

# Balancing Between Resistance and Resilience

*How the Catholic Church Affects the Social Position of Rape Victims amidst the Sexual Violence Epidemic in Eastern Congo, South Kivu*



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Cover Photo: The women's group *Dynamique Femme*, including rape victims, during an explanation about soap-production in Kiliba. All members have special clothing with Maria prints for special occasions like these.

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## Abbreviations

BdE	Bureau(x) d'Écoute
CAMPS	Centre d'Assistance Medico Psycho Social
CDA	Critical Discourse Analysis
CDJP	Commission Diocésaine Justice et Paix
CEJP	Commission Épiscopal Justice et Paix
CENCO	Conférence Épiscopale Nationale du Congo
CPJP	Commission Pastoral Justice et Paix
CPLVS	Commission Provincial pour la Lutte contre les Violences Sexuelles
DF	Dynamique Femme
DRC	Democratic Republic of Congo
EU	European Union
FDLR	Forces Démocratiques de Libération du Rwanda
HHI	Harvard Humanitarian Initiative
HRW	Human Rights Watch
INGO	International Non Governmental Organization
IO	International Organization
MDA	Mediated Discourse Analysis
MMM	Mensen Met een Missie
MSF	Médecins Sans Frontières
NGO	Non Governmental Organization
<i>OCHA</i>	Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs
OPJ	Officier de Police Judiciaire
SOFIBEF	Solidarité des Femmes de Fizi pour le Bien-être Familial
USCCB	United States Conference of Catholic Bishops
UN	United Nations
UNIFEM	United Nations Development Fund for Women
WCC	World Council of Churches

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## Introduction

### *Sexual Violence Epidemic in DRC*

War-torn Eastern Congo is currently known to be ‘the worst place in the world to be a woman or a child’.<sup>1</sup> Although Congo’s war that started in 1996, sparked by the Rwandese genocide of 1994,<sup>2</sup> was declared over in 2003, the ‘war against women’ in the east of the country was not. The war and ongoing political instability is marked by extreme violence, including widespread rape. A recent report of Human Rights Watch (HRW), that revealed the continuance of attacks against civilians in eastern Congo, stated that the situation has recently deteriorated even further, especially for women (2009a: 11). An average of 40 women and girls are being raped daily in the eastern Congolese province South Kivu (Rodriquez 2007: 45). During the first nine months of 2009, over 7,500 cases of sexual violence against women and girls were registered at health centers across North and South Kivu, nearly double of 2008, and likely only representing a fraction of the total (HRW 2009: 11). The total numbers of raped women are unknown,<sup>3</sup> but it is estimated that more than 200.000 women and girls have been raped since the country’s conflict started.<sup>4</sup>

Rape has become a ‘weapon of war’ in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). Women and girls are strategically and systematically targeted. Through rape enemies attempt to humiliate, dominate, instill fear upon, punish, disperse and/or forcibly relocate members of a community or ethnic group. The destructive and sadistic atrocities perpetrated by different armed groups over the last ten years even signals a new pathology classified as ‘rape with extreme violence’ (REV) (Mukengere Mukwege & Nangini 2009). Dr. Mukwege, a gynecologist and obstetrician at Panzi Hospital in Bukavu, is confronted with such a scale and brutality of sexual violence on a daily basis that he has called it “the monstrosity of our century”.<sup>5</sup> The victims who are treated at Panzi-hospital are the living proof of this: the majority of them are tortured during the rape itself (beaten, wounded with machetes, genitally mutilated or burned or objects are inserted into their vaginas) (ibid: 2). The use of sexual violence has escalated over the past ten years in eastern DRC resulting in an epidemic-like phenomenon.

And effective it is. Sexual violence exacerbates conflict and perpetuates insecurity in the wake of war. It holds entire communities hostage, and has an economic, social, cultural and inter-generational impact. Rape is strategically used to inflict shame, suffering and humiliation not only unto women, but on men, families and communities as it undermines deep-rooted cultural notions and values. Reinforced by harsh cultural practices of stigmatization and rejection of rape victims, rape effectively destabilizes communities and weakens the already shattered sense of social cohesion by war. Out of fear for public stigmatization and rejection by their environment, rape victims prefer to keep silent about their experiences, provoking silentization of rape in the wider Congolese society.

Moreover, the sexual violence epidemic is aggravated by the fact that, as a result of widespread rape during the conflict, rape and other forms of sexual violence are increasingly being committed by civilians leading to a ‘normalization’ of sexual violence among the community (HHI & Oxfam 2010).

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<sup>1</sup> Website UNIFEM; [http://www.unifem.org/gender\\_issues/peace\\_security/facts\\_figures.php](http://www.unifem.org/gender_issues/peace_security/facts_figures.php) (accessed August 11, 2010).

<sup>2</sup> See appendix 1 for the ‘context of war’.

<sup>3</sup> It is difficult to measure the scale of rape because a lot of women do not seek help. Moreover estimating the scale of rape or of sexual violence is complex due to wide conceptualization of ‘sexual violence’. See Chapter 1, paragraph 5.

<sup>4</sup> In statement of Hilde F. Johnson, Co-Chair of UN Action Against Sexual Violence in Conflict, 5<sup>th</sup> March 2009. See website: <http://www.stoprapenow.org/womenday2009.html> (accessed August 11, 2010).

<sup>5</sup> Website UNIFEM; [http://www.unifem.org/gender\\_issues/peace\\_security/facts\\_figures.php](http://www.unifem.org/gender_issues/peace_security/facts_figures.php) (accessed August 11, 2010).

### *Bringing in the Churches*

The societal attitude toward rape - silentization, stigmatization and normalization - fosters 'free play' for all perpetrators of rape. The fact that the Congolese state has proven not to be capable of seriously tackling this issue leads to a continuance of the rape epidemic until today. Although a new law on sexual violence was passed in 2006, impunity is widespread due to the dysfunctional justice system and wide-spread corruption (Zeebroek 2008: 6). Moreover, the Congolese government troops are alleged of serious human rights violations such as sexual violence themselves (HRW 2009a; 2009b). This clearly weakens the already fragile state's authority and legitimacy.

It is precisely amidst an environment of a hardly functioning and legitimate state that religious institutions, primarily the Roman Catholic Church, play an important role in the Congolese 'post-war'<sup>6</sup> society. Despite the publication of hundreds of reports and studies on sexual violence by (I)NGO and IO's, as well as the increasing scale of international attention for this epidemic in newspapers, magazines, blogs, television programs and the making of documentaries since the new millennium, the role of this dominant actor remains out of sight. The call for action in September 2009 from the World Council of Churches (WCC), of which the Roman Catholic Church is not a member, raises more questions than answers on the role of the churches in the rape epidemic. It stated, among other things, that:

*"[WCC] urges WCC member churches to publically condemn violence against women and to make constructive efforts to overcome such violence by declaring that violence against women is a sin. [...] [And] encourages all WCC member churches to continue offering solidarity to the women of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) so that they know that they are not alone in their struggles and by the initiation of public campaigns to combat violence [...]"*<sup>7</sup>

This implicates that the churches in Congo generally do *not* publically condemn these practices, and that they normally do *not* direct the accountability for these practices where it belongs; on part of the perpetrators of violence.

Despite the central presence of churches in Congo's current society, there is clearly a lack in academic and policy oriented research<sup>8</sup> linking them to the social phenomenon of sexual violence. This 'gap' is not new though: for much of the twentieth century, religion was ignored or marginalized in the analysis of social, economic, and political phenomena (Wheto & Uzodike 2009: 58). However, this practice should be regretted. As Berger (1999: 18) argued: "Those who neglect religion in their analysis of contemporary affairs do so at great peril". This is especially true for analyses of African countries like Congo where churches are omnipresent and religion is very central in people's everyday lives. About the Congolese, Yamba (2002: 583) reasons: "[in] the life of these people, the religious ethic is more than a simple reference; it is rather a necessity of life".<sup>9</sup> Especially in a conflict situation, religion is likely to serve as a stabilizing factor since it provides the population with a sense of direction and destiny (Lubbe 2002: 240). This makes that in a war torn society like in Congo, social phenomena inherently influence churches and vice versa. This is even more so since this particular

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<sup>6</sup> Whether Congo is really 'post-war' is questionable due to the continued presence of different rebel groups in the east, and north-east of the country. However, the term 'post-war' here signifies the period after the official ending of the conflict in July 2003.

<sup>7</sup> See, for the full text of statement of the WCC, website: <http://www.oikoumene.org/resources/documents/central-committee/geneva-2009/reports-and-documents/report-on-public-issues/statement-on-sexual-violence-against-women-in-the-democratic-republic-of-congo.html> (accessed August 11, 2010).

<sup>8</sup> This lack of policy oriented research is acknowledged by OCHA in a meeting report of 26<sup>th</sup> June 2008 in New York. One of the 'key research priorities' that were identified was on 'the role that religion, including religious institutions and personnel are playing; positively or negatively, in prevention to sexual violence in conflict as well as the promotion of care for survivors.' Also Tearfund UK has been conducting research between April and June 2010 on "the role of the church in responding to sexual violence against women". However, the research outcomes of this study are unknown to the researcher at the time of writing and thus are by no means integrated in this study.

<sup>9</sup> Translated from French into English by the author



social phenomenon directly and profoundly affects notions of morality and spirituality. Social phenomena can therefore not be completely understood without scrutinizing the role of churches and religion.

In Congo, Christianity is the largest religion, comprising around 95% of the population. With 30 million Catholics in the country, representing about half of the population, the Roman Catholic Church is the largest and most influential church. About 20 % of the population is Protestant; 10 % is Kimbanguist; 10% is Muslim while the remaining 10% comprises other religious organizations, syncretic sects and traditional religions.<sup>10 11</sup> Moreover, Christianity in Congo is estimated to be on the rise: growing 3.36 % annually and 3.44% for the Roman Catholic Church in particular (Barrett, Kurian & Johnson 2001:211).

#### *The Catholic Church as a Dominant Socio-Political Actor*

Besides being a central ideological institution, the Catholic Church have proven to be a strong socio-political actor in Congo as well. Prunier (2001:139) argued:

*“Given its large constituency and immense wealth and infrastructure, the Catholic Church has come to wield enormous influence in the DRC, particularly in the context of a declining state.”*

However, already before the war the Catholic Church was considered to be the “only truly national institution apart from the state”, and as “the only other locus of significant economic, social and political influence” (Schatzberg 1988: 117). The roots of this development can be traced back to Belgian Colonial times. Although Belgium presented itself as a secular state, its colonizing action in the Congo has always been closely linked to the position of the Catholic Church. The Catholic Church, which was perceived as 'national', was favored throughout the colonial period (Prunier 2001: 141).

The 31 years of Mobutism, after Congo’s independence in 1960, constituted a total vacuum of the basic social and administrative services which a normal government is supposed to provide (ibid: 155). The Catholic Church played an enormously important role in Congolese society, providing many of the basic services in terms of health, education and even communications partly substituting the progressively collapsing State. This was particularly true in the Kivu’s, which, being both very distant from Kinshasa and vaguely considered as 'rebellious', were particularly neglected (ibid: 156).

#### *Research Puzzle*

All in all, this has lead to the following question which is central in this study:

*“Given that churches currently function as the most influential ideological and socio-political institutions in war-torn Eastern Congo and given that war-related rape is broadly silenced and stigmatized causing high degrees of social disintegration in the Congolese society, to what extent does the way the Roman Catholic Church frames rape and the way it acts, encourages or seriously obstructs societal solidarity towards, and reintegration of, rape victims?”<sup>12</sup>*

Social research has been necessary to provide an answer to this question. The evidence of this study has been largely collected during a 2,5 month field research in the diocese of Uvira in the province of South Kivu in eastern DRC from March till May 2010. This research was mainly conducted via *Commission Diocesaine Justice et Paix* (CDJP) in Uvira, an organization at bishop level which is part of a Catholic structure working on justice and peace. CDJP Uvira is one of the partner organizations of

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<sup>10</sup> See: CIA’s World Fact Book; <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/cg.html> (accessed August 11, 2010).

<sup>11</sup> However, DRC’s religious configuration exhibits overlapping affiliations, which make exclusive categorizations difficult. In addition, religious identity in Congo (as with class and ethnic identified) is often situational and based on pragmatism. (Wheto & Okeke Uzodike 2009: 61)

<sup>12</sup> A frame, constituting a part of discourse, is an “interpretative schemata that simplifies and condenses the “world out there”” (Snow and Benford 1992: 137).

the Dutch NGO *Mensen Met een Missie* (MMM) who kindly supported and partly enabled me to do this research. This study will also be a report for MMM as it provides them with in-depth knowledge on the dynamics of issues like sexual violence that their partner organizations work with on a daily basis in their search for peace.

### *Research Relevance*

The relevance of this research is manifold. First of all, it is a significant contribution to a gap of knowledge in the academic world. This study sheds light on, as I argued before, the ‘understudied’ relation between two dominant phenomena in the post-war society in Congo: the Catholic Church and the sexual violence epidemic. The dominant socio-political role of the Church has been broadly studied as well as the role of religion in the DRC. The role of gender and women in conflict, violence against women or rape are also increasingly examined. However, also wartime-rape and sexual violence for example in Congo have been the focus in different studies. Yet these are predominantly aimed at finding explanations for (massive) war-time rape.

Secondly, little empirical description and analysis have been done on the relationship between discourse and conflict, and in particular in relation to conflict phenomena like sexual violence. This study wants to fill this void. Previous researches on sexual violence focus on what I call the ‘dominant cultural frame’ of rape, i.e. the ‘general’ way in which rape is understood in (Congolese) society. Alternatively, this research highlights a different meaning of rape, that of the Catholic Church. Moreover, in case the frame of the influential Catholic Church is considered to be more ‘optimistic’ on the position of rape victims than the dominant meaning of rape, which is rather intolerant and exclusionary towards rape victims and therefore socially disintegrative, the latter might be seriously contested and influenced which provides seeds for social change. The discursive analysis in this study will not only contribute to identifying glimmers of hope but will also go deeper into the relationship between discourse and action. Because how do both concepts exactly relate to each other? Understanding the complex relationship between discourse and action will inherently shed light on the complexity of the sexual violence epidemic, and the ways to battle it.

Thirdly, this research has social relevance. The sexual violence epidemic has deep societal consequences resulting in a weak social solidarity, social cohesion and social resilience. Moreover does wartime rape lead to a sense of moral decay and has increased the sexual violence committed by civilians in the post-war society. In other words, sexual violence is more than a wartime-phenomenon; it is rather a ‘post-war reality’. In this sense, this research addresses and examines a pinching *contemporary* societal problem. This can lead to insights into the obstructing or enforcing role of the Church in this social phenomenon and on the way how to deal with that.

Lastly, this previous aspect is likewise interesting for the policy world. The fact that sexual violence remains a problem up until today, as it is still used among rebels and soldiers but also among civilians, makes that different local, national and international organizations will, or at least *should*, find ways to battle it. For these actors, this research provides *new* information on this social phenomenon which must be held in the back of one’s mind during the development and implementation of policies.

### *Analytical Framework*

This study is a discursive approach to the rape epidemic and particularly to the way in which the Catholic Church affects the dominant meaning of rape in Congo. A discursive approach emphasizes the importance of discourses (the language we use, the social practices we engage in) in the generation of exclusionist identities. The focus of this research is on the societal solidarity and reintegration of rape victims, i.e. literally on their ‘inclusion’ in the Congolese society. It is therefore necessary to understand to what extent the Catholic Church counters the dominant discourse that socially excludes rape victims. The negative and excluding attitude and behavior towards rape and rape victims is, in fact, ‘constructed discourse’. Changing that situation, and fostering a positive and including attitude and behavior towards rape victims, is however also a matter of ‘constructed discourse’.

The meaning of rape, and the way society accordingly acts upon this meaning, is socially constructed. A discursive approach accounts for this *social constructivist* way of thinking. Social constructivism sees people, not as robots that are only motivated by utility and where action is always an instrumentally rational choice, but rather as individuals that always attach meaning to their actions. The world around us (including social phenomena, structures, constructions etc.) is the work of social interaction and of countless human choices, rather than laws resulting from divine will or nature. The understanding that social structures do not exist independently from us, but that we make them, endorses the ontological notion of '*duality of structure*' introduced by Giddens (1984): structure as both a medium and an outcome of social practices. The notion of duality of structure entails the elimination of any 'externality,' any distance between actor and structure. Yet, while we are part of the construction of these discourses, we are at the same time subject to it and contribute to its reproduction.

A discursive analysis scrutinizes the relationship between discourse and social action. Both notions are intrinsically related to each other. This is also exemplified by Jabri's conceptualization of discourse (1996: 94-95):

*"Discourses are social relations represented in texts where the language contained within these texts is used to construct meaning and representation [...]. The underlying assumption of discourse analysis is that social texts do not merely reflect or mirror objects, events and categories pre-existing in the social and natural world. Rather, they actively construct a version of those things. They do not describe things, they do things. And being active they have social and political implications."*

Discourse does thus not solely operate at an abstract level, as 'representations' or "discourse reduced to discourses" (Fairclough 2005: 58). On the contrary, discourse constitutes the 'power to define' and is translated into concrete social actions.

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) takes as one of its central precepts that discourse is a form of social action and enables us to see 'what discourse does', or 'discourse *as* action'. A slightly different approach, Mediated Discourse Analysis (MDA), can best be summed up by transforming the slogan into 'discourse *in* action'. Mediated Discourse Analysis was developed as an alternative to approaches to discourse that see social action as secondary, and approaches to social analysis that see discourse as secondary (Scollon 2001). By not privileging discourse or social action, MDA strives to preserve the complexity of the social situation. This relationship between discourse and social action is defined by Norris and Jones (2005:9) as follows:

*"[T]he relationship between discourse and action is dynamic and contingent, located at a nexus of social practices, social identities and social goals. [...] MDA sees discourse as 'cycling' through social actions: verbal and textual tools working their way into practices, material objects, and the built environments in which we interact."*

Discourse must, in this sense, be seen as fluid and reactionary and always in a dynamic (not passive or unilateral) relationship with practices, objects and environments. This type of analysis thus does not merely mean 'taking into consideration the context' in which discourse occurs simply as a way to understand the 'text' better. Neither does MDA mean to suggest that discourse is simply an 'ingredient' in action because this obscures the complex ways actions are taken through discourse and the ways discourse works its way into actions. Rather, the relationship between discourse and action, "is manifested in the *tension* between the kinds of actions that discourse and other cultural tools make possible and the ways people purposefully mix these tools in response to their immediate circumstances" (ibid).

In this research MDA is used to better grasp the complexity of the relationship between the Church's discourse and action that this report will clarify. At the same time, discursive analyses are not all about merely identifying the dynamics between discourse and practices or supporting or

refining an academic theory. Norris and Jones (ibid: 10) argue that like scholars in CDA, those working in MDA are committed to a project not just of studying social interaction but of taking social action. MDA is thus a project to promote social change which gives yet another meaning to the slogan *discourse in action*. This study thus also highlights how rape victim's social position is or can be changed and to what extent this leads to social change in Congo.

My analysis will be presented in four chapters. Chapter 1 will deal with the dominant frame of war-related rape in the Congolese society that fosters processes of silentization, stigmatization, and hence, social breakdown. This must be clear before proceeding with an analysis of the way the Catholic Church frames rape in order to understand the differences between both 'meanings' of rape. The first chapter will at the same time explain the complication of the singular focus of rape as weapon of war and address the normalization of sexual violence in the current Congolese society. Chapter 2 will provide a Catholic discursive perspective on rape; how does the Church see rape? How is this related with Catholic dominant values and dogma? What are the underlying messages of this frame? And how does the Church discursively try to reconstruct the attitude and identity of rape victims? Chapter 3 will explain the Church in action. What does the Church do to fight this phenomenon? And how do these practices relate to the Church's 'discourse'? The last – conclusive - chapter relates the empirical findings with theoretical perspectives on the discourse/action relationship and will provide an answer to the main question whether and to what extent the Church encourages or obstructs the societal solidarity and reintegration of rape victims i.e. their social position in the Congolese society.

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## Research Methodology

### *Research Setting*

This study is based on a two-and-a-half month fieldwork from March till May 2010 in the province of South-Kivu<sup>13</sup> in Eastern-Congo. As South Kivu has a surface of 65.070 km<sup>2</sup> and is rather difficult to travel due to the hilly tropical landscape and lack of infrastructure, the research is confined to the territory of the diocese of Uvira and the city of Bukavu. The diocese of Uvira is one of the five dioceses of Archdiocese Bukavu and covers about 36.000 km<sup>2</sup> (comparable to the surface of the Netherlands). The research is carried out in two of the three territories of the Diocese of Uvira, namely in the plain of the territory of Uvira and in the interior in the territory of Mwenga.<sup>14</sup> The point of departure of this research was Uvira because the office of CDJP Uvira was based there. This city is centrally located on the border with Burundi and 120 km south of the capital of the province Bukavu. The further selection of the research setting has been partly determined by the field trips organized by the staff of CDJP, varying from a few days to a week, to visit and provide support to their activities at parish level.<sup>15</sup>

### *Access to the Field*

Doing fieldwork in one of the most unstable regions of post-war Congo is not an easy task. In view of the short preparation period for this research, getting access to an organization with an existing network and contacts was a major benefit. Not only for practical reason, also security-wise it was rather imperative to (in-)directly join a locally based organization. Luckily I got to know an enthusiastic MMM's policy employee who introduced me to CDJP. Although CDJP functions somewhat like an NGO, it is directly related to the Catholic Church as it forms part of the worldwide network of Justice and Peace commissions which are directed by the Vatican.<sup>16</sup> The coordinator of CDJP Uvira, a Congolese priest, is a highly respected person with a lot of knowledge on the core social problems affecting South Kivu and contacts all over the diocese. Although the emphasis of CDJP's might differ, for the diocese of Uvira the main activities in the combat against sexual violence are centered around the *Bureaux d'Écoute* ('listening houses'), victim's integration in the Catholic women's groups '*Dynamique Femme*', family mediation and, lastly, public awareness raising campaigns. CDJP Uvira was thus a perfect basis to conduct my research.

