CHALLENGES ENDURED BY WOMEN DURING THE CONFLICT-RELATED SEXUAL VIOLENCE IN THE DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF THE CONGO

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Abstract

This paper presents an analysis and discussion of the effects of sexual violence from the perspective of women survivors in the eastern province of the DRC. It aims to understand how these challenges affected their livelihood capacities. This research was conducted in the South Kivu Province. Qualitative data was collected by means of one-on-one interviews and focus group discussions. Data was elicited from the experiences of 56 women who are survivors of sexual violence. The recorded data was manually transcribed and analysed thematically through the lens of the feminist theory and by means of the gendered livelihood strategies approach. The findings suggest that the impact and consequences of sexual violence clearly led to the loss of a sustainable way of life, which is a major factor that influences women's livelihood coping strategies negatively.

Keywords: War in the Congo - -Women survivors -war's impact - livelihood Strategy-South Kivu

Introduction

The impact of sexual violence (SV) on women's lives has been felt throughout the DRC since the eruption of the liberation war in 1996. Although the war and conflicts in the DRC are presumed to be a continuation of troubles that erupted in the colonial era, the long war that started in 1996 and officially ended in 2003 was unique because it featured widespread and horrific sexual violence. In his book entitled 'Dancing in the glory of monsters: The collapse of the Congo and the great war of Africa', Stearns (2012) argues that the horrors of the war that began in 1996 in the DRC are not fictional stories, but are events that are hardly comprehensible to outsiders. Stearns further notes that, in this war, human beings conducted savage, mindless and inhuman acts, yet they were supported by political rationales and motives. In Civil war and development policy, Collier (2003:1) demonstrates that in modern war civilian ("non-combatant") including women and girls are the most affected. The atrocities committed against them destroyed their physical bodies, their means of living, and their minds. Johnson et al. (2010) on impact of conflict-related sexual violence describes various impacts on survivors such as physical abuses (physical assault, amputation), economic violation (destruction of property, home and other means of living already built) and movement violation (capture, kidnapping and forced displacement). Yet most authors like

Stearns(2012), Peterman *et al*. (2011), Johnson *et al*. (2010) and Bastick *et al*. (2007) put an emphasis on this impacts, few has human-centred approaches to understanding women survivors views on how the conflict-related sexual violence has impact their day to day means of living. However, analysing the impact of conflict-related sexual violence from the view of women survivors would give a clear insight on how to link sexual violence impacts and people's capacity to cope to these impacts.

Sexual violence severely impacts not only women survivors and their households, but also the community at large. Providing a global overview of SVand its implications for the security sector in the context of armed conflicts in 51 countries across Africa, Europe, the Middle East, America, and Asia over the past 20 years, Bastick *et al.* (2007) describe the physical, psychological and socio-economic impacts of SV on survivors. Their findings have been confirmed by other studies that were conducted in developing countries (Cindi *et al*., 2006; Arieff, 2010; Zraly & Nyirazinyoye, 2011).

Methods and Techniques

This research used both focus group and individual interviews method. According to Krueger and Casey (2014), it is useful in research to decide on a shift between focus groups and individual interviews considering that some participants can be reluctant to share their feelings in group discussion.

Focus groups was used as an appropriate environment to collect stories, to stimulate participants who could not remember to describe their stories which would not have been possible in individual interviews (Krueger & Casey, 2014). Focus groups was also used to select key individuals who could provide valuable information for this study and with whom researchers could engage to collect in-depth information through one-to-one interviews. The focus group method was important for collecting data on participants' perceptions of the everyday experiences of survivors of sexual violence as this method would be less threatening to the participants and would provide an environment where the participants could discuss their perceptions, ideas, opinions, and thoughts collaboratively (Onwuegbuzie *et al.*, 2009). Focus group discussions were conducted in each selected area in series of two or three focus group discussions until the participants did not produce any further ideas that were different from those that had already been collected. This study conducted a series of seven focus group discussions. The shortest lasted fourty minutes and the longest ninety minutes.

The study randomly selected six or seven participants for each focus group discussion. During the focus group discussions, the participants indicated other survivors of sexual violence who had other experiences and some of them were selected to be interviewed. As for the first focus group discussions, the FOs and VAs were sent to meet them and get their preliminary consent.

For the one-on-one interviews, particular participants were selected either from the focus groups because authors needed to collect further information from them, or they

were cited by other participants as being more experienced. In the one-on-one interviews, authors would introduce particular topics relevant to the participant and let her develop her ideas. Authors also used the probing technique to gain more details from the respondents' ideas. Primary participants were seventheen survivors of sexual violence who met the criteria for inclusion, as were listed above.

