

The War on Women's Bodies in the Democratic Republic of the Congo

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War rape has been occurring as long as there have been wars, and as we have learned in class rape is not about sex, but about power, so to, is war. In many classes that I have taken we have discussed the notion of wars fought on women's bodies, this again, is not about women, but about power. Women are the cultural bearers in a society, the reproducers of not only generations, but of culture as well; this is a powerful location, both socially and ideologically. The use of rape as a tactic of war is immobilizing for a community, for both previous and future generations. Rape is, therefore, used systematically to advance one group's political, economic, religious, or social position over another.

The Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) has been in a constant state of civil war since 1996 following an influx of refugees from the adjoining Rwanda. These refugees fled after the genocide in Rwanda in 1994. This war has been devastating to the DRC, with a population of just over 56 million, an estimated 3.3 million have died as a result of this war. The rapes occurring in the DRC have been equally, if not more so, devastating. Women are being raped particularly violently, often in front of their families; rapes so violent the women are often requiring several surgeries to repair the damage done (Women for Women). This essay will examine the topic of war rape, specifically as it is occurring in the DRC. In this essay I will look at the theory behind wartime rape, briefly, the history of the conflict in the DRC, how this conflict has

crossed borders from Rwanda into the DRC, and the effects and consequences of this conflict and the particularly heinous wartime rape of the Congolese women.

The Methodology: why the DRC?

Reflecting on the research process itself, I found that the information that I was looking for was both easy and hard to find. For example, of current information there was much to be found from Amnesty International and Women for Women International. There were online articles which pointed fingers at the Western world, particularly the United States for their role in the funding of the conflict – apparently the U.S., due to the wealth of natural resources in the DRC has played a role in funding both sides of this conflict. Unfortunately, the current academic resources on war rape, specifically in the DRC, were not overwhelming. I was most able to find information of an academic nature on the mass rapes in the former Yugoslavia, and likewise from the Second World War, though what I was able to find here was mostly of a feminist nature.

I came to this topic after some brief thought that since entering second year classes in women's studies the notion of war's being fought on women's bodies emerged. Though I understood this thought in theory I wanted the opportunity to look at it more in context to be able to truly understand this notion. I did a simple Google search on war rape and the DRC was mentioned with its link to Rwanda. Rwanda's story of genocide has been one which has been close to me since first year; I am familiar with the history of the genocide in Rwanda. I took a course entitled

‘Introduction to the Philosophy of Religion’ in the summer of first year, and was completely taken aback that the actual subject matter for the course was a philosophical study of evil using the Rwandan genocide as a case study. The professor of the course had been on a United Nations sponsored committee to try to establish an academic estimate of the number of casualties during the one hundred days of genocide in Rwanda.

I will never be able to forget the way that the professor spoke of his experience in Rwanda. He spoke of the smell of the bodies which lined the streets, stacked upon each other. He spoke of the sheer number of those bodies, that they were everywhere, a particularly violent death because the Hutu weapon of choice had not been an automatic weapon, but a simple machete. It takes much more hatred to be able to kill with a blade than it does with a gun, he told us, and it is more work.

The worst that he spoke of was the women. Piled body upon body, the evidence of her rape often still within her. The attackers certainly did not rape out of pleasure, this was a rape intended to kill. He spoke of the women’s bodies lying on the side of the streets with the machetes still inside of them, pieces of wood, and likewise. The same continues in the DRC today. The women are being raped with the intention to either kill the woman herself, or to end her ability to procreate. I wrote of it above, vaginal fistula; rape which is causing often irreparable damage, and if not often requiring up to four surgeries to correct (Elsevier 181).

Theorizing the Issue: a history of war rape

The history of war includes the history of war rape. These atrocities can be dated as far back as the Babylonian wars to the present day (Brownmiller) and the treatment of women during times of conflict is noted as early as 700 BCE in Sun Tzu's The Art of War, and 500 BCE in the Hindu Code of Manu (Frederick 6). Though we know the historical pervasiveness of rape as a weapon of war the first well documented cases came to light following the Second World War (Frederick 2, 16; Milillo 196). From the documentation provided during WWII the development of the most horrific sexual assaults can be found.