### *Security Situation*

In general the security situation in Eastern Congo, especially in the Kivu provinces, is pinching and unstable. Although the 'big' war is over, there is no peace either due to the continuous presence of different rebel groups in the area who predominantly hide in the inlands. Along the main road, where most parishes are located, and in the cities of Uvira and Bukavu, the security threat was less risky during the research period. Moreover, attacks are generally directed at the local population and

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<sup>13</sup> See appendix 2 for a map of South Kivu.

<sup>14</sup> The territory of Fizi, south of Uvira, was very difficult to access and hostilities broke out during my stay.

<sup>15</sup> During these fieldtrips I visited parishes in the territory of Mwenga (Kamituga, Kitutu, Mugombe, Mwenga, Kasika); territory of Uvira (Kamanyola and Kiliba) and Bukavu. Nevertheless CDJP Uvira also facilitated my individual fieldtrips to, for example, the parish of Kamanyola, and several times to the parish of Kiliba.

<sup>16</sup> Concerning the Church's involvement in the field of justice and peace, the Church in Rome has decreed commissions around the world to promote peace, justice and reconciliation. In Congo, at national level, there is a *Commission Episcopale Justice et Paix* (CEJP); at bishop level, *Commission Diocesaine Justice et Paix* (CDJP); and at parish level, *Commission Paroissiale Justice et Paix* (CPJP). At diocesan and parish level the commissions are coordinated by a priest. However, some commissions are more active than others, depending upon the situation of the environment. This structure is decreed to take up the responsibility on behalf of the Church to fight problems that hinder national justice and peace such as the sexual violence epidemic in the eastern part of Congo.

not so much at foreign aid workers or NGO personnel. However, to protect myself in the research area I did profit very much from my collaboration with CDJP. Being considered as part of the team and benefiting of their sense of responsibility towards me, very much eased my work as a researcher. I did also experience an extra form of safety by being associated with clergy which are overall locally respected people. To estimate the security situation I drew heavily on the capacity of experience of the CDJP personnel and the priests. Although an attack by rebels or bandits (especially on the road) is always a possibility, I fortunately did never experience such a situation, neither have I been otherwise physically in danger.

### *Research Methodology*

The first few weeks of the fieldwork also made it clear to me that my initial focus research, i.e. the position on rape of both the Catholic and the Protestant church, was too broad. Since the position of the Catholic Church on the rape epidemic turned out to be interesting in and of itself, without the comparative analysis, as well as in view of the practical possibilities of this research, the Catholic Church became the core focus. Also methodology wise one should be flexible, especially when doing research in a dangerous field. Kovats-Bernat (2002) argues that methodology should not be approached as a fixed framework for the research but rather as a flexible and integrative practice informed by shifting social complexities in the field (ibid: 210). I have obtained the evidence on which this study is based through the usage of different research methods.

A core research method was semi-structured and informal interviews with a wide range of actors in the field. I conducted and recorded 63 interviews<sup>17</sup> apart from informal conversations with other informants. During all interviews I used a topic list to guide the interviews. This allowed me to hold a flexible approach to my informants which facilitated the possibility for informants to bring up interesting related issues that they considered important. Besides the recorded interviews, informal conversations have helped me to get a better understanding of the societal problems like domestic violence, poverty and moral decay. All interviews, except for those with rape victims,<sup>18</sup> were conducted in French.

The method of participant observation has also proven useful and necessary for this particular research topic. In order to get a slightest understanding of the discourse and practices of the Church, it is crucial to observe and participate in the Church's activities as much as possible. A substantial part of my research consisted of (participant) observation of the daily routine of the parishes. I attended the Catholic masses regularly and observed (and sometimes participated) in the meetings and activities of *Dynamique Femme*. These experiences served to get a realistic perspective of the position and functioning of the Church in the community. It also served as an important source of information to notice particularities and the atmosphere in for example the women's groups that would otherwise never be found out via interviews. Participant observation served to collect information but also to verify the information received through previous conversations. Hereby, I verified whether their 'attitude' as shown in our conversations, corresponded with their 'behavior', i.e. 'what they really do in practice'. The tension between both discourse and practice seems in the

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<sup>17</sup> Among these 63 conducted interviews: 13 interviews were with rape victims; 12 interviews with Catholic priests from different parts in the diocese; 11 interviews with psychosocial assistants (i.e. 'social workers'); 6 interviews with local NGO-personnel; 6 Catholic women (mostly representatives) participating in *Dynamique Femme*; 2 interviews with the governmental village chiefs; and further with CDJP staff; a local police commander; FARDC's specialist on sexual violence; protestant pastors; and concluding with different representatives of the Kimbanguist Church, *Église de Reveil* (an evangelic church); *Église Independent du Congo*; and the Muslim Community.

<sup>18</sup> As a researcher I was aware of the required caution and carefulness when working with rape victims in order not to endanger them in any sense or to let them reviving buried traumas. Therefore, I had to reflect on the aftermath of my interview sessions with the rape victims. Therefore, in all the interviews the female psychosocial assistant was present who could translate my questions into Swahili and vice versa, and who had already a relation of trust with these women. I also did not ask in-depth questions about the incident in order to not to force these women to rethink these traumatic events. I did not have the feeling that women felt extremely hesitant or unwilling to share their story with me. Instead, I had the impression that they trusted me as I, being a white young woman who could not speak the local language, was not 'one of them' and moreover trusted by the social worker.

end very crucial in my study. Besides being useful for the collection of data, participant observation was also particularly important in order to gain the confidence of informants, especially of the rape victims. Therefore I chose to focus on a particular group of Catholic women in my fieldwork, the women from Kiliba.<sup>19 20</sup>

In addition to these methods and to further deepen my discursive analysis, I analyzed Catholic weekly bulletins like *'Flash'*, *'Notre Parlement et Nous'*, *'Ensemble pour un Etat de Droit'* but also Catholic magazines like *'Renaître'*, articles, letters, speeches and other publications. This gave me particular insight in the discourse of the Catholic Church and how they frame the current sexual violence epidemic and the role and social position of rape victims. The use of these different research methods, triangulation (t Hart et al. 1998: 270-271), has contributed to a more accurate understanding of the data and has increased the internal validity of the data assembled.

### *Sampling and Representation*

The selection of informants was generally not a problem as my informants consisted of a limited number of people who worked with CDJP or CPJP at a local level such as psychosocial workers and group representatives. I also talked to the priests of almost all parishes I visited. Concerning the interviews with rape victims, I let the psychosocial worker choose the women I could talk to. However, I did ask them not to pick women who were heavily traumatized and to make a selection which depicted a fairly realistic representation of the rape cases she normally receives at the *Bureau d'Écoute*. In order to get a complete picture of the sexual violence *problématique* and of the Catholic Church's position, I talked to a wide range of actors varying from government representatives, police officers, to psychologists, feminist NGO's, ordinary people and clergy of different churches. The combination of a wide variety of informants is the result of a mixed, yet purposeful, sampling. The informant selection is a very good representation of the main stakeholders for this study in the diocese of Uvira. However, because some areas of the diocese were inaccessible, this study is not representative for the entire province of South Kivu,<sup>21</sup> neither does this account represent the functioning of the Church on this issue in other parts of Eastern Congo. Furthermore, even in South Kivu, CDJP's approach on sexual violence is in its infancy and some aspects are still in an implementation phase which makes long-term outcomes and effects unpredictable.<sup>22</sup>

### *Limitations*

Some practical limitations of this research follow from the lack of freedom of movement in the precarious setting of South-Kivu and the inability to accurately plan all your research preferences in a limited time-scope. Sometimes, due to a lack of sharing information on the foreseen activities of the CDJP team, the research required a fair amount of flexibility and anticipation on my side. Moreover, unexpectedly, I was not able to communicate with everybody I wanted to because the local population does not all speak French but predominantly Kiswahili.

Moreover, because I am not religious (which was generally not noticed as it remained 'unpronounced'), some fundamental notions of religion and functioning of the church were not familiar to me. Yet, since my research was more concerned about the social role of the Catholic Church, and as I learned more in the course of the research, this was not a major issue. I even felt this as an advantage in a sense that I could assess the situation with a rather 'unbiased' point of view.

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<sup>19</sup> Kiliba is a town of around 35.000 inhabitants, 25 kilometers north of Uvira and on the Congolese side of the border with Burundi. Kiliba was known for accommodating the second biggest and oldest sugar mill in the whole DRC. Unfortunately, the bankruptcy of the mill and the war in 1996 hit Kiliba extraordinarily hard and produced the extreme harsh socio-economic consequences that its population faces today.

<sup>20</sup> I visited Kiliba four times (of which two five-day visits) to familiarize the women participating in *Dynamique Femme* with my presence and facilitate the conversations I had with some of them. To gain further confidence, I did not only observe their group activities and meetings, I also helped them with harvesting their collective field and visited them in their houses.

<sup>21</sup> This means that this study is not representative for those villages on the *moyen* and *haut* plateaus or inland, outside the scope of CDJP's activities.

<sup>22</sup> CDJP's *Bureaux d'Écoute* exist since 2007 and *Dynamique Femme* since 2006 (although its implementation depends very much per parish which also means that some parishes in the Diocese of Uvira do not yet have DF-groups).

I felt somehow limited in executing the research method of participant observation. As a white woman, a '*muzungu*',<sup>23</sup> I constantly attracted a lot of attention, no matter where I went. Standing in the spotlights sometimes hindered me in conducting my research peacefully as it was difficult to seek 'low profile' contact with potential informants. Especially when working with rape victims, integrity and carefulness are of utter importance.<sup>24</sup> For that reason, I was not allowed to assist in intake conversations with rape victims in the *Bureaux d'Écoute*. Concerning this topic I can only re-construct these sessions. I also had problems with in-depth interviews with rape victims. It was hard to connect as profoundly as I would have liked to with these women. I only succeeded more or less with three victims.

The aim of this research is not necessarily to make claims that can be widely generalized, neither to provide an 'emic' account of the role of religion in rape victims' lives; rather I intend to provide an in-depth analysis of the role of the Catholic Church in the sexual violence epidemic in *this* particular part of Congo, and principally how the Church through its discourse and practices affect the social position of rape victims.

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<sup>23</sup> '*Muzungu*' means 'a white person' in Kiswahili.

<sup>24</sup> For this reason, the name of the victims in this research are fictitious names.



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# Chapter 1: The Dominant Cultural Frame of War-related Rape

## *Fostering Silentization, Stigmatization and Social Breakdown*

### 1.1 Explaining War-time Rape

#### *Strategic Rape*

War-time sexual violence has been one of history's greatest silences (Rehn & Johnson Sirleaf 2002: 11). For a long time it was dismissed as, what Carlsen (2009: 474) has called, the "rape and pillage just happen during war" explanation. The taboo which has overshadowed rape and sexual violence in war for a long period of time was not broken until the aftermath of the genocide in Rwanda in 1994 and the ethnic cleansing in former Yugoslavia between 1992 and 1995. The mass rapes of women in these two conflict zones<sup>25</sup> have generated open debates about the phenomenon (Skjelsbaek 2001: 211) as it was "too widespread, too frequent, and seemingly too calculated and effective for it *not* to be part of a larger political scheme and hence a weapon of war" (ibid: 213). From the first reports in 2000, until today, the massive rape in Congo has also been, for the most part, described as a combat tactic, as a strategy of war<sup>26</sup> "used systematically in operations against the civilian population" and "systematically employed to intimidate the local population" (Ertürk 2008: 10, 8). A wide range of surveys report on the extraordinary brutality of sexual violence in DRC, which includes gang rape, sexual slavery, forced 'marriages' and genital mutilation. *Medécins Sans Frontières* (MSF) (2004) stated that, "Sexual violence has been so clearly linked to the military strategy of warring parties [in DRC] and has occurred in such a systematic way that it is wrong to think of it as side effect of war."

The use of sexual violence as a weapon of war can have different (intermingling) sets of goals. Rape can be used to terrorize civilian populations, causing people to flee and leave their homes, their belongings and their fields. In other cases, mass rape is used during cultural and ethnic cleansing as a means of polluting bloodlines and forcibly impregnating women to produce 'ethnically-cleansed' children. The rape-babies are often recognized as children of the enemy and they are extremely vulnerable to stigma, maternal rejection, statelessness and abandonment. And foremost, rape is strategically used to inflict shame, suffering and humiliation (HHI & Oxfam 2010: 5). The weapon of war theory is called the *strategic violence theory* by Carlsen (2009) and Mullins (2009) understands it as *genocidal rape* because combatants and soldiers figuratively rape and dilute the community and the nation.

#### *Other Explanations of Rape*

However, it is argued that rape in Congo's war, has not *exclusively* been used as a 'weapon of war'. Besides a strategic explanation of rape, Carlsen (2009) also categorized: *opportunistic*, *patriarchal militaristic* and *superstition* theories of sexual violence. *Opportunistic sexual violence theory* claims that economic gain is the motivation for widespread sexual violence during wartime (ibid; Mullins 2009: 726-727). This theory explores the relationship between sexual violence against women and the allocation of resources such as the mineral resources in the Eastern Congolese inlands. One mapping exercise reveals the correspondence between the areas of documented rape and the areas of mineral wealth in South Kivu (Munkengere Mukwege & Nangini 2009).

Another motivation for sexual violence during wartime is explained in the *patriarchal militarism theory*. This theory proposes that sexual violence during wartime is motivated by the

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<sup>25</sup> It is estimated that 250.000-500.00 women and girls were raped during the 1994 genocide in Rwanda; and that 20.000-50.000 women and girls were raped during the war in Bosnia-Herzegovina in the early 1990's. See website UNIFEM: [www.unifem.org/gender\\_issues/peace\\_security/facts\\_figures.php](http://www.unifem.org/gender_issues/peace_security/facts_figures.php) (accessed August 11, 2010).

<sup>26</sup> See, for example: HRW 2002; 2005; Card (1996); Ohambe et al. (2004), and Pole Institute (2004) etc.

desire to exert control and power over women and men who are perceived as feminine. Sexual violence during war is a by-product of a system of patriarchy, where power relations are hierarchical and motivated by masculinity. This relationship between rape, misogyny and patriarchy is manifested in the military and its exercise in power (Carlsen 2009: 480). And finally, while isolated to specific cases, *superstitious beliefs* are playing a role in some instances of sexual violence in the DRC. Among combatants, but also among civilians, there is a belief that rape or women's bodies bring them prosperity and protects them from injury or death (ibid: 481).

Rape can also be approached through different more epistemologically based analysis of rape. According to Skjelsbaek (2001), more than essentialist or structuralist understandings of sexual violence, the relationship between sexual violence and war can best be conceptualized within a social constructivist paradigm to explain the complex empirical reality at hand. This line of thought can be summarized as follows (ibid: 226):

*"[T]he perpetrator, and his (potentially also her) ethnic/religious/political identity becomes masculinised, while the victim's ethnic/religious/political identity become feminized. Further, the masculinised and feminized identities are situated in a hierarchical power relationship where masculinized identities are ascribed power and feminized identities are not."*

This epistemological approach interestingly encompasses other, previous, explanations of rape. Drawing on 'feminizing' and 'masculinizing' of identities, Skjelsbaek (ibid: 213-214) argues that "any convincing analysis of this phenomenon must have at its basis a clear gendered understanding of the war-zone". However, not only of the warzone, also in the post-war society, gender relations are inherently connected to the persisting practices of sexual violence.

## 1.2 Social and Symbolic Meaning of Rape

### *Affecting Cultural Values*

Whatever the motivations of rape, there are certain factors, based on the particular cultural values and gender ideologies in Congo, which make rape in this setting a particularly effective tool of humiliation and intimidation (Eriksson Baaz & Stern 2010: 41). Besides rape being an efficient form of biological warfare that is inexpensive to implement, effective over large areas, and does not particularly endanger the attackers, its effectiveness relies on perceptions that are deeply embedded in patriarchal societies (Mukengere Mukwege & Nangini 2009: 1-2). "[W]omen's sexuality is a prefecture of male ownership, and it is linked to the persistence of unequal gender relations and particularly to the way women's bodies are regarded" (ibid: 2). Traditionally, in the Congolese society, women's virginity, purity and fidelity are important values of which the protection lies at all times in the hands of men. Women's bodies are considered to be 'property' of the girls' family, and later of the husband('s family) through the dowry.

In marriage, Congolese women are seen as weak and untrustworthy and valuable only through their status as a married woman. While men's status in society is also reliant upon their being married man, they are expected to exercise strict control over their wife (Mechanic 2004: 14). I asked a Congolese pastor about the most important role of Congolese men and women in the marriage, he argued:

*"For a woman the most important role is to **stay faithful** to her husband and to her family. Also [it is] important to have the courage to work for the children so that the family leads a good life. For men, they should **protect the fidelity** of their women but also take care of their wives."*<sup>27 28 29</sup>

<sup>27</sup> Interview with pastor of 8ième CEPAC on April 16, 2010 in Kiliba.

<sup>28</sup> Like this citation, all other citations of interviewees are translated by the author from French (transcriptions) into English.

The fact that guarding women's fidelity is the first thing this informant addresses reveals the importance of this value for both men and women. While men's own fidelity is thus less a concern, as it is socially acceptable for a man to have many partners, it is argued that women are "rebuked for showing sexual desire or even speaking openly about sex" (ibid: 14-15).

### *Unequal Gender Power Relations*

It is not exaggerated to say that in the Congolese culture women are subordinated to men. The *Chef de Poste*<sup>30</sup> of Kamanyola did not try to disguise the reality of this gender power inequality:

*"We say that a subordinate woman is a woman that is not beaten by her husband; a subordinate woman is clean, diligent, works hard and avoids violent clashes [with her husband]."*<sup>31</sup>

In other words (and this was confirmed by multiple informants), it is culturally accepted to beat women when they are not subordinate, or do something wrong in the eyes of the husband. It was often argued that 'women will understand when men beat them.'<sup>32</sup> Despite their subordinate position, women are also charged with the basic survival of the family. The most important task of men is considered to be the protection of his family physically and, ideally, also financially. Yet this last task is barely performed due to the post-war socio-economical situation, making women the ones who carry the weight of war disproportionately.

The tremendous power of rape depends, in part, on the gender relation as briefly presented here. 'Femininity' is associated with the need for protection, subordination, peacefulness, and life-giving, in contrast to the supposed 'masculinity' of protection, warring and killing. Rape clearly humiliates (feminizes) the enemy, or men, in a wider sense by dishonoring 'their' women (and/or family/clan/tribe/nation), and proving them to be *inadequate protectors* (Eriksson Baaz & Stern 2010: 41). As virginity, purity and fidelity are ideals strongly linked to 'femininity' in Congo, which ought to be protected by men, rape constitutes not only a physical and moral attack against women, as well as an attack by humiliation and dishonor of the husbands, brothers, fathers, and son of the victims (Olujic 1998: 39).

### *Individual vs. the Community*

To better grasp the influence of rape on the social environment of the victim, one must understand the close interrelationship that exists between the 'individual' and the 'community' in most African cultures. According Lassister (1999), most African philosophers regard African concepts of the 'individual' and 'self' to be almost totally dependent on, and subordinate to, social entities and cultural processes. In this sense, a Kenyan theology professor believes that the individual has little latitude for self determination outside the context of the traditional African family and community (Mbiti 1969). He writes:

*"Whatever happens to the individual happens to the whole group, and whatever happens to the whole group happens to the individual. The individual can only say: 'I am, because we are; and since we are, therefore I am.' This is a cardinal point in the understanding of the African."* (ibid)

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<sup>29</sup> Emphasis added.

<sup>30</sup> I.e. communitarian governmental representative.

<sup>31</sup> Interview with *Chef de Poste* on April 21, 2010 in Kamanyola.

<sup>32</sup> A group of young men once assured me that "beating a woman is just like saying that you love her". A young married man explained to me, "If I beat my wife, she knows that I care about her." (Informal conversation with the Catholic *Comité de Jeunes* (i.e. youth commission) of Kiliba on May 5, 2010 in Kiliba.)

This might explain why sexual violence is such a forceful weapon, as individual rape cases affect the entire community around the victim. For Ghanaian philosopher Kwame Gyekye (1988: 31-32), the individual, although originating from and inextricably bound to his family and community, does nevertheless possess a clear concept of himself as a distinct person of volition. He argues that:

*“It is from this combined sense of personhood and communal membership that the family and community expect individuals to take personally enhancing and socially responsible decisions and actions.” (ibid)*

I certainly do not want to suggest here that rape is a deliberate decision or action of rape victims. I rather want to make clear that, through the mutual interrelatedness, rape has far-reaching effects on the whole social environment which makes dominant *social* practices like blaming and ostracizing of the *individual* victim ‘understandable’.

