

THE ROLE OF WOMEN COMBATANTS IN THE DRC CONFLICT

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Abstract

The article addresses the role played by women combatants in the DRC conflict. After providing a summary of the Congo Wars, it elaborates how the gruesome aftermath of these wars laid the platform for women and girls to break the stereotyped gender roles and enter what is perceived as “the domain that is tainted with masculinity.” The article further explains the challenges faced by women combatants, and how these combatants are transformed from a victim into active perpetrators of rape and sexual violence. The existing action plans of the peace process are critically examined through the lens of isolated women combatants. The article also mentions the drawbacks of not including women combatants in rehabilitation and reintegration processes such as DDR. The article goes on to suggest future plans of action for the proper reintegration of women combatants and provides strategies for the redressal of women’s grievances in the war-torn Congolese society. The article concludes by citing the role of women under Mubutu’s dictatorship as evidence for the possibility of the feminisation of Congolese National Armed Forces through an understanding of how gender works in the military sphere.

Brief History of the Conflict

The root cause of the Congolese War that formally stretched from 1996 to 2003 was the Rwandan Genocide of 1994. The genocide killed around 800,000 people belonging to the Tutsi ethnicity and moderate Hutus; and around 2 million Rwandan refugees fled to Eastern DRC (formerly known as Zaire). From early parts of 1995, genocidaires who fled to Eastern DRC continued their militant activities in the region by organizing cross-border firing and attacks on Rwanda through their military wing, known as the ex-FAR. Continuous clashes between ex-FAR in the DRC and RPA of Rwanda further deteriorated the political stability in both countries.¹ In 1996, the newly formed Tutsi

¹ United Nations High Commission “The Rwandan Genocide and Its Aftermath,” in *The State of the World’s Refugees 2000: Fifty Years of Humanitarian Action*, UNHCR, January 2000
<https://www.unhcr.org/publications/sowr/3ebf9bb60/state-worlds-refugees-2000-fifty-years-humanitarian-action-chapter-10-rwandan.html>.

government in Rwanda in the aftermath of the Rwandan Civil War joined forces with Uganda to invade Eastern DRC, with the aim of avenging the Hutus seeking refuge in the DRC for the Rwandan genocide. Despite the report of UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) suggesting that only 7% of the refugees in the DRC could be responsible for the genocide, the united Rwandan-Ugandan front invaded Eastern Congo; raising suspicion about the real motive behind the invasion. The coalition forces, along with the help of DRC's opposition leader Kabila, managed to overthrow Mabuto's dictatorship. The First Congo War, that took place between the ousting of dictator Mabuto in 1996 and the newly appointed President Kabila ordering the coalition forces to retreat from Eastern DRC in 1998, witnessed grave human rights violations against the Rwandan refugees in the Congo. OHCHR report suggests that around 238 incidents of Human Rights violations and war crimes were officially listed in this period of two years, making it the most reported period in that decade.² The Second Congo War had equal atrocities committed as its predecessors, with around 200 incidents reported this time. The second war ended with the Sun City agreement in 2002; and the transitional government of the Democratic Republic of Congo, headed by Joseph Kabila, took charge in 2003.³

Aftermath of the Conflict

Despite predictions about DRC experiencing relative peace and stability after the installation of the provisional government following the Pretoria Accord signed between Congo and Rwanda, and the 2002 Luanda Agreement between Congo and Uganda; few experts spoke about the lack of understanding and coordination between state and non-state actors in this region as well as the difficulty in the reintegration of ex-combatants into the war-torn Congolese society. Both Congo Wars had multiple stakeholders in the conflict; it was due to this factor that both the wars were popularly called the African Wars. Peace agreements signed between a few countries did not resolve the existential crisis of the Congolese citizens. Not only did the continuous wars push Congolese citizens into deep poverty, various state and non-state actors operating from DRC's neighbouring countries such as Burundi, Rwanda and Uganda exploited the vast untapped natural resources in the region; violating the national sovereignty as well as international laws through illicit activities. Such activities drastically affected the economy and environment of DRC.⁴

² UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, "Democratic Republic of the Congo, 1993-2003", *Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR)*, August 2010.
https://www.ohchr.org/documents/countries/cd/drc_mapping_report_final_en.pdf

³ "History of the Conflict - Eastern Congo Initiative," Eastern Congo Initiative, May 28, 2020, <https://www.easterncongo.org/about-drc/history-of-the-conflict/>.