Authors also used individual interviews with four social workers (FO or VA) who had lived with survivors of sexual violence for five years or more and who were concerned with the issues addressed by this study. The involvement of these participants in the study was particularly vital not only because they could provide additional information regarding their general views about the research, but also because they could provide psychological support just in case some psychological trauma was triggered in the participants as they responded to the questions.

As recommended by Carlsen and Glenton (2011), this study used purposive as part of non-probability sampling to conduct in-depth research on the sensitive topic under investigation. In this purposive sampling technique authors used PAPROF's Field Officers (FOs) to recruit survivors of sexual violence. Thus, 56 survivors of sexual violence were interviewed as primary participants. Participants were selected from women survivors of sexual violence who were members of VSLA led by PAPROF. To ensure a fair selection process, the women were selected from their groups first by the respective FOs during their ordinary meetings.

To transcribe the data, audio recording data were converted into digital text and according to Saldaña (2015:9), this is preferred process for small-scale studies (Saldaña 2015:29) to help the researcher focusing more on data than on the software and then own and have more control over the work. This decision to manually transcribe and analyse the data was also encouraged by Ajagbe *et al.* (2015:332). According to these authors, manual analysis that consists of reading data or listening to data from an audio recorder, marking data by hand, and coding and categorizing them can be appropriated in situations where the researcher has on-hand a database of fewer than 500 pages of transcript. It is also suitable when the researcher wants to be closer to data, can easily control the process, and feels comfortable rather than using software (Ajagbe *et al.* 2015:332). Findings of this research are going to be discussed in the following pages as themes generated in the analysis of data.

- **"And from there our curse began"**

When the war erupted in 1996 women were confronted with an atrocity that they never imagined they would experience – sexual violence with extraordinary ferocity. This fundamentally jeopardized their livelihood. Eliza called it the "beginning of women's curse" in the Congo:

> *"I don't know what to say because each of us was surprised in various ways: one at the river, maybe another in the fields or at home at night.* [She was silent for a few moments, deep in thought.] *And from there our curse began! We could not determine where they came from – from which country or*

> *region. Even if we could see their faces we could not recognize them or even understand their language. But we were all raped by more than two aggressors."*

While there was consensus among the respondents that Kaniola in the western region was a particular den of sexual and gender-based violence where numerous crimes were committed, they indicated that the perpetrators of sexual violence attacked anywhere and at any time. Shombe said:

> *"I was on my way to Kalonge for business when they attacked me and other women who were with me by surprise. There were four well-armed men. They called upon four more men which made eight. They started raping us. Each man took his turn to rape each of us. This happened in the forest of Kabanzi just before Kalisi. They were very black and we wondered from which country they were, as they could not be Congolese. They were speaking a strange language but could speak a bit of Swahili."*

The participants contended that they commonly suffered because of these atrocities in their rural home areas. For example, perpetrators attacked women who were on their way to the market to buy food for the family. They stopped them, stripped them naked and then raped them all in turn. Attacks also occurred after dark, as was described by Eliza:

> *"Sometimes they would come at night. We heard them pounding on the door. They were soldiers. I couldn't distinguish them from Congolese soldiers but we were told that they were 'Interahamwe.'"*[1]

Women participants in this research agreed that the sexual violence was conducted with extreme violence. Bintu said:

> *"I was nine months pregnant. It was a Sunday. We learnt they had just killed our chief − Muhandikire. I heard the sound of guns crackling and worried too much and while still worried, I saw seven men coming towards me saying, 'You will see today, we just killed your chief.' They beat me and threw me there* [she indicates a distance of three meters].*"*

In respondents' view, the perpetrators of the atrocities against them functioned like a pack of animals, as a small group summoned more men so that they could reinforce the pack to rape a small group of women. They considered women as animals, calling them dogs and raping them with unprecedented cruelty. Not only did they gang-rape all and cut the throat of one victim a day, but they ordered the survivors to drink the blood of the murdered woman while they had to wait in agonising trauma to discover who the next victim of this slaughter would be.

