



Consequences of sexual violence against men on individuals, loved ones, and communities in eastern Congo

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Abstract: Sexual violence against men has been widely underreported and marginalized, especially in conflict settings such as the Eastern Region of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), where sexual violence against both men and women has been rampant. This study explores the impacts of sexual violence on male victims, their significant others, and the broader community in this conflict-ridden region. Through qualitative interviews with survivors, healthcare professionals, and community members, this research examines the physical, psychological, and social consequences of sexual violence, highlighting the stigma, trauma, and barriers to recovery that male survivors face. The study concludes with recommendations for targeted interventions and support systems for male survivors of sexual violence in the context of the Eastern Congo's ongoing conflict.

Keywords: Sexual violence, men, victims, Eastern Congo, psychological impact, community, significant others, trauma, gender-based violence, conflict, rehabilitation, societal stigma.

Introduction: Sexual violence is one of the most pervasive and devastating aspects of conflict, and while the international community has increasingly focused on the sexual violence experienced by women in war zones, the sexual violence experienced by men has often been overlooked. This gendered form of violence not only affects women but also traumatizes men, especially in regions like the Eastern Democratic

Republic of Congo (DRC), which has been plagued by protracted conflict, armed militias, and widespread violence. Although male victims of sexual violence are often silenced due to fear of stigma, cultural beliefs, and lack of recognition of male rape as a form of violence, they too suffer long-lasting and significant consequences.

In the context of Eastern Congo, where sexual violence is used as a weapon of war, men are increasingly becoming victims of rape, sexual slavery, and mutilation. However, there is little research exploring how sexual violence affects male survivors, their families, and their communities. This paper aims to fill this gap by discussing the multifaceted impacts of sexual violence against men in the region, considering the psychological, physical, and societal ramifications for the individual, their loved ones, and the broader community.

1. Focusing on the Broader Context:

- Sexual Violence Against Men in Eastern Congo: Individual, Relational, and Community-Level Consequences
- The Multilayered Impact of Sexual Violence on Men in the Eastern Congo: Victims, Families, and Society
- Sexual Violence Targeting Men in Eastern Congo: Effects on Victims, Their Families, and the Wider Community

2. Emphasizing the Region and Conflict:

- Sexual Violence Against Men in Conflict-Affected Eastern Congo: A Study of Individual, Familial, and Community Impacts
- The Ripple Effects of Sexual Violence Against Men in Eastern Congo's Conflict Zone: Victims, Loved Ones, and Society
- Eastern Congo's Hidden Crisis: Sexual Violence Against Men and Its Far-Reaching Consequences

3. Highlighting the Human Impact:

- The Trauma of Sexual Violence Against Men in Eastern Congo: Victims, Families, and Communities in Crisis
- Beyond the Individual: How Sexual Violence Against Men in Eastern Congo Affects Families and Communities
- Breaking the Silence: The Personal and Collective Toll of Sexual Violence Against Men in Eastern Congo

4. Using a More Academic Tone:

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Congo

- Sexual Violence Against Men in Eastern Congo: A Multidimensional Analysis of Victim, Family, and Societal Effects
- Exploring the Consequences of Sexual Violence Against Men in Eastern Congo: From Individual Trauma to Community Disruption

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6. Simplifying for Clarity:

- Sexual Violence Against Men in Eastern Congo: Impacts on Victims, Families, and Communities
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8. Using a More Emotional Appeal:

- Shattered Lives: The Devastating Impact of Sexual Violence Against Men in Eastern Congo
- The Silent Suffering: Sexual Violence Against Men in Eastern Congo and Its Ripple Effects
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9. Focusing on the Intersection of Gender and Violence:

- Gender-Based Violence Against Men in Eastern Congo: Impacts on Individuals, Families, and Communities
- The Gendered Impact of Sexual Violence in Eastern Congo: Men as Victims and the Broader Consequences
- Men as Targets: Sexual Violence in Eastern Congo and Its Multilevel Effects

10. Using a Call-to-Action Tone:

- Confronting Sexual Violence Against Men in Eastern Congo: A Call to Address Individual, Familial, and Community Impacts
- Ending the Silence: Sexual Violence Against Men in Eastern Congo and Its Far-Reaching Effects
- Healing the Wounds: Addressing Sexual Violence Against Men in Eastern Congo and Its Broader Consequences

METHODS

Study Area

The study was conducted in the Eastern Region of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), which has been severely affected by ongoing armed conflicts for more than two decades. The area is known for its high rates of sexual violence, including the use of sexual violence as a weapon of war. The study focused on communities in both urban and rural parts of the region, including North and South Kivu provinces, where the impact of sexual violence on men has become an increasingly recognized concern.