From the Nazi's occupation of Russian territory rape, it is generally accepted, was ordered by the Nazi officers (Frederick 16), to the infamous "Rape of Nanking," when Japanese troops entered China's capital in 1937 (Frederick 18, Milillo 197). It is documented that 20 000 rapes occurred during the first thirty days of the occupation, though it is believed that the number is more likely as high as 80 000 (Frederick 18). The implications of the sanctioned rapes saw the Nazi's definitive purpose: the thorough shaming, dishonouring and devastation of 'inferior people' (Frederick 16). Though it should not be left out that those in the armies occupying states, as in the German Nazi's in Russia, when the war turned in favour of the Allies this did not extinguish the practices of rape as a weapon of war. At the end of the war the victorious soldiers of the Allied forces went on to rape the women of the offending countries, as in 'an eye for an eye,' one rape for another (Seifert 67).

The explanation behind the use of rape as a weapon of war can be simply, though inadequately, put, as with interpersonal rape itself, not about sexual aggression, but about power. The connection of rape to power most appropriately found in war, as war is blatantly about power. However, in order to understand the full depth of the devastating physical and psychological effects of rape in war, the social and political contexts must be outlined. First, in a patriarchal context, women are often seen as the property of men, which creates in a society the expectation of protectionist values (Farwell 394). Oftentimes, women are seen as *belonging* to a man, either father or husband, thereby creating an ideology of protection associated with the honour of her family. These values are informed by militarism, as it supports the patriarchal, and thus, hierarchical power dynamics in society between men with power, and women without power. Religious beliefs often work in conjunction with patriarchy, to support the inequity in gender relations through the principles surrounding procreation, that is, chastity and the assertion of paternity, culminating in the creation of honour in the ownership over woman's power to procreate (Farwell 394). Hence, the rape of women during times of conflict proves to dishonour her, her family, and her community, thus undermining her connections and structures of support.

Secondly, as seen later in this paper, the physical consequences of rape, often far more brutal than rapes reported during times of peace, are particularly violent, resulting in the purposeful destruction of the woman's ability to reproduce (Farwell 394-396; Elsevier 181). Often few women are spared, from the very young to the very old, women up to eight months pregnant, in labour, or having just given birth. The

damage through rape is often so dramatic that the utter destruction of the vagina and other reproductive organs is carried out (Elsevier 181), this current element now being considered as a war injury. The resulting damage to the woman's reproductive capabilities is an act of genocide; this is the systematic annihilation of a society's capabilities to physically reproduce themselves, and women's particular ability to reproduce the social and cultural identity of the society (Women for Women).

Finally, the connection of the physical damage done to the women's bodies and the psychological effects wielded has the traumatic effect on each individual as well as the group psyches, which have been undermined and destroyed by subjecting the sheer volume of women to mass sexual assaults (Farwell 397). Thus, mass rape in the context of war is used as a systematic tool to dehumanize, demoralize and displace women in their families and communities. Rape in war is an act of genocide.

Contextualizing the Issue: a history of conflict across borders

An etiological examination of Rwanda's history will provide the origins of the ethnic tension leading to the hierarchal social distinctions in the region. In the case of genocide in Rwanda – a conflict which later crosses borders into the DRC – we must consider that the small country of only 26,338 km², with a population of approximately 7.8 million people was formally a colony of Germany, acquired through means of force by Belgium after the First World War. The majority of the population is comprised of two tribes in Rwanda: 85% Hutu, 14% Tutsi (CBC News Online staff). In Shake Hands with the Devil, Lieutenant-General Roméo Dallaire wrote regarding Rwanda's history:

The Tutsis, who were tall and quite light-skinned, herded cattle; the shorter, darker Hutus farmed vegetable plots. The Belgians viewed the minority Tutsis as closer in kind to Europeans and elevated them to positions of power over the majority Hutu, which exacerbated the feudal state of peasant Hutus and overlord Tutsis. Enlisting the Tutsis allowed the Belgians to develop and exploit a vast network of coffee and tea plantations without the inconvenience of war or the expense of deploying a large colonial service (47).

It is important to note here that the specific distinction between tribes as noted by the Belgians was qualified with an identification process – this process included various measurements taken, particularly the width of the individual’s nose (Raymont) – with accompanying identification cards. The remainder of Rwanda’s history can be summed up in a few unsettling political happenings, namely civil war, followed by a mass Tutsi exodus and *coups d’etat*. Independence in 1962 saw the beginning of these radical political attempts, and the installation of Major General Juvénal Habyarimana led to a twenty-year dictatorship in 1973 (Dallaire 47). Rwanda in 1994 was only a slightly different situation. The Rwandese Patriotic Front (RPF), an army of refugee Tutsis abandoned by neighbouring countries--Zaire, Uganda, Burundi, and Tanzania--strategically and wilfully attempted to return to Rwanda after approximately thirty years of exile. The RPF were causing a great distress to the Rwandese Government Forces (RGF), a primarily Hutu-dominated group.

