

Press release Sida/Nordic Africa Institute

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New report on war rapes challenges common view of gender violence

A singular focus on rape hampers efforts to combat sexual gender-based violence in conflict, according to new findings in a report on the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). To improve the situation of women, it is also necessary to understand the context in which violence is being committed and to work with men and boys, both as perpetrators and as victims of gender-based violence.

Reporting on the conflict in the DRC has focused mainly on sexual violence against women. This important reporting has underscored that it is vital that women who have been subjected to sexual violence are seen as survivors, not victims; support for survivors of sexual violence is a crucial part of both individual and societal healing in the wake of armed conflict. In the DRC a large portion of the systematic violations of human rights is being committed at the hands of the armed forces (both the national army and the different militia groups). However, attempts to understand such violence based on the soldier's own stories, are rare.

In a report published by Sida, the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency, together with the Nordic Africa Institute, researchers Maria Eriksson Baaz and Maria Stern interviewed more than 200 soldiers. The findings challenge the often simplistic explanation of 'rape as a (strategic) weapon of war' and provide a broader picture of the causes leading to sexual violence in conflicts.

"During the interviews, we spoke with soldiers about masculinity, femininity and sexual violence. Of what it means to be a good soldier. We never asked if they themselves had committed acts of violence, but we asked them about their thoughts and their explanations in a more general way. However, many of their stories suggested that they talked about close experiences," says Maria Eriksson Baaz.

Eriksson Baaz and Stern believe that the world's singular focus on sexual gender-based violence against women in the DRC conflict (often described simplistically as a war strategy) has had problematic consequences. The complexity of gender-based violence is obscured and other often related crimes, such as mass killings, systematic torture, forced recruitment and forced labor, receive less attention and resources. In the process, an understanding of the links between sexual violence and other violence has been lost. Additionally, men's and boys' rights and needs as survivors of violence have been ignored, resulting in a continued cycle of violence.

The prevailing simplistic depiction of sexual violence in the DRC has hindered a deeper understanding of gender-based violence in the DRC context. Stereotypes of women as victims and uniformed men as perpetrators, but also civilian men as actors when they repudiate raped women, have been cemented in place. However, men are also subjected to gender-based violence and sexual violence.

In the DRC conflict, men and boys are raped; they are forced to have sex with family members and relatives; they are forced to watch as relatives are raped; and they are forced to perform violent and degrading sexual acts. Impunity, together with the collapse of society's traditional systems, has led to a normalization of sexual violence.

“Recognizing that men and boys are also victims of sexual violence can strengthen the fight against gender-based sexual violence against women. It leads to a questioning of gender stereotypes and facilitates the breaking of cycles of violence,” Maria Stern states.

The report's conclusions are useful not only for the reconciliation process in the DRC, but also for other countries in situations of conflict or post-conflict.

Link to Policy Note: <http://nai.diva-portal.org/smash/record.jsf?searchId=1&pid=diva2:319658>

Link to full report: <http://nai.diva-portal.org/smash/record.jsf?searchId=1&pid=diva2:319527>

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