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[1] *'Interahamwe' is a Kinyarwanda word meaning 'those who stand together'. It was a militia group that was formed in the period leading up to the Rwandan genocide which led to many of the killings. They were known to be violent men (Hogg, 2010). They were a splinter group from the former 'Forces Armée Rwandese' (Armed Forces of Rwanda) that was dominated by the Rwandan Hutu ethnic group. It is estimated that around 1.2 million Hutu refugees fled to the eastern DRC (former Zaire) following the Tutsi genocide in 1994 (Aptel, 2010).*

Women were victims of all the different combatants. Soldiers came from neighbouring countries such as Rwanda (the Hutu and the Tutsi), the official army (FARDC)[8] and militia groups (the Mai Mai,[2] Mudungu 40,[3] and Chiviri[4]). All of them looted, raped and tortured, and territories were occupied by each of these groups in turn. They came in groups as armed combatants to occupy and conquer. To establish their power and superiority they raped, looted, tortured and killed. Secure in their authoritarian position, they started raping in public. Children and villagers were gathered together to view the acts of rape. Some men became traumatized to the extent that they fled the area and left their wives without support. Women victims and survivors of sexual violence were severely traumatized too. This phenomenon is linked to the feminist theory of rape as presented by Foucault (1984) and later revised by Henderson (2007) who posits that rape is a crime of violence, not sex which is interpreted as a form of assault whose sexual nature is irrelevant, and which is analogous to other violent crimes.

The literature (Ayele 2011, Kurtenbach and Seifert 2010, Cox 2008) refers to wartime sexual violence and the atrocities that were committed in South Kivu in eastern DRC. The motives for the particularly brutal manner of the sexual violence in this area were elaborated by Ayele (2011), Kurtenbach and Seifert (2010), and Cox (2008). These authors argue that the predominant motive for the sexual violence was the desire of male armed groups (official, non-official, and militias) to exert dominance over women and the population. In this instance women's bodies were objects that had to be conquered to achieve and demonstrate a position of dominance. The respondents' testimonies clearly demonstrated the use of the aggressors' power over women, both as men and as armed aggressors. This is demonstrated by the respondents' comments such as: "*They took us and did whatever they wanted*" and "*They sent a letter of whatever it was that happened to us to the local authorities.*" The point was to show that these men could do with women as they pleased in an unrestrained manner.

▪ **Crumble Women's Capabilities for future livelihood activities**
The traumatic experience of sexual violence generally destroys victims physically and psychologically as it often results in sickness and physical weakness. Kika shared her experience of physical trauma:

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[2] The Mai Mai was a local militia group that claimed to protect the integrity of the country against foreign armed forces in the eastern Congo. They founded their 'army' on traditional forces that protected volunteer members against modern firearms.

[3] Mundudo 40 was a group of Mai Mai led by Mundudo in the west and north of South Kivu.

[4] Chiviri was the leader of another group of Mai Mai in the west and north of South Kivu. This group was integrated into the national army during the program of disarmament, demobilization, repatriation, reintegration and resettlement.

> *"Meantime, those who were in my room started beating me terribly. They took a big pestle that I used to close the rabbit hutch with and they hit me on the head and they called those who were in the other room, telling them that they had already killed me."*

In many instances this impact was so severe that these women were no longer able to work:

> *"That is why you saw those cases we were sending to Panzi where they have been repairing cases of prolapse and fistula.[5] You meet women who are so damaged that they cannot function normally or do work as usual, so they don't feel like working because of the damage to many of their organs that were destroyed."*

From a survivor's viewpoint, Namavu reported the following:

> *"The negative impact of that is, they may rape you like that and infect you with diseases that create weakness in you, so that you won't be able to work the way you used to work. Sometimes they raped and injured you with their gun, then when you went to the hospital they found that the womb was destroyed."*

Rape negatively affected the survivors in all aspects of their lives. The greatest impact was physical, as survivors of rape became unable to conduct their normal day-to-day activities. In the DRC, it is custom that women conduct all the domestic activities including cooking, cleaning, doing the laundry, cultivating the land, and at the same time raising children. After they had been raped, many women were afflicted with different diseases including HIV, STIs, and others had fistulas which were repaired but the women never fully healed. These persistent medical issues prevented the survivors from continuing their previous daily activities.