Several political and Hutu extremist groups contributed to act as the main perpetrators in the continuation of the Tutsi classification of the ‘Other’, and in the ultimate dehumanizing act of genocide in Rwanda. The political upheaval of the state of Rwanda after the assassination of, now, President Habyarimana in 1994 led to the Hutu plan to exterminate the Tutsi population (Frederick 39). After approximately 1 million dead, 3 million refugees, and 200 000 to 500 000 women the victims of sexual assault (Frederick 38), the Rwandan genocide seemingly came to a halt; at least in the mainstream views of the Western world.

Civil war broke out in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) in 1996, instigated by extraordinary numbers of refugees from neighbouring Rwanda (Women for Women). This extension of the Rwandan genocide continues as more than strictly ethnic conflict, but a struggle for control of power and resources both domestic and foreign. Rwanda’s resources are primarily in coffee resulting in the country’s insignificant role in the developed world, the DRC, however, is rich in minerals – cobalt, diamonds, copper and gold – thus the competition for control is fierce. This conflict, the deadliest in documented African history, has seen the highest civilian death toll in a war since World War II (Women for Women). The documentation of sexual assault is more difficult, as the rapes are often unreported, and the women often go untreated in an attempt to keep hidden and maintain their place in both their families and communities (Elsevier 181).

A Review of the Literature

“War rape: new conceptualizations and reponses”

Nancy Farwell in “War Rape: new conceptualizations and responses” presents her main arguments through the discussion of ‘why war rape?’ and ultimately how the discussion of war rape enters into the context of international law. The majority of articles presented in this literature review will set similar frameworks, that of the historical development of war rape itself, to the current social and political implications of these developments. Farwell states at the outset that war rape, since it has begun to be used as a systematic, “policy-based attack against civilians” that it is indeed a weapon of war (390). The development of war rape as a weapon of terror, all authors agree, has been noted historically through the Geneva Report since the well-documented incidents mentioned earlier during and after World War II. The Geneva Report still has proved inadequate in the protection of women against mass war rape, as it establishes a form of protection for women which only serves to reinforce gender relations in a patriarchal and hierarchical form, that of the earlier mentioned *protectionist values* (Farwell 394).

She continues to the development of war rape as an emerging crime of war in international law, deriving from the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda (ICTR) and the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY). From the contexts of these atrocious attacks on women, in Rwanda for the strict purposes of genocide and the former Yugoslavia for ethnic cleansing, new legislature has been founded. Of particular interest from a feminist perspective is the development of war

rape being defined as a “crime against humanity” (Farwell 390). The new provisions for these crimes in international law allow for the “complex intersections of gender, patriarchy, militarism, and ethnic, religious, and political identities that underlie a continuum of violence against women, including war rape” (Farwell 390).

“Rape as a Tactic of War: social and psychological perspectives”

Diana Milillo’s article “Rape as a Tactic of War: social and psychological perspectives” adds to Farwell’s arguments by further developing the explanations surrounding war rape as a war crime. Rich with personal narratives, Milillo explains their purpose as “useful in that they put personal testimony into often-depersonalized theories of violence and aggression” (198). The narratives offer a unifying quality to the victims as women, through paralleling subject matters, that of “shock and devastation” (Milillo 198). Asserting that early feminists argued that there is no relation to sexual desire in rape, Milillo contends that rape is about power and control, but that in the context of war this power and control becomes not over the women as individuals, but as a culture and society.

By addressing the role of social dominance and power, Milillo acknowledges women through cultural norms about gender and sexuality, stating that “Almost all societies hold structural and social assumptions of the patriarchal and heteronormative power of men over women” (198). This argument develops into very traditional discussions of what it means to be a woman, a discussion about chastity and honour, about family, religion, and the state. As Milillo notes, some women, even in developed

countries such as the U.S. still consider marriage of an older, wealthier man to be the only option (199). This does not mean that he must be old and wealthy, just so long as he is older and wealthier than she. It is not a far reach then that this discussion of tradition, chastity and honour, reflect the dominant view in many patriarchal societies that a woman who is raped brings shame and dishonour to her family. Milillo writes, and this is the main issue at work in the case of rape as a war crime particularly in the DRC, that women are often disowned by both family and community after being raped (199). This threat of rupture from the only support networks that these women know often leads to the underreporting of rapes, particularly in times of conflict.

