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Armed Conflicts in Africa: Examining Sexual Violence as an Instrument of War

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Abstract

Sexual violence finds its most brutal expression during armed conflicts. Across culture and time, sexual violence has assumed a myriad of forms and dimensions. It is widespread, but grossly underreported. It is the deep and multi-dimensional impact of sexual violence on individuals, families, and communities that gives it the status of ‘an instrument of war’, having drastic consequences. This work seeks to lend a voice to ‘breaking the silence’ about sexual violence during armed conflicts, and to contribute towards a better understanding of why and how sexual violence occurs during armed conflicts. Although most post-colonial conflicts in African states are broadly traceable to colonial legacies of fragile states, ethno-political contestation and the complex political economy of resources, the extent of exploitation

of vulnerable members of society during conflict may necessarily be a reflection of pre-existing social dynamics. From a constructivist position, this qualitative contribution interrogates the use of sexual violence in advancing the strategic aims and interests of warring parties. The study identifies that sexual violence during armed conflicts is a practice which subverts peacetime norms, and it is considered a taboo in many African societies. We argue that the cultural perception of sexual violence as a taboo makes it a motivator as well as a silencer, for perpetrators and victims respectively. Sexual violence during armed conflict in the Central African Republic (CAR) and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) are examined. Lessons are drawn from these cases which may be useful to other researchers, practitioners, and policy formulators.

Keywords: Africa; Armed Conflict; Sexual Violence; Breaking the silence; Central African Republic (CAR); Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC)

Introduction

Discourses on sexual violence as a premeditated instrument of war are increasingly dominating the field of conflict research. While this phenomenon in itself is as old as the concept of war, its occurrence as asserted by a 2017 Report of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), remains widespread and underreported (OHCHR 2017). Sexual violence has played a major role in the political economy of wars (Leatherman, 2011), as a strategic tool used to intimidate, punish, and control (UNA, 2018). It entails a range of violations or exploitations which are sexual in nature (Enslar, 2011; Leatherman, 2011).

The deep, multi-dimensional and horrific impact of sexual violence on individuals, family units and communities is what makes it 'an instrument of war' (Marsh, Purdin, & Navani, 2007). There are legislations at local and international levels which criminalize acts of sexual violence (Gagioli, 2014)¹. Sexual violence in any form is a despicable act of savage criminality; it violates the socio-cultural norms and values of groups, tears family units apart, causes deaths (Arieff, 2010), leaving scars and traumatic memories that linger

¹ See Gagioli 2014 on details about international humanitarian law and human rights law in relation to sexual violence.

beyond war times (Hunt, 2010). More so, these acts make many female and in some cases male members of affected communities objects of abuse (Marsh et al., 2007; Rosen, 2008), with legacies of physical and psychological ruins. In grappling with the context, scope, rationale, and impacts of sexual violence during armed conflicts in African states, a range of elements which interplay in the conflict and sexual violence dynamics come to the fore; history, culture and norms, gender sensitivity, dominance, politics, and economics. Thus Leatherman (2011) notes that:

Sexual violence in armed conflict is a multifaceted and complex criminal act. Trying to explain why it happens seems like answering a bottomless question. There is simply no simple answer. (p.32)

While most post-colonial conflicts in Africa may be traceable to factors such as colonial legacies of fragile states, ethno-political contestation (Mazrui, 1986), and the political economy of resources (Collier & Hoeffler, 2002; Fukuda-Parr, Ashwill, Chiappa, & Messineo, 2008; Schneider, 2017), it is crucial to note that armed conflicts particularly create an environment of chaos which breeds sexual violence (Zihindula, Makhubele, & Muthuki, 2018). Sexual violence has been recorded in many armed conflicts across Africa; in Sierra Leone, Liberia, Sudan, Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and Central African Republic (CAR) reports abound. Despite its reoccurrence and glaring destructive effects, there have been high levels of silence, which has reduced awareness and kept perpetrators distant from accountability (van Velzen & van Velzen, 2010).

