Sexual Violence in the
Democratic Republic of the Congo

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Content

1. Introduction

Since the First and Second World War, the involvement of civilians in war has risen dramatically. According to UNICEF data, since World War Two ninety percent of all war victims have been civilians (Seifert 1996, 35-38). The Geneva Conventions of 1949 and their Additional Protocols form a body of law that tries to prevent attacks on civilians in combat. Sexual violence as a weapon of war is officially prohibited under international humanitarian law. However, seldom have war rapists been prosecuted. Brutal attacks on civilians, and especially on women and children, persist.

Definitions of rape and other crimes related to sexual violence are often used exchangeably. The UN Commission on Human Rights defines rape as: "Rape should be understood as the insertion, under conditions of force, coercion, or duress of any object, including but 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" (Carlsen 2009, 474). "Sexual violence is a broader category that includes rape, sexual torture and mutilation, sexual slavery, enforced sterilization, and forced pregnancy" (Wood 2009, 133). In this paper I will use the broader concept of sexual violence as defined by Wood.

Although sexual violence in times of peace has dramatic consequences for victims, sexual violence in wartime is believed to have an even larger impact. Hagen distinguishes five categories in which sexual violence in wartime differs from other forms of sexual violence: scale, public occurrence, brutality, slavery, ethnic cleansing and genocidal rape. "Given our current understandings of the long-term effects of this type of trauma, it is perhaps one of the most violent and effective tools of war" (Hagen 2010, 15). That sexual violence in wartime is seen as a possible military strategy is a relatively new phenomenon. Rape and other forms of sexual abuse were seen as regrettable side-effects of war, not as a weapon that can be used to achieve victory.

In this paper I will focus on sexual violence in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). I will focus particularly on the Second Congolese War, also known as the Great War of Africa, and its aftermath. The war is infamous for its extreme violence directed towards the civilian population. The conflict started in 1998 and officially ended in 2003, but because of the fragile state, violence and human rights abuses still continue. Since most cases of sexual violence occurred in the eastern provinces, I will particularly focus on this region.

Scholars from different academic fields have done research on sexual violence in the DRC. Most of these scholars focus on prevention of sexual violence. It is generally agreed that a lack of hierarchy in the military, impunity due to a weak judicial system and poor economic conditions are problems that have to be addressed in order to protect the girls and women of the DRC. Less attention has been paid to the trauma care initiatives that have been set up by the Congolese

government and (I)NGO's. However, Marleen Bosmans highlights the importance of both preventive as well as aftercare measures by stating that: "weak, ineffective or even non-operational legal systems [...] combined with the isolation and social stigmatisation of the victims, may create an environment that is conducive to an increased incidence of sexual violence against women, children and adolescents, instead of preventing it" (2007, 7). Since there is critique on both preventive as well as trauma care measures, a two-sided approach is needed to give insight in the following question: *To what extent are current measures to tackle problems related to sexual violence in the DRC sufficient?*

By offering this two-sided approach I hope to provide some new insights regarding sexual violence in the ongoing crisis in the DRC.

In the first chapter I will briefly discuss how sexual violence in war has evolved from being viewed as a regrettable by-product to a 'weapon of war'. In this chapter I will also set out a theoretical framework which will enable me to answer the following sub question:

Why is sexual violence used as a strategy of war in the DRC?

Most scholars have focused on legal and economic perspectives when analysing why sexual violence still occurs in the DRC. Even though these perspectives should not be undervalued, I focus on the root causes that can be found in the Congolese armed groups.

After discussing preventive measures and analysing why soldiers still engage in sexual violence, I will focus on trauma care initiatives. A lot of the initiatives to support victims of sexual violence are based on Western ideas of how to recover from traumatic experiences. However, there is no hard scientific evidence that these Western ideas are useful in the context of a different culture. Therefore I will research the follow sub question in the second part of my paper:

To what extent can Western ideas on trauma be applied to sexual violence in the Second Congolese War (and its aftermath)?

Next to academic literature, I will make use of interviews with both perpetrators and victims of sexual violence. Most of the interviews are quoted from reports from Human Rights Watch (HRW). I am aware of the limitations of using interviews from an activist organisation like HRW and also the fact that the reliability of the statements given by both the victims and the perpetrators can be doubted. Still, I feel that the fragments I used really capture the problems in the DRC and support the academic literature in a non-activist way.

In the end I conclude that not enough attention has been given to the 'root causes' of sexual violence found in the structure of the military. Furthermore, Western assumptions on how to heal from traumatic experiences should be reconsidered and more attention should be given to traditional ways of healing.

2. Sexual violence in war: a theoretical framework

In this section I will analyse the current academic debates around sexual violence in war in order to present a theoretical framework. I will discuss the different attitudes towards sexual violence in war and their historical evolution. Then I discuss Elisabeth Wood's theory on *repertories of violence*. I will apply this theory on the Congo-case further on in this paper.

2.1 Rape as a weapon of war

For a long time, sexual violence was seen as an unfortunate by-product of war. Men were believed to lose their sexual self-control in times of war (Seifert 1996, 36). Where society normally prevents men from committing acts of sexual violence, these societal controls on male sexual urges vanish in times of war. The biological "testosterone argument" is closely related to this explanation. Male aggressiveness should derive from a higher degree of testosterone (Seifert 1996, 36). Also, it is argued that the more violence one is exposed to, the more violent one gets. This "spiral of violence" makes the taboo on violence disappear. Soldiers who feel mistreated by the enemy in any way 'victimise' themselves. They want to take revenge and create a picture of 'the evil other' in order to justify their own violence (Baaz and Stern 2009, 498). All explanations for sexual violence during wartime mentioned above are based on the assumption that sexual violence is an unfortunate by-product of war. One of the most important changes in literature on sexual violence in war took place in the nineties, when scholars acknowledged that sexual violence is not simply a regrettable side-effect of war, but that it can actually be viewed as a 'weapon of war' (Buss 2009, 145-146).

