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## Opinion: Rape Traumatizes All Congolese, Not Just Women

By Jocelyn Kelly

Bukavu, Democratic Republic of the Congo – Women in the eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) have faced what many say are the worst instances of sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) in the world. Numerous articles, reports, documentaries and photo exhibits collectively paint a picture of Congolese women physically and emotionally devastated by gang rape; rape with guns, shards of glass and other objects; and the constant threat of repeat attacks. The latest reports of mass rape emerging from Fizi this month highlight the need to better understand the dynamics around sexual violence in DRC.

Many programs exist in eastern DRC today that assist with the medical and psychological needs of survivors – these programs can be life saving and are desperately important. But women here do not live in a void. They deeply affect those around them and are affected by those people in turn. Ignoring the needs of the family and community networks in which these women work and live means that the international community is ignoring the holistic needs of the women they are trying to serve. Truly effective SGBV programming and policy must provide services to husbands, children and other family members in addition to survivors of rape. Women cannot truly heal if their support networks are broken.

Perhaps nowhere in the world is rape as public as it is in DRC. In many cases, family members are forced to watch, and sometimes forced to participate in, the rape of a wife, sister or mother. Other times, rapes are carried out in public areas where neighbors and community leaders can see. This creates family- and community-wide trauma, just as it is intended to do. Husbands feel helpless as they are unable to stop the attack and children see that their parents are powerless to protect them.

Family support can further deteriorate as many husbands reject their wives after rape because of the cultural shame and stigma. This leaves many survivors desperately poor as they try to support themselves and their children without a traditional male head of household. Some women find support with other war-affected women through group loans and cooperatives, while others, in desperation, are forced to trade sex for food or money. Couples that do stay together still face deep-seated trauma and cycles of blame and shame within the home. Some men may use drugs and alcohol or perpetrate physical violence against family members as result of their own trauma.

Adults struggle to deal with the consequences of a war that has lasted two decades. Children in eastern DRC, however, have known nothing else. In a conflict that has changed the very nature of society, those born in the past twenty years have no reference point for peace. The young are inherently vulnerable to violence, displacement and the host of health problems that come with destabilization. In eastern DRC, children are often the first to suffer the effects of war. Not only are children the direct victims of sexual violence, but they are also often forced to witness horrific acts of violence against family members. Cycles of violence emerge as children who have been deeply traumatized by violence join armed groups, street gangs or live on the street because their family networks cannot support them.

The ripple effects of sexual violence – disenfranchised men, domestic abuse, destabilized families and vulnerable children – are the result of SGBV and the conflict more broadly. To respond to problems in an integrated way, we must look at them holistically. It is vitally important that populations with special needs – like survivors of rape – get specialized services. However, if women are to recover fully after their trauma, their communities must heal as well. And we must recognize that survivors of violence are not only survivors – they are businesswomen, farmers, mothers, sisters, daughters and leaders. They interact with, depend on, and shape their social networks and communities. Communal violence requires collective recovery, and in helping communities rebuild, we are helping women heal.

*Jocelyn Kelly is the director of the Women in War Program at the Harvard Humanitarian Initiative. She is the lead author of the recently published report, [‘Hope for the Future Again’: Tracing the effects of sexual violence and conflict on families and communities in eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo.](#)*