In African cultural settings, acts of sexual violence such as rape are considered a taboo; they are unacceptable and forbidden (Arieff, 2010; OHCHR, 2017; UNb, 2018; Zihindula et al., 2018). The researchers argue that the notion of 'taboo' towards issues of sexual violence in African societies is both a motivator and silencer for the perpetrators and victims respectively. Perpetrators of sexual violence seek to systematically crush the essence, norms and values of a people by crossing very delicate social 'boundaries', thereby dominating victims and their communities. Similarly, victims maintain silence for the shame of stigmatization, the fear of communal rejection and further victimization, or the lack of faith in structures and institutions that may not serve them justice.

This paper seeks to lend a voice to 'breaking the silence' about sexual violence during armed conflicts in particular, and other forms of inhuman conducts which assume sexual dimensions. It interrogates

‘how’ and ‘why’ sexual violence is used in advancing the interests of warring parties, with the intent of contributing to a better understanding of the phenomenon. Although the focus of this study is sexual violence during armed conflicts, it is important to note that there are other forms of violence such as “mass killings, systematic torture, forced recruitment, and forced labour” (Baaz & Stern, 2010, p. 12) which may take place under similar circumstances.

Theoretically, the paper takes a constructivist position in engaging the dynamics of sexual violence during armed conflicts in Africa, while factoring the role of cultural norms. Constructivism views the world as a social construction (Wendt, 1995), and suggests that reality and knowledge are shaped by interactions with others. A crucial argument among constructivists is that agency and structures are mutually constituted (They, 2018), in other words, human capacity to act and interact shape social structures and accepted ideas, while the set of ideas and structures, in turn, regulate actions. In addition, identities and interests are determined by interactions or are socially constructed (Behraves, 2011). This theory is useful in providing an analytical orientation for this work because it helps to explain how norms and values are products of long periods of social interactions. It also explains why unacceptable behaviours such as sexual violence have strong destabilizing effects on affected individuals and communities.

This qualitative contribution is laid out in themes, allowing for effective thematic engagements of the phenomenon of sexual violence as an instrument of war in African armed conflicts. It closely examines armed conflicts in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and Central African Republic (CAR), while identifying patterns of sexual violence in these selected states, for the purpose of drawing lessons that may be extrapolated to other similar situations. Published and unpublished materials which included personal accounts of survivors were utilized in generating relevant content for this work. The DRC and CAR share a lot in common; they are both African states that have colonial histories, are saddled with protracted internal conflicts, and have high numbers of displaced vulnerable populations. Findings from this study will therefore be applicable in similar situations.

The paper begins by providing context and background understanding of the phenomenon of sexual violence during armed conflict. It goes further to discuss the factors which inform its use as

an instrument for waging war. The experiences in selected African conflict situations (DRC and CAR) are then examined, while the motives and impacts of sexual violence during armed conflicts are highlighted as well. Additionally, the role of taboos in the conflict-related sexual violence dynamics is assessed. The study concludes with a call for gender sensitivity and other recommendations for future researchers, practitioners and policy formulators.

Contextualizing sexual violence and taboo during armed conflicts

Acts of violence such as sexual violence find their most brutal expressions during armed conflicts. Across culture and time, sexual violence has assumed a myriad of forms and dimensions (Rosen, 2008), which include rape, mass campaign of rape, forced marriage, forced incest (OHCHR, 2017), honour killing, torture, cannibalism, and genocide (Leatherman, 2011). It has been employed in the systematic conquest of targeted groups and considered in many cases as 'spoils of war' (Banwell, 2014; Leatherman, 2011). History is replete with accounts of sexual atrocities during conflicts around the world and indeed within Africa (Zihindula et al., 2018). It is important to note that although sexual violence towards women, and in fewer cases men, has existed for a long time in history, the phenomenon has largely remained underreported (OHCHR, 2017).

