

Stop Treating the Consequences and Start Addressing the Causes

Today, as we accept honorary doctorates at the Medical Faculty of the University of Umeå, we are obliged to use this occasion to raise our voices for those whose own voices have now gone unheard for the last 10 years.

One woman who was brave enough to raise her voice, a 70-year-old woman in eastern Congo, told of what she endured at the hands of armed rapists: she tried in vain to convince the rapist to leave her alone on the grounds that they could be her own grandchildren.

Sexual violence in armed conflict, we often hear, is inevitable: that there should be an "accidental war injury". But we must reiterate here today that sexual violence in conflict is neither inevitable, cultural or sexual. It is criminal, and it must be treated that way. No other human rights' violations are so routinely dismissed that there would be an "inevitable".

For each reported assault, it is estimated that 20 rapes are not reported. So dark a figure is enormous. Sexual violence in conflict has become many perpetrators' preferred weapon. The reason is as simple as it is nasty: it's cheap, quiet and efficient. You do not need bullets or bombs, only individuals with cruel intent. This form of abuse not only mutilates victims physically and psychologically, but ruins entire families, communities and whole society. Women who survive are frequently displaced, often become pregnant or infected by sexually transmitted diseases including HIV / AIDS and can become sterile.

Armed conflicts have since a few decades changed drastically. Traditionally used to describe the war that two countries' struggle for territory, a war that was fought on the battlefield of the well-equipped and well disciplined armies. Modern warfare is characterized however, especially by civil war being waged by individuals and groups that do not always represent the state. Triggers are often tensions relating to identity, ethnicity or religion, or is a struggle for land and natural resources, particularly oil and mineral resources. This has also led to a change in the affected: today more than 75 percent of those killed or injured in armed conflicts are non-combatants. In modern low-intensity conflicts it is above all rebel groups - and poorly trained and rarely paid government troops - killing civilians and defying international law. Someone once said that most civilians are dying because of war rather than combat. Now women have been pushed towards the frontlines - not as soldiers, but as victims.

The United Nations (UN) is frequently criticized for shortcomings and mistakes. As it was after the brutal mass rapes in Walikale in the eastern Congo. This also has to be allowed, instead of making excuses and evasions, we must find explanations and see how to improve. It is also important that we start looking at what the UN, the Congolese government, civil society, and women activists are already doing well, and how we can further reinforce these structures and institutions.

Traditionally, consequences for the perpetrators are often negligible. While women go on with long-lasting consequences of pain and shame, the criminals go free. The Panzi Hospital has

been treating thousands of women bearing these consequences since 1999. We will continue to do so. However, we are tired of treating the consequences, we must and are insisting on addressing the causes.

Important is that we seriously address the issue of impunity.

One of the few bright spots recently in the DRC was the arrest of "Colonel" Mayele, a leader of a rebel group designated as responsible for mass rapes in Walikale, Mai Mai Cheka. The arrest followed, a few days later, the International Criminal Court's disclosure that French authorities have arrested another person identified as committing mass atrocities against civilians, Callixte Mbarushimana.

Women have no justice if those who violate them go unpunished. Everyone who heard the stories of the women in Congo and specifically in Walikale, understand that women do not feel safe under their own roofs, in their own beds, --cannot possibly feel indifferent. However, the women of Congo do not need more pity, they need concrete solutions; and they need to be a part of those solutions. Our goal must be to uphold international law and international political and economic pressure, so that all women - even in war-torn parts of the world - can continue to provide for their children in their fields and feel safe in their own communities.

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