Rape and other forms of sexual violence are used as instruments to achieve various goals. Obviously, sexual violence is used to impose fear on the local population. Rape has also been used to destroy an ethnic group and its culture. In order to ethnically cleanse the enemy, rape and forced sterilization are used to prevent births of children on the side of the enemy. In cases of forced pregnancy, the child will be of mixed ethnicities (Carlsen 2009). Next to the direct physical effects, there is also a psychological effect of sexual violence as a weapon of war. In cultures where virginity is highly valued, "displaying a woman's dishonour in the public area destroys the entire underlying social order of a community and the core self-worth of the victim" (Hagen 2010, 16). In this explanation the female body becomes the battleground on which the war is fought. This means that sexual violence can be an effective 'tool of war', because of its highly traumatizing and demoralising effects on the victim and the community she is part of.

In order to achieve the above mentioned goals, soldiers use sexual violence as a 'tool of war'. In the next section I will analyse why military groups engage in sexual violence during war using Elisabeth Wood's research on *repertoires of violence* (2009).

2.2 Repertoire of violence

Wood (2009) did research on the *repertoire of violence* of an armed group. She defines a *repertoire of violence* as "the set of practices a group routinely engages in [...] a particular group may include in its repertoire any or all of the following: kidnapping, assassinations, massacres, torture, sexual violence, forced displacement, and so on" (Wood 2009, 113). In her analysis of a group's *repertoire of violence*, she finds reasons why or why not certain groups engage in sexual violence, while others do not. I will use Wood's analysis of *repertoires of violence* to create a theoretical framework. Later on in this paper I will use this theoretical framework to analyse the causes of sexual violence in the DRC.

Firstly, a group's repertoire of violence depends on strategic choices the military leaders make. Whether or not sexual violence is used as an instrument of war depends largely on its assumed 'productivity' and may change over time due to reactions on changing tactics of the enemy or interactions with the civilian population. Whether the military leaders are actually able to impose their strategic choices on the individual combatants depends on the strength of the military hierarchy. Therefore, I will first set out the top-down processes in which strategic choices are made and discuss the role of hierarchy in an army. After that, I will discuss bottom-up processes in which group processes influence the individual's decisions.

Leadership strategy

Military leaders base decisions on the type of violence their armies will use on different factors. First of all, the availability of supplies such as armoury should not be underestimated. If 'regular' warfare instruments such as rifles and guns are scarce, military leaders will sooner turn to sexual violence as a tool to defeat the enemy. Furthermore, the geographical area in which the battle is fought influences the type of violence a military engages in. If the battle is fought on terrain far from the civilian population, sexual violence is not an effective instrument. Also, when international or domestic support is needed, the repertoire of violence can be adapted to the wishes of these external actors (Wood 2009, 136-137). On the other hand, in for example cases of ethnic violence, sexual violence can be an effective instrument because it can very well lead to ethnic cleansing (forced pregnancy for example leads to the birth of children with a mixed ethnicity).

Military hierarchy

Armed groups are generally of a strict hierarchical nature. Given the often extremely chaotic and violent times in a conflict, this hierarchical structure is needed in order to make everyone work towards the same goal. It depends on the strength of the hierarchy of an armed group whether or not the military leaders are able to impose their tactics on their subordinaries. According to Wood, military leaders have to hold the people below them accountable, usually through

punishment, if they want to successfully enforce their tactics. Furthermore, "when military leaders are seen as legitimate authorities, the likelihood of obedience even in the wielding of extreme violence is greatly enhanced" (Wood 2009, 137).

Group processes

The goals and tactics of an armed group influence the way they recruit new soldiers. Because every new soldier carries with him the norms and values he learned in the environment he grew up in, ethnicity and personal background are important factors when an armed group decides where to recruit new personnel. Rebellion groups for example, tend to recruit people with a criminal background, while state armies often try to create an army with soldiers from different ethnicities. Thus, it is important to note that group processes are to a large extent influenced by the recruiting policies of the armed group. In a relatively heterogeneous armed group, it is likely that a new hierarchy with its own values will be formed. However, in a relatively homogeneous group, hierarchies and cultural backgrounds from 'regular' daily life will be continued within the structure of the armed group (Wood 2009, 138).

As I mentioned before, military leaders have to be seen as legitimate authorities in order to maintain a minimum level of obedience. Next to recruitment policies, an important factor that shapes the nature of an armed group is the process of creating group cohesion. "In state militaries, the powerful experiences of endless drilling, dehumanization through abuse at the hands of the drill sergeant, and degradation and then 'rebirth' as group members through initiation rituals typically meld recruits into combatants whose loyalties are often felt to be stronger than those to family" (Wood 2009, 138). Group cohesion in the form of the above mentioned 'drilling' rituals thus create an extremely strong feeling of loyalty and enable military leaders to bring their war tactics into practice.

In the section above I have described different aspects that form an armed group's *repertoire of violence*. In the next chapter I will use this theoretical framework to analyse the causes of sexual violence in the DRC.