A plethora of factors contributes to the occurrence of sexual violence during armed conflict. In wartime situations of despair and fear, the displacement of people that ensues creates an environment that supports acts of sexual violence (Arieff, 2010; Bleasdale, 2011). Due to conflict, supportive social networks usually weaken or collapse, and vulnerable citizens are consequently exposed to exploitation (Arieff, 2010; Messerschmidt, 2018). Similarly, the absence of social services such as medical, legal, law enforcement, as well as the breakdown of infrastructure during armed conflicts fuels the prevalence of sexual violence (Arieff, 2010; OHCHR, 2017; Pisik & Calvert, 2009; Pruitt, 2012). Baaz and Stern (2010) opine that in many cases, soldiers feel neglected by their superior, they also experience lack of supplies and remuneration, and in some cases, they are required to live off the population, these elements combine to create a feeling of frustration which results in violent practices such as sexual violence.

Another explanation emerges from the traditional settings in many African societies, as is the case in the DRC and CAR, where men culturally play leadership, protective as well as economic roles at family and community levels. The negative impacts of conflicts - death, displacement, forceful conscription to militia, etc. - make it difficult for them to perform such cultural roles, thereby exposing members of their family and community to a range of exploitations, including sexual violence. Moreover, the predominantly patriarchal power dynamics in different African societies generally place women and girls in a position of vulnerability in relation to men (Zihindula et al., 2018). The situation not only nurtures a tendency for gender insensitivity but may get aggravated by conflicts and creates an environment for sexual violence to occur.

Social structures, norms, and taboos which make behaviours such as sexual violence socially unacceptable usually get broken in times of conflict (Leatherman, 2011). Behavioural patterns are bound to change, as social norms and support mechanisms weaken under the pressure of armed conflict, thereby giving way for deviant behaviours such as acts of sexual violence to blossom. As described by Arieff, sexual violence is the “collateral damage” which results from violent conflicts (Arieff, 2010), it takes place in different locations which range from homes, farms, open spaces, to places of refuge or hiding, as victims suffer untold horrors (Leatherman, 2011).

A taboo is a vehement social prohibition in relation to any aspect of human activity or social custom which is believed to be too sacred or forbidden (Radin, 2009). Therefore a taboo connotes two different things; actions that are too sacred (consecrated) or too accursed (forbidden, impure, dangerous or disgusting) for any normal/ordinary members of a society to perform. Although taboos are observed differently in many cultures around the world, these prohibitions are largely constructed based on moral and religious considerations. The concept of taboo is essentially tricky because it provides an inter-mix of two forceful opposites - sacred and forbidden - in the same word. In the context of this study, a taboo implies the ‘forbidden’. It connotes impure, disgusting, and accursed actions and practices that are sexual in nature, in relation to the DRC and CAR armed conflict settings in view. In fact, when a taboo is broken, it often attracts objections or dangerous consequences. According to Radin (2009), taboos may also not be talked about in public.

As can be seen, armed conflicts are characterized by practices which subvert the norms that are typical of peacetimes. Taboo being prohibited actions, may serve as a means by which peacetime norms can be subverted through violent practices which characterize armed conflicts. Therefore, during armed conflict, an act of violence (including sexual violence), is not simply a physical act, but a constructivist act which entails the subversion of norms.

Sexual violence as an instrument of war

There are contestations whether sexual violence during conflicts is strategic, opportunistic, or both. It is crucial to note that acts of sexual violence have been used strategically in armed conflicts (Leatherman, 2011; Rosen, 2008). It is the deep and multi-dimensional impact of sexual violence on individuals, families, and communities that gives it the status of 'an instrument of war', having acute, chronic, and in some cases, fatal consequences (Marsh et al., 2007). The application of sexual violence during armed conflict is the battle strategy that targets the living vessels of opponents (Rosen, 2008), making human bodies (mainly female) a battleground (Enslar, 2011; Rosen, 2008; Zihindula et al., 2018). It wreaks untold damage on the body and mind of victims, their families and communities. It is employed to systematically dissipate socially constructed values, norms, and taboos. Such acts not only break targeted groups but dominate them as their socio-cultural essence is trampled upon. Beyond the physical scars and pains, there are traumatic memories that linger beyond conflict times (Hunt, 2010), in many ways, these dark memories and histories shape the prospects of peace as well as the future of affected communities in post-conflict times.

