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The Causes of Sexual Violence in the Armed Conflict in the DRC

abstract

My dissertation thesis (*The Motivations of Sexual Violence in the Democratic Republic of the Congo*) is a case study of sexual violence in armed conflict in the DRC examining and analysing the causes of its intensity and extent. The main research questions of the study are:

- What are the causes of the systematic sexual violence in the armed conflict in the DRC?
- Why sexual violence in the armed conflict in the DRC occurs in the large extent and with high intensity?

The research theoretically stems from the constructivism as one of the three main scientific approaches to sexual violence in armed conflicts. Since the constructivism presents male and female identities as social constructs, it seems as the best approach to sexual violence where gender of victims and perpetrators is often generalized by supporters of essentialism. Hence, the inherent neutralism of constructivism makes it very suitable instrument for an empirical research.

Further, the study works with combination of feminism, cultural anthropology, and feminist evolutionary psychology in the constructivist framework. This blend may seem incoherent but it allows a complex insight into the issue of sexual violence in the DRC and an interpretation of its motivations from both, victim and perpetrator points of view.

The case study is based on a qualitative research in the field which I conducted in the Eastern DRC. It consisted of 34 interviews with the perpetrators and the victims of sexual violence committed in the Congolese armed conflict. The interviews referred to gender-based aspects of a patriarchal social discourse which has been confirmed in informal discussions with local people, by observation of social (and language) acts, and by triangulation with the relevant scientific literature.

The study tested 13 hypotheses of the causes of sexual violence in armed conflict applicable in the case of the DRC. They have been collected after a state of art review. The hypotheses have been used as a basis for more specific theory of sexual violence in the Congolese armed conflict. They have been operationalized as the following independent variables:

1. war strategy
2. indoctrination during a military training
3. humiliation of the “enemy“ women by their rape
4. humiliation of the “enemy“ men by the rape of “their“ women
5. humiliation of the “enemy“ men by their rape
6. extreme assertion of masculine (misogynist) identity, femicide
7. genocide, ethnic purge
8. socialization of combatants
9. religion and mythology
10. nationalist ideology

11. lack of discipline in armed groups
12. compensation of war frustration
13. sexual instinct

The research results proved the independent variables No. 3, 4, 7 and 9. being the main causes of the systematic sexual violence (dependent variable) in the armed conflict in the DRC. The variable No. 3 – “humiliation of the “enemy“ women by their rape“ relates to the variable No. 4 – “humiliation of the “enemy“ men by the rape of “their“ women“, and with variable No. 7 – “genocide, ethnic purge“. Except for an inherent logical pattern appearing here, the correlation among the three variables has been empirically tested in interviews and triangulated with literature and social discourse analysis. The variables confirm sexual violence to be the worst kind of social humiliation in the DRC (being probably the worst type of psychological trauma for the Congolese). The sexual violence there is an equivalent of a “social murder“, i.e. a total social elimination of the opponent and frequently also of his family or the whole community (ethnic group).

The construction of sexual violence as a humiliation stems from the Congolese conservatism produced by a strong local patriarchal discourse. Gender inequality, endorsed by power domination of “men“, leads to creation of a sex taboo based on a paternity protection linked to a guarantee of power and wealth transfer to (patrilineal) biological descendants. Since the gender roles of “women“ are in this patriarchal discourse constructed as inferior, perceived as a property of the dominant gender category of “men“, their injury is a humiliation for the owners (unable to protect them). Thus, women are often not the primary intended victim of the sexual violence; it is their husbands to be therefore humiliated and punished. A tactical use of the humiliation appears also at the variable No. 7 – “genocide, ethnic purge“ where reproductive organs of women and men are frequently physically destroyed.

The specific independent variable No. 9 – “religion and mythology“ has been confirmed particularly by the paramilitary group Mai-Mai (Water-Water) whose members commit the sexual violence in a belief of receiving a magical protection against the enemy bullets (being magically changed into water) from the rape. Sexual violence here is constructed as “magic“ from the same reason as “humiliation“ at the previously mentioned independent variables. Any substitute for sex (as “magic“ or “humiliation“) obtains its importance from the taboo of sex and from the specific role of women (e.g. “chaste“, “virginal“, etc.) originating from the patriarchal discourse.