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Congo's rape crisis: Reflections on the new Red Rubber wars – By Georgina Holmes

BY UNCATEGORISED ([HTTPS://AFRICANARGUMENTS.ORG/AUTHOR/AFRICANARGUMENTSEditor/](https://africanarguments.org/author/africanargumentseditor/)) / © SEPTEMBER 16, 2011 / 0

<https://africanarguments.org/2011/09/16/the-new-red-rubber-wars-reflections-on-congo%e2%80%99s-crisis-by-georgina-holmes-3/congowomen-4/> Guardian journalist Diane Taylor recently filed a report Mwenga in South Kivu depicting the plight of Congolese women rape victims who are forced to v

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conditions of slavery in gold and mineral mines. Earning less than a dollar a day, these women seek employment because “their fields are in forests occupied by rebels and growing food has become too dangerous” [1]. This latest account is one of many media stories to expose the vulnerable and inhumane position Congolese women find themselves in, in a country that has experienced decades of conflict, state failure, impunity and corruption.

Taylor’s account is exceptional because she chooses to investigate into the societal consequences of illegal mining trade in the east of Congo, rather than focusing solely on war. The women in Taylor’s report find themselves in an exploitative industry because they either fear becoming, or have already become, victims of violence. The reframing of gender based sexual violence (GBSV) in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) is vital if governments are to take the problem of rape seriously. Rape in the east of Congo is not just the bi-product of war or a weapon of war. Rape is an integral part of a destructive regional militarized economy.

According to the UN, the DRC is one of the most gender-inequitable regions in the world, ranking 131 out of 177 of those countries reviewed[2]. Although the DRC has among the most gender-aware policies and conventions in Sub-Saharan Africa, a gap exists between the laws to protect and promote women’s rights and the reality of women’s lives, which are subject to local customary law and local political power. In some parts of the east of Congo where borders with Uganda and Rwanda are porous, local political power has been destroyed and replaced by lawlessness and military power. Women’s rights are eroded further by a culture of impunity and the absence of a fair, effective and efficient judiciary service.

A report published in June 2011 by the American Journal of Health and commissioned by the United Nations stated that the DRC was “the worst place on earth to be a woman” . Statistical estimates determined that some 1,152 women are raped daily, amounting to 48 rapes an hour. The findings indicated that between 2006 and 2007, “approximately 3.07 to 3.37 million women reported experiencing intimate partner sexual violence” , suggesting that sexual violence was more widespread across the country than previously thought[3].

These shocking statistics demonstrate the scale of the problem, yet themselves should be treated with caution. Swedish academic Maria Eriksson Baaz criticises the report’s generalising tendencies, observing that it would not be possible to glean an accurate picture in a country as vast as the DRC[4]. Provinces in the east of Congo comprise Ituri, North Kivu, South Kivu, Maniema, Oriental and Katanga and each has separate socio-political histories and highly complex politics.

Co-founder of the UK-based campaign It Must Stop (<http://www.congonow.org/members/it-must-stop>) Victoria Dove Dimandja maintains that prior to the invasion of Uganda and Rwanda and the onset of the civil war in 1997, rape, gang rapes and extreme sexual violence was “something we never had in our country. It was happening here and there, and in the city” . Yet, with vast numbers of Congolese civilian men, local militias and regular Congolese army soldiers perpetrating GBSV, rape cannot be understood as a product of foreign intervention alone.

The international media also has a tendency to image Congolese and/or regional political problems in isolation to the wider international political economy within which strategic military/political actors – for example, Kabila, Kagame and Museveni – operate. Where media coverage reports that rape in the east of Congo is a weapon of war used by militias, the informal mining industry is imaged as a consequence of war, rather than the reason for continued instability.

Rape and militarized economies

How then, do we re-politicise the problem of systematic and opportunistic rape in the east of Congo so that international, regional and local political and economic factors are understood to coalesce? Framing rape as an integral part of a militarized economy, where arms and war go hand in hand with the profiting from illegal mining, may bring us one step closer. Within this destructive economy, where 98 percent of mines are said to have the involvement of militia[5], women and sex have become commodities to be seized, bought and bartered.

Rape, including the rape and mutilation of men and boys, has become a form of ethnic cleansing, used to terrorize local people, destroy communities and displace populations in areas where armed groups compete for mineral-rich land. Foreign military regimes, individual soldiers and militias from Uganda, Rwanda, Burundi, Sudan, and Zimbabwe have all, over the years, imported militarized rape into the east of Congo.