### 1.3 Rape Victims Facing Social Exclusion

#### *Blaming and Rejecting the Victim*

Due to a combination of cultural values and the patriarchal structure, female victims are often held accountable for the shame and humiliation they have brought upon themselves and their environment. Men suffer the shame of their failure to protect their property that includes women, family, bloodlines and soil. Women who have suffered rape feel this humiliation through their duty to endure the *private stigma of shame* (Olujic 1998: 39). Olujic states that this suffering is a way of protecting men’s public shame. Female rape victims are thus blamed for publicly, yet indirectly, harming men’s honor and highlighting their incapacities. Not exceptionally women are thrown out afterwards, or in other cases their husbands simply marry other women. This was precisely the case of a 53 year old rape victim, Elisa, who I met in Kiliba. She told me:

*“I was raped on my field by three men. I screamed but other women had fled already. After the rape, I stayed on my field because I was so injured that I did not have the force to walk home. In the night my children and husband were informed about what happened to me and came to look for me. [...] But then, in my home, the problems started. My husband said that it had been an ‘arrangement’ with my boyfriends and abandoned me.”<sup>33</sup>*

Like this case shows, rape is generally framed as if it was the women who ‘has slept’ with another man, hereby replacing what is in fact *men’s* responsibility, upon women. As Elisa’s husband left her and remarried another woman in Uvira, Elisa was forced to take care of the whole family herself. Being a mother of seven children and dealing with traumatism and physical injuries, this was for her an incredible tough task.

Rape also renders victims seemingly unsuitable for future marriage and love relationships. This came to the surface during an interview I had with a young 15-year Nicolette.<sup>34</sup> I took the opportunity to ask her mother who attended the session about how she felt about the future prospects of her daughter. She said she did not know what to do with the girl as it would be hard to find her a husband now she was raped. She said she seriously thought of rejecting her while her daughter was sitting next to her. I was astonished by the answer but the psychosocial worker reaffirmed that this was the reality rape victims were facing. They are forced to find shelter and make both ends meet themselves, despite their often young age.

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<sup>33</sup> Interview with 53 year old rape victim on May 4, 2010 in Kiliba.

<sup>34</sup> Interview with 15 year old rape victim on March 19, 2010 in Kamituga.

### *Stigmatization and Silentization*

Through these social practices of blaming and rejection, rape victims are extremely vulnerable for stigmatization by the community. Stigma derives not only from the act of being raped, but also because generally, up to 27% (Pratt & Werchick 2004: 12) of the rape victims have contracted HIV/AIDS which is already a reason for stigmatization in society. It is also a motivation for men to reject their sexually violated wives for fear of contracting HIV/AIDS or other sexually transmitted diseases. This acute level of stigmatization, but also due to the cultural taboo to talk publicly about sex, has encouraged a 'culture of silence' regarding rape and sexual violence. Many women would rather hide what has happened to them than face ostracism from their communities which renders them helpless in a very intolerant society. The ostracism and stigmatization are even worse when rape results in pregnancy (Ohambe et al. 2004: 27).

The silentization is another important contributing factor that makes rape an effective weapon of war and hinders victims in seeking appropriate healthcare, psycho-social and juridical assistance. Most victims only take the plunge to come to the *Bureaux d'Écoute* weeks or months after the rape incidents, while often remaining quiet about what happened to them in the meantime. According to Diken & Laustsen (2005: 113), "The rape victim often perceives herself as an object, as a 'dirty', morally inferior person. The penetration inflicts on her body and herself a mark, a stigma which cannot be effaced." The degrading and humiliating experiences of rape victims have caused women and girls to lose their dignity, honor, self-esteem and feelings of stigma and shame further isolates them from their families and communities.

## **1.4 Fostering Social Breakdown**

### *Social Bonds and Reproductivity*

The mass rape of women in eastern Congo does not only affect the victim or her family, it has also devastating consequences on the society at large. Widespread infliction of sexual violence is considered to effectively destroy the cultural and social bonds of entire communities (Thomas 2007). Mukengere Mukwege and Nangini (2009: 2) argue that, "It [massive rape] damages social cohesion and the identity of the rape survivor, which is exacerbated when rape is committed in public, searing shame into the collective memory of the community". They state that the impact of military rape on the population as a whole has far-reaching effects that ultimately undermine cultural, national and political solidarity (ibid: 2-3). Card (1996: 8) interestingly phrased the effect of marital rape:

*"There is more than one way to commit genocide. One way is mass murder, killing individual members of a national, political or cultural group. Another way is to destroy a group's identity by decimating cultural and social bonds. Marital rape does both."*

Moreover, women, who are worst affected by the rape epidemic, are at childbearing age, which also means that the reproductivity of the Congolese population is jeopardized. According Mukengere Mukwege & Nangini (2009: 2), "The long-term outcomes [of mass marital rape against women] translate into the slow death of a population incapable of reproducing."

### *Declining Production*

Congolese women not only literally and symbolically represent reproduction of the Congolese society, but they are also the ones preoccupied with the society's production, especially in rural areas like South Kivu. Congolese women represent 80 % of the agricultural workforce (Mechanic 2004: 18). As farmers, rural women provide for their families' everyday needs, and they sell the surplus they produce to meet the families' other vital needs such as education, clothing, and medical expenses. The mental and physical damages that massive sexual violence brings about, as well as the social isolation, evidently leads to a lowering of women's productivity. Also the constant threat of rape attacks forced women to stay out of the fields, increasing the impoverishment of communities. In

addition, rape is often accompanied by pillage (Carlsen 2009: 478), leaving the women and their families completely stripped of the fruits of their labor and of their means of production (Ohambe et al 2004: 44).

### 1.5 Facing 'Post-War' Realities

One might expect that, with the conflict dying out in the DRC, sexual assault cases, too, would drop. It is undeniable that sexual assaults were indeed more numerous during the heat of the war,<sup>35</sup> yet the number of cases is still worrisome. Resulting from war, the "institutionalized fusing of sex, power and masculinity means that rape has become the terrifying norm." (Mechanic 2004: 18) Besides the continuance of rape by men in uniform, different sources<sup>36</sup> confirm the normalization of sexual violence among civilians, especially in South Kivu. There even appears to be a shift emerging in the *nature* of sexual violence within South Kivu.<sup>37 38</sup> Any current analysis of the sexual violence epidemic in Congo is thus not complete without taking into account these contemporary societal changes.

#### *Poverty and Decreasing Morality*

Firstly, the continuance of sexual violence among the society is explained as the blurring of previously held moral standards, often in combination with extreme poverty. According to the local police commander in Kiliba, a small poor town close to Uvira, moral decay and poverty are inherently linked to one and another. He argues:

*"The population is poor; people can't make both ends meet; there is no work for young men; all families are poor because the sugarcane factory does not work anymore. To cope with this situation the young girls hang out with the boys, to earn something extra. [...] The parents don't have money to pay the school fees, to buy food, to buy clothes. When the family is struggling to survive, what are then the options left for the young girls? The prostitution! It's a general thing, not only in Kiliba, it's all over Congo."*<sup>39</sup>

The most extreme problems unfold in Eastern Congo, especially in its poor inlands which are rich in coltan, gold and other minerals. These mine regions attract a lot of people, especially young men, in search of employment and quick money. Vulnerable girls and women living under pressing conditions, not infrequently turn to 'survivor sex', trading their bodies in return for small amounts of food, money and temporary shelter. However, this creates a situation in which abusive sexual relations become even more accepted as men begin to regard sex as 'service' that is easy to get under pressure. Sex for pleasure and sexual assault increasingly constitute a grey zone and the lines between them are weakened which enables men to cross over on whim (ibid: 20).

Moreover, moral values are not only affected by pinching poverty. Others consider that the massive rape acts of military and rebels have "intoxicated" the civilians.<sup>40</sup> This is understandable when people have lived in a war situation for years where rape is common and has also been a public event in most cases. Practically the whole population has witnessed these acts and has become more or less morally and psychologically destabilized.

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<sup>35</sup> See for example HHI & Oxfam (2010: 18) which shows that the rape survivors presented to Panzi Hospital were almost three times higher in 2004 and 2005 than in 2008.

<sup>36</sup> See for example Mechanic (2004) and HHI & Oxfam (2010).

<sup>37</sup> During the period studied in HHI & Oxfam (2010) which is 2004-2008.

<sup>38</sup> In the report on sexual violence in eastern DRC of HHI & Oxfam (2010), it is stated that "the data presented here provide strong evidence that the number of reported civilian rapes is on the rise in South Kivu." Their data present a 17-fold increase in reported cases of civilian rape and statistically significant declines in the types of rape known to be perpetrated almost exclusively by armed combatants (gang rape and sexual slavery).

<sup>39</sup> Interview with police commander on May 4, 2010 in Kiliba.

<sup>40</sup> Interview with the psychosocial assistant Bde/ DF-coordinator on April 15, 2010 in Kiliba; interview with *Chef de Cité* on May 5, 2010 in Kiliba.

### *Social Changes*

Moreover, a lot of women have been left vulnerable after the war as a result of a high degree of internal displacements, whether they were forced to flee for the violence or left their ancestral grounds to seek economic prosperity elsewhere; in the cities or one of the mining areas. Before the war, the social bonds of a group were normally strong as they were largely based on the common membership of a tribe or clan. The community regularly also protected 'their' women.<sup>41</sup> Yet, due to massive displacements and killings, the social cohesion and protection structures have deteriorated. The increase of sexual assaults must, according to the coordinator of CDJP, also be explained in relation to this development:

*"People don't find themselves any longer in their 'milieu coutumier' [local tribal environment] where a cultural chief takes pity on the morality. Everybody, 'toute le monde', is chef of his own now. There is no cultural authority which guards the traditional and moral values and punishes. [...] Now, when people find themselves outside these traditional environments, a different mentality is born."<sup>42</sup>*

This loosening of previously held social bonds thus explains several things. Firstly, the unleashed behavior of perpetrators to commit sexual assaults which go unpunished due to the lack of social control. Secondly, it explains the necessity of women to engage in prostitution because of the loss of a previously held social safety net as well as the tendency to engage in other forms of sexual debauchery. But also, as a third point, it makes that women lack the social protection of the environment that would protect women and girls against rape attacks.

Moreover, civilians are not only implicated in the commercialization of sex through (survival) prostitution, but also in the 'commercialization of rape'. The current attention for the sexual violence epidemic has led to the tendency to use 'inventive' rape as an effective bargaining strategy or as a means to get access to services of a large number of NGO's and IO's (Eriksson Baaz & Stern 2010: 50-55).

### *Sexual Violence as Pre-War Cultural Practice*

The existence of protection mechanisms of communities does not mean that there was no sexual violence or rape before the war in Congo started. The CDJP coordinator acknowledged that it always existed, but that nobody paid attention to it as, in most cases, sexual violence was a part of the culture.<sup>43</sup> Because sexual violence has its basis in highly unequal gender power relations which have been present both before and after Congo's conflict, sexual violence against women is thus not merely an act of war (Olujic 1998: 31).

At least three forms of sexual violence can be identified that were fairly omnipresent and accepted in the Congolese culture. The first is 'rapt': a form of kidnapping a girl to marry her. When a man 'loved' a woman, he took her by force and raped her. Then the man could call the girls' family to declare that she was his wife now and demand an arrangement between the two families in order to pay the dowry. It was also generally accepted to give young girls into marriage, often with much older men. This deal also included starting a sexual relation with her from the age her body began to 'mature' (which is on the age of around 11, 12). In Kiswahili there is an expression which is, according to the priests of Kiliba, still frequently used by Congolese men: "*Mwanamuke hakuwake mdogo kwa mwanaume*", meaning something like "A girl is never too young a man".<sup>44</sup> And thirdly, in marriage itself, the most frequent rape was (and still is) committed there as women are property of the man, meaning that men 'have the right' to sleep with her whenever he wants to. Most rape cases outside

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<sup>41</sup> Interview with two employees of SOFIBEF on April 8, 2010 in Uvira.

<sup>42</sup> Interview with coordinator CDJP Uvira on May 20, 2010 in Uvira.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> Informal conversation with Catholic priests on May 5, 2010 in Kiliba.

this framework in Congolese pre-war 'traditional' culture were considered a serious crime in most parts of the country (Eriksson Baaz & Stern 2010: 43). They were punished locally for example through compensation (*'arrangement amiable'*) and shaming processes.

#### *Conceptualization of Sexual Violence and Rape*

The existence of certain forms of sexual violence before the war and its apparent 'normalization' after the war does complicate the signification of rape and sexual violence. While defining something as, or in the realm of, sexual 'violence' it necessarily contains a morally condemnable claim. While some acts of sexual violence are (highly) condemnable by the Congolese society itself, others are absolutely not and in fact culturally tolerated. It appears there is a large gap between this customary law and the new judiciary law (2006) on sexual violence. Yet, the conceptualization of sexual violence adhered to in this study, is the same as is defined in the Congolese judiciary law on sexual violence (in which rape is only one part or form of sexual violence). This constitutes entering or penetrating into a sexual organ or let it touch the other; and forcing the other to enter or penetrate into his sexual organ or let it touch another person (in case of women raping men). For the first time, the law specifically criminalizes acts such as the insertion of an object into a women's vagina, sexual mutilation, sexual slavery, forced marriage and forced prostitution. It defines any sexual relation with a minor (lower than 18 years) as statutory rape.<sup>45</sup>

In this study I use the terms of rape and sexual violence simultaneously. Firstly because a fair share of war-related rape goes hand in hand with other forms of sexual violence such as entering objects into women's bodies and mutilation. Secondly, the informants themselves, and studies and reports alike, used the terms interchangeably. Thirdly, the Catholic Church uses this definition. One must understand it is not only 'rape as a weapon of war' that the Church fights against, but *all* forms of sexual violence (including prohibited but tolerated cultural practices) are condemned by the Church and, hence, must be battled.

In sum, the dominant cultural understanding of war-related rape in Congo centers predominantly around the massive use of rape as a strategic military tactic of war since the start of Congo's conflicts in 1996. Strategically or not, rape or sexual violence against women profoundly affects Congolese cultural values and traditional gender roles. In a culture where women are seen as the valuable but subordinate property of their husbands or family, rape means the shameful and humiliating inability of men and the community to effectively protect their 'property'. The social response, however, is not one of solidarity but rather a removal from the communitarian responsibility towards that of the victim, making raped women accountable for what 'they' have inflicted upon the community. This fosters societal stigmatization and intolerance of rape victims, which hence ('purposefully' from the 'rape as a weapon of war' theory) leads to their social disintegration. However, because women are literally and symbolically the (re)producers of the society, the scale and brutality of rape in Congo produce moral decay and social breakdown, aggravated by post-war normalization of different forms of sexual violence.

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<sup>45</sup> Penalties for rape range from five to twenty years, but are doubled under certain conditions, for example when committed by a public official, by several persons together, with use or threat of a weapon, or in situations of captivity.



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## Chapter 2: Framing Rape; a Catholic Perspective

### *The Church's Discursive Power; Countering the Silence and Stigma?*

#### 2.1 Understanding Catholic Core Values

##### *Complementarity between Men and Women*

In order to understand the meaning the Catholic Church attaches to rape and its victims, underlying core Catholic values must be explored. The Catholic Church is a forceful advocate, at least in its statements, on the parity of men and women, and the promotion of women in society. Evidence is found in the Genesis (1, 27) where it is stated that women, like men, are made in the 'image of God'. This is interpreted as if God gave the same ontological dignity to both men and women.<sup>46</sup> Therefore women cannot be considered inferior or subordinated to men.<sup>47</sup> The part in the Bible (Genesis 2, 18) where God said, "It is not good for the man to be alone; I will make him a helper [the woman] suitable for him," is therefore not interpreted as the inferiority of women, but rather as evidence for the complementarity of both sexes. The wellbeing of men is framed as if this largely depends upon women and the idea that women are the "*porte-bonheur*", i.e. 'lucky charm', of men is seen as a 'positive thing'. However, in this close (inter)dependency lays also the danger for men: as women can behave sinfully, which was firstly demonstrated by original sin committed by Eve, women are supposed to be 'guided' by men.<sup>48</sup>

Men and women are, in essence, equal partners although both have specific roles. The couple, sanctified through the institution of marriage, is seen as the most perfect concretization of the parity of men and women (USCCB 2008: 408). Spousal love, according to Church teaching, is meant to achieve an unbroken, twofold end: union of husband and wife as well as transmission of life. The sacrament of matrimony is viewed as God's sealing of spousal consent to the gift of themselves to each other. By creating man and woman, God also instituted the family. The family, created by the consent of the spouses, is meant for their personal good, and for the procreation and education of children. In procreating and educating children the family reflects God's work of creation. The family is considered to be the "the domestic church" and "the original cell of social life".<sup>49</sup> Marriage between women and men, and the family, are both central in the dogma of the Catholic Church.

##### *Women's Vocation*

The Catholic Church frames clear vocations on the part of women. The most central vocation of women is virginity and motherhood. This can for example be read in the *Mulieris Dignitatem*, a 1988 apostolic letter by former pope John Paul II that explained and reaffirmed 'Christian complementarianism', as well as the dignity and vocation of women in the light of new feminism. It emphasizes that virginity and motherhood are the main dimensions of the fulfillment of the female personality. These dimensions acquire their full meaning and value in Mary who, as a virgin, became the mother of the 'Son of God', Jesus Christ. This explains Virgin Mary's central role and extensive adoration in the Roman Catholic Church. The vocation of motherhood goes hand in hand with the Church's ideal of large families which it sees as a blessing. The Catechism states, "A child is not

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<sup>46</sup> In: Flash Special, '*La Conception Chrétienne des Droits de la Femme*', N.02 of February 2006, Archidiocèse de Bukavu, Commission Diocésaine Justice et Paix.

<sup>47</sup> Document '*Prise en Charge de la Femme par Elle-même et de Son Foyer*' of DF, CDJP Uvira, for the meetings with women in different parishes throughout the diocese 2009/2010.

<sup>48</sup> In: Flash Special, '*Le Role de la Femme dans la Famille*', N.03 of March 2006, Archidiocèse de Bukavu, Commission Diocésaine Justice et Paix.

<sup>49</sup> In the Catechism of the Catholic Church. See, for example, the following website: [http://www.catholicity.com/catechism/the\\_family\\_in\\_god's\\_plan.html](http://www.catholicity.com/catechism/the_family_in_god's_plan.html) (accessed August 11, 2010).

something *owed* to one, but is a *gift* [of God], and ‘the supreme gift of marriage’” (Schreck 1999: 315).<sup>50</sup>

The ascribed value of maternity is inherently connected to women’s role as educator and teacher of children in the family. Roman Catholic teaching identifies the family as the social and moral centre of the community. In this line of thought, the Catholic Church admires women in particular because of their vocation and role as educators of the children, family, and hence, the society at large.

### *Catholic Values vis-à-vis Sexuality*

According to the Church, humans are sexual beings whose sexual identity extends beyond the body: to the mind and soul. The sexual act is sacred within the context of the marital relationship that reflects a complete and life-long mutual gift of a man and a woman (Kreeft 2001: 245). This precludes the polygamy and concubinage, common to African cultures before the arrival of Christianity. The Catholic Church considers, like in some other religions, all sexual acts outside of marriage to be grave sins. Sexual sins violate not just the body but the person's whole being. The gravity of the sin “excludes one from sacramental communion until repented of and forgiven in sacramental confession” (ibid).

Chastity is therefore a central value in the Catholic belief. The Catechism calls it a “moral virtue [...] a gift from God, a grace, a fruit of spiritual effort” (USCCB 2008: 405-406). Because the Church sees sex as more than just a physical act but rather one that affects both body and soul, it teaches that chastity is a virtue all people are called to acquire (ibid). However, in practice it is more valued among women, intensified through the intense admiration of the Virgin Mary in the Catholic Church. ‘Offenses against chastity’ can be somehow ranged in order of gravity (Kreeft 2001: 247-248). It ranges from minor sins like lust, masturbation, sexual relationships before marriage and pornography, to more severe sins such as prostitution. Prostitution is particularly sinful, both for the prostitute and the customer, as it reduces a person to an instrument of pleasure, violating human dignity and harming society as well. More severe is rape, which is considered as an intrinsically evil act that can cause grave damage to the victim for life, followed in the rank order by any form of incest.

## **2.2 Impact on Catholic Dogma**

### *Head-on Collision*

Rape is thus one of the most grave sins or ‘offenses against chastity’ that the Catholic Church qualifies. Placing this value as well as other Catholic core values such as virginity, exclusive spousal sex, and the centrality of the family, in the context of the massive rape practices in eastern Congo leads to a ‘head-on collision’ with the Catholic dogma. More generally, the Congolese National Bishop Assembly (CENCO) argues that “violence is not Christian” and that violence against women contradicts ‘*l’harmonie originelle*’ between men and women which was desired by God.<sup>51</sup>

Up till now, mass rape in Congo has been primarily understood as a phenomenon that affects *cultural* values like for example male honor,<sup>52</sup> and less as a phenomenon affecting other *moral* or *spiritual* values. However, this is not the complete picture. Rather, as the Archbishop of Bukavu states, “[W]hile violating all taboos with impunity, they [the perpetrators] also have desecrated our cultural, *moral* and *spiritual* values.”<sup>53 54</sup> The Church sees that sexual violence practices undo central

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<sup>50</sup> Emphasis added.