Arieff (2010) argues that sexual violence is a crime that is 'opportunistic' in nature since conflict situations fuel the occurrence of sexual violence. The absence of structures that protect citizens and hold criminals accountable, create opportunities for high levels of impunity to be demonstrated by perpetrators of sexual violence (Arieff, 2010). Therefore, crimes such as rape and other acts of sexual violence flourish when opportunities such as open chaos, violent conflict, and a general social disorder present themselves. Similarly, poor economic circumstances that are associated with conflict expose women greatly, in other words, economic deprivations associated with

conflicts present opportunities for women to be victimized and sexually exploited (Arieff, 2010).

In contrast, Baaz and Stern (2010) in their analysis of the complexities associated with violence in the DRC, submit that it is problematic to focus on only one aspect of violence during wars, they submit that apart from sexual violence, there are other forms of violence such as mass “killings, systematic torture, forced recruitment, and forced labour” (p.12), which equally require attention. In many instances, these other forms of violent acts occur side by side violence of sexual nature. Similarly, Solhjell (2011) highlights that the singular focus on sexual violence during armed conflict analysis may result in a tendency to commercialize rape. Moreover, “in a war-torn and poverty-stricken country, with not even a minimal level of health services, claiming to be raped can be a means of survival for many women suffering from maternal health issues” (Solhjell, 2011, p. 121).

While acknowledging that violence during armed conflict assumes variant dimensions, it is crucial to examine sexual violence because of its complex nature, the lingering socio-cultural and economic effects it has of families and communities, and for the fact that it is violence on human vessels which holds multiple and far-reaching implications. More so, a 2017 UN report provides clarity as to how sexual violence may constitute an instrument, tool or weapon of war. “When acts of sexual violence are linked to a military or political objective and intended to serve a strategic aim of the conflict, they amount to the use of sexual violence as a weapon of war” (OHCHR, 2017). Therefore, any act of sexual exploitation that serves the strategic aims of armed conflicts can be conveniently termed an instrument or tool of war (Leatherman, 2011; Rosen, 2008). If sexual violence serves such strategic aims of intimidating, punishing, disorienting, destroying, and dominating enemies, it qualifies as an instrument of war.

Sexual violence in DRC armed conflicts

Two major wars have been fought in the eastern DRC since the mid-1990s, with numerous rebellions recorded alongside. In 2003, the war between DRC and its neighbours came to an end. However, armed groups still operate, especially in the mineral-rich eastern DRC. These groups have continued to destabilize the region by employing a range of techniques including various forms of sexual violence (Eastern

Congo Initiative (ECI), 2018). Reasons for their continuing operations include a history of group rivalry, the quest for territorial control (UNa, 2018), and perhaps, more importantly, the presence of minerals in eastern DRC (P. Collier, 2011) which has mostly been exploited illegally.

There are contestations about the estimated number of rape victims in the DRC. Besides the over 5 million UN reported cases of death in the DRC conflicts, UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) reports also put the estimated number of internally displaced persons in the DRC at 3.8 million (OCHA, 2017). However, the cases of rape and other forms of sexual violence are clearly underreported, even though conflict-related sexual violence in the DRC is arguably the worst in the world. In fact, “In the Congo, it is more dangerous to be a woman than a soldier” (Beschryver, 2009). The 2010 United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) report estimates that an average of about 1100 rape cases are reported monthly in the DRC. However, Rosen (2008) notes that the UN estimates are largely based on reported cases of rape. Hence, such estimates may simply represent a fraction of the actual number of victims if unreported cases are factored. Ensler (2011) also notes that there are possibly over half a million women who have been raped in the DRC, if unreported cases are put into consideration. Sexual violence, although ‘cheaper than bullets’, certainly leaves indelible scars on victims (Pisik & Calvert, 2009).