Extending beyond this, there is a wider economy of violence where women are perceived as assets, valued for their productive and reproductive labour. Attacking communities to steal food, water, clothing, cash and farming equipment (even seeds) from women is another source of income. There have been instances where local men “join the military on rape raids” , in addition to exploiting conflict situations to “sexually assault women without fear of punishment” [6]. As is now well known, militia and soldiers often regard rape as “~payment’ for their military work and a means to climb the military ranks – this is particularly the case for child soldiers.

There are also the survivalist strategies of women and girls who enter into prostitution, quietly play the part of the military “~wife’ or “~camp follower’, or exchange sex for food and other resources. The women in Taylor’s report, who have been driven into an exploitative mining industry fall into this

category, and there have been reports of families sending girls as young as thirteen into mining towns to seek an income through prostitution. Translate »

Coltan and cassiterite: the new Red Rubber wars

The fact that societal breakdown in the east of Congo is as much a product of the global demand for cassiterite, tin ore and coltan to supply consumers with technologies such as mobile phones and laptops, as it is to do with state failure, may explain the lack of international political will to address the problem of GBSV.

Governments and international institutions have historically been guilty of keeping Congolese women at the margins of international politics, first perceiving rape as a bi-product of war, then understanding rape to be a weapon of war and now, since the official end of the Congo wars, defining GBSV within the context of development and the Millennium Goals.

In a letter of response from the Foreign & Commonwealth Office to Victoria Dove Dimandja and colleague José Musau Kalanda dated 10 January 2011, the UK government concedes that “the situation for women is not improving” . The letter states that the UK is “actively supporting Congolese women by assisting efforts to publicly challenge sexual and gender based violence and to increase the number, influence, and capacity of Congolese women in public life” . The letter notes the UK government’s call to urgently “enhance [MONUSCO’s] efforts to protect and defend civilians” . The letter also states that “the primary responsibility for protection of civilians lies with the DRC authorities” [7]. This ignores the complexity of the regional militarized economy and isolates DRC from the rest of the world. The separation of DRC politics from international politics in turn enables governments such as the UK and the US to present themselves first and foremost as providers of humanitarian aid.

Campaigners Dimandja and Kalanda are frustrated with the UK government’s disinterest in identifying and holding to account strategic-level operators within the mining industry who by extension are perpetrators of human rights abuses, including GBSV. They contend that spending aid money promoting women’s rights amounts to “pouring money onto the symptoms without treating the cause” . They want the UK to lobby the UN and EU and put pressure on multinationals. “Let us come together to fight for a responsible government, securing the borders and legalising the mining industry,” said Dimandja, “then allow women to reorganise themselves” .

These women are encouraged to join parliamentary meetings because “it’s been seen as a positive thing for Congolese women to speak for themselves” , but often find they are not being listened to. Part of the problem, they say, is the refusal of potential influencers such as NGOs to seriously discuss the regional and international politics which are sustaining Congo’s terrible status quo. Many of these NGOs, who receive UK government aid money to deliver DFID programmes in the absence of an effective Congolese government, prefer to remain a-political.

Oxfam maintains that it must “balance its work on the ground in very difficult and challenging environments with the political statements it makes” to ensure staff and the lives of the people they work with are protected[8]. Oxfam’s most recent campaigns have focused on the strong voices of Congolese women, and other women and men globally, who are campaigning for change in the DRC[9]. This reminds us that women are not just rape victims: those who seek employment in the mines or adopt survivalist sex strategies are choosing the best of the worst options available to them in the regional militarized economy.

DFID’s new DRC operational plan 2011-2015 recognises on paper the need to align the UK aid programme with wider UK government conflict and security policy goals for the region. This, together with a slow-growing momentum to regulate the mining industry is a step forward, but alone is not enough. Public interest must be roused if we are to see a future where consumers purchase fair trade technologies from corporations that can guarantee their products do not contain materials extracted from regions of Africa where extreme human rights abuses occur.

Georgina Holmes is a member of the Africa Research Group, Department of War Studies, King’s College London

[1] Diane Taylor, 2011 “‘Congo rape victims face slavery in gold and mineral mines’ in *the Guardian*, 2 September www.guardian.co.uk/world/2011/sep/02/congo-women-face-slavery-mines

[2] Tinsley, discussion at the House of Commons, 27 November 2008

[3] Peterman *et. al*, 2011, “‘Estimates and Determinants of Sexual Violence Against Women in the Democratic Republic of Congo’ *American Journal of Public Health*, June 101:6

[4] BBC “‘DR Congo rape study “‘questionable’”, www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-13448513 (<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-13448513>)