⁴ Security Council Press Release, "Security Council condemns illegal exploitation of Democratic Republic of Congo's Natural Resources", *United Nations Security Council (UNSC) – The United Nations (UN)*, May 2001.
<https://www.un.org/press/en/2001/sc7057.doc.htm>

The power vacuum in a few parts of DRC due to weak political stability was exploited by the militant wings of non-state actors such as “The Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Rwanda (FDLR)”, “The National Liberation Forces”, “The Allied Democratic Forces (ADF)”, and the “Mai-Mai Militias”. These militants sexually harassed women and girls to terrorize households. Unfortunately, raping women also coincided with the toxic masculinity of warfare resulting in widespread rapes in the Congo. According to the United Nations, more than 8000 women were raped in the DRC with non-state actors such as the FDLR resorting to gruesome measures that included gangraping women and girls in the rural areas of Eastern Congo.⁵ Dr Mukwege, in his interview to the Journal of International Affairs in 2013, confessed with deep frustration that around 500,000 women were raped in the Congo from 1996 to 2013; making it one of the worst places for women to live. According to him, rape and violence against women were perceived as a ‘strategy of war’ by the militant groups to terrorize the people; especially because rape and violence not only affect the victims but also causes irreversible damage to the impressionable younger generation.⁶

Stigma around rape and sexual harassment in Congo – the making of women combatants

Women and girls continue to be the main target for almost all militant groups in the region. Many Congolese citizens consider rape involving extreme violence to be a systematic treatment given to women and girls by militant groups not only to sabotage the intimate integrity of the victim but also to harm the family and society. Therefore women are raped publicly in front of their families in the Congo. The society considers survivors of rape and sexual violence as a disgrace; the male family members of the victims as well as the community to which they belong look down upon them and banish them from their homes. Having no other livelihood, these helpless women join rival armed forces to avenge the militants that ruined their lives.⁷ Some women join the armed forces because of their prolonged exposure to armed-conflicts and battles when they were abducted by the militants for being their ‘bush wives’. These women were sometimes involved in the conflict in the capacity of a cook or intelligence person. Their gender roles are reversed through an excess exposure to so-called “masculine” activities such as fighting using weapons. Congolese societies, being very strict and rigid with their gender roles

⁵ Jack Kahorha, “The Worst Places in the World for Women : Congo”, *The Guardian*, June 2011. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2011/jun/14/worst-places-in-the-world-for-women-congo>

⁶ Denis Mukwege. "CONGO: NO PEACE WITHOUT WOMEN." *Journal of International Affairs (New York)* 67, no. 1 (2013): 205-09.

⁷ Ibid.

and stereotypes, refuse to reintegrate these women. Thus, these women are once again driven to the arms of the militants groups and armed forces.⁸

The inability of the Congolese government to enforce gender equality and the culture of impunity in the region are some factors leading to women being recruited by the militant groups. Although Congolese laws empowered women as equal to men and guaranteed gender equality, widowed women were commonly banished from the house by their in-laws. They were further ostracized from their ownership to assets and commodities that were jointly owned by the couple earlier. Even though the majority of market forces in the Congo consisted of women, they were not granted any position of authority in these markets. They had to organize their trade unions and run their businesses under male supervision. Such real-life inequalities resulted in the systematic oppression of women by men, which unsurprisingly extended to other forms of oppression such as sexual harassment and violence.⁹

Plight of women combatants in Armed Forces and Militia – what transforms them into active perpetrators?