The systematic employment of sexual violence in the Congo beats the human imagination in its sheer intensity, scale and methods. It is used to intimidate, punish, and control (Khan, 2011). It violates the culture of the people and breaks the cultural essence that holds communities in place (Bleasdale, 2011). Perpetrators demonstrate absolute impunity; kidnapping, enslaving and raping women, going as far as setting children ablaze (Kilonzo et al., 2009). Besides the practice of hanging women alive for magical powers in combat, there are also a superstitious beliefs associated with raping young virgins; the blood from the broken hymen is used for charms which they believe will protect them from bullets(Integrated Regional Information Networks (IRIN), 2014). A United Nations report on sexual violence in the DRC states that:

In 2017, Twa militia in Tanganyika were responsible for the highest number of documented cases of sexual violence perpetrated by a

non-State armed group. Conflict-related sexual violence perpetrated with extreme brutality has also spread to the three Kasai provinces. In that context, anti-Government Kamuina Nsapu militia and pro-Government Bana Mura militia have both targeted civilians believed to support their adversaries. Deliberate attacks against communities along ethnic fault lines have included the use of taboo practices, such as victims being raped in front of relatives, a pregnant woman having her fetus ripped out and at least one victim being forced to perform sex acts on a family member before being executed. (UNA, 2018, para. 1)

A survivor gave details of her experience of how she watched her husband beaten to death by Rwanda backed militia, they raped 2 of her daughters and then she was raped on top of her husband's mutilated body, she was raped so brutally that she had to undergo 8 (eight) surgeries in order to repair her damaged internal tissues (WashingtonTimes, 2009). Yet another survivor narrated her ordeal as follows: “[...] they raped me, five of them. After I was raped, my husband ran away. To this day, I don't know where he is” (IRIN, 2014). This explains why men may abandon their wives because of the knowledge of her being ‘defiled’, or why a woman may remain silent for the fear of losing their loved ones or being stigmatized.

In many cases, the cruel nature of the violent attacks are unbelievable. In a study by Zihindula et al (2018), they present the respondents' description of perpetrators of sexual violence as follows:

They considered women as animals, calling them dogs and raping them with unprecedented cruelty. Not only did they gang-rape all and cut the throat of one victim a day, but they ordered the survivors to drink the blood of the murdered woman while they had to wait in agonising trauma to discover who the next victim of this slaughter would be. (p 10920)

A Nobel peace prize winner, Dr. Dennis Mukwege who performed several lifesaving surgeries on victims, explained that perpetrators go as far as leaving signature marks on their victims. Victims from Baraka and Fizi are given gunshot wounds in their vagina, those from Hombo area are burnt on their backs, while victims of the Ninja militia experienced paralysis of the limbs as a result of long hours of being tied up (Mukwege, 2009).

As part of responses to the situation in the DRC, a number of arrests have been made with the intention of bringing arrested culprits to book. Justice Minister of North Kivu Christopher Ndibeshe in

2014 stated that 25% of prison inmates in the Goma prison are convicted or charged with rape (IRIN, 2014). However, Ida Sawyer, a Human Rights Watch representative in the DRC explains that there is a continuing increase in the rate of sexual violence despite international and local efforts to stem the trend, stating further that most of the convictions have not sufficiently included high ranking individuals such as senior rebel commanders or military personnel who are involved in these acts (Sawyer, 2014).

