

# A high price to pay for cheap technology

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Rape in war cannot be addressed in isolation. It is deeply embedded in both the local context and that of global proportions. This is one of the conclusions made in a doctoral thesis about eastern Democratic Republic of Congo presented at Uppsala University, Sweden, on 19th September.

The ongoing widespread insecurity and violence targeting civilians as well as warring groups in the resource-rich region of eastern Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) is the site of intricate conflicts. Sexual violence employed in war, directed mostly at women but also affecting men and children, has become the signature of this conflict. It is a conflict that has turned children into soldiers.

In her thesis, entitled "Women Survivors, Lost Children and Traumatized Masculinities", Jill Trenholm explores certain aspects of the phenomena of rape in war in eastern DRC. The aim was to illuminate the phenomena of war rape with the goal of generating both practical and theoretical knowledge for prevention and sustainable public health/humanitarian interventions.

"Our desire for the latest technology at the cheapest price implicates us in the brutal conflict ongoing in eastern Democratic Republic of Congo", says Jill Trenholm, who will defend her thesis on 19th September.

"The war is in its sixteenth year with a death toll of over five million people, unprecedented levels of [sexual violence](#), and involving so many global players but is described as one of the most underreported conflicts. It is my hope that this thesis will shed some needed light upon

this matter."

Among other things the phenomenon of war-rape in DRC is driven by a quest for cheap resources for an insatiable western market. DRC has large reserves of gold, diamonds, tin etc as well as eighty per cent of the world's coltan, a necessary component in electrical gadgets such as computers and mobile phones. It is most often young men who dig out or descend into mines to retrieve these minerals, often risking their lives under appalling conditions in return for a pittance. Intimidating, raping and looting the local people have become a commonplace survival strategy including the mining regions. Rebels, the state army and even peace keepers have been implicated in committing sexual violence.

Local leaders interviewed in this study described rape as "the bomb that continues to explode" in part to express its effectiveness in destroying communities. However, they also expressed the view that the plight of raped women is only the tip of the iceberg in a complex web of militarization, impunity, mass traumatization, inappropriate aid, international apathy and abject poverty with gendered, ethnic and global dimensions. The leaders showed a deep understanding of the situation but a sense that even their best efforts were insufficient. They called on the international community to attend to the real needs of the Congolese people; promoting good governance contributing to a sustainable peace process, removing the Interhamwe (Hutu rebels that entered Congo after the Rwandan genocide), and building up infrastructure such as roads rather than donating bags of food to a country with such fertile soil.

Young male ex-child soldiers, seen as both victims and perpetrators of violence described how they were socialized as soldiers. Some were abducted by the various military groups while others joined "voluntarily" to access material basics such as food, shelter and/or clothing. This begs the question: what is choice? Through processes of intimidation, torture, forced lack of empathy or reflection, receiving topical or oral indigenous

mixtures to promote bravery and substance abuse, the young boys were inculcated into a world of stereotypical hyper-masculine militarized behaviors where aggression and killing is promoted as a mode of problem solving.

Affected women expressed a sense of profound dispossession to the extent that they sometimes did not even feel human. They were most often rejected by their partners and community after being raped, largely due to the fear of sexually transmitted infections particularly AIDS, the trauma suffered by their partner/community, unwanted pregnancies and the fact that armed groups might return to "re-claim" these women leaving the community at risk for reprisals. The affected women suffered losses of their families, health, status, safe spaces and a means to survive, in other words profoundly marginalized. That said women affected by rape showed compelling strength and resilience within the margins as they struggled to live and provide for a child born of rape. They sought support from among other things, God and faith, the scarce health resources available and small businesses.

The thesis concludes that rape in war cannot be addressed in isolation. It is deeply embedded in both the local context and that of global proportions. Gender, ethnicity and class are important markers of power played from the personal to the global levels. A more complex view of the perpetrator is argued for as well as a re-thinking about humanitarian aid and the role of the global political economy. Above all promotion of peace and poverty reduction must be concomitant goals.

Jill Trenholm's thesis, entitled "Women Survivors, Lost Children and Traumatized Masculinities" will be presented on 19th September 2013 at the Department of Women's and Children's Health, Unit of International Maternal and Child Health, Uppsala University.

Provided by Uppsala University

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