<sup>51</sup> In ‘*Violences aux Femmes, Communiqué de la CENCO*’ drawn up by L. Monsengwo Pasinya, President of CENCO, in Kinshasa on 25th March 2008. Website: <http://www.cenco.cd/presidencenco/violSex.htm> ; (accessed August 11, 2010).

<sup>52</sup> Referring to rape as ‘weapon of war’-explanations.

<sup>53</sup> In ‘*Intervention de l’Archevêque de Bukavu à la Rencontre Organisée par Congo Global Action aux Etats Unis D’Amérique, du 1<sup>er</sup> au 4 Avril 2008*’.

<sup>54</sup> Emphasis added.

Catholic moral notions like virginity, chastity, fidelity, and motherhood 'as benevolent gifts of God' of their sacred signification and renders them worthless. Moreover, this has happened on such a scale and level of brutality that it might question the existence of God, especially on part of the rape victims who had to bear these horrible acts. A Congolese psychologist argued that some highly traumatized rape victims are particularly lost in a spiritual sense, asking themselves questions like: 'Where was God when I was raped? If he really existed, why didn't He help me? After all I prayed all my life for him.'<sup>55</sup> Also the core sense of spirituality is thus endangered through the rape epidemic.

#### *Undermining Human Dignity*

All sorts of practices of sexual violence are framed as a violation of the Catholic core notion of 'human dignity'. CENCO states that: "Sexual violence is [...] not human, neither reasonable, nor Christian. It is an attack on the *human dignity* of women."<sup>56 57</sup> The Church understands rape as a 'weapon of war' therefore on the one hand as an act of perpetrators who lack all sense of human dignity, on the other hand, as heavily inflicting upon the human dignity of the victims and their environment. As a priest in Kamanyola argued:

*"In the war... They wanted to make us silent. So to achieve this, they laid their hands on your wife, your means, your children. They slept with your wife even in front of your own children. [...] They [the perpetrators] are soldiers and bandits, those who do not respect **human dignity** anymore. They come to loot Congo, to humiliate the Congolese."*<sup>58 59</sup>

Especially the humiliating practices which central to strategic military rape, such as watching the rape of your own relatives, or worse, fathers who are forced to rape their daughters or sons raping their mothers, violate human dignity in the deepest sense. But also 'lighter' forms of sexual violence like prostitution out of poverty is considered as infringing women's (human) dignity.

#### *Violation of Motherhood*

However, the violation of women's 'vocation' and dignity in their most value role as *mothers*, is the largest concern of the Catholic Church. In a declaration of CENCO, rape is predominantly condemned because it so much affects motherhood: "it [sexual violence] generates traumatism of a large number of young *mothers*" while, after all, "the *mother* is the source of life".<sup>60</sup> Also Bukavu's archbishop emphasizes the effect of 'rape as a weapon of war' as a violation of the value of motherhood: "They [the perpetrators] know that, for us, by dishonoring women, they humiliate the husbands, the children, the family and the society of *which she is the mother*".<sup>61 62</sup> Mothers are in the end considered as *the* educators of the nation and the backbone of the society. The Archbishop further explains:

*"For us, the woman, mother of all the living, is a sacred creature. Depository of life, the woman is very much valued and respected in the African society. She constitutes the pillar of*

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<sup>55</sup> Interview with psychologist CAMPS on May 12, 2010 in Bukavu.

<sup>56</sup> In '*Violences aux Femmes, Communiqué de la CENCO*' drawn up by L. Monsengwo Pasinya, President of CENCO, in Kinshasa on 25th March 2008. Website: <http://www.cenco.cd/presidencenco/violSex.htm>; (accessed August 11, 2010).

<sup>57</sup> Emphasis added.

<sup>58</sup> Interview with Catholic priest on April 22, 2010 in Kamanyola.

<sup>59</sup> Emphasis added.

<sup>60</sup> In '*Violences aux Femmes, Communiqué de la CENCO*' drawn up by L. Monsengwo Pasinya, President of CENCO, in Kinshasa on 25th March 2008. Website: <http://www.cenco.cd/presidencenco/violSex.htm>; (accessed August 11, 2010).

<sup>61</sup> In '*Intervention de l'Archevêque de Bukavu à la Rencontre Organisée par Congo Global Action aux Etats Unis D'Amérique, du 1<sup>er</sup> au 4 Avril 2008*'.

<sup>62</sup> Emphasis added.

*the family and of our society. Attacking women's honor, is attacking the family and the whole society. Attacking a woman is attacking life.*<sup>63</sup>

While acknowledging the use of rape as a 'weapon of war', the massive rape of women in eastern Congo is in the Catholic discourse framed as, besides constituting an attack on cultural 'African' values, harming the Faith in its deepest sense since women, as mothers, are 'sacred creatures' who are fundamental to the Catholic belief and their ideology of the wellbeing of the society at large.

#### *Affecting Other Catholic Values and Institutions*

Evidently, the vocation of women as mothers is not the only value at stake in view of the scale and brutality of rape which is experienced in the eastern part of Congo. The CENCO has stated that sexual violence also opposes the Christian vision of 'sexuality'.<sup>64</sup> Because for the Catholic Church the sexual act within the marital relationship is considered sacred and outside of marriage a grave sin, *forced* sexual acts *outside* the marriage endanger the sacred institution of marriage itself. The socially destructing effect of rape moreover damages the notion of the family as 'the smallest Church on earth' and 'the original cell of social life'.

The Catholic notion of childbearing as 'a supreme gift of marriage' is also severely undermined through rape. Whether rape is intentionally used to beget children at the enemy for purposes of ethnic cleansing, or pregnancies are simply the result of forced sexual intercourse, rape-babies are a reality in the sexual violence epidemic in Congo. The fact that girls as from 12 and 13 years old are getting pregnant of their rapist is neither an exception. The Catholic notion that every pregnancy is considered as 'a gift of God' leaves however a bitter taste in the mouth in view of the brutalities of rape.

Moreover, for girls, rape clearly violates the value of virginity as it constitutes a sexual act outside and before the marriage. For married women, rape is a sexual assault outside marriage, and therefore a form of infidelity. In both situations, rape is an assault on women's chastity. Some Catholic rape victims I have spoken to clearly referred to the violation of one of these Catholic values. As an example, I will present here the case of the 54-year old victim Alexia who I met in Kiliba:

*I got to know Alexia as a very religious and brave woman. Every morning she attends the Catholic mass at 6am and she is always busy helping, doing little tasks in the parish like cleaning and cooking. At the time of her rape incident Alexia was already widowed for a couple of years. Once, she told me with a sense of pride, that through the years after the death of her husband (as she did not have sexual relations anymore), she felt like a virgin again. However, she then sadly said that her brutal rape incident, by Burundese FDD-CNDD rebels in 2003, brutally destroyed this sensation.*<sup>65</sup>

The sense of impurity and contamination that rape inflicts upon victims, especially when they are intensely religious like Alexia, is hard to erase. Rape shattered her imaginary virginity, i.e. her sense of bodily purity and integrity.

#### *Sexual Violence as Exemplary for Societal 'Anti-values'*

Crucial to the understanding of the Catholic meaning of the sexual violence epidemic in Congo is the idea that wartime rape is 'just' one aspect (although one of an enormous scale and of crushing impact) of a wider immoral tendency. It is interesting to observe that the National Bishop Assembly, or the Vatican, did not provide a single statement against 'sexual violence as weapon of war' in DRC (excluding other forms of (sexual) violence against women) in order to place emphasis and direct *all*

<sup>63</sup> In 'Intervention de l'Archevêque de Bukavu a la Rencontre Organisée par Congo Global Action aux Etats Unis D'Amérique, du 1<sup>er</sup> au 4 Avril 2008'.

<sup>64</sup> In 'Violences aux Femmes, Communiqué de la CENCO' drawn up by L. Monsengwo Pasinya, President of CENCO, in Kinshasa on 25th March 2008. Website: <http://www.cenco.cd/presidencenco/violSex.htm> (accessed August 11, 2010).

<sup>65</sup> Interview with 54 year old victim on May 7, 2010 in Kiliba.

attention and efforts towards this phenomenon to get a hold on it. Rather the declaration of CENCO draws on a general message of the condemnation of 'all forms of violence against women' albeit with a special focus on 'sexual violence'.<sup>66</sup>

It is not only from a dogmatic point of view that the Church fights against all forms of violence (against women), it is also to understand this positioning in light of contemporary societal tendencies. Although clergy were well aware of the presence of sexual violence *before* the war and the fact that sexual violence predominantly has become 'accentuated' or escalated *by* the war, in interviews they did not see sexual violence apart from the contemporary forms of sexual violence. They attribute the persistence of sexual violence today to a wider societal 'moral decay' and increase of what they conceptualize as '*anti-valeurs*'. With this they mean sexual debauchery by the youth (such as pre-marital sexual relations, watching porn movies etc.), survival prostitution (to make ends meet, or simply in order to make girls pay their own school fees), sexual relations between older men and young girls and the use of 'sexual violence' as a bargain strategy (to get good grades of schoolteachers or to press men to pay money).

This tendency is interestingly framed by clergy as some sort of 'disease' which affected society during wartime. For example, a local young priest in Kiliba told me about the ordinary local practice of young girls to start having relations with much older men, pretending to be their girlfriends and having sexual relations with them in exchange for material or financial benefits. According to him, these kinds of affairs are rampant in the contemporary Congolese society. He argues:

*"This has started with the war. Before, this had absolutely not the same scope. The society has become a bit **sick**."*<sup>67 68</sup>

Another Congolese priest in Kamanyola said about the inclination of the civilians to copy warlike behavior such as wide practice of sexual violence during the war:

*"[I]nstead of imitating the good examples, people imitate the bad ones. Man is currently at the bottom of the human ladder."*

When talking to the Catholic clergy about 'sexual violence in Eastern Congo', they very much attach this topic to a wide scale of 'immoral' practices which increasingly become socially or culturally tolerated. It is thus the Church itself who frames these acts as 'morally reprehensible', as a 'moral decay' or as 'anti-values'. They do this for the very reason that, not only war-time rape, but *all* of these contemporary social and cultural practices undermine the message and thus the power of the Catholic Church. Current dominant practices and 'immoral' values diametrically oppose the 'good' values and ideology of the Church. All in all this makes that the Catholic Church, in theory, attempts to combat sexual violence from a wider societal perspective. A priest in Kiliba argued for example:

*"I think that education at all levels of society should be focused on the understanding that sexual violence is not a value. [This current lack of education] results in the fact that nowadays one speaks a lot about **sexual** violence, and a lot less about **moral** values which could protect [women] against sexual violence."*<sup>69 70</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> In '*Violences aux Femmes, Communiqué de la CENCO*' drawn up by L. Monsengwo Pasinya, President of CENCO, in Kinshasa on 25th March 2008. Website: <http://www.cenco.cd/presidencenco/violSex.htm> ; (accessed August 11, 2010).

<sup>67</sup> Interview with Catholic priest on May 4, 2010 in Kiliba.

<sup>68</sup> Emphasis added.

<sup>69</sup> Interview with Catholic priest on April 18, 2010 in Kiliba.

<sup>70</sup> Emphasis added.

## 2.3 Taking Away the Blame?

### *Countering Cultural Accusation*

It is clear that the Catholic Church generally condemns all sorts of practices of sexual violence as it affects the Church in a fundamental way. But does this mean that the Church also counters the shaming and blaming of rape victim in the society? Does the Church protect these women against these practices? At first sight the Church does counter the 'pure' guilt that is widely placed upon rape victims for what they have inflicted upon the community. The archbishop for example acknowledges:

*"Women who have been violated are rejected by their community [...] and are socially dead. It is excluded that they return to their own families. [...] It's however not the fault of these women to get raped. The enemies of Congo exploit the formal prohibition of those practices in our cultures. It's diabolic!"<sup>71</sup>*

Also the coordinator of CDJP Uvira agreed with the archbishop by saying that:

*"They [raped women] are victims in the first place. It's not them who want to get raped! And nobody are you going to say: "I want to be raped".<sup>72</sup>*

The fact that the Church, as an important and central social actor, counters the dominant cultural attitude of accusation against the 'victim', is in and of itself a major breakthrough in the fight against sexual violence. However, the responses of informants to the question 'whether it is justified to blame rape victims', also revealed a sense of ambiguity. Highlighting the more hidden religious transcripts of 'blame' make one better understand 'why' and 'how' the Church handles the problem of sexual violence in the society the way they do. A Catholic priest argued that guilt or blame is something different in its realistic, scientific sense than in its spiritual /religious conceptualization.<sup>73</sup> For example, an 'act' in which you are involved might not be directly your fault, however, it might (in)-directly affect your spiritual bond with God.

### *Notion of Sin*

Talking about blame in a religious sense inherently raises questions about the matter whether being 'victim' of sexual violence affects the spiritual bond with God, and if so, if this is conceived as committing a 'sin'. Sin, in religion, is the concept of acts that violate a moral rule or is the state of having committed such violation. The moral 'code of conduct' is decreed by a divine entity, in the case of Christianity, Biblical law. The Christian divine law could refer to the 'Ten Commandments' in Exodus that God demands of those that follow him. Sin is commonly used to mean an action that is prohibited or considered as 'wrong'. However, it must be remarked that, such as is argued by writer Ryszard Kapuściński (2008 [2000]: 278), the concept of 'sin' as a personal internalization of blame is a Christian tradition and not familiar to the collectivistic African tradition. As both traditions are central to this research, this complicates the interpretation of what a 'sin' constitutes and how that relates to the understanding of 'blame'.

All informants denoted the behavior of the perpetrators, soldiers, rebels, militias, as a grave sin as they intentionally and deliberately committed the act and hereby violated God's laws. However, the question is whether an act must be intentional to be sinful. This makes one think about whether sexual violence can also be considered a sin on part of the victims. In case of brutal rape for strategic military ends, the informants are fairly clear about the situation the victims are in. One wondered, 'when women are raped while being held by multiple men, or threatened with a

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<sup>71</sup> In "Les violations massives des femmes – une arme de guerre; Entretien avec Mgr. François-Xavier Maroy, archevêque de Bukavu, à Zurich" in Zeit-Fragen by J.M. Kyalangilwa and M. Erne, 22-11-2007.

<sup>72</sup> Interview with coordinator CDJP Uvira on May 20, 2010 in Uvira.

<sup>73</sup> Interview with Catholic priest on April 22, 2010 in Kamanyola.

machete, gun or burning sticks, how is it then possible to consider this as a sin?' In these cases sin is understood as expressing a 'will', a voluntary and conscious act, to violate God's law. As the rape victims in these cases are totally muted, leaving them without a choice, and absolutely not having the 'will' to get brutally raped, this is generally not considered as a sin. Besides the rather defined laws of God, 'the Ten Commandments', where violation is considered a sin, the whole idea of sin is not something which is externally imposed on an adherent; rather it contains the idea that one's conscience values one's own behavior as a conscious violation of God's laws or its relationship with him. It is thus not so much for the religious clergy to define rape as a sin but rather for the adherent him or herself.

The Catholic clergy interviewed for this study neither have a clear answer to the question whether rape victims have committed a sin or not. It is obvious that rape violates Catholic *values* like virginity, chastity, fidelity and sexuality as sacred in the context of a marital relationship. Yet, rape can by some be understood, like one of the priests in Kiliba did,<sup>74</sup> as a violation of one of God's *laws*, the 6<sup>th</sup> commandment 'You shall not commit adultery', because it constitutes an extra-marital sexual relationship. Other priests preferred to remain quiet on this issue.<sup>75</sup> It thus largely depends on the puritan interpretation of one priest against another. The priests spoken to also made clear that it depends very much upon the situations and circumstances of the raped women and that therefore rape-cases should be evaluated individually to say something about the sinfulness of victims.

#### *Victim's Personal Understanding of Sin and Blame*

There are obviously no data about the share of rape victims that consider bearing a rape attack as sinful, however it is obvious that, due to the wide range of intolerant social practices, these women often blame themselves for what they have been through. Among the psychosocial assistants there was also confusion about this question of sinfulness of rape acts on part of the victim. Psychosocial assistants of the *Bureaux d'Écoute* did not explicitly talk about whether victim's behavior was sinful or not. The CDJP coordinator of Bukavu, a priest, argued that this is not appropriate to discuss with rape victims during the sessions as they are focused on consoling the victim, rather than accusing them.<sup>76</sup> He also argued that rape often inflicts feelings of impurity upon rape victims but that defining the sinfulness of rape largely depends upon the conscience of the victims.

Although this issue is difficult to grasp,<sup>77</sup> a priest in Kiliba did remark the relative frequency of women going to confession to reveal their previous held secret rape incidents.<sup>78</sup> The priest argues that the fact that women come (for this reason) to confession, inherently shows that they feel sinful, and therefore demand the mercy and benediction of God. In most of the cases the priests let them know that God forgives them, that he understands that it was an accident, that they should forget it and now should move on with their lives. The priest of Kiliba acknowledged that, in these cases, the evil has already taken place and that one must not blame the victim exaggeratedly. He points to the mission of Jesus Christ on earth, "Jesus has not come to condemn, rather to rescue."<sup>79</sup>

One of these victims who feel extremely sinful is Alexia. She still does until today, in spite of having confessed and having asked forgiveness via the priests for several times already. She states,

*"It has become a **chronic sin** for me. I asked them [the perpetrators] to take everything with them but not to make me commit a sin. They didn't understand me and instead, they slapped me and hence raped me."*<sup>80 81</sup>

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<sup>74</sup> Interview with Catholic priest on April 18, 2010 in Kiliba.

<sup>75</sup> Interview with Catholic priest on April 22, 2010 in Kamanyiola.

<sup>76</sup> Interview with coordinator CDJP Bukavu on May 11, 2010 in Bukavu.

<sup>77</sup> As it is, confession is a private act between the adherent and the priest and because the clergy are not allowed to openly talk about it, one cannot exactly know what is said during the session.

<sup>78</sup> Interview with Catholic priest on April 18, 2010 in Kiliba.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid.

<sup>80</sup> Interview with 54 year old victim on May 7, 2010 in Kiliba.

<sup>81</sup> Emphasis added.

She even denied *herself* the Holy Communion<sup>82</sup> for a while after the incident. However, the priests have forgiven her and told her that she should try to forget what happened to her. Despite all this she still feels impure.

However, there are also cases in which the Church, through certain behaviors, reinforces these feelings of impurity, sinfulness and blame. This happened in the case of the 16 year old Nicolette. Her situation:

*At the age of 14 Nicolette was raped by a 31 year civilian who she knew from an event at the parish in Kiliba. After the festivity she was lured to the man's house to pick up some food and there he forced her to have sex with him. She got pregnant. Despite she felt bad about what happened, the clergy denied her the Communion. A priest said they did this as a 'demonstrative act', to make clear to the rest of the youth of Kiliba that this act is not normal (despite it was against her will). Moreover, he argued, "she was spiritually impure in one way or another" and that "her sin was clearly visible through the pregnancy" as she was not married to the one who made her pregnant. To restore her purity she went to the priests to ask forgiveness of God for what had happened to her. Now, two years later, she tells that she still feels guilty.<sup>83</sup>*

The *act of denying the Holy Communion*, whether by the clergy or by victims themselves, and the *act of confession*, which implicates asking forgiveness to God for what one has done, might signify, in an ambiguous way, the sinfulness of rape on part of the victims. The Church does not much, however, to counter these feelings when they seem to be 'unfounded' because the conscience of the victims says they *are* founded. Thus *through* the act of forgiveness, the sinful understanding of sexual violence of victims is 'acknowledged' but also consoled at the same time.

However, not all victims spoken to blamed themselves and saw their rape incident as a sin. The 53 year old Elisa said that she did not feel guilty for what happened to her, or that it constituted a sin because "I did not do it voluntary".<sup>84</sup> Neither did 49 year old Gabrielle consider her rape incident as a sin. She argued that it was not her fault and that is was an 'accident'. She said that because the rape was against her own will, it is not a sin.<sup>85</sup> Although they both did confess, they did not deny themselves the Holy Communion for this reason. Personal feelings of blame and sinfulness thus very much depend upon every victim independently and to what extent they adopt what has been said during the sessions in the *Bureau d'Écoute* where psychosocial assistants try to take away intense notions of self blame.

#### *Setting High Moral Standards*

However, concerning the scale of the sexual violence epidemic, Catholic clergy indirectly questions whether all these raped women have sufficiently defended their moral and spiritual values at all times. As this, in the eyes of the Church can be questioned, in some cases rape victims *are* indeed partly blamed for what has happened to them. One priest sketched the following hypothetic situation:

*"You know, when I would have been married, I also wouldn't simply accept when my wife comes to me to tell me: "I have been raped". I would ask her the evidence, "Even no scratches? Even when the other was stronger?"<sup>86</sup>*

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<sup>82</sup> The Holy Communion or Eucharist is a Christian sacrament or ordinance. The consecrated bread and wine represent the body and blood of Jesus, and through its consummation the relationship with God is re-confirmed.

<sup>83</sup> Interview with 16 year old rape victim on May 6, 2010 in Kiliba; informal conversation with Catholic priest on May 6, 2010 in Kiliba.