In 2011, there was a major breakthrough, Colonel Mutuare Daniel Kibibi, was charged to court with some of his men for sexual violence. Kibibi was convicted on 4 counts of crime against humanity. He was sentenced to 20 years imprisonment (AlJazeera, 2011). However, the local judiciary in the DRC shows limited capacity to handle cases of sexual violence. Local courts are located far from many rural communities, while the court fees are beyond the means of poor civilians. This is one of the reasons for silences which occur after rapes, because women lack the economic capacity to initiate or pursue justice (Misonia, 2014). Similarly, the social dynamics of stigmatization that are associated with being raped, where victims are rejected, make the victims of rape to sometimes stay silent as a way of saving their face and their families.

Initiatives for women empowerment, rehabilitation and treatment have been springing up in the DRC, where survivors are supported to heal from their trauma. Avenues for fellow survivors to meet and share experiences are created. The City of Joy is one of such centres where survivors get a chance to heal and learn their rights. There is also a sanctuary in Goma for survivors of sexual violence who share common experiences. Medical initiatives to treat cases of traumatic fistula have also been of great help to victims in the DRC.

Sexual violence in the CAR armed conflict

The Central African Republic (CAR) has experienced an increase in anti-government movements. For almost half a decade, the CAR has been caught in a web of violent conflict, “armed groups in the Central African Republic have committed widespread sexual violence and used rape and sexual slavery as a tactic of war. Two main parties to the conflict among others, the Seleka and anti-balaka, have used sexual violence to punish women and girls, particularly along sectarian lines” (Human Rights Watch (HRW), 2017). More than 15% of

women and girls in the Northern part of CAR have been victims of sexual and other gender based violence (HRW, 2007).

Some of these rebel groups maintain strong holds over territories in the north and in the north east of CAR (Arieff, 2010). The armed conflict has caused a lot of displacement of citizens within and beyond the borders. A 2018 UN report states that 688,000 people have been displaced as a result of the CAR conflict. While moving from troubled areas in search for safety, civilians often face the threat of armed groups and exposure to sexual violence. Even in their camps, they stand the chance of being assaulted as there is very limited security provided for them (UNb, 2018).

In CAR, sexual violence has clearly been employed as a weapon not only to intimidate and punish, but to terrorize. The attacks have shown religious and ethnic dimensions, for instance “the rape of women because they were Muslim ...the rape of ethnic Haoussa women because they belonged to the ethnic group of a rival rebel movement, the targeting of Christian and animist women rape, and the rape of women because they were suspected to have Muslim husbands or partners” (OHCHR, 2017, p. 1).

These attacks disrupt the socio-economic dynamics in communities, women are unable to go to market, and their fields are abandoned for fear of being attacked and raped. The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) mapping project in CAR (2003 to 2015) revealed that almost every party to the armed conflict were involved in the perpetration of acts of sexual violence. The perpetrators of sexual violence have been identified to include members of local security forces, foreign forces, rebel groups as well as peace keeping forces (OHCHR, 2017).

Survivors who narrated to the Humans Right Watch described the gruesome methods that were applied in violating them. One of the survivors recounts that, “one of them took a grenade and put it in my vagina, and then they removed the grenade and raped me” (HRW, 2017). Another survivor named Angel lost her husband and parents in an attack from the Seleka fighters, after which she was held captive as a sex slave for nine month. She got pregnant in the process, and narrated thus; “when I had the baby, I did not want to hold him, I felt like killing him”. Just like Angel, Josephine narrated her story; “they said I am a wife of a Seleka, so they can’t have sex with me. Then they broke a bottle and shoved it into my vagina. My husband abandoned

me” (HRW, 2017). These miseries highlighted here are some of the dimensions and effects of sexual violence in the CAR conflict.

In CAR, there are particularly grousome methods of violations employed; “rapes committed in public, in front of family members, and community members; gang rapes on a victim, involving sometimes 10, and as many as 20 attackers; rape of very young girls and boys, including those below 10 years of age; rape of male victims, including gang rape” (OHCHR, 2017, p.1). More than 15% of women and girls in the Northern part of CAR have been victims of sexual and other gender based violence (HRW, 2007).