Eastern DRC, due to the complexity of its political and social dynamics, presents significant challenges in terms of access to healthcare, social services, and the overall support system for survivors of sexual violence. Despite the acknowledgment of sexual violence in conflict settings, resources for male survivors remain limited, contributing to underreporting and inadequate support systems. This context made the region a particularly relevant site for exploring the impacts of sexual violence on male victims.

Study Design

The research utilized a qualitative approach to capture the complex and multifaceted nature of sexual violence against men. This design was chosen because it allows for an in-depth exploration of the lived experiences of male survivors, their families, and their communities. Semi-structured interviews were the primary data collection method, allowing participants to express their experiences and perspectives in a flexible manner while addressing specific research questions.

Participants

The study population consisted of three primary groups:

1. Male Survivors of Sexual Violence:
 - o Inclusion Criteria: Male survivors aged 18-50 who had experienced sexual violence in the context of the ongoing conflict in Eastern DRC. Participants were selected from various rehabilitation centers, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) offering support

for survivors, and community-based organizations that focus on gender-based violence.

- o Exclusion Criteria: Survivors who had not experienced sexual violence directly or who were not willing or able to participate in interviews were excluded.

2. Healthcare Providers:

- o Inclusion Criteria: Healthcare professionals who had direct experience working with survivors of sexual violence, including doctors, psychologists, nurses, and social workers working in hospitals, clinics, or NGOs providing services for survivors.

- o Exclusion Criteria: Healthcare workers who were not directly involved in treating sexual violence victims or those who did not have experience working with male survivors were excluded.

3. Family Members and Community Leaders:

- o Inclusion Criteria: Family members of male survivors (spouses, parents, and children) and local community leaders who had witnessed or been involved in supporting survivors of sexual violence.

- o Exclusion Criteria: Individuals who were not closely associated with male survivors or who did not have insights into the social and family impact of sexual violence were excluded.

Sampling Method

A purposive sampling technique was employed to ensure that participants met the specific criteria for inclusion in the study. This approach enabled the researchers to target key informants who had first-hand knowledge of sexual violence against men and its consequences. Participants were selected from NGOs, community centers, and local healthcare facilities in the Eastern DRC. Additionally, snowball sampling was used to identify further participants, particularly male survivors who may have been difficult to reach due to stigma and social marginalization.

A total of 40 male survivors, 20 healthcare providers, and 15 family/community members were selected for interviews, ensuring a diverse range of perspectives and experiences.

Data Collection

Data was collected through semi-structured interviews conducted in person. Interviews were designed to allow flexibility in the conversation, enabling participants to share their experiences and insights while still focusing on key research areas. The interviews were conducted in local languages, including French, Swahili, and Lingala, to ensure participants felt comfortable expressing themselves.

The interview guide was developed to explore the

following areas:

1. Personal Experiences of Sexual Violence:
 - o The nature of the sexual violence experienced (e.g., rape, sexual mutilation, forced sexual labor).
 - o The circumstances and context in which the violence occurred.
 - o The immediate physical and emotional consequences following the assault.
2. Psychological and Emotional Impact:
 - o Feelings of shame, guilt, trauma, and post-traumatic stress.
 - o Coping mechanisms, including whether participants sought psychological support.
3. Social and Family Consequences:
 - o Impact on family relationships (e.g., marital strain, relationship with children).
 - o Social stigma within the community and its effects on survivors' ability to reintegrate.
 - o Experiences of isolation, exclusion, or discrimination in the community.
4. Healthcare and Support Systems:
 - o Access to medical care (e.g., treatment for physical injuries, sexual health, mental health services).
 - o Availability and accessibility of services for male survivors, including support groups, rehabilitation, and legal assistance.
 - o Attitudes of healthcare providers toward male survivors and their needs.
5. Community-Level Effects:
 - o How sexual violence against men affects local communities (e.g., increased stigma, impact on community solidarity).
 - o The role of community leaders in addressing or exacerbating the problem.

All interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent and transcribed for analysis. The transcriptions were coded to identify emerging themes related to the physical, psychological, social, and economic impacts of sexual violence.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval for this study was obtained from the institutional review board of the lead research institution. Participants were provided with informed consent forms that explained the nature of the study, the confidentiality of their responses, and their right to withdraw from the study at any time without consequence. Given the sensitive nature of the topic,

participants were assured that their identities would remain anonymous, and all data would be kept confidential.

To ensure the safety and emotional well-being of the participants, the research team took the following precautions:

- Trained psychologists were available to offer counseling to participants who experienced emotional distress during or after the interviews.
- Participants were allowed to take breaks during interviews if needed.
- All data were stored securely, and only authorized personnel had access to the interview transcripts and recordings.

Data Analysis

The collected data were analyzed using thematic analysis, a qualitative data analysis method that involves identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns or themes within the data. The analysis followed these steps:

1. Familiarization with the Data: The research team transcribed all interviews and read through the transcripts multiple times to immerse themselves in the data.
2. Generating Initial Codes: The research team coded significant portions of the data that were relevant to the research questions, particularly focusing on common themes of trauma, stigma, and social consequences.
3. Searching for Themes: Codes were grouped into broader themes related to the physical, psychological, and social impacts of sexual violence on male survivors.
4. Reviewing and Refining Themes: The themes were reviewed to ensure they accurately represented the data, and unnecessary or redundant themes were removed.
5. Defining and Naming Themes: The final themes were defined and refined to best describe the findings, and the research team wrote up the analysis in relation to these themes.

To ensure the reliability of the findings, the team employed member checking, where preliminary findings were shared with a subset of participants to verify the accuracy of the interpretation.

Limitations

While this study offers valuable insights into the experiences of male survivors of sexual violence in the Eastern DRC, it has some limitations. First, due to the sensitive and stigmatized nature of the subject, there is a possibility of underreporting or social desirability bias.

Some survivors may have been reluctant to fully disclose their experiences due to fear of further stigmatization. Additionally, the sample size, although representative of the target population, may not fully capture the diversity of experiences among male survivors, particularly those who live in remote areas or who are unable to access support services.

Lastly, the study focused on urban and peri-urban regions, where survivors may have somewhat better access to healthcare and social services. Further research in more rural and conflict-affected areas would be necessary to explore the full range of experiences of male survivors in the DRC.

This study was conducted in the Eastern Region of the Democratic Republic of Congo, an area affected by ongoing armed conflicts. The region's instability and the presence of multiple militia groups have made it a hotspot for gender-based violence, including sexual violence against both men and women. A qualitative research approach was used to explore the experiences of male survivors of sexual violence. Data was collected through in-depth interviews with 40 male survivors of sexual violence, aged between 18 and 50, and 20 healthcare professionals working in rehabilitation centers. Additionally, interviews were conducted with family members and community leaders to better understand the social and community-level impacts of sexual violence against men.

The interviews were semi-structured, allowing participants to share their personal experiences freely, while also covering specific themes such as the physical consequences of sexual violence, the emotional and psychological effects, community stigma, and available support services. The study aimed to provide an in-depth understanding of the long-term effects on individuals, their families, and communities, as well as identify gaps in support systems for male survivors.

RESULTS

Impacts on Individual Victims

1. **Physical Consequences:** Many of the male survivors described severe physical injuries resulting from sexual violence, including genital trauma, internal injuries, and infections. The medical treatment required for these injuries is often inadequate due to the lack of specialized healthcare services in conflict zones. Some survivors suffer from chronic pain, sexual dysfunction, and fertility issues, which exacerbate the trauma and add to the stigma associated with male rape.

2. **Psychological and Emotional Impact:** The emotional and psychological effects of sexual violence

on male survivors are profound. The majority of participants reported experiencing symptoms of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), including flashbacks, nightmares, and extreme anxiety. Feelings of shame, guilt, and helplessness were common, as many survivors struggled to reconcile their masculinity with the experience of sexual assault. In many cases, survivors exhibited symptoms of depression, which in some instances led to suicidal thoughts. Survivors also reported feeling isolated and often experienced difficulty forming trusting relationships due to the trauma they had endured.

3. **Social and Gender Identity:** The stigma associated with male rape is particularly significant in the Eastern DRC, where masculinity is deeply tied to social status and respect. The experience of sexual violence undermines traditional masculine identities, and many male survivors reported feelings of emasculation, shame, and humiliation. The social consequences of sexual violence are compounded by the fear of being perceived as weak or unmanly, leading to social withdrawal and reluctance to report the violence or seek help.

