

Gender-based violence in the Great Lakes Region

Facts and Figures

For the panel organised by FAS on the 22 March 2007

Introduction: Sexual violence against women and girls in the Great Lakes region

Sexual violence against women is one of the main features of the conflicts in the region. It is an integral part of the war and has been used as a weapon by all sides of the conflict: rebels groups and national armies. Sexual violence is also committed by United Nations peace-keepers who are sent in the region to protect the civilian population. Cases of “survival prostitution” have been increasing, with women and girls trading sex for food and shelter. Sexual violence has been committed at a massive scale and has affected thousands of women and girls, with devastating consequences on women and their communities. It is difficult to find reliable statistics on the number of women who were raped and sexually assaulted. We all are aware of the estimation of **250.000 women raped during the war and genocide in Rwanda. No official statistics exist for Burundi and the DRC.** However some UN agencies and local human rights organizations working in Eastern DRC, estimate that **between 40.000 to 60.000 women were raped between 1996 and 2002, in Eastern DRC alone.** Sexual violence represents a serious public health issue in the region. The rapes have severely affected the mental and physical health of the victims. Many women suffer problems which require reconstructive surgery. A high number of rape victims are infected with HIV/AIDs. According to Human Rights Watch 4.6% of combatants involved in the war in the Eastern part of DRC, are HIV-positive, which means that there is a high risk of infection.

There is a prevalent **culture of impunity** throughout the region, which is partly explained by the social acceptance of sexual violence against women, including within the police and judicial system. At the same time, there is a strong social stigma attached to rape as well as a general attitude that rape is somehow women’s fault. This explains why the victims are generally wary of lodging a complaint¹.

I. Situation by countries

1. Democratic Republic of Congo

Sexual violence against women and girls is one of the most horrifying aspects of the armed conflict in eastern DRC. All sides have participated in these atrocities. During the conflict, rape was happening on such a scale that local and international human rights organisations, as well as women’s organisations, began referring to “**a war within a war**” and to a “**war against women**”.

2. Burundi

The growing incidence of rape has been exacerbated by widespread discrimination against women, and its consequences aggravated by poverty, population displacement and a failing health care system. The perpetrators are largely members of the Burundian armed forces and armed political groups, as well as armed criminal gangs who not only rob but also rape.

Most victims of rape in Burundi currently face insurmountable obstacles in trying to bring suspected perpetrators to justice. Many women who have been victims of rape or other forms of

¹ http://www.glow-boell.de/media/de/txt_rubrik_2/Ndeye_Sow_FGmai06.pdf

sexual abuse are too intimidated by certain cultural attitudes and state inaction to seek redress. To do so can often lead to hostility from the family, the community and the police, with little hope of success. Those who do seek justice are confronted by a system that ignores, denies and even condones violence against women and protects perpetrators, whether they are state officials or private individuals. The near total impunity granted to members of the armed forces - whatever their crime - discourages many from even attempting to begin legal action against members of the armed forces.

While stigma and fear mean that many cases go unreported, the scale of the violence forced rape out into the open in 2003. The increase in the incidence of rape has been confirmed by national and international organizations working in Burundi and acknowledged by government authorities.²

3. Rwanda

During the 1994 genocide, Rwandan women were subjected to brutal forms of sexual violence. Rape was widespread. Women were individually raped, gang-raped, raped with objects such as sharpened sticks or gun barrels, held in sexual slavery (collectively or individually) or sexually mutilated. In almost every case, these crimes were inflicted upon women after they had witnessed the torture and killings of their relatives, and the destruction and looting of their homes. Some women were forced to kill their own children before or after being raped. Women were raped or gang-raped repeatedly as they fled from place to place. Others were held prisoner in houses specifically for the purpose of rape for periods ranging from a few days to the duration of the genocide. Pregnant women or women who had just given birth were not spared, and these rapes often caused haemorrhaging and other medical complications which resulted in their deaths. At checkpoints and mass graves, women were pulled aside to be raped, often before being killed. Many women came close to death several times during the three month period and in some cases begged to be killed so that the suffering would end. Instead, they were often spared so they could be raped and humiliated by the genocide perpetrators. Survivors report that during the genocide, militia even raped the corpses of women they had just killed or women who had been left for dead. After killing women, the militia would frequently leave their corpses naked.

Although the exact number of women raped will never be known, testimonies from survivors confirm that rape was **extremely widespread** and that **thousands of women** were raped.

In Rwanda, as elsewhere in the world, rape and other gender-based violations carry a severe social stigma. The physical and psychological injuries suffered by Rwandan rape survivors are aggravated by a sense of isolation and ostracization. Rwandan women who have been raped or who suffered sexual abuse generally do not dare reveal their experiences publicly, fearing that they will be rejected by their family and wider community and that they will never be able to reintegrate or to marry. Others fear retribution from their attacker if they speak out.

Often, rape survivors suffer extreme guilt for having survived and been held for rape, rather than having been executed. Victims of sexual abuse during the genocide suffer persistent health problems. According to Rwandan doctors, the most common problem they have encountered among raped women who have sought medical treatment has been sexually transmitted diseases, including HIV/AIDs (although it is often impossible to know if this is due to the rape).

² <http://web.amnesty.org/library/index/engaf160082004>

A large number of women became pregnant as a result of rape during the genocide. Pregnancies and childbirth among extremely young girls who were raped have also posed health problems for these mothers. The "pregnancies of the war," are estimated by the National Population Office to be between **2,000 and 5,000**.