3. Sexual violence in the DRC: prevention

3.1 Short historical overview of the conflict

In this paper I focus on the sexual violence that took place during the second Congolese war. This conflict officially lasted from August 1998 until late 2002, but proxies still continue fighting for land and resources today. The conflict is "the widest interstate war in modern African history" (Globalsecurity.org 2011) and has often been called 'the Great African War'. It involved "nine African nations and directly affected the lives of 50 millions Congolese" (Globalsecurity.org 2011). It is estimated that five million people died during this period of violence, mostly due to starvation and war-related diseases (International Crisis Group 2010). According to David van Reybrouck, the writer of the book '*Congo, a History'*, the second Congolese war disappeared from the world news broadcasts because of its impenetrability and obscurity, for outsiders it was very hard to understand the dynamics of the conflict (Reybrouck 2010, 464). In this section I will outline the most important historical events before and during the conflict so that a clear context is provided for the upcoming chapters.

The Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) won its independence from Belgium in 1960. Soon after this, the country was in turmoil because it continued carrying "the burden of the legacy of King Leopold II with a high level of violence and continuing human rights violations" (Uppsala Conflict Database 2011). In November 1965, Colonel Jospeh Desire Mobutu, backed by the U.S. and Belgium, ousted Kasavubu, the first official president of the DRC, and began a thirty-two year rule of the country (International Crisis Group 2010). Mobutu was a corrupt president, enriching only himself and his allies, but he could continue to misbehave for such a long period because Western countries assisted him under pretext of blocking the expansion of communism. After the Cold War, Mobutu could stay in power until 1997 only because of manipulating the multiparty politics which were forced upon the country through international pressure.

In October 1996, an armed rebellion led by AFDL (Alliance des Forces Démocratiques pour la Libération du Congo) and supported by Rwanda and Uganda began a military campaign towards Kinshasa, and succeeded in toppling Mobutu in May 1997 (Uppsala Conflict Database 2011). These two years of violent conflict are called the first Congolese war. In the end, Laurent-Désiré Kabila replaced Mobutu as president, renamed the country the DRC and consolidated power around himself and the AFDL (Globalsecurity.org 2011).

During 1997, "relations between Kabila and his foreign backers deteriorated" (Globalsecurity.org 2011), and when in July 1998 he ordered all foreign troops to leave the DRC, the Second Congolese war started. According to Van Reybrouck it is easiest to make a distinction between three phases in this conflict. During the first phase, which lasted from August 1998 until

July 1999, Rwanda, Uganda and a patched rebellion army tried to oust Kabila, and failed. This phase ends with the signing of the Lusaka peace accords which admittedly did a lot, but did not stop the fighting. The second phase lasted from July 1999 until December 2002. In this phase of the conflict, Rwanda and Uganda didn't try to get their armies to win over Kabila's Kinshasha or the whole DRC anymore, but together with local militia's they controlled half of the DRC and exploited its multitude of raw materials and commodities to the fullest. Loot became more important than power, and violent confrontations were becoming custom. This turbulent phase came to an ending with the signing of another peace accord, this time in Pretoria. Officially the Rwandese and Ugandans would have to return to their countries and the United Nations would increase its presence. But nevertheless, the third phase began in 2003 and still continues today, most of the time in the Kivu. During this long period, the war has been limited to the eastern parts of Congo, parts directly bordering Uganda (Ituri) and Rwanda (the Kivu). These zones have known moments of heavy fighting, violation of human rights on massive scale and enormous human suffering. (Reybrouck 2010, 464-465).

According to Van Reybrouck, each phase was heavily influenced by the aftermath of the Rwandan genocide, the weakness of the Congolese state, the military strength of the new Rwanda, the overpopulation of the Great Lakes area, the old Colonial borders, the growing ethnic tensions because of increasing poverty, the local presence of weaponry, the impotence of the UN, and above all the extensive presence of natural resources such as minerals, diamonds, coltan and coal of which the world market increasing its demand with every day (Reybrouck 2010, 465).

3.2 Causes of sexual violence: why do soldiers rape?

Even though both the Congolese government and the international community have tried through various efforts to stop the sexual abuse of civilians, the violence still continues. In this section I will first give a short overview of the prevention measures that have been taken so far. After that, I will analyse the Congolese armed groups *repertoires of violence,* in order to answer the question 'why do soldiers rape?'.

From a legal perspective, in 2006 the Congolese government passed two laws that had to make an end to the impunity of perpetrators of sexual violence. Still, in 2008 only 27 soldiers were convicted of crimes related to sexual violence in the eastern provinces of the DRC, while the UN reported 7703 cases of sexual violence in the same region in the same year (Human Rights Watch 2009, 6). Reasons for implementation difficulties include weak military and legal institutions, women's difficulties to talk about their experiences and the costs of bringing a perpetrator to court (Freedman 2011, 173). Carlsen states that: "In a region where families barely have enough to survive, the prosecution of a rapist is simply too high a cost to bear" (2009, 476).

The UN created a *Comprehensive Strategy to Fight Sexual* Violence. This strategy covers five themes: 'security sector reform; prevention and protection; combating impunity; multi-sectoral assistance; and data and mapping' (Freedman 2011, 174). In order to achieve these points, the UN Mission in the Democratic Republic of Congo (MUNOC) works together with the Forces Armées de la République Démocratique du Congo (FARDC), the Congolese army. One of their tasks is to fight rebel groups in the eastern provinces. This means that in order to protect the civilian population, MUNOC has to use violence. Soljhell identifies this as a *paradox of protection*, 'as the best way to stop violence is seen to be to use it' (2010, 14). In times where levels of fighting increase, the number of rape victims also rises. Since the FARDC is accountable for the most cases of sexual violence, fighting rebels to protect the civilian population seems to be somewhat counterproductive (Solhjell 2010, 14).

(I)NGO's and several initiatives by Congo's civil society have tried, mainly through legal training of military personnel, to prevent acts of sexual violence. However, Baaz and Stern see a danger in emphasising training too much. According to them, soldiers are well informed on human rights and international humanitarian law. Training without implementing necessary steps to end impunity, will be a waste of time and money (2010, 36-37). In addition to this point, MUNOC estimates that only eleven percent of incoming funds have been actually used effectively to take preventive steps regarding the physical safety of women and girls (Solhjell 2010, 15).