[5] See Taylor, 2011

[6] Peterman et.al. June 2011 p1065

[7] Foreign & Commonwealth Office, 10 January 2011

[8] Oxfam, statement, 14 September 2011

[9] See Oxfam’s film *Walk in My Shoes* <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y6yRfIXnjEc>

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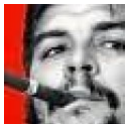


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[ALEX ENGWETE \(HTTPS://ALEXENGWETE.BLOGSPOT.COM/\)](https://alexengwete.blogspot.com/)

30 SEPTEMBER, 2011 AT 13:35 ([HTTPS://AFRICANARGUMENTS.ORG/2011/09/THE-NEW-RED-RUBBER-WARS-REFLECTIONS-ON-CONGOS-RAPE-CRISIS-BY-GEORGINA-HOLMES-3/#COMMENT-14182](https://africanarguments.org/2011/09/the-new-red-rubber-wars-reflections-on-congos-rape-crisis-by-georgina-holmes-3/#comment-14182))

Kudos for this detailed exposition on the plight of eastern DRC women that I belatedly discover today.

I got just three observations.

Firstly, I think that the hashtag “*gender based sexual violence (GBSV)*” adopted by the UN is a euphemism that somehow waters down this scourge—too bad “*sexual terrorism*” wasn’t adopted in its stead (see below).

Secondly, you state:

“

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Yet, with vast numbers of Congolese civilian men, local militias and regular Congolese army soldiers perpetrating GBSV, rape cannot be understood as a product of foreign intervention alone.”

And yet, this is exactly what Dr Marion Pratt and Leah Werchik forcefully argue in their seminal report entitled “Sexual Terrorism: Rape as a Weapon of War in Eastern Democratic Republic of Congo: An Assessment of programmatic responses to sexual violence in North Kivu, South Kivu, Maniema, and Orientale Provinces (January 9-16, 2004”) (http://www.gdnonline.org/sourcebook/chapt/doc_view.php?id=B&docid=753)

Thirdly, the plight of men raped by armed groups isn’t conveyed in this otherwise brilliant presentation—which goes a long way to prove that this “thing” is definitely an imported phenomenon.



ALEX ENGWETE ([HTTPS://ALEXENGWETE.BLOGSPOT.COM/](https://alexengwete.blogspot.com/))

30 SEPTEMBER, 2011 AT 13:48 ([HTTPS://AFRICANARGUMENTS.ORG/2011/09/THE-NEW-RED-RUBBER-WARS-REFLECTIONS-ON-CONGOS-RAPE-CRISIS-BY-GEORGINA-HOLMES-3/#COMMENT-14183](https://africanarguments.org/2011/09/the-new-red-rubber-wars-reflections-on-congos-rape-crisis-by-georgina-holmes-3/#comment-14183))

To dispel any misunderstanding, I meant to say the following: “*And yet the **CONVERSE** is exactly what Dr Marion Pratt and Leah Werchik forcefully argue...”*”

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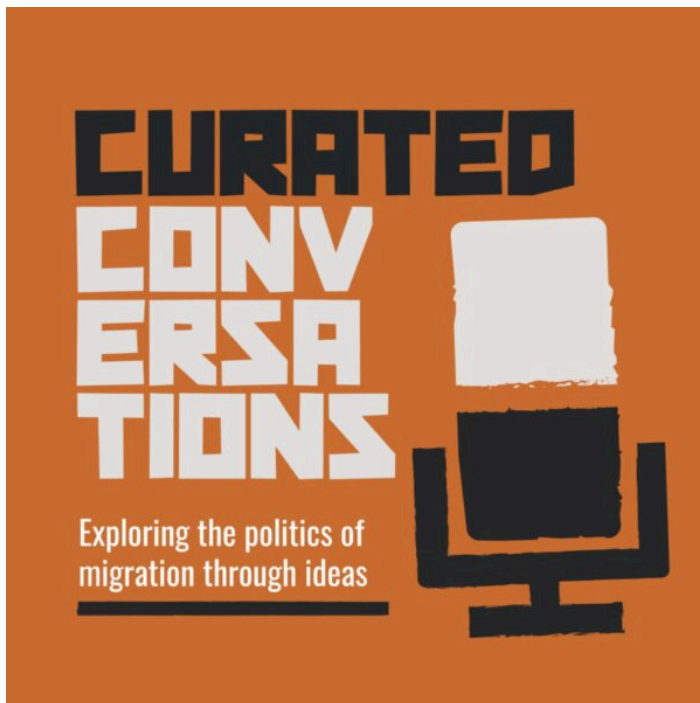
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