<sup>84</sup> Interview with 53 year old victim on May 17, 2010 in Kiliba.

<sup>85</sup> Interview with 49 year old victim on May 17, 2010 in Kiliba.

<sup>86</sup> Interview with Catholic priest on April 18, 2010 in Kiliba.



According to this priest, despite women being the target of rape attacks, they should, also in case of mental or physical threats, fight back the rapist. He distinguishes: “there is threat and there is consent of threat”. Subsequently he argues:

*“Therefore, dying without being raped is better than being raped keeping in mind you’ll stay alive this way. That’s the case of martyrs. [...] This is thus a call on part of the Catholic women. As Jesus has said: “Do not fear those who can kill your body but fear those who can kill your body **and** soul. [...] In this sense, for us, talking about sexual violence is at the same time a call on the courage of martyrs on part of women. One should not simply accept to be raped because one has seen a weapon.”<sup>87 88</sup>*

In other words, women must not let themselves get raped easily as the struggle between the perpetrator and the victim also symbolizes the defense of her physical and spiritual integrity, meaning her Christian values. According to a priest in Kiliba, victims must therefore be blamed for the lack of defense in this sense. However, he did not know whether his opinion was shared widely among other clergy. Also a different priest in Kamanyola argued in the same way:

*“Martyrdom is ‘a good thing’ because it’s humiliating being raped without consent. However these cases are rare: 1 on 20, or 2 on 10, accept guarding her dignity and even the death. [...] I admire this courage. It’s a way to discourage the aggressors.”<sup>89</sup>*

This admiration for martyrdom became moreover concrete through a horrible rape act during my stay in Congo. A woman from the village of Kiliba was raped and murdered by three men, supposed to be bandits.<sup>90</sup> She was working on the field when the men overpowered her. The story goes that she recognized one of the aggressors from the village, not understanding how he could ever rape her she tried to defend herself. Consequently, after being raped several times, they cut her throat as well as her genital apparatus. This incident terrified the entire community, particularly women, and kept them from working on their fields for a period of time. However, the leader of the parish in Kiliba judged the courageous act of this woman:

*“It is really praiseworthy to lose your life under these conditions. It is a superior ideal, because it is an act of loosing of one’s life for one’s conviction.”<sup>91</sup>*

The admiration for women who resist rape, in the sense of martyrdom, has become central to the Church’s ideal for (Catholic) women in Congo. The Congolese Catholic Church worships ‘*La Bienheureuse Soeur Anuarite*’, a Congolese sister who in 1964 in Congo’s civil war preferred to defend her Christian values, and accepted to be killed, rather than being raped by a Congolese Colonel. The Congolese Catholic Church launched her as *the* symbol of the National Catholic Women’s Initiative in Congo, *Dynamique Femme*, and thus actively proposing *Soeur Anuarite* as a model for other Congolese women.

The centrality of this symbol in the Congolese Catholic Church does affect the question of blame and sin of rape victims from the perspective of the Church as well as the discussion on the contribution of the Church to dominant societal processes of blaming. The active and public use of *Soeur Anuarite* as a symbol for *Dynamique Femme* creates on the one hand an image of rape victims indeed having committed a sin as they ‘chose’ rape over death. On the other hand, especially considering the fact that rape victims are integrated in these women groups, it can be interpreted as

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<sup>87</sup> Ibid.

<sup>88</sup> Emphasis added.

<sup>89</sup> Interview with Catholic priest on April 22, 2010 in Kamanyola.

<sup>90</sup> Interview with police commander May 4, 2010 in Kiliba.

<sup>91</sup> Interview with Catholic priest on April 18, 2010 in Kiliba.

if victims should indeed be blamed for their own rape as they have not sufficiently defended their moral and spiritual values. Setting extremely high moral standards inherently reinforces the dominant cultural notions of blame on part of the rape victims. However, this must not be understood as if the Church *actively* promotes martyrdom among women in case of rape, but rather as an underlying, partly hidden, transcript which further complicates the Church's general message in the fight against sexual violence.

#### *'Evidently' Sinful Behavior*

The last factor which further complicates the question of blame and sin from the perspective of the Catholic Church is the moral decay in the contemporary Congolese society. In cases of rape and sexual violence, where women have been 'inciting' men through their behavior or way of clothing (meaning 'sexy' like hot pants or short skirts),<sup>92</sup> the clergy has no problems blaming women for being raped and judging these acts as sinful on part of the 'victim'. In this case the behavior and appearance of women is considered to be 'intentional' to seduce men. Currently this is a problem at school and at universities in Congo. In a '*Flash*' about sexual violence in this environment, written by CDJP Bukavu, the behavior of girls themselves was also attacked:

*"Nevertheless, one should not forget that in certain cases, girls themselves make them susceptible for these sorts of violence by exaggerated sexy clothing and even harassing teachers with tempting invitations. It is not true that all girls are innocent nor saints."*<sup>93</sup>

The same goes for women and girls engaged in (survival) prostitution and other practices where the line between 'sexual violence' and 'sexual debauchery' is vague. These acts are considered to seriously violate core Catholic values and institutions, and therefore allow for a vigorous response of the Church, condemning these practices rather than preaching in favor of the innocence and blamelessness of *all* victims of sexual violence.

## **2.4 Speaking out against Rape?**

The Congolese Catholic Church publically condemns the sexual violence epidemic and to some degree the cultural accusation of rape victims. The CENCO has stated:

*"It is imperative that the public authorities, the civil society, and especially the human right defense organization and the religious beliefs, mobilize themselves to combat and make an end to this plague which is more and more propagated in the world and in our society."*<sup>94</sup>

Yet, how does this discourse evolve? Does this discourse merely remains a hidden social text or is it rather freely expressed and propagated? As the Church has a central and influential public position, does it make use of this position to verbally disperse this discourse?

#### *The Masses*

Concerning the masses, the priests argued that they talked about sexual violence however "not every day, but from time to time".<sup>95</sup> Preaching against rape nevertheless depends on several things. Firstly, it is partly up to the priest to whether or not talk about it. A psycho-social assistant in Kasika said, in response to the question whether the local priests ever addressed the sexual violence issue in Church, "[N]ot really. One priest, he sometimes drops some words during the mass, but the other

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<sup>92</sup> Legs are considered to be the sexiest part of the women's body in Congo.

<sup>93</sup> In '*Flash Special; Violences Sexuelles en Milieu Scolaire et Universitaire*' N.11 May 2007.

<sup>94</sup> In '*Violences aux Femmes, Communiqué de la CENCO*' drawn up by L. Monsengwo Pasinya, President of CENCO, in Kinshasa on 25th March 2008. Website: <http://www.cenco.cd/presidencenco/violSex.htm> (accessed August 11, 2010)

<sup>95</sup> Interview Catholic priest on April 28, 2010 in Kamituga.

[the leader of the parish] does nothing at all.” Although there is no regulation that compels priests to talk about current sexual violence epidemic during the masses, they might touch upon the issue according to the lectures which are anticipated for that day. As some messages in the Gospel talk about rape or violence against women, priests might actualize these messages to explain the current problem with sexual violence. The Roman Catholic Church mass adheres to a fixed structure where the scripture reading, the antiphons sung, the texts of the prayers vary each day according to the liturgical season, the feast days or events in the life of Christ.<sup>96</sup>

### *Limitations*

However, although the priests acknowledged the existence of sexual violence against women, they did not feel particularly ‘limited’ concerning these liturgical constraints or neither did one of them express the desire to talk more about it during the mass. They denoted this as just being part of ‘the way the Catholic Church is organized’.<sup>97</sup> Moreover, the mass was rather considered as a place to spread the ‘Word of God’ in the first place, mainly through readings and prayers. Others arguments were the ‘lack of time’ due to the fixed ritual of the mass. The CDJP coordinator argued:

*“The mass is not really the moment to talk about it, to explain everything. On a Sunday you’ll have 20 to 25 minutes, but in those 20/25 minutes you’re not able to talk excessively about one theme, you also have to touch upon other themes.”<sup>98</sup>*

Other argumentations were that it was not appropriate to talk about rape or other forms of sexual violence in the mass as talking about sexuality remains a taboo, especially in cases where children are present (despite there are separate children’s’ masses).

Moreover, those who openly challenge violence against women and its unequal underlying gender power relations, are likely to expect cultural resistance. A priest in Kiliba once preached against the domestic (sexual) violence by husbands towards their wives, as women used to frequent his office to complain about these offences. Yet, the reactions of men after the mass, when the priest did his weekly village visit, were very disapproving and they urged him not talk like this in the future.<sup>99</sup> They considered beating or violating their wives as their ‘right’ and as an issue that should be dealt with at a household level, rather than by the priest. These repressing societal attitudes towards women, in addition to the cultural taboo on sexuality, make priests consider talking about sexual violence as a delicate task. Neither did I get the impression that, considering the complexity of the Church’s attitude of blame and sin on part of the rape victims, priests forcefully preached during the mass against the social practices of blaming and stigmatization of victims of sexual violence.

In addition, the problem with sexual violence is understood to be part of the “mad depravation”<sup>100</sup> of the wider society and therefore rarely discussed as a singular isolated phenomenon during the mass. However, some priests did argue that it was more common to address societal topics like sexual violence in specific gatherings *outside* the mass as it could be more like a discussion or a way to provide the population with information.<sup>101</sup> However, it is clear that the public condemnation of sexual violence does not lead to forceful and frequent preaching against it by all priests at parish level.

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<sup>96</sup> The Roman Catholic mass is, for example, much more strict and defined than most Protestant worships, where the pastors are much freer to talk about a range of different topics.

<sup>97</sup> Interview with Catholic priest on April 28, 2010 in Kamituga.

<sup>98</sup> Interview with coordinator CDJP Uvira on May 20, 2010 in Uvira.

<sup>99</sup> Interview with Catholic priest on April 18, 2010 in Kiliba.

<sup>100</sup> Interview with coordinator CDJP Uvira on May 20, 2010 in Uvira

<sup>101</sup> Different priests referred to the possibility of organizing sessions outside the mass to take the time to discuss specific topics with adherents. However, it is questionable whether this strategy is effective to reach the large share of ‘non-converted’ population that fiercely holds on to the cultural and customary practices and who usually do not attend these meetings. Subjects such as sexuality, marriage and HIV/AIDS are nevertheless more occasionally discussed in the youth groups of the Catholic Church.

## 2.5 Activating Resistance and Resilience

### *La Bienheureuse Soeur Anuarite*

The Congolese Catholic Church's choice of *Soeur Anuarite* as a symbol for *Dynamique Femme* is meant to inspire Congolese women "to show courage, not only to propose a social alternative, but also to propose a *corrective* to what has derived in our society characterized by a culture of violence and death".<sup>102 103</sup> A CDJP staff member explains the choice for *Soeur Anuarite* as a national symbol:

*"With everything we encounter nowadays; also through the things coming from the West [pornography, pre-marital sex etc.]; through the globalization and the new global ethics which enter bit by bit in our culture, the things which were a value before, such as a girls' virginity, is currently declining. What was a value yesterday, ceased to be a value today. [...] The person who can say, "I accept death instead of being violated", is a person who preserves virginity and fidelity as a value. In this case it's unlikely that a person will say: "If it [virginity or fidelity] is not a value anymore, why should I lose my life?"*<sup>104</sup>

With the decay of moral values such as virginity and fidelity, brought to a climax in the current sexual violence epidemic, the use of *Soeur Anuarite* as a corrective is thus part of the Church's 'strategy' to counter this societal process. It is meant to serve as a model for ordinary Congolese women, as something they should aspire and as an image they should seek to live up to. As a model, Anuarite shows other Congolese women, as the CDJP coordinator argued, "that a Congolese woman can say 'NO' to violence, and to everything that goes against her dignity".<sup>105</sup>

### *Condemning Silentization*

A part of this mission to restore victims' dignity (and hereby also Catholic values) is through 'fighting the silence'; speaking up about what happened to them. This would help rape victims to escape the circling spiral of negative thoughts. Low self-esteem, isolation and feelings of worthlessness hamper the Catholic Church in realizing the Catholic ideal of strong women as mothers, wives and sisters constituting the backbone of the society. Contrary, remaining silent and accepting the situation you are in, does not resemble this image of a courageous woman that stands for her values and personal dignity. According to the CDJP coordinator, also rape victims have a choice. He argues:

*"[T]here are persons who have experienced these kinds of [physical or mental] threats but who accepted to remain in such a situation. In these cases, one can be somehow blamed for this behavior because one has chosen to stay and live under these conditions [rather than fight them]".*<sup>106</sup>

However, women are often too ashamed to return to their family and consider themselves as worthless. In these cases the CDJP coordinator seriously condemns the passive attitude of rape victims. He stresses the role of the Catholic Church saying that, "The Church shows that you still have values! [...] However, it's up to you to take up things and to start your new life".<sup>107</sup>

### *Victimizing the Victim*

The Catholic run *Bureaux d'Écoute* are precisely set up in order to fight the silence that surrounds rape, but also to provide victims with support. During the sessions victims are consoled in the first

<sup>102</sup> In 'Flash Special; Création de la Dynamique Femme au sein de la Commission Justice et Paix' N.1 January 2006.

<sup>103</sup> Emphasis added.

<sup>104</sup> Interview with coordinator CDJP Uvira on May 20, 2010 in Uvira.

<sup>105</sup> Ibid.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid.

<sup>107</sup> Interview with coordinator CDJP Uvira on May 20, 2010 in Uvira.

place. Rape has often been a highly traumatizing event. For some victims it is the first time they open up about what happened to them. The coordinator of CDJP Bukavu explains the power of the BdE:

*“The most important is that women feel rehabilitated in their being, in their role as mother or daughter. They are internally mentally damaged and that is what needs to be restored. It’s a process which costs a lot of time and means patience. To heal these ‘internal’ wounds one should be listened to by someone who does not accuse [the victim]. **That is the power of Bureaux d’Écoute. It’s an active listening that does not judge but understands.**”<sup>108 109</sup>*

For the first time, rape victims are really treated like victims, rather than those to be blamed or sometimes as instigators of evil. By telling victims that it basically ‘could happen to anybody’ and that ‘they have not wanted to be raped’ the *Bureaux d’Écoute* counter the dominant cultural frame of rape and, instead, tries to shift the balance towards an understanding of victimhood among raped women. Although this sounds rather logical from a Western perspective, for a lot of victims this is not, considering what clergy call the current “*coutume retrograde*”, i.e. regressive customary practices, and the lack of awareness raising activities especially in the more remote areas. Yet, only through firmly encouraging a process of victimization that is so much needed to counteract the culturally blaming of rape victims, these women can be liberated from isolation, of self-reproach and of their lack of self-confidence. Only from this point of departure, strong dignified and self-respecting, i.e. ‘Catholic ideal’, women can be created.

#### *Empowering the Victim*

By telling their stories, such as in *Bureaux d’Écoute*, women can find an outlet for the festering emotions and free themselves of feelings of worthlessness and shame. A rape victim stated (Kizende 2007: 34):

*“It is one thing to have been through what I have been through. But to have no one acknowledge your pain enhances that pain threefold... Your willingness to recognize my humanity has given voice to my distress and meaning to my pain.”*

This “act of acknowledgement” of victims’ sufferings plays an important role in processes of detraumatization and revitalization. Porter (2007: 183) argues that:

*“[R]ecognition is crucial for many women; having their offences acknowledged, recognized as hurtful, [and] as destroying self-esteem [...] are important dimensions towards healing.”*

In the *Bureaux d’Écoute* victims are simply ‘heard’ in the first place and can open up about what happened to them, revealing their secret; the burden they carried with them for, often, a long period of time. During the counseling, the psychological assistants also seek to restore a sense of victim’s self-dignity. They are consoled in their situation but also encouraged not to lose hope or courage. Rather, they argue that they should picture themselves as the same women they were before the accident, and not as worthless or powerless because they have been raped.<sup>110</sup> One form of counseling (‘*counselling de pre-decision*’) focuses on the self-determination of rape victims. Instead of taking women by the hand and blindly leading raped women through a process of medical and legal care, the psychological assistants seek to emphasize the idea that women have the power to somehow change their current subordinate situation of victims. They ask for example, as the psychosocial assistant in Kiliba did:

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<sup>108</sup> Interview with coordinator CDJP Bukavu on May 11, 2010 in Bukavu.

<sup>109</sup> Emphasis added.

<sup>110</sup> Interview with psychosocial assistant BdE/ DF coordinator on April 15, 2010 in Kiliba; interview with psychosocial assistant on April 21, 2010 in Kamanyola.

*“Despite you have been raped; what is it that I can do for you?”, “Do you want to stay in this situation, where you only wash yourself with warm water, rather than going to the hospital?”<sup>111</sup>*

Also in other services and activities that the Catholic Church provides through CDJP (which will be discussed in the next chapter) the emphasis is on reactivating women and on the restoration on their personal dignity.

In sum, the Church differs from the dominant cultural frame of rape which *only* focuses on the affect of rape on men and the wider environment without taking the effect on rape victims into account. The Church’s frame of rape highlights the effect that rape has on the *personal* human dignity of victims but it also sees rape as extremely harmful for the wider society as women, particularly as mothers, constitute the backbone of the society. Moreover this analysis reveals that massive rape does not only affect *cultural* values, but also *moral* and *spiritual* values. The sexual violence epidemic thus constitutes a serious treat, especially through its persistence in the contemporary Congolese society, for the Church. Therefore they use a *wide* conceptualization of sexual violence which the Church argues to battle.

The Church’s discourse, however, also reveals a great sense of ambiguity. In the first place the Church, through CENCO and archbishops, breaks the silence by forcefully condemning sexual violence in the official public discourse. At the same time there is an apparent lack of preaching against sexual violence on parish level. Secondly, the Church on the one hand condemns the wide accusation of victims as if they are the ones who are responsible for rape, and on the other hand are women, and victims as well, in some way ‘reproached’ for not sufficiently defending their moral and spiritual values. At the same time, the Church’s discourse vis-à-vis victims, such as via the BdE, portrays the way the Church seeks to console and encourage victims in their situation.

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<sup>111</sup> Interview with psychosocial assistant BdE/ DF coordinator on April 15, 2010 in Kiliba.

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## Chapter 3: The Church in Action

### *In Search of Creating Safe and Tolerant Places for Rape Victims*

#### 3.1 Catholic Bureaux d'Écoute

*A 49 year old victim just left when I first visited the Bureaux d'Écoute in Kamanyola. The woman had come on foot from a village located 25 kilometers from Kamanyola. CDJP's listening house was the first facility in the neighborhood that could assist her. Although the woman was raped a week ago, she was so much ashamed of what happened to her that she did not dare to come sooner. She was still in shock and afraid of having contracted a disease. She was raped on a field by a civilian, presumably someone from a group of bandits who hide in the hills. While physically threatening her, he raped her twice. She did yell, but nobody heard her. After the rape she fled with her basket with firewood on her back.<sup>112</sup>*

Every day victims of rape, like this woman, walk into the *Bureaux d'Écoute* (BdE) centers of the Catholic Church all over South Kivu. CDJP Uvira coordinates 8 *Bureaux d'Écoute* located at parish level and CDJP Bukavu 15 desks.<sup>113</sup> Some are more frequently visited than others, partly depending on the presence of rebel groups in the environment. For the BdE in Kamanyola this victim was 'only' the fourth case of the month of April, but the cases are generally not less brutal. The psychosocial assistant told me that the month before, in March, four women declared a rape incident in the middle of the night by uniformed men. Two of them were as old as 67 and 68 years old. In the middle of the night uniformed men entered their houses, and while some firmly held their husbands, others raped them. Thereafter the perpetrators left, taking their goats and even some stew with them. In February there was even a woman of 70 years old who was raped on her field with eggplants.

The psychosocial assistant of Kamanyola argued, "The war is over, but the violence is not". Every day, except Sunday, she and her female colleague can be found in the annex of the local Catholic health center. They have nothing more than a table, some (broken) chairs, a big blue notebook and some anti-HIV/AIDS campaign posters on the wall. There is no sign outside on the wall or door that reveals the purpose of their desk. Inside the building, their desk is located next to the door of the general nurse of the health center. This way, outsiders have no reasons to assume that the women that daily enter here, are in fact rape victims. In this sense, women who are victims of sexual violence, are protected against accusation and stigmatization.

These '*Bureaux*' or '*Maisons d'Écoute*' are, as the name reveals, centers where every rape victim, regardless of one's descent or religious identity, is 'heard'. Where women who have been raped are culturally imposed to maintain quiet or are simply too ashamed about what happened to them, these listening centers are a sound place where they can speak freely. In the *Bureaux d'Écoute*, victims' sufferings are not only heard, but women are also provided with advice and guidance, making these '*Bureaux*' a place of encounter between human fear, compassion and hope.

#### *Catholic vs. other Bureaux d'Écoute*

The Diocesan Justice and Peace Commission of Uvira provides medical and psychological support through their listening houses to approximately 1500 rape survivors every year.<sup>114</sup> However, the concept of *Bureaux d'Écoute* is not exclusively Catholic. Other organizations, of which some are

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<sup>112</sup> Field notes on April 20, 2010; informal conversation with psychosocial assistant BdE on April 20, 2010 in Kamanyola

<sup>113</sup> Also outside the province, in Bunia (1) and in Kasungu (2) CDJP started to open listening houses.