In spite of the above mentioned efforts, the violence still continues. While analysing sexual violence in the DRC, I found that most research focuses on impunity due to a weak legal system. In the following section, I will focus on the root causes of sexual violence by analysing the *repertoire of violence* of armed groups in the DRC. I believe that it is necessary to understand the reasons *why* an armed group engages in sexual violence if you want to end it.

In order to analyse the causes of sexual violence in the Second Congolese War and its aftermath, I will use Elisabeth Wood's theory on *repertoires of violence* (2009) as provided in chapter two. Human Rights Watch (HRW) conducted research in the eastern provinces of the DRC and published its findings in the report '*Soldiers Who Rape, Commanders Who Condone'* (2009). This report includes several interviews with soldiers who committed crimes of sexual violence. It is good starting point to analyse the war tactics of armed groups active in eastern parts of the DRC. In addition to this report, I will use the report *'Rape in War – Motives of Militia in DRC'* (2010) by the United States Institute of Peace (USIP).

Leadership strategy

HRW researcher Anneke van Woudenberg states that sexual violence is used as a war strategy by military leaders for mainly three reasons: 'Rape in Congo has been used as a weapon of war, as a

tactic by armed forces to punish communities for supposed support to their enemies, to demonstrate control or to instil fear' (Institute for War & Peace Reporting 2008, 4). In addition to these reasons, soldiers are heavily dependent on the civilian population for their basic means of survival. For example, USIP found that Mai Mai soldiers were afraid to get a bad reputation under the civilian population. An interviewed soldier told USIP that: "There are women there who grow food in their fields in the surrounding villages, they assist us with food" (USIP 2010, 9). This statement indicates that it would be a counterproductive strategy of war to use sexual violence against the civilian population. However, since most armed groups do not have a base camp for longer periods, they move frequently to different areas. Therefore, there is often no need to establish a sustainable relationship with the local population.

HRW also found that soldiers of the FARDC gave low salaries and poor living conditions as a reason to commit acts of sexual violence. Erika Carlsen underlines this argument by stating that "as a result of these conditions, combatants and soldiers are encouraged to loot resources [hereby] taking advantage of unequal power relations between women and men. In the often encouraged and condoned looting of goods, women are treated as another resource to be looted" (2009, 477). With low salaries, it becomes a way of surviving for soldiers to loot and live on the civilian population. While bad relations with civilians will be counterproductive on the long run, soldiers who lived under poor conditions for extensive periods will go for the easiest solution.

Van Woudenberg's statement that sexual violence is used as a way to demonstrate control is supported by USIP. When an interviewer told a Mai Mai soldier that a different armed group raped several girls in the area the Mai Mai tried to protect, the soldier answered that: "It is exactly to provoke us! [...] I am shocked because I am looking after somebody, but another person comes and does such dirty things to them. We are really unhappy about that" (USIP 2010, 10). Since there are so many different armed groups active in the eastern region, sexual violence is used to provoke and demotivate other armed groups.

USIP states that the military leadership is often too weak to enforce their strategies on lowerranked soldiers (2010, 11). In the next section I will discuss the problems concerning military hierarchy. But befor I proceed, I would like to point out that the above mentioned reasons for soldiers to engage in sexual violence are all based on research in regions where resources are the most important incentive for soldiers to go into the army. Either out of ideological reasons, if they want to protect Congolese resources from foreign domination, or because they have no other means of survival. In other regions and phases of the conflict in the DRC, sexual violence has also been used to accomplish genocide of different ethnic groups (Carlsen 2009, 478-479).

Military hierarchy

In its report, HRW concludes that "there is confusion over the chain of command" and that "commanders made aware of the problems did not take action against those responsible, [also] military authorities who should have been in a position to give orders were either unwilling or unable to control the troops" (2009, 32). These quotes indicate that impunity and lack of structure within armed groups are the main reasons why sexual violence still occurs. Commanders lose control over their troops and blame other army divisions when perpetrators go unpunished. Another important reason for commanders to deny sexual violence happens under their command is fear to be prosecuted themselves. Officially they are responsible for crimes that happen under their command. This argument is supported by the story of a fifteen-year-old girl was raped by two soldiers. She told the following story to a HRW interviewer:

> "I was just coming back from the river to fetch water…two soldiers came up to me and told me that if I refuse to sleep with them, they will kill me. They beat me and ripped my clothes. One of the soldiers raped me. When he had finished, he told me that if I followed them, they will kill me. So I stayed there, and then went home… My parents said they will look for the soldiers. We did find the soldiers but they denied it happened. My parents spoke to a commander and he said that his soldiers do not rape, and that I am lying. I recognized the two soldiers, and I know that one of them is called Edouard" (Human Rights Watch 2009, 50).

One of the most important reasons for the lack of structure and hierarchy in the FARDC is the mixing of former militia groups with the FARDC. After the formal peace accords of 2003, soldiers from several militia groups were given 'professional' military training and integrated in the FARDC. This process is called *brassage*. The goal of *brassage* was to break old bands of loyalty and to create a unified state army. However, since 2003 new groups of soldiers have been integrated in the FARDC constantly. This means that there is a constant reorganisation of brigades and army structures. New soldiers are often badly trained, which troubles the integration process. Old loyalties persist, which creates 'parallel chains of command' (Baaz and Stern 2010, 18-19).