“An Element of Genocide: rape, total war, and international law in the twentieth century”

The article “An element of genocide: rape, total war, and international law in the twentieth century” misses the relevance of Congo and Rwanda specifically, but remains an interesting piece in the development of ideas surrounding the causation behind war rape and its use as an element of genocide. Christoph Schiessl, the author, notes the introduction of war rape as a method of war and genocide in the wake of the atrocities in the former Yugoslavia, the focus of this particular article (197).

Schiessl cites the main theories of causation for war rape as: 1) intimidation and demoralization; 2) to disperse a population; and finally, 3) the bonding of male soldiers in war, a time when male bonding is heightened (208). To elaborate on these theories the article examines how rape itself is a tool of dominance, intimidation and

demoralization, and as such, when used in war time is not only these things to the victim alone, but to the family and community within which she lives (198). These tactics, provided by just one act prove to destroy and defeat physically and psychologically, again, the woman, her family and her community (198). As a controlling act, rape serves to remove a woman's control over her own body, and within the context of a patriarchal society serves to remove the control from the men associated with the woman, as the rape serves as a symbolic castration (198-9). The intentions of public raping is used just to hit home the shaming of the community. Schiessl notes, "Soldiers dragging women out of their houses to rape them in public is a common occurrence, and helps to demoralize the civil population" (199).

"Destruction of the vagina in violent rape a war crime in Congo"

Adding to the complications of war rape, Congolese women and victims of rape are facing particularly brutal assaults. As reported in Reproductive Health Matters, Congolese women are frequently attacked so violently that the injuries are often resulting in "vaginal fistula, the rupture of the vaginal wall which can cause urine and faeces to leak uncontrollably" (181). Often requiring several operations to repair the damage to the women's reproductive organs, the small minority of women making their way to hospital must await their procedures before returning to their communities, where they are no longer guaranteed a their place back.

"U.N. Envoy to Resign in Wake of Sex Scandal"

As earlier mentioned the allied combatants often claim victims of their own. As in Russia during the Second World War, the Allied forces took it upon themselves to rape in revenge the women of the enemy state. For women in the DRC the affects of this devastation is quite possibly worse, as the Congolese women are being raped not only by the insurgents, but often also by United Nations (U.N.) peacekeepers. In March of 2005, the Washington Post reported repeatedly on the 'sex scandal' within the U.N. peacekeeping missions in the DRC, citing "several African countries hav[ing] been dogged by sexual abuse scandals since the early 1990s" (Lynch A14). The article continues to disclose the exceedingly troubling information that U.N. peacekeepers are safeguarded from "prosecution by military agreements" (Lynch A14). Colum Lynch, who reported on the issue mentions several internal U.N. reports which have stated several cases in the DRC of "pedophilia, prostitution and rape, often offering food or jobs in exchange for sex" (A14) by the U.N. peacekeepers and bureaucrats. Lynch concludes the article, however, by stating that officials have stated that they are "cracking down on sexual abuse" (A14).

"Congo's Desperate 'One-Dollar U.N. Girls'"

Further to this, an exposé written by Emily Wax, "Congo's Desperate 'One-Dollar U.N. Girls': Shunned Teens, Many Raped by Militiamen, Sell Sex to Peacekeepers" depicts the story of one young girl just fourteen years old. Raped at ten by militiamen she was told by a women's organization where she sought counselling that "she had done nothing wrong but that the theft of her virginity made her worthless as a bride. She should understand, the counsellors said, that now no man would marry

her” (Wax A01). Left in such a desperate situation as this at just ten years old, she has made her way the only way she knew how; she now sells her body to the U.N. peacekeepers. Of the prostitution itself, the young girl states, “Sometimes it happens in U.N. cars, other times at the camp. But at least they paid us. I was worthless anyhow. My honor was lost” (Wax A01). Wax continues that “according to health experts, the sale of sexual services by girls and women who may have lost their chance for a marriage payment has become common across the region” (A01). The loss of marriage is tied to the problematic use of ‘bride prices’ amongst the Congolese.