Efforts have been made to bring offenders to book in CAR, although insufficiently so. In August of 2018, the first case of conviction for conflict-related sexual violence crime was recorded. The convicted persons were two anti-balaka members who had raped a sixteen-year-old Bambari girl. Such court rulings often serve as deterrence to others who would want to act with impunity (UNb, 2018).

Motives and impacts of sexual violence during armed conflicts

From the afore-discussed DRC and CAR cases, the criminal act of sexual violence during conflict sufficiently qualifies as a lethal combating instrument. Perpetrators of sexual violence employ a wide range of methods, which include, but are not limited to rape, mass campaign of rape, forced incest, hostage taking and sex slavery, forced prostitution, mutilation, and honour killings.

There are a number of strategic aims that sexual violence has been used to achieve during armed conflicts. These span violation of the cultural norms of targeted victims (Zihindula et al., 2018); ethnic cleansing through forced impregnation of women from enemy or conflicting groups (OHCHR, 2017); and deliberate punishment, intimidation, humiliation, retaliation and striking of fear into communities leading to their displacement (HRW, 2017). It is also used by militia generals to reward commanders for successful conquest of a targeted group or groups (HRW, 2007; Pisik & Calvert, 2009), for the extraction of vital information from victims, and as part of the process of inducting new members into the fraternity of combatants (Arieff, 2010).

Victims suffer varying levels of reproductive health impacts, among which are; contraction of sexually transmitted infections and

HIV, traumatic fistula, and forced pregnancies. Often, victims attempt dangerous methods of abortion, especially in a situation where medical services are disrupted, while children who are born of rape maybe rejected. Hunt (2010) stressed that there are psychological consequences of wars, some of which include; posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression, fear, loss of self-worth, and suicidal tendencies (Marsh et al., 2007). On the social level, there is a possibility of rejection of individuals by their family or stigmatization of families at the community level (Morrison & Orlando, 2004). The economic and human development effects are also enormous.

Identifying perpetrators

In the growing conversations and awareness about sexual violence during conflicts in Africa, different categories of armed groups and combatants (government forces, rebel groups, and gangs) have been identified as major culprits in sexually related crimes during conflicts (Ensler, 2011; OHCHR, 2017; WashingtonTimes, 2009). Although combatants are easily identified as perpetrators, it is pertinent to note that the social disorder which characterises conflict also exposes people to “bandits, border guard, human traffickers, and slave traders” (Arieff, 2010). There is a corresponding increase in civilian perpetrators as more armed combatants carry out sexually violent acts. In fact, many young men willingly join(ed) armed groups because of the economic gains, the possibility of enjoying impunity, and the prospects of participating in the spree of violent sexual pleasures and looting of civilian properties (HRW, 2007).

Moreover, other than combatants and civilians, an inquiry by the United Nations in 2005 revealed that peace keepers participated in sexual violation of girls and women in the DRC, in many cases, the victims were below 18 years of age (UN 2005). In view of this, it becomes worrisome to contemplate where lies the safety of the vulnerable members of society in times of conflict, especially when those who are authorized to help them become abusers. Conversely, perpetrators, rather than being dehumanized, could be re-humanized and constructively engaged in endeavours to better understand how and why sexual violence occur (Baaz & Stern, 2010).

Taboo and silence

Taboos must then be understood as restrictions and thresholds, suggesting actions that are culturally and morally unacceptable. Taboos may also be understood as negative norms, which are prohibited in a group or society. An act of sexual violence such as rape in an African cultural setting is considered a taboo and thus forbidden (Arieff, 2010; OHCHR, 2017; UNb, 2018; Zihindula et al., 2018). From a constructivist viewpoint, it is crucial to note that the notion of taboos like other norms, are products of long periods of social constructions. They are foundational aspects of a people's cultural essence and identity. When acts of sexual violence occur, they amount to taboo practices, which inadvertently subvert peacetime norms, violate the soul and essence of communities, and damage the glue that holds them in place. Sexual violence tramples upon cultures that have thrived for centuries. It is such a deep impact sexual violence has, that is why it must be condemned in peacetime and at wartime.