<sup>114</sup> See website of one of the sponsors of CDJP's *Bureaux d'Écoute*:

[http://www.sciaf.org.uk/where\\_we\\_work/africa/dr\\_congo/helping\\_survivors\\_of\\_sexual\\_violence/rape\\_survivors\\_project\\_diocese\\_of\\_uvira](http://www.sciaf.org.uk/where_we_work/africa/dr_congo/helping_survivors_of_sexual_violence/rape_survivors_project_diocese_of_uvira) (accessed August 11, 2010).

'faith-based', have also implemented listening houses in the field.<sup>115</sup> A Congolese psychologist argued that people generally have a lot of faith in churches, whether Catholic or Protestant, because "they have the capacity to be discrete, to maintain confidentiality."<sup>116</sup> He also reasoned that the churches feel most sensible and concerned about the spiritual questions of rape victims (about the existence of God etc.), which made them set up *Bureaux d'Écoute*. He argued:

*"Because if we [Christian churches] don't do this type of work [providing psychosocial assistance for rape victims], there won't be a Faith there anymore. The people will no longer believe in the Bible. They won't believe in all that anymore."*<sup>117</sup>

Despite the presence of other BdE, CDJP's BdE are in some areas, like in Kamanyola, practically still the only facility available for victims. In other places, like in village of Mwenga, where the rape epidemic is really pinching due to the continuous presence of FDLR troops in the forests, there are seven other organizations that set up a *Bureaux d'Écoute*. In such places the BdE of CDJP in and of itself treats, on average, 30 new cases a month. Deeper into the bush, the BdE of Kitutu, located at an arm length of *Interhamwe* camps, sometimes receives around 100 cases a month due to mass women kidnaps by the FDLR. These numbers reveal the gravity of the rape epidemic in some regions, surpassing the capacity of any organization.

However, the Catholic approach and functioning is fairly well positioned amidst the presence of other BdE in the field. In the first place, the Catholic desks are one of the few BdE that have all 'four features' (psychological, medical, socio-economic and legal support). Another advantage is the fact that CDJP's *Bureaux d'Écoute* benefit from being located in the buildings of local healthcare centers or hospitals. This simplifies victim's way to the listening houses since the desks are very well hidden, limiting the possibilities for stigmatization and creating spaces of trust and integrity. And last, but not unimportantly, CDJP receives financial aid from different donors.<sup>118</sup> This is central to the functioning and impact of CDJP's BdE and the socio-economic activities of the women's groups.

### ***How the Bureaux d'Écoute function***

#### *Raising Awareness*

In order to attract victims, the psychosocial assistants must visit the communities to raise awareness about the existence and the functioning of the *Bureaux d'Écoute*. Some do this via a calendar-like system that says who, when and where one must go to. In Kamanyola, the psychosocial assistants inform the community twice a week in the different *shirika's* (Catholic spiritual communities at neighborhood level). On Sundays they go to services of Protestant churches, the Muslim community and to the *Église de Reveil*. Church services are considered to be very effective for awareness raising campaigns because one reaches a large share of the population at once. Public announcements during the services are normally quickly spread from mouth to mouth.

Sometimes rape victims are approached individually when the psychosocial assistant hears from a new case, for example through members of *Dynamique Femme*. This was a frequently applied method of the psychosocial assistant of Kiliba. She tells how she approaches the victim:

*"When I arrive at her house, I ask something like "Do you perhaps have a glass of water to drink?" If she gives me the glass of water, I start talking to her: "If it rains a lot, we will probably have a lot of harvest this year isn't it nice?" Talking about these kinds of things the*

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<sup>115</sup> CDJP is the largest Catholic organization with BdE. For the Protestants CAMPS is the organization with the most BdE (15 centers in South Kivu) and is leading in the provision of psychological aid in South Kivu and has instructed CDJP's psychosocial assistants in the diocese of Bukavu.

<sup>116</sup> Interview with psychologist CAMPS on May 12, 2010 in Bukavu.

<sup>117</sup> Ibid.

<sup>118</sup> SCIAF (Scottish Catholic International Aid Fund), EU, CAFOD (Catholic Agency For Overseas Development), AGEH (Arbeitsgemeinschaft für Entwicklungshilfe) and CRS (Catholic Relief Service).



*children will think that we are talking about our agriculture activities and stuff. Then I say: "Well I go back to my house now. Could you accompany me for a bit?" in case there are people in her house. When we're walking, I'll ask her: "I heard that there are some women who have been beaten somewhere, in sector 6 [an agricultural field] I guess. Did you perhaps hear about that story?" And right now, she can safely say that she indeed heard about it and says: "I, I'm also beaten". Ahhhh. Now I say: "You could come to my place, so that we can continue talking about it and deepen our conversation." When she comes to me, I ask her: "How have you been beaten?" etc. And then she starts telling the whole story."*

Approaching rape victims to make them come to the *Bureaux d'Écoute* is veiled with secrecy. A too aggressive and public approach would expose the victims to processes of blaming and shaming by the community and seriously endanger the social and socio-economic circumstances of the victim. It would also deter (other) victims to seek help.

Besides raising awareness in the community about the existence of listening houses, CJDJ also runs different education programs to inform the population about women's rights and the criminality of sexual violence. For example, last April, CJDJ Uvira organized a workshop in every parish to inform local authorities and representatives, such as the military, police, government officials, teachers etc. about sexual violence.

### *Psychological Support*

For most of the victims it is a major step to present themselves at one of the *Bureaux d'Écoute* as they have to cope with shame, blame, fear and stigma in their personal lives. A psychosocial assistant said:

*"The victims who enter into the Bureaux d'Écoute want to directly close the door behind them. They want to close all windows and also all the curtains before they even say one word. That's how most victims feel when they come in here."<sup>119</sup>*

As can be read from psychological intake reports, practically all women suffer from mental and emotional instability resulting in depression, aggression, fear, panic, self-reproach, confusion, memory loss etc. Psychosocial assistants generally observe feelings of worthlessness, humiliation, dishonor, blame, lack of self-confidence and a loss of energy. Victims thus cope with traumatism although in different degrees.

In order to understand the situation of each victim individually, they let victims tell their story. The assistants actively listen to these women, asking them 'open questions' ('*écoute active*'). The incident and their problems are summarized and paraphrased by the psychosocial assistant. They try to "help the victim to accept the circumstances of her problem. She is told that it was not her fault."<sup>120</sup> In one element of the different forms of counseling, called '*counseling spirituel*', victims are consoled and encouraged with the Word of God. Although victims have different beliefs, it is argued that "we all believe in God".<sup>121</sup> For some victims, God is the only hope they have left, others start to question the existence of God. In all cases they try to show victims that God will find them again and that they must have faith in him. When a victim is Catholic, she is comforted with words about Virgin Mary, that she will assist them. Only if they really believe in God the victims will be saved from their situation.<sup>122</sup> This is a very interesting element in the process because it reveals the way the Church, through the BdE, seeks to reinforce or restore the confidence and faith of victims in God.

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<sup>119</sup> Interview with psychosocial assistant BdE on April 28, 2010 in Kamituga.

<sup>120</sup> In '*Fiche de Prise en Charge Psychologique*' of the *Bureau d'Écoute* in Mboko October/November/December 2009.

<sup>121</sup> Interview with psychosocial assistant BdE on April 21, 2010 in Kamanyola..

<sup>122</sup> *Ibid.*; Interview with psychosocial assistant BdE /coordinator DF Kiliba on April 28, 2010 in Kiliba.

In the context of Eastern Congo the BdE must be considered as fairly progressive and furthermore impactful. For example, the 54 year old Alexia told me:

*"I have problems. I was in the house and suddenly, with one blow, 6 people have entered into my house. They were plundering. They have raped me in front of my children and took everything with them. They left but took one of my daughters with them. [...] We didn't have anything left. We didn't know what to do. Everybody was informed. I even didn't dare to walk around in the village or go to the church. But thanks to Maman P. [the psychosocial assistant] I received some help and care. Because of that I was a bit consoled."*<sup>123</sup>

Like this victim, practically all victims acknowledged that their worries and mental problems diminished after visiting the *Bureaux d'Écoute*. Some other responses were:

*"After I went to the Bureaux d'Écoute I felt a bit encouraged by her [the psychosocial assistant] because she said I should not keep worrying and thinking about what happened."*<sup>124</sup>

*"The advice has helped me, before [I came to the Bureaux d'Écoute] every time I thought about the incident, I felt embarrassed."*<sup>125</sup>

*"In the Bureau d'Écoute we receive advice which helps us forget our horrible memories."*<sup>126</sup>

Most of the victims said to deal with continuous flashbacks which made them feel sad, angry or embarrassed. Through talking to the psychosocial assistant they were to a varying extent alleviated. Moreover, the tactic used to de-traumatize rape victims, to come to terms with their own sorrow, is rather based on *forgetting* than on *speaking* about the incident. Outside the BdE, discussing personal rape incidents largely remains a taboo.

### *Medical Support*

Victims also deal with strong physical reactions such as pains, nausea, palpitation, breathing problems, insomnia, loss of appetite, headache, dry mouth, shivers and tiredness as can be read from the psychological intake reports.<sup>127</sup> After the medical examination victims receive medical care in the BdE's affiliated health center or hospital. Some of these women have grave medical problems from sexually transmitted infections (also HIV/AIDS), genital injuries, pregnancies, fistula's, to a broken spine. These physical burdens affect victims in their mental wellbeing but also isolate them from the wider community. Being treated medically is thus a major relief for these women as it enables them to slowly resume their daily activities. Moreover, the fact that CDJP pays these 'extra' medical expenses is an enormous aid for these women because they could hardly ever be paid by victims themselves. CDJP closely collaborates with the medical staff in the treatment of the victims.

However, the medical support of CDJP goes beyond the merely financial aspect. For example in Kamituga, in the inlands of Congo, the BdE is located in the city's major hospital. Here I accompanied the psychosocial assistant on their daily round to visit the hospitalized victims. Most of them were young women who became pregnant by their rapist and had just given birth. These new mothers were frequently visited by the psychosocial assistant and provided with support and encouragements to take care of the baby and themselves. Such as for these two cases:

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<sup>123</sup> Interview with 54 year old victim on April 15, 2010 in Kiliba.

<sup>124</sup> Interview with 16 year old victim on May 6, 2010 in Kiliba.

<sup>125</sup> Interview with 37 year old victim on March 19, 2010 in Kamituga.

<sup>126</sup> Interview with 15 year old victim on March 19, 2010 in Kamituga.

<sup>127</sup> In 'Fiche de Prise en Charge Psychologique' of the Bureau d'Écoute in Mboko October/November/December 2009.

*In the hospital we met a 13-year old mother who was raped by her brother in law and had just given birth to a baby boy called 'Merci'.<sup>128</sup> While her mother did accept the newborn baby, she did not want her daughter to return to school but instead to take care of the baby. We also visited a 14-year old girl who just gave birth to a baby boy. She also went to school before. However, because her mum is a single parent she had to pay the school fees herself. Therefore, she worked at the local market selling peanuts and bananas. Now that she has given birth to a baby and her mum is not able to take care of it, she's doesn't know how to manage all this.<sup>129</sup>*

In either of these two cases for whom school is no longer an option, CDJP depicts them a future in which they could participate in local women groups where they could learn skills to make their own money. Especially learning how to sew was popular among these girls, imagining starting a clothes shop one day. For this group of women, CDJP also pays the costs of the delivery and other medical care for the benefit of the new born child. They actively seek to support the victim to avoid acts of abandonment or neglect of the rape babies. Abortion, despite the frequent practices in Congo, is an extremely severe crime in the Catholic Church which they attempt to discourage under all circumstances.

In the same hospital I also faced another more grave case. I met a rape victim in her thirties who was severely injured during a rape attack by rebels near Kitutu, a village in the inlands of South Kivu. In this case CDJP also provides extensive medical and social support:

*When I met the woman she was all bandaged and looked extremely fragile and emaciated. She was visibly highly traumatized. During her daily work on the field she was raped and, hence, set on fire by her rapists; the Interhamwe who are hiding in the hills near Kitutu. As her legs were severely burned, she had to undergo a risky surgery in which one of her legs was amputated. The bill of this operation, and there were more to come, amounted to 240 dollar (an incredible amount of money for the local population). She and her husband explained that their own protestant church had not done anything for them, except for raising less than 10 dollars. They neither had family members who helped them, nor any acquaintances that came to visit them. Lacking income or other money, they said to depend "on people with a good heart" to get something to eat.<sup>130</sup>*

In this case, all medical costs were paid by CDJP. Moreover, the psychosocial assistant of the BdE was the only person who visited them on a daily basis to provide them with some moral and emotional support. She stimulated the husband in the first place for not letting his wife down, which would generally be the case. She also encouraged both of them to keep up faith in the future. After recovery, the victim would be able to participate with other women in one of the social programs of the CDJP. Sadly, this never happened. She died two weeks later.

### *Juridical Support*

The third type of assistance that CDJP offers the victims of sexual violence is legal support. The Catholic Church in Congo in general is one of the largest promoters of a national State of Law.<sup>131</sup> The National Bishop Assembly even publishes a weekly newsletter to encourage the State of Law called 'Ensemble pour un Etat de Droit' i.e. 'Together for a State of Law'. The Church sees the pillars of the

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<sup>128</sup> According the psychosocial assistant of Kamituga, this name was probably given to the baby because the young victim had almost died herself during the delivery. She was thus thankful to God for not letting this happen. Moreover, in Africa one has the habit of giving names to newborn babies that are related to things that happen in people's personal life or to public affairs.

<sup>129</sup> Field notes on April 28, 2010 in Kamituga.

<sup>130</sup> Ibid.

<sup>131</sup> They advocate a state where the leaders have been democratically chosen; where there is a separation of powers (legal, executive and juridical) and where citizens have both rights and obligations to fulfill.

State of Law such as respect of human dignity and the promotion of justice, as inherently connected to its own ideals. The Church acknowledges the need for authority and a functioning state because:

*"A well-ordered society needs people who have legitimate authority to preserve society's institutions and to care for the good of all" (Pope John XXIII).<sup>132</sup>*

The Church calls upon the population to be subject to the governing authorities:

*"[F]or there is no authority except from God. Those that exist have been instituted by God and those who resist authority will incur judgment (Rom 13:1-2)."<sup>133</sup>*

Rape or other forms of sexual violence are understood by the Church as crimes which need to be denounced and addressed legally through the judiciary apparatus to seek justice. Striking was the resistance of the CDJP team and the clergy against what is called '*arrangement amiable*', the preferred local way to make an arrangement between the victim and the perpetrator.<sup>134</sup> Despite this reality, CDJP seeks to continue to assist women who have the courage to lodge a complaint against their rapist. They provide them with an attorney and pay all other legal expenditures which are often a major problem for the rape victims. However, the number of victims making use of this possibility is still limited. Victims often do not have confidence in the juridical system. That this fear is grounded became clear to me during my stay in Kiliba:

*A young girl was raped by a civilian in the beginning of May 2010. After having visited the Bureau d'Écoute, she was advised to lodge a complaint against the accused with the assistance of the lawyer of CDJP. However, during the interrogation of the perpetrator by the juridical police officer (OPJ), he started to run away all of a sudden. Later, it turned out that he bribed the OPJ with 30 dollar, who let him run away on purpose, pretending 'he escaped'. Two weeks later the parents of the victim came to the psychosocial assistant to say that they wanted to drop their charges because the family of the perpetrator had come to arrange the case financially. She replied that this was impossible since the case was already at the public persecutor, and moreover reassured them that amicable arrangements are forbidden by law.<sup>135</sup>*

This case characterizes the tension between customary practices, the deficit of the judiciary system, and persistence of the Church to obtain legal justice. Interestingly, it is the Church who forces the state and the population to obey the legal rules and hold on to the State of Law and not vice versa.

### **3.2 Victims' Integration in Dynamique Femme**

#### *Socio-economic Support*

In the *Dynamique Femme* (DF) structure that has been set up in practically all parts of Congo since 2006, CDJP Uvira have started to implement social activities for the vulnerable women in almost

<sup>132</sup> In the Catechism of the Catholic Church. See, for example, the following website:

[http://www.catholicity.com/catechism/the\\_person\\_and\\_society.html](http://www.catholicity.com/catechism/the_person_and_society.html) (accessed August 11, 2010).

<sup>133</sup> Ibid.

<sup>134</sup> This is often done when the perpetrator is retraceable, frequently civilians, to arrange the problem according to their customs. In amicable arrangements (the family of) the perpetrator pays, for example, five goats, a rush mat and some women's clothes to settle the deal. In this way, the material loss of the raped woman, who is hard to give in marriage by the family and is thus unlikely to receive a big dowry, is partially restored. The parents of the victim can also force the rapist to marry the victim. According to CDJP's attorney, one often opts for this solution as it is quicker than the legal procedure, and moreover, the family of the victim is assured of receiving at least some material compensation which in court cases is regularly not the case. (informal conversation with lawyer CDJP on April 15, 2010 in Kiliba)

<sup>135</sup> Interview with psychosocial assistant BdE/coordinator DF Kiliba on May 17, 2010 in Kiliba.

every parish. Vulnerable women such as widows, young girls and raped women are given preference for participation in these women groups. Widows in Congo regularly have a low social status and are culturally marginalized after the death of their husbands because property, in some tribes including the children, is inherited by the family of the husband.<sup>136</sup> In the case of young girls, uncertainty about their eligibility for marriage, or school drop-out due to pregnancies, sometimes urges them to look for financial means elsewhere. About the vulnerability of rape victims a psychosocial assistant argued:

*“One regards them [the rape victims] as ‘femmes libres’ [free or liberated women: a negative connotation], who risk being launched into the prostitution.”<sup>137</sup>*

By supporting raped women, especially when they are young, and giving them something to do, they are kept of the street, away from the dangers of ‘immoral debauchery’ something the Church seeks to counter.

Not all victims who are treated in the BdE thus participate in *Dynamique Femme*.<sup>138</sup> The members of *Dynamique Femme* collectively participate in knitting, sewing or soap making activities or work on the communal field.<sup>139</sup> These women’s projects are aimed at a system of ‘auto-financing’ for which CDP provides the basic supplies (seeds, tools, sewing machines and equipment, initial yarn and clothing etc.) in order to enable the women to set of their activities. After this initial investment it is up to the women themselves to make profit out of their product and purchase the necessities to continue their production. CDP encourages the women to take up the responsibility for their wellbeing and socio-economic situation themselves, and the activities should be carried on by the personal incentives of the group. The material and financial profit from these activities must, however, not be seen as ‘life changing’ but it helps them to make ends meet. For example, women who participate on the communitarian field and cultivate basic food supplies such as cassava, corn and peanuts, do not see the share of the harvest as ‘sufficient’. Therefore women do this work besides their work on their own private field.

Concerning hand production work like knitting small seat coverings of wool, or embroidery, the sales were marginal, making this rather a social activity than a socio-economical one.<sup>140</sup> The soap production, as soap is a basic necessity, was more successful. By selling soap on the local market, they earned sufficient to purchase the components for the next production process. Also by selling 5 pieces of soap for their own benefit, they earned 500 francs (50 eurocents) a week.<sup>141</sup>

### *Collective Detraumatization*

Raped women, just like other women in *Dynamique Femme*, often participate in one or more groups. Yet the soap making program is in some parishes especially implemented for rape victims. These activities have the aim to collectively detraumatize the victims. By participating in a social group for a common cause they are drawn out of their shell, and moreover provided with a small income or knowledge to engage, for example, in soap production on their own. Through working in the group and talking to one another, they forget their worries for a moment. “It is to console them, and to let them forget the rape they had to bear.”<sup>142</sup> In the group, the personal situation of the victims is

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<sup>136</sup> Interview with responsible of DF widow group Kiliba on April 15, 2010 in Kiliba.

<sup>137</sup> In: Interview with 15 year old victim on March 19, 2010 in Kamituga.

<sup>138</sup> In the group of *Dynamique Femme* in Kiliba, for example, 85 women are member of which 37 are victims of a rape incident. 11 of those women were not Catholics. Although *Dynamique Femme* is a Catholic initiative, all non-Catholic participants are rape victims. Yet their religious identity, like their identity as rape victims, is not discussed in the group. DF’s representatives instead frame their ‘vulnerability’ as the reason for participation in the group.

<sup>139</sup> Some parishes have extended their activities for women. In Kamituga, the parish created the ‘Foyer Social’, a kind of social meeting place for women where they could follow literacy programs (like in some other parishes). In Kiliba, the group of widows also has a mat and basket production of corn leaves and plastic bags.

<sup>140</sup> Interview with responsible *Foyer Social* on April 27, 2010 in Kamituga.

<sup>141</sup> Interview with responsible *Foyer Social* & soap production group on April 27, 2010 in Kamituga.

<sup>142</sup> Interview with psychosocial assistant BdE on April 26, 2010 in Mwenga.

therefore not discussed: “No, they do not speak about it anymore. They do not even want to allude to it.”<sup>143</sup> Instead of detraumatization through collectively talking about what they have been through or using the group as a sounding board for personal problems, the approach of detraumatization in these groups is rather focused on keeping the personal rape incidents quiet.