Group processes

Wood states that initiation rituals are important to create loyalty towards the group and the military leaders. USIP describes extreme initiation rituals happening, in order to "beat the civilian out of new recruits". A new soldier is beaten "black and blue so that he might leave his civilian thoughts" (2010, 6). These initiation rituals are mainly focused on integration in the group, not on making new soldier loyal towards the military leaders.

Soljhell identifies soldiers' problems with their masculinity as an important motive to commit acts of social violence. Traditional male roles in society have been affected by the war, while at the same time international media coverage created an image of women as solely

victims and men as perpetrators (Solhjell 2010, 16-17). Obviously, these images emerged for a reason. Still, as I mentioned before, many men have no other choice than to go into the military if they want to make a living. In the army they often fall prey to the social pressure to engage in acts of sexual violence. Hagen states that: "Often there is the social pressure for each rapist to 'out do' his comrade with more severity than the previous rapist" (2010, 16). These problems regarding feelings of masculinity are called *'hyper masculinity'*. This means that the effectiveness related to the strategy of war is less important than regaining social status (Solhjell 2010, 17). Even though 'regular' warfare would be more effective, soldiers still choose to commit acts of sexual violence, since this restores their traditional power over women.

3.3 Conclusion on prevention

In the paragraphs above I have analysed the *repertoire of violence* of armed groups in the Eastern part of the DRC. It is hard to draw a definitive conclusion out of this analysis. There are various reasons for military leaders to incorporate sexual violence in their *repertoire of violence.* These reasons depend on the main goal the armed group tries to achieve. These reasons vary from ideological nationalistic motives, to straight economic motives. Moreover, all groups consist of soldiers with different ethnic and cultural backgrounds and with different values and beliefs that influence the group processes. Assuming that the soldiers I quoted from the different reports speak sincerely and that the authors of these reports used them in the right context, then still it is difficult to draw generalizing conclusions from these statements. Yet, I believe that Elisabeth Wood's theory on *repertoires of violence* is a good starting point when investigating the causes of sexual violence. An important conclusion that can be drawn is that the process of *brassage* is problematic and in many cases counterproductive. Even if military leaders can be convinced to fight sexual violence under their command, this will not be effective if the military hierarchy is weak. So far there has been a focus on the medical, social and juridical aspects of addressing sexual violence in the DRC (Solhjell 2010, 15). Although these aspects are important, renewed attention for the structure of the military is needed in order to make the other measures more effective.

4. Sexual violence in the DRC: trauma

In the previous sections I have tried to give insight in the reasons why armed groups engage in acts of sexual violence as a weapon of war. The preventive measures taken thus far do not address these reasons sufficiently. In the coming section I will focus on the aftercare for victims of sexual violence. I will discuss critiques on the present methods and ideas on trauma. Derek Summerfield (1999) identified seven Western assumptions on trauma care. I will use these assumptions to analyse the situation in the DRC.

4.1 Consequences of sexual violence

Victims of sexual violence suffer from various longstanding trauma's, both physical and psychological. In this paragraph I will first set out the most important consequences for the victims' lives. In the following paragraphs I will analyse the trauma care that is provided to the victims of sexual violence and the influence of Western ideas on recovery from traumatic experiences.

Physical consequences

The amount and severity of physical consequences obviously depends on the acts of sexual violence the woman (or child) is victim of. Some of the most reported physical consequences are sexually transmitted infections like HIV, sexual dysfunction, unwanted pregnancies (with the result of unsafe self-induced abortions), broken bones, bruises, menstruation problems and vaginal tearing. Above these direct physical consequences, victims often experience lifelong consequences due to unprofessional and insufficient medical facilities (Hagen 2010, 18-19, Bosmans 2007, 5).

Psychological consequences

Besides these physical consequences of sexual violence, victims suffer from grave psychological harm. Psychological consequences encompass "post-traumatic stress disorder, generalized anxiety, phobias, insomnia, flashbacks, nightmares, grief [and] complete loss of self-esteem" (Hagen 2010, 19). According to Kristine Hagen: "women may experience deep distrust in previous relationships, a fearfulness and withdrawal from others, and a lack of safety within their surroundings and within themselves and others. Disruptions in women's core beliefs, complicated by the cultural taboos around sexuality, make disclosures and support seeking for the acts of sexual violence committed against them nearly impossible" (2010, 19).

As a result of being victim of sexual violence, women face the risk of being rejected by their families and communities. The virginity of women is valued very highly, and the dishonour and humiliation a raped woman brings to her community is often a reason to expel her from her

home (Bosmans 2007, 6). For children and unmarried women, the chances of marrying a husband after being raped decrease enormously. This can result in forced marriages with the perpetrator.

Besides the above mentioned individual costs, there are also various communal costs. Identified costs encompass an increased burden to public health care and workplace-related costs due to decreased productivity or inability to work. Next to these more economical costs, the shame and dishonour that are brought to the community are perceived as even more disastrous (Dutton, et al. 2003, 161-162).

In the section above I have briefly listed most of the physical and psychological consequences for victims of sexual violence. Now I will discuss Western responses (by NGO's and other international agencies) on the traumatic experiences Congolese women suffered from.

4.2 Western perspectives on trauma

Many nongovernmental organisations and international agencies such as UNICEF and the World Health Organisation are active in (post-)conflict settings to provide humanitarian aid. Their programmes aim to address posttraumatic stress and other trauma related syndromes. Derek Summerfield argues that even though these programmes cost millions of dollars, "there is no evidence that war-affected populations are seeking these imported [Western] approaches, which appear to ignore their own traditions, meaning systems and active priorities" (Summerfield 1999). Wilson supports his argument by stating that even though globalisation caused a trend "towards the homogenization of cultures", it cannot be assumed that "Western psychotherapeutic techniques can be applied to non-Western cultures" (Wilson 2007, 17). There is general agreement among scholars that Western ideas on how to heal from traumatic experiences cannot be directly copied to other cultures. However, it is argued that there is a certain universal dimension to the rehabilitation process (Wilson 2007, Drožđek and Wilson 2007). Therefore, I will try to answer the following question in this section of my paper: To what extent can Western techniques of trauma care be applied to the situation in the DRC?