Although many women fought side-by-side with male militants in militant groups such as Mai-Mai Militias, the reversal in gender roles were not received well by men. The male soldiers constantly strive to maintain the military and security domain as an exclusive masculine sphere where they get to be military ‘men’ and where they do not let women in. They refute femininity and have been proactively preventing femininity from playing a role in armed conflicts and battles.¹⁰ This leaves a few women combatants with an urge to impress their male counterparts even as constant de-valorisation of their achievements pushes them to any extent to receive validation. Therefore, these combatants are also involved in the violence on women perpetrated by the male fighters to conceal their so-considered ‘feminine weaknesses.’ By doing this, they not only support sexual violence but also start to perpetrate them. Regardless of their conscience, the former victims of rape become rapists themselves.¹¹

Post-combat reintegration is not an easy task for women combatants. The transformation in their gender roles is not received well by both the male combatants as well as the society. The women combatants-

⁸ Julia Brooks et. al., “The Impact of Gendered Misconceptions of Militarized Identities on Disarmament, Demobilization, Reintegration and Humanitarian Assistance in the Democratic Republic of the Congo”, *ATHA White Paper Series, Harvard University*. March 2012.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Baaz, Maria Eriksson, and Maria Stern. "Whores, men, and other misfits: Undoing 'feminization' in the armed forces in the DRC." *African affairs* 110, no. 441 (2011): 563-585.

¹¹ Ibid

turned-perpetrators are also viewed as a threat to the safety of commoners as they have previously assaulted and raped many prisoners-of-war and commoners. Since their gender roles have transgressed societal norms, they are considered as outcasts. At the same time, the government and other entities that facilitate post-combat reintegration and rehabilitation of combatants and fighters fail to recognise women combatants as people in need of these services. Therefore, many reintegration and demobilization programmes targeted at combatants fail to accommodate women combatants.¹²

Drawbacks in the peace process – no consideration of the reintegration of women combatants into the society

In the recent years, the international community has come out of its indifference and tried to resolve long-standing societal disharmony in the Congo. The United Nations, under former Secretary General Ban Ki-moon, facilitated the Addis Ababa Framework Agreement among various stakeholders of the conflict. The recent review meeting on February 2018 witnessed a dialogue between top delegations that included representatives of all the involved countries, the United Nations, the African Union, the Southern African Development Committee (SADC), the International Conference on the Great Lakes Region (ICGLR), UN Special Envoy for the Great Lakes Region, AU Chairperson, and so on. The committee was enthralled by their success in weakening non-state actors such as the FLDR and ADF and enhancing cooperation and peacebuilding among the stakeholders. It is to be noted that the committee report never mentioned anything about the failure to provide proper rehabilitation and training to reintegrate women combatants into the society. Although the committee expressed growing concerns about refugees and IDPs, they continued to miss prioritizing women in the process. It is very vital for them to prioritize women in the process owing to women's disadvantaged position in the society.¹³

Although the World Bank has been involved in funding developmental projects in the region, the weak law-and-order in the Congo decimates the benefits enjoyed by Congolese citizens. The development projects are eyed by both state and non-state actors in the region as these projects are the only hope for economic development in the region as private investors fear the macroeconomic instability of the country. Therefore, taming the situation in Eastern Congo is important for sustained economic

¹² Julia Brooks et. al.,

¹³ Special Envoy for the Great Lakes, "Five Years On, Progress has been made in the implementation of Peace, Security and Cooperation Framework for the DRC and the Region, But Challenges Still Remain", *Office of the Special Envoy for the Great Lakes – The United Nations (UN)*, February 2018. <https://ungreatlakes.unmissions.org/five-years-progress-has-been-made-implementation-peace-security-and-cooperation-framework-drc-and>

development and harmony in the region as there are frequent clashes amongst the Rwandan remnants (FDLR), the Hutu militants in the region (CNDP), the Congolese National Army (FADRC) and other militant groups.¹⁴ While DDR (Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration) initiatives are happening in the Congo, it is predominantly focussed only on male combatants. By following policies such as ‘one-man = one-weapon’, only those combatants who handed over a weapon are provided with a reintegration kit. Since most female combatants didn’t possess weapons of their own, they are not included in this scheme. Many women-combatants were also asked to evacuate the rehabilitation centre midway because the male combatants needed extra rehabilitation and training for their smooth reintegration into the society. The minimal to no rehabilitation and training received by women combatants leads to improper reintegration into the society; as a result of which they resume being perpetrators of rape and sexual violence that they involved during their days as combatants; thereby causing harm to the commoners.¹⁵ Due to lack of proper reintegration of women combatants into the Congolese society, the security threats in these regions are never-ending and the Congolese citizens cannot enjoy the benefits of development projects funded by the World Bank.