Bearing rape also means a sense ‘dehumanization’ of the victim, especially when they are raped in a brutal manner. To combat this feeling of emptiness and worthlessness, rape survivors need to be ‘humanized’, i.e. made feel ‘human’ again. The social aspect is very important in this process. The coordinator of the soap making group said:

*“We place rape victims in a setting of a group so that they find themselves amidst a kind of family again.”<sup>144</sup>*

Thus, through social activities with other women, victims find a sense of social companionship.

Another element of these group meetings is providing women with advice or moral lessons. The group leaders inform them about “how to live in groups, how to forgive, how to convince those who do wrong to other people and how to reunite those who dispute.”<sup>145</sup> Others declared to advise women about subjects like undesired pregnancies, HIV/AIDS and also about sexual violence, however on practical issues such as ‘what to do if’.<sup>146</sup> These group meetings can be considered as an opportunity to enforce Catholic values and disperse a sense of Catholic social teaching among the women participating in the groups.

#### *Group Solidarity*

The integration of rape victims in social groups is thus seen as very important for the recovery of rape victims. However, the general cultural attitude of silentization, stigmatization and intolerance towards rape victims are not completely external to these groups. How do these processes affect the groups and their attitude towards rape victims?

According to the DF coordinator in Kiliba, there is solidarity between the members of *Dynamique Femme*. She said: “One is sensible of the wellbeing and grief of the members”.<sup>147</sup> For example, to become a DF member, women pay a monthly contribution of 100 franc (about 10 eurocents). This is used for what is called ‘reciprocal support’. In the village of Kiliba for example, there are nine ‘*shirika*’ and in each of them there is a *Dynamique Femme* responsible. When someone of the group loses a relative, is sick or gives birth to a baby, this is remarked by the DF responsible of the *shirika* where the member is living. The group supports that person with a small donation, often about 2000 franc (2 euro) and also gives a cloth and something to eat like cassava and some rice. Also in case of decease of a relative of a member, the members living in the same neighborhood assist the fellow member during the period of grief. They assist at the wake and stay the night, sleeping on cane mats. The other members of *Dynamique Femme* work on the field of the family of the deceased.<sup>148</sup>

In the group of widows in Kiliba, all activities are based on this system of reciprocal solidarity. Every Friday morning they unite to collectively make mats and baskets for the local market. The profit is not split but saved in order to be able to pay for medical costs or the funeral of one of the fellow widows. The DF coordinator remarks:

*“Without this initiative, widows risk being buried in a cane mat. At least they can now buy each other a coffin”.*

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<sup>143</sup> Interview with responsables *Foyer Social* & soap production on April 27, 2010 in Kamituga.

<sup>144</sup> Ibid.

<sup>145</sup> Ibid.

<sup>146</sup> Interview with psychosocial assistant BdE on April 26, 2010 in Mwenga.

<sup>147</sup> Interview with psychosocial assistant BdE/ DF coordinator Kiliba on May 17, 2010 in Kiliba.

<sup>148</sup> Ibid.

However, on the other hand the DF coordinator argued that Congolese women, also in the DF groups, are rather suspicious of one another. For example, in order to make these projects work, some women need to take the lead of for example the soap making process, the widows group or be treasurer. This turned out not to be an easy thing to do since rural Congolese women are not used to take up responsibilities outside their strict traditional role in the family. According to the coordinator of the DF-group of Kiliba, it was therefore very hard to find women who were willing and had the courage to take up the responsibility for the women groups.<sup>149 150</sup> This hinders them in becoming a powerful women's basis that forcefully fights against practices that undermine women's dignity. The DF coordinator argued: "The real enemies of women are women, not men."<sup>151</sup>

#### *Continuance of Silentization*

Whether this general group solidarity of *Dynamique Femme* groups is also expressed towards rape victims must partly be explained in relation to the question of silentization of rape. The social reintegration of victims in DF is not based on their identity as 'raped women'. Rather, it is maintained secret that a reasonable share of the *Dynamique Femme* members are in fact rape victims. Integrating them, but maintaining their circumstances quiet, constitutes a purposeful act of the leaders of the groups. Like the coordinator of DF in Kiliba said:

*"There are not merely victims in the groups because that would be hard. The victims would not accept that. If someone knows that 'the other' is a victim, she would be marginalized. Then one would point the finger to her. And then everyone else [in the village] knows: 'Over there, that's the communal field of the raped women; and those there, that are the raped women who are going to sew [...] or who are going knitting in the parish!' Then, you're assured of the fact they would never come back."*<sup>152</sup>

Even amidst the women's group, victim's identity is thus kept quiet to protect them from stigmatization of outsiders but also from some less sympathetic member within the group. They even purposefully add 'non-victims' to group activities, such as the soap making, in order to avoid possible stigmatization. In this group in Kamituga for example, where 30 of the 48 participants are rape victims, bearing rape as a common denominator is not expressed. As argued before, the detraumatization process is focused on 'not talking' and 'forgetting' as they do not want to reopen healing wounds.

Consequently, also among rape victims *themselves* they sometimes do not know that amidst their fellow members, with who they spend a considerable amount of time on the communal field, knitting or in the DF-meetings, there are women who underwent a similar fate. However in every parish this was a bit different.<sup>153</sup> The most striking example came from two victims interviewed for this research: Gabrielle and Elisa. While observing the women in their activities in the parish I always saw these two victims talking and walking side by side. In the two interviews I held separately with them, they declared they did not know any other member of the group who also had been raped,

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<sup>149</sup> Interview with psychosocial assistant BdE/ DF coordinator on May 17, 2010 in Kiliba.

<sup>150</sup> Also personally she was initially also looked down upon by the community for having taken up this role as 'coordinator'. As she has studied and had a good job as secretary in the local sugar mill, women look at her suspiciously. And still, she is the driving force of *Dynamique Femme* of Kiliba. To the annoyance of the DF coordinator herself, when she is not around, activities are barely executed neither do other women dare to take decisions themselves.

<sup>151</sup> Informal conversation with psychosocial assistant BdE/DF coordinator on May 7, 2010 in Kiliba.

<sup>152</sup> Interview with psychosocial assistant BdE/ DF coordinator on April 15, 2010 in Kiliba.

<sup>153</sup> In Mwenga, it is said that victims do recognize other victims and that they talk about their incidents when they are together at work in the field or while fabricating soap. Also in Kamituga the victims do recognize one another, but those who are not a victim in the group do not. The psychosocial assistant did observe the fact that after a while some victims began to trust one another and slowly became friends. In other places like Kiliba, where the community is much more 'closed'; the victims do not recognize other victims in the group.

while at the same time reaffirming their close mutual friendship.<sup>154</sup> The DF-coordinator, who is also the local BdE psychosocial assistant, affirmed that sometimes, like in this case, rape is maintained absolutely secret. This also urges her to carefully watch her steps. She claimed, “It is a bizarre game that I play here, isn’t it?”<sup>155</sup>

The general tendency in the Catholic women groups to maintain rape a secret, in spite of the fact that sometimes victims do recognize one another, is a kind of ‘survival strategy’ both on part of the victim as well as fostered by DF leadership. It protects victims from further stigmatization, yet it does also imply a certain lack of solidarity towards the rape victims in the women groups to openly share one’s grievances and collectively find comfort and consolation. These women’s groups thus do not function totally disconnected from the dominant cultural attitude towards rape victims although the general sphere in the groups expresses solidarity. However, also the imprinted shame and suffering of the victims themselves makes that completely breaking the silence on rape, also in these rather save and tolerant social structures, is still utopian.

### *Victim’s Resilience*

The *Bureaux d’Écoute* and *Dynamique Femme* did positively affect the mental and social activation of the rape victims who participated in these structures. Some of these rape victims I got to know, and they can be considered as very brave and courageous considering the hardships and challenges they have to face in their daily lives. Talking to them about their daily activities, most of them declared that they stood up at 5/5.30am in the morning after doing a morning prayer in bed. Then women generally get out to fetch water and, hence, start working on the field. However, sometimes they came back without any harvest and, thus, unable to prepare their children a normal meal. The victims acknowledged their hardship, but seemed to somehow ‘accept’ it and, hence, try to cope with it. For example:

*Alexia: besides working on her field every morning, her voluntarily activities for the priests (like washing clothes and making corn porridge), the daily work at home and participating in DF’s activities like the communitarian field, soap-production and making mats and baskets, she set up a small hand fabricated distillery to produce some sort of whiskey of corn and cassava. Every month Alexia produces about 12 bottles which she sells for 1000 francs each (about 1 euro) to meet urgent medical expenses. Also she takes care of an old and very poor rape victim who lives in her neighborhood and who comes to eat at Alexia’s place on a daily basis.*

*Elisa, who was repudiated by her husband, besides her activities on the field and in Dynamique Femme (communitarian field and soap making), crushes palm nuts every day to pay the school fees of their children. Another time, when I spoke to her, she told me that she worked in bricks production, but because she lacked the means to continue this production she changed to crushing palm nuts. This is extremely hard work with which one earns only 4500 francs for 25 kilo in three months. However, in order to sell it, she has to go by foot to the city of Uvira, which is at 25 km distance.<sup>156</sup>*

*Another 49-victim, Gabrielle, works besides her activities in the Catholic women groups and the work on the communitarian field, and her own cultivation of her field, three more days on the field of others as H/J, ‘homme par jour’. With this job she can pay the school and medical expenses.<sup>157</sup>*

<sup>154</sup> However, this was not completely true since the rape incident of the 53 year old woman was already spread by her former husband.

<sup>155</sup> Informal conversation with psychosocial assistant BdE/ DF coordinator Kiliba on May 4, 2010 in Kiliba.

<sup>156</sup> Interview with 53 year old victim on May 17, 2010 in Kiliba.

<sup>157</sup> Interview with 49-year old victim on May 17, 2010 in Kiliba.



Neither of them has lost her faith in God. Remarkably, all victims spoken to argued that God protected them during the incident, and prevented them from being killed. The fact that these three women are, by chance, all Catholic, and the way they actively take their lives in hand, seems like they indeed somehow live up to the Catholic ideal of courageous resilient women. Although it remains unclear to what extent the *Bureau d'Écoute* and *Dynamique Femme* have *exactly* been contributing to their current situation, their Faith and the support they received after the rape incident via CDJP clearly seem to be key contributors. However, it is most likely, but not a prerequisite of, that victims with a Catholic faith recover and integrate best socially through their participation in the Catholic based DF groups

### 3.3 Family Mediation

#### *Repairing Social Relations*

One of the remaining consequences of the sexual violence epidemic which the Catholic Church attempts to fight is the rejection of rape victims at the level of the family. Since for the Catholic Church marriage and family are the pillars of its faith, the cultural practices of repudiation produce a clash with Catholic dogma. It is understood that instability of the (Christian) family which is the 'original cell of social life' inherently destabilizes the foundations of society. In case of repudiated victims, the Catholic Church sees mediation between the victim and the husband and/or family as an obligation to the family and society at large. But mediation by Church-actors can also be seen as an attempt to battle immoral behavior, to prevent victims from having to prostitute themselves. A psychosocial assistant in Uvira argued:

*"Rejected victims, when they are not assisted [in the BdE], they can simply do nothing else but wandering in the streets."*<sup>158</sup>

#### *CDJP's approach*

Mediation is initiated by the psychosocial assistants of the *Bureaux d'Écoute*, priests, or functionaries of the CPJP and only between the victim and her family or husband.<sup>159</sup> However, CDJP Uvira has recently started a program in all its parishes to educate communitarian mediators and volunteers to combat (the consequences of) sexual violence. In all parishes, 4 mediators (2 men, 2 women) are trained to seek a constructive dialogue between victims and their families that enables both parties "to pursue a life in harmony and in group".<sup>160</sup>

Where practices in the field of mediation by other churches<sup>161</sup> seem to be rather ad-hoc (and moreover often prohibited amicable arrangements), the approach of the Catholic Church gives a more organized and structural impression. A very active organization in the field of communitarian and family mediation is for example CPJP Kamituga. Their desk is even a desk of reference for non-Catholics. From August 2009 till April 2010 they have successfully mediated in 8 rape cases. Regularly victims come to their office, sometimes in panic as they have no other place to go to. CPJP goes to see the husband or family where they talk to the most influential members and try to explain through a wide set of questions that it was an accident and not the will of the woman to get raped. However this process can take days, weeks or even months before the husband or family apologizes

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<sup>158</sup> Interview with psychosocial assistant CAMPS on April 7, 2010 in Uvira.

<sup>159</sup> Once I heard of '*arrangement amiable*' by a Catholic party, from one of my informants. When a 13 year old girl who was raped by her brother in law, an unidentified Catholic group has initiated a reunification between both families. This was done in spite of the disapproval of the young girl who did not want to forgive the perpetrator. (Interview with a 13 year old victim on March 19, 2010 in Kamituga) However, women in general, and especially young girls, often have no voice in family decisions. They cannot even talk in public or express their opinion when they are not asked to.

<sup>160</sup> This was argued during CDJP's workshop '*Formation des Mediateurs Communautaires*' on April 27, 2010 in Kamituga.

<sup>161</sup> Protestant or other churches also occasionally engage in mediation between the victims and her husband or family, or in 'amicable arrangements' because reconciliation is considered a Christian as well as an Islamic value.

to the victim (and her family) for being ignorant and having repudiated her. The vice-president says that, hence, also the victim needs to apologize:

*“She must kneel and reassure her husband and the rest that she would never do such a thing purposefully. ‘That God will punish me in case of derailment’. Then she ends begging pardon.”<sup>162</sup>*

This process is a major step towards reconciling the victim with her husband or family. Yet, it is interesting to see that women must literally *kneel* to make a vow and excuse themselves (for something they have basically not done) which somehow reaffirms women’s subordinate position.

Concluding, it is evident that the Catholic Church also in the fight against the sexual violence epidemic fulfils its role as socio-political actor. Through *Bureaux d’Écoute*, victims’ integration in *Dynamique Femme*, family mediation and awareness raising campaigns executed by the Catholic Justice and Peace commission, the Church works on a structural and integer manner to fight this problem. Especially through their BdE, the Church seeks to create safe and tolerant places which function as islands of integrity amidst an intolerant and harsh environment. However, these practices also reveal how the Church seeks to get a grip on the current moral and social decay. By strengthening rape victims mentally, spiritually and physically via the BdE, and socially, socio-economically and above all morally through Catholic women’s groups, the Church attempts to protect the vulnerable victim from giving way to immoral tendencies but also to enable them to appropriately fulfill their role as mothers, sisters, wives and daughters again on which lend the family and the entire society. By reactivating victims through these practices the Church somehow reconstructs their identity from presumed ‘worthless’ and ‘passive’ creatures to dignified, strong and active women.

However, these practices also reveal another ambiguous aspect of the relationship between the Church’s discourse and action. The Church evidently fights this epidemic by providing services and actively seeks to break the silence around rape through their *Bureaux d’Écoute*. On the other hand, victims’ detraumatization and social activation processes are based on the same notions of silentization which they try to fight. Detraumatization of rape victims is based on ‘forgetting’ and ‘not speaking about it’. This silentization is done purposefully by victim’s themselves but also encouraged by the CDJP staff in order to protect them from stigmatization both from within and outside the group. Also the environment that is supposed to foster victim’s social reintegration in the society is affected by the dominant cultural frame of rape.

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<sup>162</sup> Interview with vice-president CPJP on April 27, 2010 in Kamituga.

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## Chapter 4: Conclusions; Linking Reality to Analytic Framework

### *Understanding the Complexity and Ambiguity of the Discourse/Action Relationship*

#### 4.1 Discourse and Action: a Complex Relationship

This research has studied how the Catholic Church in Congo seeks to affect the position of rape victims in the Congolese society and did this by analyzing the discourse and practices of the Church in (a part of) the province of South Kivu in this respect. The way this needs to be analyzed is not by merely explaining how the Church *frames* sexual violence and the Church's *practices* through CDJP. But rather by understanding the wider discourse of the Church on sexual violence, and how this interrelates with 'action'. As Jabri (1996: 94-95) argued about social texts: "They do not describe things, they *do* things."<sup>163</sup> Discourse is thus means action, rather than operating solely at an abstract level as words or representations. Shi-Xu (2005: 21) eloquently argued:

*"Language and communication do not merely provide descriptions of reality: they also perform actions at the same time, which bring about changes to state of affairs. In other word, **discourse is not merely what people say, but also what they do by saying something.** This also implies that discourse is a form of social practice that has specific goals or purposes and consequences."<sup>164</sup>*

Besides the interrelatedness of discourse and action, the findings of this study have also revealed a certain *ambiguity* and the *complexity* in the relationship between the Church's discourse and practices. In the tradition of MDA, Norris and Jones (2005: 9) have argued that:

*"[T]he relationship between discourse and action is **dynamic and contingent**, located at a **nexus** of social practices, social identities and social goals.[...] MDA sees discourse as '**cycling**' through social actions: verbal and textual tools working their way into practices, material objects, and the **built environments** in which we interact."*

This complex relationship between the Church's discourse and action in this research is visible in different ways. On the one hand the Church in its *official public* framing, forcefully condemns the sexual violence epidemic and portrays it as something inhuman, destructive and unacceptable. The Church consequently acts upon this official public frame through their practices which are implemented via the CDJP structure. However, on the other hand, this sense of gravity that the Church attributes to the sexual violence epidemic in its official public frame is not translated into *all* practices of the Church.

For example the lack of forcefully speaking out against sexual violence during the mass reveals the discrepancy between the *official public* Catholic frame of rape and its practices. This was addressed by the President of the Provincial Committee for the Fight against Sexual Violence (CPLVS). She argued:

*"The churches [in general] are not visible in this struggle; they do not fight openly against sexual violence. This means talking about it: visible and openly! Because if they [the priests and nuns] would talk about sexual violence, the people would maybe listen to them."*<sup>165</sup>

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<sup>163</sup> Emphasis added.

<sup>164</sup> Ibid.

<sup>165</sup> Interview with President CPLVS on May 14, 2010 in Bukavu.

The Church's position is thus rather ambiguous in the sense that the Church on the one hand wants to fight sexual violence, and fight the silencing around rape. The Church does this even literally through their *Bureaux d'Écoute*. But the Church also *maintains* the silence during the masses, in the *Dynamique Femme* groups and are 'maintaining the silence' and 'forgetting' central notions at the basis of victim's detraumatization processes. The ambiguity in the relationship between the Church's discourse and practices is also visible in the lack of forcefully preaching against related cultural practices of shaming and blaming of rape victims.

Partially these discrepancies can be explained by the fact that the notion of 'discourse' is wider than merely public 'frames'. Focusing on the public frame of sexual violence of the Church will thus not portray the *total* discourse of the Church on this issue. But on the other hand the relationship between discourse and practices is not *linear* one as this study has revealed. A Mediated Discourse Analysis accounts for these discrepancies. According to Jones (2001b):

*"MDA problematizes the relationship between discourse and action, noting that it is not always possible to 'read' social actions from discourse or to expect certain forms of discourse to inevitably accompany certain actions."*

Contrary to CDA, which starts with the notion that 'discourse opens a window on social problems' (Scollon 2001): "MDA opens this window wider to include things like objects, gestures, non-verbal sounds and built environments" (Norris and Jones 2005: 9). These discrepancies between what people say, and what people do, can be explained by knowing that discourse is simply also that what is *not* said or is *not openly* expressed. However, this *does* produce certain action and can (in)directly bring about changes to state of affairs. The relative silence on sexual violence in the masses, the confession of rape victims, the denial of the Holy Communion (whether personal or imposed), and the Catholic symbols of Virgin Mary and *Soeur Anuarite* in particular, also produce information. They are *also* social texts, albeit *hidden social texts*, which are part of the discourse. By being part of the wider discourse of the Church on rape, they have consequences and produces social action. As Jabri argued, "being active they [social texts/discourses] have social and political implications." (1996: 94-95).

## 4.2 Understanding the Complexity and Ambiguity

The complexity and ambiguity in the relationship between discourse and practices of the Catholic Church in the fight against the sexual violence epidemic, which explains the way the Church acts the way they act and consequently affects the solidarity towards and the social reintegration of rape victims, can be explained in four general arguments.

### 1) Religious Puritanism

The first argument deals with the Church's understanding of blame on part of rape victims. Although on the one hand the Church seeks to undo the massive blame which is culturally inflicted upon rape victims, delving deeper in the Church's rhetoric reveals a less tolerant perspective. The more hidden social texts and practices, particularly the act of confessing, denying the Holy Communion and the symbol of *Anuarite*, reveal that the clergy, to a certain extent, and victims alike find that bearing rape somehow affects their spiritual bond with God, purity, moral and spiritual values. Choosing life over death in case of threatening rape attacks, thus bearing rape instead of forcefully resisting it, means in the eyes of the Church that one has somehow 'chosen' to rather violate God's law and Christian values and be raped than protect their bodily and spiritual integrity and hereby the Christian values and be killed. The fact is that in practice any victim prefers life over death and do not resist rape till the very end. In this sense, the Church sees bearing rape - without forcefully trying to fight the perpetrator - as a sin or as something which victims must be blamed for. This is due to the admiration for martyrdom among Catholic clergy which is reinforced in Congo because of the

worship of the Congolese nun; Blessed *Soeur Anuarite*, who resisted rape. Forcefully preaching against the blamelessness of rape victims is thus not likely to be expected from a Catholic puritan perspective.