However, the taboo perception towards sexual violence in CAR and DRC, may suggest two things: a motivator and silencer for the perpetrators and victims respectively. Firstly, it motivates perpetrators because they are cognizant of the fact that by sexually violating their victims, they wreak multi-dimensional havoc on the individual victim, their family, and extended community. Perpetrators are aware of the impact it has on a society, thus, the reason why they commit such acts in a calculated and deliberate manner, with an intention to cause deep harm and subdue targets. To this extent, the desire to trample on the opponent's norms motivates perpetrators. It crushes the values and essence of victims and ultimately tears communities apart, which is an objective in wars. Secondly, the perception of sexual violence as a taboo may explain why victims maintain silence, for the fear of stigmatization, communal rejection and further victimization, or for the lack of faith in structures which are unable to serve justice. In such a dilemma, silence towards violent sexual conducts during armed conflicts and a seeming normalization of it may become possible.

Noting the above, we argue that armed conflicts create an environment for the subversion of peacetime norms and for such deviant behaviours as sexual violence to occur, which undermines disapprovals towards sexual violence. In addition, the extent of exploitation of vulnerable members of society such as women and

girls during conflict may necessarily be a reflection of pre-existing social dynamics, precisely of gender insensitivity and female victimization. For instance, social structures as seen in the DRC and CAR, that normalize the stigmatization and rejection of innocent victim of rape, even when they need support, certainly demonstrates insensitivity and discrimination. The strategic use of sexual violence during conflict merely becomes an amplification of such discriminatory tendencies in the face of impunity. Therefore, pre-existing social dynamics also have influences on the extent of sexual violence during conflict.

Conclusion

Sexual violence has been used as an instrument to punish, intimidate, control, and dominate targeted groups during armed conflicts in African states. The dynamics of conflicts in the DRC and CAR substantiates this. There are high levels of social disorder during violent conflicts, which have resulted in violent behaviours such as sexual violence at alarming scales. It impacts on reproductive health, and despite these situations, there are a lot of silences about the pains and sufferings of African women and girls, as well as boys in some cases, from sexual violence as seen in the DRC and CAR. It is the multi-dimensional effects of trampling on peacetime norms and human bodies that make sexual violence a weapon of war. It is strategically employed to meet the aim of conflict; a strategy to destroy and dominate opponents. In the two countries, cultural perceptions towards sexual violence are similar, as it is considered a taboo. The perception of sexual violence as a taboo has played the role in motivating aggression as well as silencing the victim. A higher level of gender sensitivity, respect for human dignity, as well as mechanisms that prevent the exploitation of vulnerable members of society during conflict is therefore imperative.

Recommendations

In line with the findings of this study, the researchers therefore put forward a number of recommendations, highlighting the need for:

- Greater sensitization about acknowledging victims as those who need help and support, rather than being rejected, stigmatized or further victimized;
- Capacity development for the judiciary in affected states, so that effective court prosecution and justice for victims can be achieved;
- Survivors as well as witnesses to be protected and encouraged to speak up and break the silence, thereby creating more awareness;
- Better education for soldiers – local forces and peace keeping missions- to shun acts of sexual violation;
- Provision of better medical services for the treatment and rehabilitation of victims;
- Mechanisms to stimulate higher levels of gender sensitivity should be put in place;
- More women to be trained, empowered and given a voice, to emerge as leaders in spreading messages of change;
- Improvement of security situations in vulnerable areas, and the empowerment of local communities to protect themselves; and
- Greater collaboration between agencies, states and major stake holders (locally and internationally) in dealing with the complex issues of sexual violence and general insecurity.

The due consideration of these recommendations is necessary, given that African women are our grandmothers, mothers, sisters, cousins, daughters, and nieces who deserve to be safe and to actualize their full human potentials in the interest of a peaceful, productive, and united Africa.

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