With the public outcry of sexual abuse toward the U.N. Wax’s article seems to suggest progress where Lynch’s did not. A reported two commanders fired, and six officers sent home for prosecution (Wax A01), however with the estimated 10 000 peacekeeping troops sent into the DRC it seems unlikely, that these young girls and women are finding adequate funds for selling their bodies to just eight of these troops. Unfortunately, with the world’s eye on *more popular* atrocities the DRC ranks low as a priority, Wax cites statistics from the International Rescue Committee stating that on average in 2004 just over \$3 per person was spent on humanitarian aid in the DRC, “compared to \$89 per person in Sudan and \$138 per person in Iraq in the same year” (A01).

The Analysis

Often times the largest theoretical problem in regards to the issue of war rape is the nature of the patriarchal society itself. The problem is that which makes a women’s

organization, as in the above example, meant to provide support and counseling, inform a sexual assault survivor that having lost her virginity she is now 'worthless.' This is a problem deeply embedded within a patriarchal context, as without such ideologies surrounding a woman's sexuality, virginity, chastity and honour these particular problems would not exist. The ideologies contingent upon women's sexuality are what give rape its power, particularly in the context of war.

Rape in war time conflict can be seen here as a systematic tool of oppression to advance one group's political, economic, religious or social position over another. The use of rape systematically dehumanizes, demoralizes and proves to displace women from their homes, their families, and oftentimes their communities. Thus, rape in this sense, can be seen as a form of genocide, its purposes used for the explicit aim of exacting power and controlling a society or culture. As seen in the analysis provided by Farwell the provisions for war rape within international law no longer link the rape to honour, such as with the Geneva Conventions. The new provisions allow a woman and the systematic attack of her the acknowledgement of the intersections of "gender, patriarchy, militarism, and ethnic, religious, and political identities" (390). This disassociation with traditional patriarchal views is a progressive step forward in the battle for women's rights, but without the full acknowledgement, which Schiessl calls for, of war rape being strongly allied with genocide, as opposed to a crime against humanity, the extent of women's roles in society is also being denied.

Women hold a powerful position within society, patriarchal or not, and that location is one which determines a nation, a culture, and a tradition. When the notion of 'woman' is linked with tradition and honour, rape, and particularly in the context of war, public rape, brings shame and dishonour to only to the woman, but to her family and community. These support networks will often disown the survivor, and the fear of this loss often results in the underreporting of such violence against women, therefore resulting in inaccurate estimates of victims. Unfortunately, it is often these inaccurate estimates, which are provided by organizations wishing to help, which lead to the potential under funding and lack of aid to the necessary regions. Such an example can be provided historically, as mentioned above, with the 'rape of Nanking' where there exists the documented number of rapes at 20 000, but the estimates are as high as 80 000. This significant increase in estimated versus documented is often the result of such underreporting. By associating war rape with a mere crime the realm of international law feeds into this viscous cycle by diminishing the role played by women, and the devastating consequences of these atrocities.

Of the theoretical articles presented here Schiessl, though writing specifically in the context of the conflict in the former Yugoslavia, seems to find the appropriate stress needed for the atrocities facing women in conflict regions. Schiessl's analysis includes the intimidation and demoralization, the purposeful dispersion of a group or culture, and the particularly disturbing aspect of male bonding and camaraderie during war times. These elements, granted, in addition to the light shed by Milillo on the role of

social dominance and power, give the full scope needed to engage war rape in a discourse of genocide.

Conclusion

Since the initial instigation of civil war in the DRC there has been little, to no, peace; in a constant state of civil war since 1996 following an influx of refugees from the adjoining Rwanda, refugees fleeing the genocide in Rwanda in 1994. This has been a devastating war to the DRC, with a large population; over 3 million have died as a result. The rapes occurring in the DRC have been equally, if not more so, devastating. Women are being raped particularly violently, often in front of their families; rapes so violent the women are often requiring several surgeries to repair the damage done (Women for Women). This essay has examined the topic of war rape, specifically as it is occurring in the DRC, the theory behind wartime rape, a brief history of the conflict in the DRC, and how this conflict has crossed borders from Rwanda into the DRC, and the effects and consequences of this conflict and the particularly heinous wartime rape of the Congolese women.

War rape has been occurring as long as there have been wars, and as we know, rape is not about sex, but about power, as is war. The notion of the war fought on women's bodies comes up time and time again in many classes that I have taken, but this is not about women, this is about power. Women as the cultural bearers in a society are the reproducers of not only generations, but of culture and tradition as well; this is a powerful location, both socially and ideologically. The use of rape as a tactic of war is

immobilizing for a community, for both previous and future generations. Rape is, therefore, used systematically to advance one group's political, economic, religious, or social position over another. Rape in times of war is genocide.

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