some women are forced to consent to sexual relations in order to survive, in exchange for food, shelter or protection. It is the same situation as was observed in the context of the former Yugoslavia at the start of the 1990s by Véronique Nahum Grappe (Nahoum-Grappe, 1997). At that time, Seifert drew similar conclusions: "If the aim is to destroy culture, women are the main target, on account of their cultural weight and their importance in the family structure" (Stiglmeier, 1994).

The following must also be considered to be sexual violence: forced marriages and pregnancies, sexual slavery forced upon young women, child soldiers and little girls charged with performing household tasks for their enemies, enforced prostitution or sexual slavery imposed on women abducted and held prisoner as the spoils of war, the removal of genital organs or their destruction. This last-mentioned type of mutilation is a new expression of violence identified in South Kivu rape with extreme violence (REV) (Mukengere Mukwege and Nangini, 2009). This form of violence is devastating for the population and may cause permanent harm to women's reproduction capacity.

Survey

The survey was done in some hospitals in rural areas with the aid of a questionnaire prepared before we went out in the field. A questionnaire was drawn up, which was made up of 4 questions and sub-questions prepared in advance and intended firstly for women who are victims of sexual violence, and then a further questionnaire for the local authorities including doctors and some specific stakeholders who were initially in contact with the victims (TV/radio presenters, awareness raisers, religious authorities, population...).

The global data: survey population

The profile of the female victims

Eighty-three percent of these women are more than 30 years of age, 18.1% are less than 30 and 5.4% of the victims are young girls, and even very young girls. Around 56.3% of them were abandoned after being raped whilst 5.4% of those who were married remained within a couple. A total of 32.7% of them are widows as the result of the conflicts. Around 34.5% work in the agricultural sector whilst 65.4% are unemployed on account of the assaults and trauma previously suffered at their place of work.

The nature of the rapes

A total of 70.9% gang rape (2 to 10 rapists) and 29% individual rape. Hundred percent vaginal rape and 5.4% vaginal and anal rape. Twenty-nine percent of these rapes were committed in the presence of members of the victims' family and 70% in the presence of friends, neighbours or whilst alone. Around 7.2% of these rapes were committed by inserting an object (all kinds of weapons, bottles, etc.), whereas 92.7% were the work of the rapist himself (his genital organs).

The perpetrators of these rapes

A total of 83.6% of the rapes were committed by armed groups of diverse nationality (militia, insurgents and armies of neighbouring states) to whom the rapists belong, whilst 10.9% are the act of the regular army. Added to these are the 7.2% of rapes committed by civilians (persons looking for precious substances in the mining sites).

The crime scenes

The great majority of rapes take place at these women's place of work, namely 61% on the way to the market, to the fields, when collecting wood for heating or at the mining sites. Around 25.4% of women are raped at home whilst 12.7% are victims of abduction, kept prisoner in the forest (sex slaves).

The ways in which victims are cared for

A total of 50.9% of these women received medical assistance, and for the 49.1% who did not, the reasons are varied and stack up on top of one another: lack of financial resources, transport difficulties or difficulties in getting to the healthcare facilities, fear, shame, guilt. Similarly, 7.2% of these women were taken care of within 72 hours of the act and were able to benefit from the PEP Kits (post-exposure prophylaxis kit), whereas 92% were only able to access this more than 72 hours later (less effective or even zero effectiveness). Around 38.1% of women were assisted by pharmacies (offered health care and medicines). 1.8% of these having suffered sexual mutilation (reparatory surgery if there is the possibility of access to the specialist centre) and 9% found to have unwanted pregnancies.

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