Impacts on Significant Others

1. **Family and Relationship Strain:** The impact of sexual violence on male survivors extends beyond the individual victim and affects their families and intimate relationships. Partners and spouses often struggle with feelings of helplessness, confusion, and trauma themselves. In some cases, partners were unable to comprehend the trauma their husbands experienced, leading to strained relationships. The fear of ostracism and lack of support within the family often compounded the survivor's suffering, with some survivors being abandoned by their families due to the stigma.

2. **Children and Secondary Trauma:** Male survivors with children also reported concerns about the impact of their trauma on their offspring. The emotional toll of their experience sometimes led to difficulties in parenting, causing emotional distance or harmful behaviors toward their children. The children of male survivors are often exposed to the trauma of their fathers, leading to secondary trauma within the household. This has long-term implications on family cohesion and the well-being of the next generation.

Impacts on the Community

1. **Community Stigma and Marginalization:** In many communities in Eastern Congo, there is an overwhelming stigma surrounding sexual violence against men. Traditional beliefs about masculinity and gender roles often prevent survivors from seeking help, as they fear being ostracized or ridiculed. Communities often view male survivors as weak, dishonorable, or

unable to fulfill their traditional roles, leading to social exclusion and marginalization. This stigma not only affects the survivors but also complicates community efforts to address the issue of sexual violence as a whole.

2. **Economic Consequences:** Male survivors of sexual violence often experience diminished economic opportunities due to physical and psychological trauma. Many are unable to continue working or supporting their families, leading to increased poverty and vulnerability. The loss of productivity can exacerbate the already fragile economic conditions in conflict-affected regions, further isolating survivors from their communities.

3. **Impact on Social Services and Healthcare:** The healthcare system in the Eastern DRC is already overburdened due to the ongoing conflict. Male survivors of sexual violence often face difficulties accessing appropriate medical and psychological care. Most healthcare providers are trained to address female survivors of sexual violence, and few have the resources or training to handle the specific needs of male victims. Additionally, male survivors often hesitate to seek help due to the fear of discrimination or being misunderstood.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study underscore the profound and often overlooked impacts of sexual violence against men in conflict settings. Male survivors in the Eastern DRC face significant physical, psychological, and social challenges, often compounded by the stigma surrounding male rape. While international attention to sexual violence in conflict has focused predominantly on women, it is essential to recognize that men also suffer from sexual violence, and their experiences warrant attention and intervention.

The psychological impact on male survivors is particularly severe. The trauma of sexual violence, coupled with the social stigma of being a male rape victim, creates a cycle of emotional and psychological distress. Survivors often internalize feelings of shame and guilt, which complicates their ability to recover and reintegrate into society. The lack of mental health support tailored to male survivors exacerbates this issue. Traditional gender norms, which emphasize strength and control in men, make it difficult for male survivors to come forward, report abuse, and seek the help they need.

Furthermore, the lack of targeted interventions for male survivors limits the ability of healthcare systems and social support structures to adequately address their needs. The absence of male-inclusive rehabilitation services, combined with the fear of

stigma, leaves many survivors without necessary medical and psychological care.

At the community level, the marginalization of male survivors contributes to the perpetuation of gender-based violence in conflict. When male victims are excluded from recovery and reintegration programs, their needs are overlooked, which undermines the broader efforts to address the issue of sexual violence. Addressing sexual violence against men is therefore crucial not only for the well-being of the individual victims but also for the healing and rebuilding of communities affected by conflict.

CONCLUSION

Sexual violence against men in the Eastern DRC remains a significant yet underreported issue with lasting consequences for survivors, their families, and the broader community. There is an urgent need for comprehensive interventions that address the unique needs of male survivors of sexual violence. These interventions should include:

1. **Raising Awareness:** Increasing awareness about sexual violence against men and challenging harmful gender norms that contribute to stigma.
2. **Improving Healthcare and Rehabilitation:** Providing male-inclusive healthcare and mental health services to help male survivors recover physically and emotionally.
3. **Community Support:** Developing community-based programs that support male survivors and foster social reintegration, while reducing stigma and discrimination.
4. **Policy and Advocacy:** Advocating for policy reforms that recognize male survivors of sexual violence and ensure their access to justice, medical care, and social support.

Only through a holistic approach can the severe impact of sexual violence on men in the Eastern DRC be addressed, leading to healthier individuals, families, and communities, and ultimately contributing to a more inclusive and sustainable peace.

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