



*MONUSCO peacekeepers on patrol in the DRC.
UN Photo/Sylvain Liechti*

COMMENTARY: WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT AND ADDRESSING SEXUAL AND GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE IN THE DRC

By Eileen Alma

Director, Women and
Indigenous Programming at
Coady International Institute

In the last two years, ethnically motivated sexual and gender-based violence rose in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), a country marked with ethnic-based tensions and conflict over the control of its extractive industries over decades. According to the 2018 Report of the United Nations Secretary General to the United Nations, sexualized violence cases emerged and spread in several provinces in 2017 with at least 804 cases of conflict-related sexual violence in this period, affecting 507 women, 265 girls, 30 men and 2 boys.¹ Despite progress by the international community actors to end these abhorrent practices, this marks a significant increase from the previous year and the delay in national elections has exacerbated conflict. Both non-state actors and state actors are identified perpetrators of sexual violence, including the Congolese National Police.

1 United Nations. *Report of the Secretary General on Conflict-Related Sexual Violence*. 16 April 2018. <https://www.un.org/sexualviolenceinconflict/wp-content/uploads/report/s-2018-250/SG-REPORT-2017-CRSV-SPREAD.pdf> pp 16-17.

Airianna Murdoch-Fyke's article provides an important overview on the gendered use of rape as a weapon of war in the DRC, noting in particular that the vast majority of these crimes are perpetrated by men against women and girls, and its prevalence in rural settings. The author elaborates on the long-term socio-economic impacts not only for the victims but also on the social fabric of kinship groups, communities and the nation as a whole. While noting the challenges of its implementation in conflict zones, the author offers a sustainable development approach to addressing sexual and gender-based violence, noting the pillars of gender equality, education, healthcare, and security and governance as being cornerstones for alleviating such impacts.

The four types of rape – researched and identified by the author as organized with other extreme forms of violence – including mutilation, infection and ultimately death – go well beyond a reinforcement of patriarchal notions of men's domination and women's submission to male ownership. Such acts of extreme violence are on the one hand, acknowledgement by perpetrators that women, objectified, hold high social and economic value and thus they have desire to render them destroyed and valueless to their "owners". At the same time, they highlight an understanding of the importance sexual and gender based roles occupied by women in kinship ties and the irreparable harm they can do to matrilineal and patrilineal lines, kinship power, economic status and relationships. The author notes that the high rates of rape in the DRC indicate attempts at community division, destruction of social cohesion, or ethnic cleansing, conclusions which are affirmed by research with victims themselves.

From the perspective of the individual, the author notes the devastating consequences of rape and extreme violence on women and children's physical, mental and social wellbeing, which calls into question how a sustainable development approach can adequately respond. For example, the notion of individual resilience – the ability to adapt in the face of adversity – is pushed here to the extreme, such as with the case of a child learning to align with one rapist to avoid a gang. Moreover, the lack of conflict resolution and the social stigma of rape means that victims of rape and other forms of sexual violence not only live with the consequences of violence for the rest of their lives, they must also do so in the midst of their oppressors. It is in this respect that promotion of gender justice and poverty eradication – utilizing the pillars noted by the author – must be accompanied by the discontinuation of impunity for perpetrators of violence against women in times of conflict or otherwise. While there has been progress in the country to convict perpetrators, the reparations that are necessary for a shift from victimhood to survivor rehabilitation, have not been so forthcoming.²

In the article, the author's development approach focuses in large part on the delivery of services intended to support rehabilitation and reintegration of survivors of sexual violence, including

2 *ibid.*

child soldiers. This includes aspects that contribute to survivors' ability to meaningfully take part in economic activities and address the wide range of physical and mental health problems that hold them back. The author also focuses on educational aspects that contribute to poverty alleviation, and address stigmatization of victims. At the same time, strategies that address existing cultural and social norms holding back development and contributing to the protracted nature of conflict dynamics must also accompany these sustainable development approaches. Efforts to address the norms and negative behaviours of those in power, especially of those in armed and security forces, are essential.

International pressure must continue to ensure that economic players in the extractive industries, whether formal or informal, are held to account. Finally and most importantly, the number of women meaningfully engaged in formal decision-making roles must be increased to ensure that their needs and those of children are being taken into consideration. Supporting women's organizations on the ground is one of the best ways to help move these important recommendations for sustainable development from rhetoric to reality and ensure the accountability of both state and non-state actors in the process.

Eileen Alma is Director, Women and Indigenous Programming at Coady International Institute, St. Francis Xavier University, Canada. Eileen's focus is on women's leadership and empowerment – political, economic, social and legal – which is considered key to addressing poverty and inequalities both locally and globally. She does so by overseeing programs that prioritize education of women and men to become aware of gendered power dynamics and to be sensitive, effective leaders in their communities as well as more broadly contributing to a wide range of educational programs and community development research.