These findings were consistent with the literature which contends that, due to the impact of sexual violence on women's bodies, "their social well-being is compromised as they may no longer freely participate in gender roles as before the rape owing to the physical illness and societal beliefs and stigma that the condition attracts" (Khisa, 2015:1). Wartime rape in the DRC left women not only with HIV and STIs, but also with one of the worst physical injuries known as fistula. Rape survivors with fistula are unable to control the constant flow of urine and/or faeces that leak from the tear. Many rape victims are divorced, shunned by their communities, and are unable to work or care for their families after developing a fistula problem. Long-term medical complications for the survivors of violent rape may include uterine prolapse, infertility and miscarriages (Pinel & Bosire, 2007). Some women often complain about their physical complications such as uterine prolapse with urinary incontinence, stress, or urinary symptoms like dysuria, low abdominal pain, dyspareunia, reduced or scanty

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[5] *Obstetric fistula is an abnormal communication created between the vagina and the bladder and or the rectum. The most direct consequence of an obstetric fistula is the constant leaking of urine, faeces and blood as a result of a hole that forms between the vagina and bladder or rectum. Nerve damage that is associated with the leaking can cause women to struggle with walking and eventually lose mobility. Sometimes women are forced to turn to commercial sex work as a means of survival because the extreme poverty and social isolation that result from obstetric fistula eliminate all other income opportunities (Kimani et al., 2014: 275).*

menses, backache, and urinary tract infection that is often followed by other pains secondary to urinary tract infection (Kaye *et al*., 2014:5). Obstetric fistula's physical consequences lead to "severe socio-cultural stigmatization as women who can no longer produce children that are considered as assets in some cultures are blamed to make her and her family socially and economically inferior and both women and their families suffer economically as a result of fistula" (Kimani *et al.*, 2014:276). According to Kaye *et al.* (2014), although repaired, obstetric events such as uterine rupture have subsequent socio-economic and other complications that diminish rape victims' quality of life (Kaye *et al.*, 2014).

In agreement with the literature, the disruption of women's physical capacity in the 1996 war in the DRC led to deepening poverty and harsher living conditions (Kaye *et al.*, 2014). Having lost their sources of livelihood, women survivors had insufficient income to meet their households' basic needs but still they needed to spend more on keeping themselves clean and to access medical treatment on a regular basis (Kaye *et al.*, 2014).

- **Abandoned by their loves 'one (breaking social network)**

While their wives were receiving treatment at the hospital, some husbands fled and abandoned their families. Girls who were left at home alone were vulnerable because their fathers often abandoned them. Sometimes these children were raped while their mothers were receiving treatment at hospital and this made things worse for the women. This happened to Visiane, who shared her story:

> *"When the aggressors came to our house for the second time, they ruined us, and attacked my husband. And when the village leader thought that my husband was dead, he seized our field saying that my husband had not complied with all the requirements. When I went home after my treatment at Panzi, I met my husband. He had already abandoned the children at home. Also, while he went to fetch wood, they were raped in our house."*

Before raping the wife, the aggressors tortured the husband and that made him flee the village. He abandoned his wife and his family in fear. Chibalonza had a similar experience and reported the following:

> *"After they had beaten my husband and taken all his money, they left him tied up. A few days after, my husband again went to Matiri where he tried to earn money. He stayed there permanently.*"

Mariam, after being treated at Panzi hospital, returned home and met her two daughters and their brothers, who reported that their father had left and that he had sold the only goat they had. She was surprised, as she reported the following:

> "*I was told, 'your husband may not come to rape us also… he is not one who will be living with a raped woman.' I asked them, 'Where did he go?' They replied, 'We don't know.' Even his family told me that I was a woman who could look for another man, and that I had to leave my husband to other women who were normal, not me. This hurt me so much.*"

Men who were still on a trip when their wives were raped refused to go home, as was reported by Ivette:

> *"He said that he didn't want to be infected with HIV from Hutu; that he had better die far from me, but never live with me again, because he got it in his mind that I was infected with HIV by those persecutors who had raped me in his presence. He also questioned how his children would consider him; the children who saw how I was raped in their presence. I suffer so much."*

This research revealed the pain and suffering of the victims of conflict-related rape. Some women survivors were brought to Bukavu city for treatment and the rest of their families were forgotten. Some spent weeks, months and even a year at the hospital in Bukavu and when they returned home, they found a dislocated and dysfunctional family structure: fathers here, property (land, house and other belongings) destroyed, and children somewhere else, all suffering. The survivors of sexual violence were presumed to have been infected with HIV/AIDS which was among the factors that drove some husbands to abandon them. Other husbands were deeply frustrated and humiliated as the rape act occurred in public and they blamed themselves.

The breakdown of social networks as a result of mass rape resulted in the collapse of the social capital the women survivors of sexual violence needed to achieve a sustainable way of life. Social capital such as networking and family and community support is an asset that women survivors of sexual violence required to achieve a livelihood.