Possible Action Plan for the effective reintegration of women combatants into Congolese society and Addressing the Grievances of Women in General

The culture of impunity in the Congo must be immediately challenged and torn down. The Congolese government should be able to bring justice to victims of sexual harassment and rape. Sexual violence against women and girls is set to be one of the major obstacles faced by the world while combatting HIV and AIDS. Therefore, the government, along with various other stakeholders such as UNAIDS and non-governmental organizations, should strive to destigmatize rape and work on ensuring the sexual and physical health of the victims as well as providing them with proper rehabilitation. This will not only reduce HIV and AIDS cases, it will also reduce the number of women getting sexually harassed and ultimately will result in the reduction in the number of women resorting to violence and armed conflicts due to lack of livelihood.¹⁶

Dr. Mukwege suggests that “the development aid provided by the World Bank should be subjected to the states’ compliance with the reforms and redress for victims and survivors.”¹⁷ By implementing this

¹⁴ Gilbert M Khadiagala, “Contemporary Security and Development Trends in the Great Lakes Region”, *Working Paper no.4 – The World Bank*, September 2008.

¹⁵ Julia Brooks et. al.

¹⁶ Denis Mukwege. "CONGO: NO PEACE WITHOUT WOMEN."

¹⁷ Ibid

policy, the government is obligated to recognize even the female combatants, regardless of whether the women combatants were in the frontline of the militant groups. The government is also obligated to reduce the stigma around redefined gender roles to make sure no woman ever conceals her ex-combatant identity fearing the reaction of the Congolese society. The government is, therefore, forced to make sure every woman combatant is duly reintegrated into the society as they must comply with all reforms to avail the development fund from the World Bank. Hence, the issues of ‘auto-reintegration of women combatants’ and concealment of combatant identity would be resolved as women combatants would receive proper rehabilitation and reintegration training while the redefined gender roles would have been destigmatized in the society.

All stakeholders involved in the post-conflict reconstruction of the Congo should adhere to the principles laid in the Security Council Resolutions of 1325 and 2016, which emphasizes women’s empowerment in the peace process. The government should expel every official working in the public services, especially the security forces, who was involved in illicit activities prohibited under International Humanitarian Laws (IHLs) and fundamental Human Rights documents such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) and the Rome Statute. This is the only way the Congolese government can build faith among its citizens. Victims Compensation Fund must be properly instituted through transitional justice initiatives such as hybrid criminal tribunals to redress the grievances of the victims of sexual harassment and rape.¹⁸

Last but not the least, the Congolese government must initiate gender-sensitive defence reforms in order to enlighten the male troops of the national army about the distinction between legal and illegal masculine behaviour in relationship to being a good soldier in order to promote its official aim of “enabling equal access for both men and women to the military as a prime state institution.” More emphasis must be placed on the know-hows of the construction of identities belonging to Congolese National Armed Forces through and by gender, for being able to design case-specific defence reform initiatives that pay attention to gendered power relations already in play.¹⁹

Conclusion

It is to be noted that a lot of women were recruited in Congolese National Armed Forces in the 1960s and 1970s under Mobuto’s dictatorship. He was believed to have been inspired by Gaddafi’s idea of creating an all-women brigade for strategic reasons. Mobuto’s regime witnessed women holding high

¹⁸ Denis Mukwege. "CONGO: NO PEACE WITHOUT WOMEN."

¹⁹ Baaz, Maria Eriksson, and Maria Stern. "Whores, men, and other misfits"

ranks in the army, which inspired more women to voluntarily join the armed forces. Although the current mood of the military is against femininity, the Congo had witnessed a vibrant role of women in the armed forces in the past, and with the right strategy used for the feminization of the Congolese military, women combatants could be trained and recruited into the armed forces just like their male counterparts.²⁰

²⁰ Ibid.