Derek Summerfield argues that there are at least seven basic assumption underlying the current Western psychological trauma care programmes. These assumptions form a good starting point when analyzing the current humanitarian initiatives.

"1. Experiences of war and atrocity are so extreme and distinctive that they do not just cause suffering, they cause 'traumatisation'.

2. There is basically a universal human response to highly stressful events, captured by Western psychological frameworks.

3. Large numbers of victims traumatized by war need professional help.

4. Western psychological approaches are relevant to violent conflict worldwide. Victims do better if they emotionally ventilate and 'work through' their experiences.

5. There are vulnerable groups and individuals who need to be specifically targeted for psychological help.

6. Wars represent a mental health emergency: rapid intervention can prevent the development of serious mental problems, as well as subsequent violence and wars.

7. Local workers are overworked and may themselves be traumatized" (1999, 1452-1457).

In my research, especially assumptions two, four and six are very relevant. Assumption two, stating that "there is basically a universal response to highly stressful events", is only partly true. There exists some evidence that there is, to a certain extent, a universal response to traumatic events. This evidence is found in age-old mythologies that have similar 'stages' in coping with traumatic experiences in different cultures (Drožđek and Wilson 2007). I will come back to this point later. Apart from the 'evidence' found in mythologies, thus far there is no scientific evidence found that assumption two can be considered right. Coping with traumatic experiences is culture-specific and cannot be captured solely by Western psychological frameworks (Wilson 2007, Drožđek and Wilson 2007, Martz 2010).

Assumption four states that "Western psychological approaches are relevant worldwide". There is no scientific evidence found thus far to support this assumption. Rather, various examples are found that there are culture-specific ways of dealing with traumatic events. Alternative pathways towards healing from traumatic experiences can be provided by "shamans, medicine men and women, traditional healers, culture-specific rituals, conventional medical practices, and community-based practices that offer social and emotional support for the person suffering the adverse, maladaptive aspects of trauma" (Wilson 2007, 4). These traditional pathways to overcome traumatic experiences are very strong embedded in non-Western cultures and should not be overlooked. Smith, Lin and Mendoza even argue that: "Humans in general have an inherent need to make sense out of and explain their experiences. This is especially true when they are experiencing suffering and illness. In the process of this quest for meaning, culturally shaped beliefs play a vital role in determining, whether a particular explanation and associated treatment plan will make sense to the patient [...] Numerous studies in medical anthropology have documented that indigenous systems of health beliefs and practices persist and may even flourish in all societies after exposure to modern Western medicine" (quoted in Wilson 2007, 4).

In addition to this, Ashvin Shah argues that we have to be aware of neo-colonialism. The promotion of Western techniques on how to treat mental problems (without hard scientific evidence that these techniques are relevant in other cultures), makes non-Western people believe they lack Western techniques. He states that international aid agencies are part of this

problem and "contribute to the abandonment of culturally embedded practices" (Shah 2007, 51). Shah justifies his portrayal of non-Western people as quite passive in this statement by arguing that this is due to the fact that historically, they "anticipate good innovations from the West" (Shah 2007, 58).

Critique on the sixth assumption, that "wars represent a mental health emergency" and that "rapid intervention can prevent the development of serious mental problems", is provided by Summerfield himself. He names this problem the 'medicalisation of distress'. This 'medicalisation of distress' is basically the "tendency to transform the social into the biological". By early intervention, it is assumed, problems like alcoholism, criminality and even new wars can be prevented (1999, 1461). The tendency to make quick diagnoses in order to start the treatment, comes at the expense of gaining insight in social relations and the victim's perspective the future.

Even though there is no clear evidence that there is a universal reaction to traumatic experiences and that reactions are heavily dependent on individuals in their specific cultures, there are some authors who believe that the pathway towards rehabilitation is universal (Wilson 2007, Droždek and Wilson 2007). Wilson argues that: "By carefully analysing the functions of mythology within a culture we can identify how it is that culture shapes posttraumatic adaption, growth, and the challenges of self-transformation" (2007, 15).

He identifies five posttraumatic phenomena that correspond with five stages that are found in world literature: "1) the trauma experience; 2) self/identity; 3) loss of connection; 4) separation and isolation; 5) spirituality" (Wilson 2007, 15). Mythologist Joseph Campbell identifies corresponding stages in myths about 'the Hero', that he found in world literature: "1) encounter with trauma, loss and disaster; 2) tests of the human spirit; 3) a sense of abandonment by humanity; 4) ultimate aloneness and despair; 5) the return of the hero" (Droždek and Wilson 2007, 368-369)[1]. These stages of rehabilitation after traumatic experiences are found in myths all over the world, and support the idea that even though there is no universal reaction to traumatic experiences, there might be a universal pathway that people follow to recover from these experiences. The healing rituals that have to be completed when walking this pathway vary per culture and are person specific.

Thus, there is general consensus that there is no evidence that Western techniques to treat traumatic experiences work best for people from different cultures. The seven assumptions identified by Summerfield should therefore be reconsidered by humanitarian aid workers active in post-conflict settings. Healing from traumatic experiences is person specific and shaped by the culture the individual was raised in. Every culture has its own ways and methods of coping with and treating traumatic experiences, although this does not mean that certain techniques cannot

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[1] I complemented Campbell's stages with the stages identified by Droždek and Wilson.

be adopted from other cultures. Also there seems to be a universal pathway that people from different cultures follow to recover from trauma. Even if this pathway is universal, the healing measures taken when following this pathway are culture specific.