▪ Forced Internal Displacement and Migration

During the conflict of war in the DRC, many residents were forced to leave their homes and this had consequences for women's sustainable livelihood. For example, Eliza said:

> *"The entire village was burnt and survivors were obliged to flee the village at dawn. Those who were half dead like me were transported to hospital by volunteers in the village."*

The women survivors experienced many miseries which caused them to abandon their homes and seek refuge elsewhere. They fled from those areas where they had been repeatedly raped and traumatized. Ironically, it was for the same reason that they were no longer welcome in their homes or among their husbands' families. Bernadette, commented as follows:

> *"Some survivors of sexual violence were obliged to 'fugue'; that is, they left without informing anyone* [i.e., they absconded]. *He would leave the children, his wife and everything, and never come back again."*

When life became insupportable, men and/or women simply packed up and left the area to go where they thought they would forget what had happened to them. They often left their land and other assets they had worked for so long and started a new life where no one in the community knew them. This lack of social and moral fibre caused the unravelling of former structures that had bonded people and societies together in mutual love and hope. Women survivors of sexual violence who were interviewed acknowledged that sexual violence caused a lot of movement, migration and internal displacement. Shombe offered the following example:

"The fact that people now move so easily from one place to another because of insecurity and war has created poverty and misery. People will now easily abandon their fields and livelihood. Apart from that, when you leave and flee to another place."

Even though peace had been regained in village areas, the women were reluctant to return because these places reminded them of the tragedies they had experienced. Some reported that their houses and fields had been burnt and they had no one to help them, so there was nothing to return to in their areas. Moreover, agriculture in some areas had lost its profitability and poverty was on the increase. Having become self-dependent, some survivors of sexual violence who had decided to displace internally fled to avoid discrimination in their societies (i.e., taunts by family and the community). However, they still faced serious challenges because they went to live in new areas where it was difficult for them to find land or jobs. Some respondents who had not been disowned by their in-laws or the chief managed to sell their land in their villages of origin for a pittance and they used that money to rent land in their new host areas.

From the vantage point of sustainable livelihood, internal displacement can be seen as a loss of capital and simultaneously as the loss of women's ability to ensure sustainable livelihood strategies. Women lost physical capital (houses), natural capital (land, farm and forest), financial capital (family revenue), and social capital (family support).

- **Forced Early Pregnancies and babies born from rape**

Many of the survivors reported becoming pregnant following rape. Fatuma, a psychosocial expert who had worked with survivors of sexual violence since the 1996 war, made the following statement:

"The other big problem is the girls and women who were raped and got pregnant. She will have a problem with her husband about that child. Her husband will be calling that child 'mtoto wa haramu'; that is an illegitimate child. He will blame her and ask how she could raise that child among his children. So the survivor will suffer and so will the child."

There was an increased number of girls who delivered babies. These mothers were called 'fille-mere' (girl-mothers) to discriminate against them and to isolate them in their community. They were not accepted or allowed to participate in day-to-day activities like others girls did. They were rejected, abandoned and neglected. Fatuma said:

"It is because their [survivors living with child born from rape] *families are saying they are cursed. Society rejects the child and says he or she is a child of a snake. If there is one who sustains fistula, she will remain suffering all her life."*

Clearly the DRC's social views of gender affects how people perceive children who were born out of wedlock and, in particular, those who were born as a result of rape. The findings of this study also suggest that children born as result of rape are rejected by their families and community and that no one takes care of them unless some local NGO steps in.

One finding of the current study was that young girls who survived acts of sexual violence abandoned their studies for various reasons. Some were afraid that people would call them the 'wife of Interahamwe' and point a finger at them, accusing them of poor morals. A few managed to study elsewhere to avoid this form of discrimination.

Recent research confirms that teenage mothers who were raped "in the city, in nearby communities, and in surrounding internally displaced people camps are socially ostracized by their families and communities, yet they are responsible for the well-being of their children" (Duyos-Álvarez *et al*., 2016:164). The eastern DRC has higher rates of teenage pregnancies than those of the entire country. For example, it was reported to be 135 births/1 000 women (Duyos-Álvarez *et al*., 2016). Women who fell pregnant following sexual violence must often choose between keeping the baby and terminating the pregnancy. In both cases, they face lifelong turmoil and live with feelings of hate, love and guilt if they have a child born as a result of sexual violence (Clifford & Slavery, 2008).