### 2) Facing Moral Decay

Secondly, the Church does not widely preach in favor of rape victims for another reason: they are afraid to contribute to the immoral behavior of a lot of women in the contemporary eastern Congolese society who are engaged in (survival) prostitution, pre-marital sex and other forms of sexual debauchery. Through these 'immoral' practices women disrespect and undermine their moral and spiritual values. However, these tendencies are not unrelated to the societal poverty. A Catholic priest in Kiliba argued: "*Une ventre affamé n'a pas d'oreilles*"<sup>166</sup>, i.e. "You can't reason with an empty belly", which explains the irrational and immoral behavior of people out of poverty. Another priest argued in the same key:

*"Men and women do not protect their values as much as before the war. With the poverty all this has become 'business as usual'. Women these days do not make love out of love anymore; they make love in order to survive."*<sup>167</sup>

Women are also considered to incite sexual violence themselves through provocative behavior and sexy clothing and they should, according to the Church, be blamed for that. Forcefully preaching *against* dominant cultural practices of blaming and shaming rape victims and preaching *in favor of* the blamelessness of victims, might be interpreted by the population as a safeguard for the sexual debauchery of women. The fear of the Church might be to indirectly trivialize and encourage these practices.

The interrelatedness of sexual violence with moral decay, for which women are held partly responsible, and the puritan interpretation of blame among rape victims, makes that the Church does not widely speak out against the blaming of 'victims of sexual violence'. Whether victims are indeed to be blamed differs, according to the Church, from case to case. Yet, considering the already extensive blaming and shaming and repudiation of rape victims, this ambiguous attitude of the Church might reinforce the dominant cultural practices rather than countering them.

### 3) Clash between Culture and Church

The third argument which explains the ambiguous attitude of the Church is the tension between culture and the Church and the power relation between both concepts. The reason for not forcefully speaking out against sexual violence in the Church depends upon the sensitivity of this subject both on part of the Church as on part of the general culture, where openly talking about sexuality is considered a taboo and therefore 'shocking'. The president of CPLVS argued:

*"To say NO against sexual violence, to raise your voice and speak out loud against this phenomenon, that's what missing on part of the churches. Every church has their adherents and community you see. And the homily is the perfect chance to talk to your clerical community about this. [...] But, here with us, sex is not something which you discuss out loud. It is rather hidden. And the priests and pastors come out of this same structure."*<sup>168</sup>

The hesitancy to preach out loud thus partly depends on the clergy's own cultural descent. As argued earlier, social structures are both enabling but also *constraining* us: we make them and are made by them.

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<sup>166</sup> Interview with Catholic priest on May 4, 2010 in Kiliba.

<sup>167</sup> Interview with Catholic priest on April 18, 2010 in Kiliba.

<sup>168</sup> Interview with President CPLVS on May 14, 2010 in Bukavu.

Sexual violence is also a sensitive topic in the Church because it touches upon deep-rooted gender roles and gender power relations. In a society where women are still considered as subordinate to men and as the possession of husbands or families, preaching in favor of women during the mass, in whatever sense, severely clashes with cultural ideas of the role of women in society. This explains the disapproving reactions of male adherents when a priest in Kiliba addressed men on their violent behavior vis-à-vis women in the domestic sphere. It was argued by men that the Church is not supposed to interfere in these cases. Therefore extensive pleading in favor of women in cases of sexual violence would upset a large share of the male adherents. This could consequently endanger the Church's power and position in wider society. The power of cultural norms and values is thus in many cases stronger than what a church has to say about it.

This type of 'clash' I also experienced myself during a workshop for local women of Kitutu about women's participation in local participative governance groups:

*Unlike in other parishes where CDJP held this workshop, in Kitutu not only the whole female population but also the entire male population came to attend the workshop. It was evident that they did not want to let them 'alone' and wanted to know what CDJP staff had to tell them. In the discussion round men successively took the microphone to make their point of view clear. They did not agree with the suggestion of CDJP to let women also participate in local governance affairs and said women should rather occupy themselves with domestic tasks and leave decision-making functions up to men. They argued that there is no parity between men and women in Congo. "There is no peace; only in peace there can be parity!" "In Europe there is peace, but not here in Kitutu. Here the rules are different!"<sup>169</sup>*

It is true that Kitutu is until today threatened by the FDLR who frequently pillage the village and rape local women. This example makes clear that sometimes, also the activities of CDJP, are severely undermined by local cultural values and gender power relations.

Together these two examples demonstrate the rise in the eastern Congolese society of what is called 'militarized masculinity'. In many (post-)war societies, men, partly due to the poor living conditions, fail to live up to 'masculine' norms such as being the breadwinner, protecting the family and obtaining multiple partners. This is considered to be an explanation of their frustration and anger which is mainly directed against women (Eriksson Baaz & Stern 2010: 98; Mechanic 2004: 20). According Chris Dolan (in Cleaver eds. 2002: 77):

*"Paradoxically, [...] [as the markers of masculinity such as] marriage, fatherhood, provision and protection become harder to achieve, they become more desirable as they appear to provide anchors and points of leverage in the midst of economic, social and political uncertainty created by war."*

As their masculinity is undermined, men often seek to restore it in the only way they know: unleashing their frustration on women, becoming more aggressive, authoritarian and sexually unaccountable (Mechanic 2004: 21-22).

#### 4) Questioning Religiosity

The fourth argument which not so much explains the ambiguity of the Church's position in the sexual violence epidemic but more the complexity of the Church's contribution to fight this problem, relates to the profoundness of faith among the local population. The Catholic leader in Kiliba argued: "the religious values do no longer constitute the main point of reference for the majority of the population".<sup>170</sup> A young priest, recalling the sermon he held previously, touched upon this issue:

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<sup>169</sup> Field notes on March 18, 2010.

<sup>170</sup> Interview with Catholic priest on April 20, 2010 in Kiliba.

*“Last Sunday during the mass I talked about this topic. It was about love. About the love for God. I showed people that: In Central Africa there live a lot of Christians, in Burundi, Congo and also Rwanda, in some parts about 97 % is Christian?!... However, I wanted to show the people that there where Christians live, there is war. While God has forbidden to kill other people! So I say to the people, albeit in different wordings, that we live in a **decorative Christianity**. It stays at the surface; it does not reach the roots of our hearts, or faith. It’s decorative! [...] Yet, at the same time, the Sunday’s service is fuller than full.”<sup>171172</sup>*

However, this imbalance between religious belief and practice must not *only* be attributed to the disillusioning impact the war has on the population but, according this priest, also to the manner of evangelization by the Catholic Church:<sup>173</sup>

*“The Church initially functioned as a kind of NGO, as a kind of social service for the local population. The penetration of the gospel was [therefore] not really serious [...]. The people came to the missionary because they had money. And because of that, one became a Catholic.”<sup>174</sup>*

In other words, the Catholic Church attracted adherents in the first place because of the services they provided and not because they necessarily felt morally convinced to adhere to the Catholic belief. This priest emphasizes the deficit of the hierarchical and vertical character of the Catholic Church which impedes the population to really feel morally and spiritually connected to the dogma of the Church.<sup>175</sup>

#### *Discourse in Action*

This study has especially shown that the relationship of the Church’s discourse and action is an outcome of a continuous process where different social and cultural intolerant practices, the identities of rape victims and the social goals of the Church in a built environment of eastern Congo which has to deal with poverty, ‘militarized masculinity’ and moral decay, all come together. Within this complex social world, the Church seeks to balance between all these different processes to remain standing and pursue spreading the message they want to spread. As Norris and Jones (ibid) argued, the relationship between discourse and action, “is manifested in the *tension* between the kinds of actions that discourse and other cultural tools make possible and the ways people purposefully mix these tools in response to their immediate circumstances” (ibid). In this sense, the Church purposefully remains silent about certain issues in their fight against sexual violence as they do not want to suddenly trigger cultural resistance against the Church and reinforce moral decay, as that might put their position in society at risk. The Church’s discourse is thus contingent and *in action* as it cycles through social action, tendencies, and circumstances in the built environment of Congo.

Analyzing the Church’s attitude through MDA’s perspective of ‘discourse in action’ does not only highlight the complex and dynamic social interaction between discourse and action, but it also

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<sup>171</sup> Interview with Catholic priest on May 4, 2010 in Kiliba.

<sup>172</sup> Emphasis added.

<sup>173</sup> From the perspective of the church, evangelization was the primary goal, and the number of converts baptized was the measure of its success. The Church’s function from the perspective of the state was to accomplish Belgium’s “civilizing mission” by creating a healthy, literate and disciplined work force, one that was obedient to the governing authorities. Although different in emphasis, church and state goals were so complementary that they were perceived by the population as sharing the same purpose. As Joseph Cardinal Malula, who was for many years the head of the church in Congo, put it, “For our people, the Church was the State, and the State was the Church.” (in: Schatzberg 1988: 177) The population considered religion as a matter for the Whites.

<sup>174</sup> Interview with Catholic priest on May 4, 2010 in Kiliba.

<sup>175</sup> A pontifical level of this problem is also acknowledged and has announced a ‘Pontifical Council for the New Evangelization’ to deal with situations where the presence of the Gospel in people’s daily lives seems to be all but lost. This ‘New Evangelization’ attacks the hierarchical attitude of the Church and rather centers around the idea of ‘the Church as a family’.

focuses on the – positive - social action it produces. This research illuminates how rape victims in Congo, dealing with social stigma, do not (have to) stay deterministically in their marginalized identities but they rather, with help of the Catholic Church, seek to slowly but surely reconstruct their social identities. The Church, via the BdE and *Dynamique Femme*, encourages them to throw off their cloak of helplessness, self-blame and shame and rather see themselves as powerful, courageous and dignified women who take their life in hand rather than submissively accept everything they go through. The Church thus fosters a sense of *resilience* and *resistance* among women to say ‘NO’ against (sexual) violence, while at the same time strengthening women to defend their own dignity and moral and spiritual values .

It is precisely the two notions of *resistance* against sexual violence and *resilience* among women, and rape victims in particular, that are central to the way the Church affect the social position of rape victims. The Church seeks to *balance* them in order to condemn sexual violence on the one hand without running the risk that they affect their own Catholic dogma and position in the Congolese society.

#### **4.3 Fostering Solidarity and Social Reintegration or Not?**

In the first place, it must be understood that the Catholic Church generally seriously opposes the dominant cultural negative attitude vis-à-vis rape victims. Especially through its CDJP structure, it seeks to counter the sexual violence epidemic by providing reliable and structural services for rape victims and awareness campaigns about sexual violence in the province of South Kivu. By services like the *Bureaux d'Écoute*, victim's integration in *Dynamique Femme* groups and family mediation, the Church encourages societal solidarity and reintegration of rape victims. The BdE in particular create islands of integrity amidst an intolerant society where silentization of rape is norm. Moreover, they create psychosocial and medical treatment which is of great importance for the victim's social reintegration. The DF-groups place the victim in a rather safe environment of only women which makes victim's feel 'alive' again and as 'socially accepted'. Through the mediation activities the Church seeks to encourage, in the most direct manner, the social reintegration of rejected rape victims. Additional awareness raising campaigns are implemented to achieve more solidarity and knowledge about sexual violence among the wider population.

In contrast, there are *external* motivations which counter-balance these practices of the Church. As we have discussed earlier, there is a persistent cultural resistance against everything that seeks to change dominant cultural practices (the 'blaming and shaming' rape victims, but also the civil practices of sexual violence). Especially those initiatives which imply a shift in the unequal gender power relations and seek to, to a certain extent, empower women, are blocked by the local male population. This is even more reinforced through the rise of post-war 'militarized masculinities' and poverty. In the relationship between culture and religion there is another obstacle that hinders the Church's initiatives as the profoundness of religiosity among the Congolese population is questioned.

Nevertheless there are also *internal* motivations that counteract the Church's initiatives like the ambiguity on the blamefulness of victims of sexual violence as well as the silentization of sexual violence during masses. The partly hidden social transcripts of the Church, like other forms of discourse, produce action and have social and political implications. However, these do not have to be necessarily positive. These underlying messages and convictions of the Church does affect rape victims because it prevents the Church from fully preaching against sexual violence and the general accusation of rape victims. This does *not* contribute to fighting the silence, neither in creating a more tolerant society for rape victims; nor does it encourage their social reintegration.

The Church thus does not everything in its power to get a hold on this epidemic. The dominant cultural frame of rape does not receive enough resistance from the Church despite being a central ideological *and* socio-political institution in eastern Congo in order to make this frame counter. However, in and of itself, countering this dominant frame is not an easy task and must be



seen as a slow and complex path. Nevertheless, the Church should try to ease its attitude on some moral issues like the sinfulness of bearing rape incidents, although this is unlikely to happen. At least should the Church be very clear about this to their adherents and the wider society, make very clear distinctions about what the Church sees as acceptable and what not and try to find manners to plea more extensively in favor of the *real* victims in this struggle who can definitely use a bit of extra help.

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## Appendix 1: Context of War<sup>176</sup>

Congo's brutal colonial history started under the Belgian King Leopold II. Under his ruling Congo, which was then considered to be his 'private property', was practically a euphemism for the brutality of colonialism. The level of killing in this epoch has been compared to that of the Holocaust and rape of entire villages has been a popular tactic of Leopold's administrators for keeping the local population pliant so that wealth (chiefly rubber and ivory) could be easily extracted for the mother country and its corporations (Hochschild 1998; 2009). Then for 52 years, Congo was a Belgian colony. Yet, after its independence in 1960, Congo was in 1965 taken over by General Mobutu. He had taken over a raw country still reeling from the impact of a poorly prepared decolonization, followed by civil war. During these 27 years Mobutu ruled his totalitarian regime which led to complete deterioration of the country, which he renamed 'Zaire'.

The 1994 Rwandan genocide sparked a new era of violence in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) when two million Hutu refugees fled into the eastern region of the country. The *Interahamwe* Hutu military quickly dominated the Congolese refugee camps and began attacking Rwandan Tutsis. In anticipation of an *Interahamwe* Hutu invasion, the Tutsi-dominated Rwandan government supplied weapons to the Tutsi people of Eastern DRC. In an attempt to control Eastern DRC and to combat the Hutu militia, a Congolese rebel group led by Laurent-Désiré Kabila joined forces with Rwandan and Ugandan troops in late 1996. After establishing a foothold in the East, Kabila's military marched to Kinshasa and, in May 1997 seized control of the country. Kabila's rise to power and the fighting that accompanied it would later become known as the "First Congo War".

In an attempt to reorganize the nation in July 1998, President Kabila ousted the Rwandan troops who had helped put him into office and ordered all Rwandan and Ugandan forces out of DRC. Kabila's actions precipitated a joint invasion by Rwanda, Uganda and Burundi in what became known as the "Second Congo War" or "Africa's World War" (as it involved 8 African nations) and was fought from 1998 to 2003. Conflict continued subsequent to the official end of the war, resulting in an estimated 5.4 million deaths between 1998 and 2007 making it the deadliest conflict since World War II. Millions of people were displaced from their homes and many were forced to seek asylum in neighboring countries. Ethnic violence between Hutus and Tutsis was responsible for many of the deaths, although this is a gross oversimplification. There were many competing interests and varying agendas, usually surrounding the struggle to gain control over DRC's rich reserves of diamonds, gold and coltan.

With the signing of the Luanda Peace Agreement, the "Second Congo War" officially ended in 2003 and a new government was elected in 2006. However, the violence and insecurity continue, particularly in Eastern DRC, where armed militias exert local political influence in the largely unpoliced region. The *Forces Démocratiques de Libération du Rwanda* (FDLR), whose Hutu leaders are linked to the Rwandan genocide, is believed to be largely responsible for the region's instability. The other armed group responsible for much of the fighting and displacement is the Congolese Tutsi rebel group, *Congrès National Pour la Défense du Peuple* (CNDP) led by General Laurent Nkunda. However, there are multiple other armed groups such as the Mai-Mai, the Burundian forces FNL and FDD who have entered the fray.

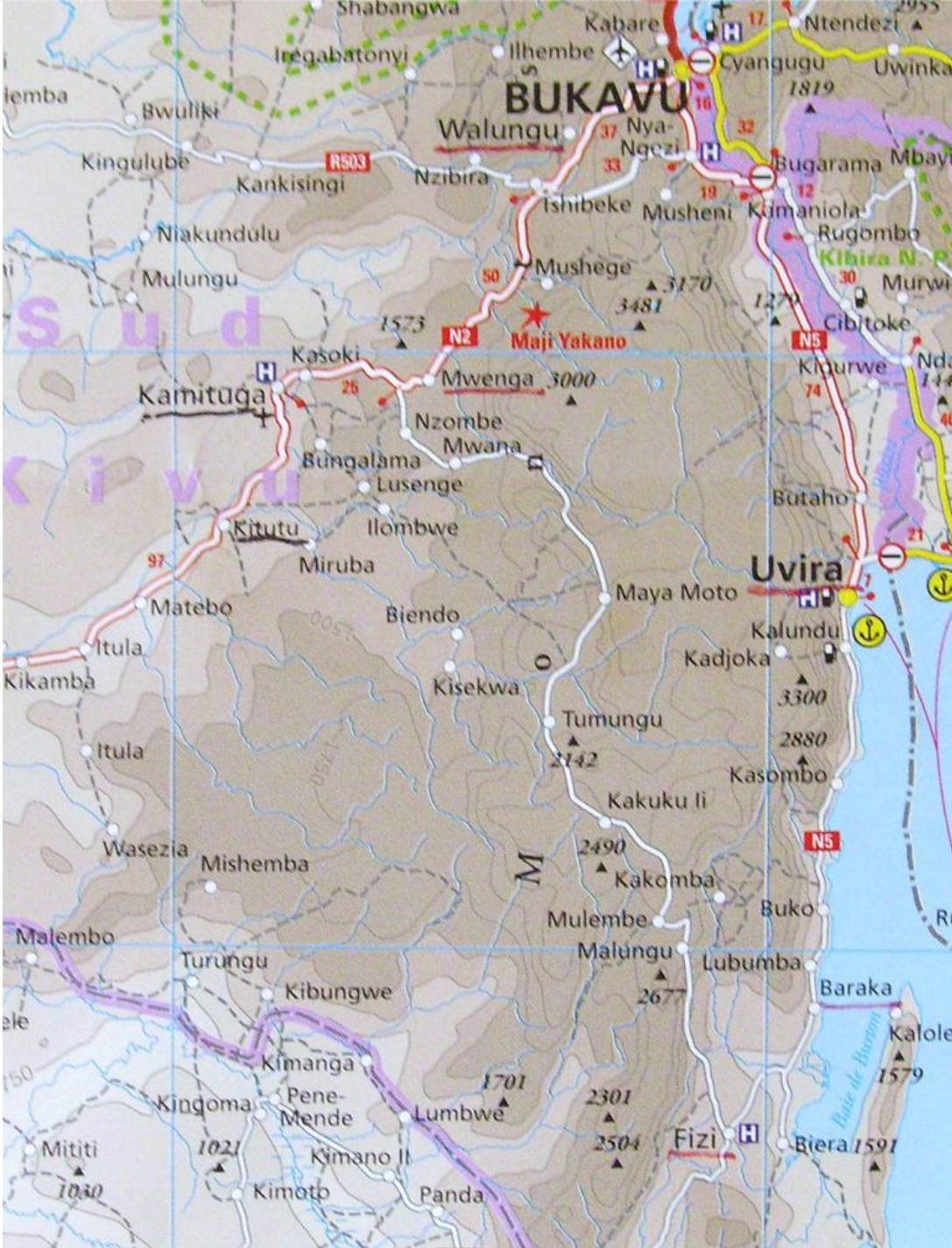
In January of 2009, the Rwandan and Congolese governments joined forces against the FDLR in an attempt to disband it. Under this agreement, Rwandan soldiers were permitted to enter DRC to uproot the FDLR in exchange for Rwanda removing Nkunda from power. Nkunda was arrested in late

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<sup>176</sup> Distracted from "Now, the World is Without me": An Investigation of Sexual Violence in Eastern Democratic Republic of Congo, Harvard Humanitarian Initiative & Oxfam International, April 2010. Because this study is not a historical analysis of Congo's war the author uses an existing analysis of the conflict situation in order to focus on the core topic of *this* research.

January 2009 and the CNDP signed a peace treaty with the government to become a political party in March 2009. However, the effort to disband the FDLR continues and has caused more fighting and more displacement in the eastern Provinces of North and South Kivu. It is estimated that up to 45,000 civilians continue to die each month, primarily from disease and malnutrition and an estimated 1.8 million civilians have been displaced from their homes.

Appendix 2: Map of South Kivu





### Appendix 3: Photos



Above: the landscape in the inlands of South Kivu.  
Under: the by parish in Kiliba, damaged by war.





Above: CDJP's participation in the parade in Uvira on International Women's Day (March 8, 2010).  
Under: Bureau d'Écoute in Mwenga.





Above: CDJP's reception in Mugombe; a parade of local women.  
Right under: music and women dancing during CDJP's reception Kamituga.  
Left under: Women during a CDJP's seminar on Local Participative Governance in Kamituga.





**Above: Dynamique Femme women, predominantly widows, producing mats.  
Under: Women in Foyer Social in Kamituga and their embroidery activities.**





Above: CDJP staff explains a group women, including young victims of rape, about the sewing project.  
Under: Victims and non-rape victims harvesting together.