4.3 Trauma rehabilitation in the DRC

In the previous section I have discussed the problems and difficulties concerning international aid in trauma care. This theoretical foundation allows me to analyse the situation in the DRC. To a great extent, the general statements I made in the previous section, can be applied to the situation in the DRC. This is mainly due to the fact that there has been almost no research done on how Western ideas on trauma are used to support victims of sexual violence in the DRC (Martz 2010, 304).

One rare example is found by Hustache et al. (quoted in Martz 2010). They analysed the support that was given to 178 victims after being raped by military personnel. The treatment that was given to these women included: "1) provision of safe and empathetic environment; 2) active listening; 3) allowing expression of personal views about events and distress; 4) assessing familial and social consequences; 5) normalizing women's reactions; 6) encouraging appropriate coping strategies; 7) working on acceptance and developing future plans" (Martz 2010, 304). Even though these points are still quite vague, especially point one is important for my analysis. I argue that the first thing international agencies should pay attention to when providing humanitarian aid, is creating a safe environment for the victims. I will come back to this later.

Anthony Marsella (2008, xi) developed a model to illustrate the relations between the cultures of the victims and the cultures of the responders (Figure 1). The combination of people with different cultural backgrounds creates a temporary 'emergent culture of disaster'. In this 'temporary culture', the Western culture is often too dominant. Michael Wessels states that:

> "In emergency situations, psychologists hired by NGO's or UN agencies often play a role in defining the situation, identifying the psychological dimensions of the problems, and suggesting interventions [...] Viewed as experts they tacitly carry the imprimatur of Western science and Western psychology, regarded globally as embodying the highest standards [...] Local communities have specific methods and tools for healing such as rituals, ceremonies, and practices of remembrance. Since they are grounded in the beliefs, values and traditions of the local culture, they are both culturally appropriate and more sustainable than methods brought in from the outside" (quoted in Marsella 2008, xi).

Figure 1: Cultural Encounters in Disasters

Also in the DRC-case there has been critique on the way aid programmes approach victims of sexual violence in line with Marsella's model and Wessel's statement. Freedman argues that: "One of the problems identified in programs aimed at preventing sexual and gender-based violence is the fact that they sometimes fail to place this violence within a wider social context. In focusing on help for victims, they do not address the more fundamental causes rooted in traditional gender roles and representations, and the low social, political and economic status of women in Congolese society" (2011, 171).

Considering the above mentioned problems in providing psychological support to victims of sexual violence in the DRC, more attention should be paid to the cultural background of the victims. Some statements can be made on a general African worldview, without generalising too much. One important aspect of the traditional African worldview is the interconnectedness of the physical and the spiritual world, wherein the universe is filled with "different elements that are held together in unity [and] harmony" (Wilson 2007, 19). If these elements get out of balance, traditional healing tries to reunite and rebalance them. Amadiume even argues that this "African philosophical basis allows for creative social justice and selective uses of memory while the Western legal justice, as in formal Truth Commissions, is sterile and unimaginative and may simply institutionalize permanent conflict in African societies" (Soyinka-Airewele 2003, 269).

Concluding from this analysis, Western aid agencies should be aware of cultural differences and traditional ways of healing when active in the DRC. In addition to this, I believe that Western agencies can play an important role in providing basic necessities for victims of sexual violence. In a WHO article, Derrick Silove argues that the best therapy is "providing safety, reuniting families, creating effective systems of justice, offering opportunities for work, study and other productive roles, and re-establishing systems of meaning and cohesion – religious, political, social and cultural" (Ommeren, Saxena and Saraceno 2005, 75). These points show a similarity with Abraham Maslow's theory on the 'Hierachy of Needs' (Maslow 1943). Maslow argues that there is a hierarchy in human needs, and that certain basic needs have to be satisfied

(to a certain extent), before a human being can satisfy other needs. Figure 2 shows the five categories of human needs.
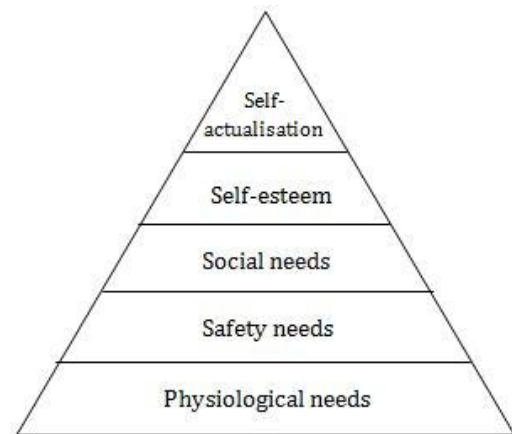

Figure 2: The Hierarchy of Needs

The physiological needs are the most important, or basic needs. If a human being is lacking everything, his craving for food is stronger than anything else. If the physiological needs are to a certain extent satisfied, a human being will focus on his safety needs. After the need for safety and protection is fulfilled, a person will try to find meaningful social relationships. Since he does not have to worry about his basic necessities anymore, there is time to find friends or a lover.

Almost everyone wants to be respected by others. Respect based on achievements creates self-respect and self-esteem (Maslow 1943). When all these needs are satisfied, a new restlessness will most likely develop. Maslow calls this last need 'self-actualization'. "A musician must make music, an artist must pain, a poet must write, if he is to be ultimately happy. What a man *can* be, he *must* be" (Maslow 1943, 382). Of course there exists an interdependency between these different needs. A need can be partially satisfied to enable a person to pursue the satisfaction of the next need.