In South Kivu, girl-mothers, also referred to as 'filles-meres', are commonly forced to leave their parents' homes because of discrimination and the low social status they have because of having a child without being married (Mossige *et al.*, 2003). A recent study indicates that only 5% of families agreed to accept their daughters after giving birth to an 'illigitimate' child. The study stated that 60% of 'filles-meres' abandoned their children, 15% got married, and 80% lived as concubines (Mossige *et al.*, 2003). This research also indicated that some 'filles-meres' who had left their family homes after disagreement with their parents related that having a child out of wedlock caused heavy consequences. They were rejected by their extended families who no longer provided for their care or that of their children. They were also likely to contract infectious diseases, including HIV/AIDS (Mossige *et al.*, 2003).

Children born under such conditions are often unloved and as they grow up, they become unbearable to the family and to the wider community because of their mothers' alleged misconduct. In some ethnic groups, virginity is considered as the symbol of a good education and a guarantee of fidelity. They believe that a girl who had previous sexual experiences will easily commit adultery once married and it will be very difficult for her to resist the solicitations of lovers, especially those responsible for the defloration of her hymen (Musimwa, 2015). Any deviation from this ideal, whether willing or not, has social consequences for a woman. First, she brings shame and dishonour to her family and secondly, she is rejected by her family which leaves her without substantial economic or social support (Milillo, 2006).

Kelly *et al.* (2011) demonstrated that, in the South Kivu community, it was mostly women who had given birth to children born of rape who became the victims of community rejection. However, the current study found that, whether a woman had a rape-related child or not, as a survivor of sexual violence she faced severe discrimination from both her family and community members. As a result, she was

often forced to leave the community and to live elsewhere. This study also encountered incidences when some women left their areas with their husbands.

▪ **Loss of the Means to Ensure future Sustainable Livelihood Strategies**

Moreover, their properties were looted which left them in a condition of dire poverty. For example, Esther stated:

> *"They really devastated the house and in the end they all came together in my room. They said they would kill me if I didn't give them money. Then, I told them I had three goats and if they wanted they could take them. I also opened my 'mukanda'* [a small cloth used as a belt by women to fasten their clothes; it has a pocket where they usually keep money] *and I threw it at their feet."*

The perpetrators of sexual violence looted every house and everything they found, as was reported by Mikaheka:

> *"I was close to death, but they didn't stop there. They packed up and collected everything − cows, goats − and took it with them. They burnt all the huts before they left. They took everything and I was left with nothing."*

Esther described this scene of misery:

> *"In the end they burnt the bed sheets, and took our belongings and our girls who were with us to go with them − we did not know where to. They took all my clothes and I did not even have a cloth for the baby that they left with me. A neighbour brought me a cloth and we took refuge in another village which was supposed to be safe."*

After the conflict, because all their assets had been looted, they found themselves in a dire economic situation. This impacted the economic survival of entire families and especially the schooling of children. They were totally cut off from any financial resources. Many of their children could no longer go to school. Others became 'maibobo' (street children) and others became 'enfant soldiers' (infant soldiers).

The findings of the current study clearly demonstrated that the social consequences of sexual violence resulted in the population's destabilizing and in the destruction of community and family bonds, which corroborated the findings by Peterman, Palermo & Bredenkamp (2011). While previously strong community and family bonds (e.g., social networking, peaceful coexistence, and children's controlled social behaviours) constituted the foundation of livelihood strategies for people in South Kivu especially in rural areas, sexual violence as a crime of war effectively destroyed many of these bonds, particularly family bonds. Research conducted in South Kivu in 2011 demonstrated that, at that time, 29% of women had been rejected by their families and 6.2% by their communities (Kelly *et al.*, 2011). These researchers defined family rejection as rejection when women were prevented by their husbands or parents from remaining at home, whereas community rejection was defined as rejection due to the ostracism of women by their peers when they were forced to leave the community. Because sexual violence in the conflict situation was often accompanied by looting and

even the burning of houses and fields, the survivors were left in extreme poverty which exacerbated their social and economic vulnerability. Tragically, this situation followed them even when they opted for internal displacement or migration.

Conclusion

For many survivors of wartime rape in the DRC, the ability to survive was limited in many ways. Significant insight was gained by analysing the impact of sexual violence on women through the lens of feminist theory. The findings that were illuminated in this study suggest that sexual violence affected all aspects of these women's lives, including their physical, psychological, socio-economic, and reproductive well-being. Moreover, their children were also severely affected. The impact and consequences of sexual violence clearly led to the loss of a sustainable way of life, which is a major factor that influences women's livelihood coping strategies negatively.

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