In late 1994, the United Nations Security Council created the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda, which is tasked with bringing the organizers of the genocide to justice. An international procedure which condemns genocide and holds the perpetrators accountable will send a message that impunity for such crimes will not be tolerated by the international community. However, the International Tribunal faced serious resource constraints, and continues to confront problems of staffing and methodology. With regard to gender-based crimes in particular, these problems are magnified. Although rape constitutes a war crime and a crime against humanity, little has been done until now to effectively include gender-based violence in the Tribunal's work.

The future of Rwanda is largely in the hands of its women. With a population that is **70% female**, it will be the women who will rebuild the country.

Although exact **figures** will never be known, testimonies from survivors confirm that rape was extremely widespread. Some observers believe that almost every woman and adolescent girl who survived the genocide was raped. While the ages of women and girls raped ranged from as young as two years old to over fifty, most rapes were perpetrated against young women between the ages of sixteen and twenty-six. **The survey of 304 rape survivors conducted by the Ministry of Family and Promotion of Women in collaboration with UNICEF found their average age to be twenty-four years old. Among them, 28 % were under eighteen years; 43.75 % were between nineteen and twenty-six; 17.1 % were between twenty-seven and thirty five; 8.55 % were between thirty-six and forty-five; and 1.6 % were over forty-five; 0.7 % did not respond. Among the group, 63.8 % were young single women.**

The only attempts to estimate the overall level of gender-based violence against women have been through extrapolations based on the numbers of recorded pregnancies as a result of rape. According to the statistics, one hundred cases of rape give rise to one pregnancy. If this principle is applied to the lowest figure (the numbers of pregnancies caused by rape are estimated to be between 2,000 and 5,000), **it gives at least 250,000 cases of rape and the highest figure would give 500,000**, although this figure also seems excessive.³

II. Thematic issues

Women everywhere are sexually assaulted, and their attackers enjoy impunity. Sexual violence against women happens at an alarming rate, in times of peace and during armed conflict. In the context of the HIV/AIDs pandemic, these brutal attacks can also be deadly. Often, women are silenced by the stigma attached to sexual violence, but increasingly they are speaking out and demanding accountability for these crimes. Police and other law enforcement authorities are quick to dismiss rape and other forms of sexual violence as unimportant crimes provoked by the victims themselves. Under international law, governments have a duty to respond effectively to violence against women, including rape.

1. Women and Armed Conflict

³ <http://www.hrw.org/reports/1996/Rwanda.htm>

In armed conflicts raging around the globe, soldiers and paramilitaries terrorize women with rape, sexual and other physical violence, and harassment. These tactics are tools of war, instruments of terror designed to hurt and punish women, wrench communities apart, and force women and girls to flee their homes. Women in Sudan, **Democratic Republic of Congo**, Sierra Leone and **Rwanda** have reported brutal rapes, sexual assaults, sexual slavery, and mutilation committed by male combatants. In some cases, perpetrators first raped then killed their victims. Those who survived the attacks suffered from psychological trauma, permanent physical injury, and long-term health risks, especially HIV/AIDs

Often, the end of war does not signal the end of violations against women. In the post-conflict period, many women confront discrimination in reconstruction programs, sexual and domestic violence in refugee camps, and violence when they attempt to return to their homes.

The creation of the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda, and the International Criminal Court hold out some hope that women in war-torn countries might finally gain greater access to justice for crimes of sexual violence. Since 1998, these tribunals have convicted individuals of rape as an instrument of genocide, a form of torture, and a crime against humanity.

2. Women and HIV/AIDs

In Africa, 58 % of those infected with HIV are women. Infection rates among adolescent girls and young women in much of Africa are strikingly higher than those of their male counterparts, exposing the disturbing reality that young women face appalling levels of abuse and discrimination

3. Internally Displaced Women

There is a lack of reliable statistics on gender-based violence in countries undergoing internal displacement. Victims of violations have often contracted HIV/AIDs and other sexually transmitted diseases. Displaced women in countries like **Burundi**, the **DRC**, Liberia, Uganda, Somalia and Sudan were more at risk of becoming victims of gender-based violence than other women in 2005. In Uganda and in Sudan, displaced women who worked in the fields, or collected water and firewood outside the camps, repeatedly fell prey to sexual abuse. In **Burundi**, displaced widows reportedly often had no choice but to resort to multiple sexual relations and polygamy in order to support themselves and their children. In the **DRC**, despite the relative improvement of the security situation throughout the country, MSF reported in March 2005 that each week, 40 raped girls and women sought its help in Bunia, the capital of the war-torn Ituri district, but that many more never reached the humanitarian organisation.

In eastern **DRC**, Darfur and northern Uganda, the rape of displaced and other women is among the war crimes allegations investigated by the International Criminal Court. It remains to be seen whether these various measures will have any impact on the life of displaced and other women.

Over the past few years, international peacekeepers have repeatedly committed sexual abuses against displaced women, particularly in **Burundi**, the **DRC**, Liberia and Côte d'Ivoire. In 2005, the UN Office of Internal Oversight Services reported that it had found a pattern of sexual exploitation by peacekeeping personnel in the **DRC**.⁴

⁴ [http://www.internal-displacement.org/8025708F004D404D/\(httpPages\)/953DF04611AD1A88802570A10046397B?OpenDocument](http://www.internal-displacement.org/8025708F004D404D/(httpPages)/953DF04611AD1A88802570A10046397B?OpenDocument)