I argue, in line with the above mentioned quote by Silove, that Western agencies can play an important role in providing victims with basic physiological and safety needs, in order to create an environment wherein the victim can rebuild social relations and self-esteem. The following gruesome quote illustrates my point that in order to rebuild a life, a victim first needs to be assisted in satisfying basic necessities:

> Ngoi Banza Leontine, 45, says she is haunted by the memory of one friend's death. The woman was killed by a machete and then beheaded. "Her head was put on a stick on the edge of the village. I was very, very sad because it was someone I knew," Leontine says softly, holding her 7-month-old baby boy to her chest to keep him quiet.
>
> "Whoever could flee ran as fast as possible. They raped women and burned the houses… Sometimes people were still inside them." Says her husband, who works for local farmers for about 25 cents a day: "They took tongues and thumbs and the genitals of women and men. *We want to have a normal life. We need clothes and mosquito nets"* (Robinson and Walt 2006).

It can be argued that by using Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs theory, again I am using a Western perspective to determine what is best for people from a different culture. However, I agree with Maslow when he states that: "There are usually available various cultural paths to the same goal. Therefore conscious, specific, local-cultural desires are not as fundamental in motivation theory as the more basic, unconscious goals" (Maslow 1943, 370).

4.4 Conclusion on trauma

Numerous international agencies have been involved in providing humanitarian assistance for the victims of sexual violence in the DRC. Still, it is argued that there is too much attention for the 'hard' or physical projects (construction work etc.), and that renewed attention for 'soft', humanitarian projects focussing on rebuilding social relations and the victim's place in society is needed (Martz 2010, 4). Even though this human factor is of major importance and extra attention can make a contribution, psychological help can also be made more effective. In this section I have analysed the Western assumptions on how victims of a traumatic experience like sexual violence should be treated. Most of these assumptions are too paternalistic and view (sometimes subconsciously) Western ideas as superior to traditional ways of healing, while there is no hard evidence that Western methods of healing work best in different cultures.

There are some indications that there might be a universal reaction to traumatic experiences, found in world literature. Even if this theory proves to be true, then still the measures that have to be taken in order to recover from trauma differ in different cultures and is person specific. Therefore I support this statement by Ommeren et al.: "The first challenge is changing entrenched perspectives and practices of international agencies and donors, so that they give priority to supporting integrated community-based mental health programmes that focus on social needs arising from mental disturbance" (2005, 76). International agencies can play an important role in providing basic necessities for victims in the DRC, which enable them to heal form their experiences using traditional methods, possibly complemented by Western influences.

5. Conclusion

Sexual violence is still one of the greatest problems in the ongoing crisis in the DRC. Scholars have done intensive research on the subject from several perspectives. It is generally agreed that a lack of hierarchy in the military, impunity due to a weak judicial system and poor economic conditions are problems that have to be addressed in order to protect the girls and women of the DRC. In this paper I tried to combine two sides of the problem.

I paid attention to the preventive measures that have to be taken to protect the women of the DRC. In this section I analysed the reasons why armed groups in the DRC use sexual violence as a 'weapon of war'. In analysing this, I used Elisabeth Wood's theory on *repertoires of violence*. The relations between the choices made by the military leadership, the strength of the military hierarchy and group processes determine whether or not sexual violence is used as a war tactic. In the case of the DRC, the process of *brassage* is of major importance in this. The lack of structure and hierarchy in the Congolese state army the FARDC is one of problems that has to be addressed to prevent sexual violence in the future.

In the second section of this paper, I analysed the methods used by international agencies and (I)NGO's to provide psychological support for the victims of sexual violence. I argued, in line with several other authors, that Western ideas on trauma care cannot be directly applied to the situation in the DRC. Traditional ways of healing should be taken seriously in the rehabilitation process after experiencing a traumatic experience. If Western agencies want to help effectively, they have to let go their (subconscious) beliefs that Western methods are superior and gain more knowledge about the specific situation in the DRC. This ancient Chinese fable captures the problem of Western assistance in the DRC at the moment:

> A monkey and a fish were caught in a terrible flood and were being swept downstream amidst torrents of water and debris. The monkey spied a branch from an overhanging tree and pulled himself to safety from the swirling water. Then, wanting to help his friend the fish, he reached into the water and pulled the fish from the water onto branch. The moral of the story is clear: *Good intentions are not enough. If you wish to help the fish, you must understand its nature* (Marsella 2008, 3).

Victims of sexual violence live in extremely insecure and often impoverished circumstances. Before they can start their process of healing, basic needs such as adequate food and housing should be satisfied. An important role for Western agencies is therefore to provide basic necessities.

In the introduction I posed the following question: *To what extent are current measures to tackle problems related to sexual violence in the DRC sufficient?*
I highlighted the importance of focusing on the structure of the Congolese army and especially on the ongoing process of *brassage*. Not enough attention has been given to the 'root causes' of

sexual violence found in the military structure. Also in the current trauma care initiatives, a shift in focus is needed to tackle the problems related to sexual violence. Western assumptions on how to heal from traumatic experiences should be reconsidered and more attention should be given to traditional ways of healing. Even though the intentions of international agencies are probably good, the focus is not. I hope this paper provided some new insights in the problems related to sexual violence in the DRC. With these new insights, the good intentions will hopefully lead to better results.

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Images:

Image on cover:
The Left Hand of Feminism. *The Culture of Rape in the Congo*. 2011
http://lefthandofeminism.wordpress.com/tag/rape-as-weapon-of-war/ (accessed January 11, 2012).

Figure 1 – Cultural Encounters in Disasters:
Marsella, A.J. *Ethnocultural Perspectives on Disaster and Trauma - Foundations, Issues and Applications.* Springer Science & Business Media (electronic source), 2008.