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**LUND UNIVERSITY**  
Faculty of Social Sciences

# **Gender Dynamics in Peace and Conflict**

*A Critical Study on Sexual Violence in the Democratic  
Republic of Congo*

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Bachelor Thesis: UTVK03, 15 hp  
Spring Term 2013  
Supervisor: Axel Fredholm

## **Abstract**

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The aim of this study is to critically explore the effects of pre-existing gender norms on the use of sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) in the conflict in eastern Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), and the normalization of such violence by examining the links between peacetime and wartime sexual violence. The analysis is based on a research overview that highlights aspects of gender, violence and conflict in the DRC, which are discussed within a feminist theoretical framework using concepts of gender inequalities and identities, hegemonic masculinity and violence as a continuum. The results suggest that unequal pre-existing gender relations in the DRC have been further exacerbated and polarized in the conflict, noticeable in the normalization of sexual violence among soldiers and civilians. Thus, a continuum of sexual violence in- and outside the context of conflict can be distinguished, as it is possible to argue that structural violence enables impunity. This study concludes that an approach to tackle conflict-related sexual violence in the DRC needs to be multidimensional. Not only should it take into consideration the effects of the global political economy and the economic incentives behind the sexual violence in the conflict, but it also needs to incorporate the dynamics between femininity and masculinity, and challenge unequal underlying gender norms which enable the acceptance of violence and impunity.

Keywords: Gender, Sexual violence in conflict, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Gender inequality, Continuum of violence

## **List of Abbreviations**

SGBV – Sexual and gender-based violence

IPSV – Intimate partner sexual violence

FARDC – the Congolese Army

FDLR – the Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Rwanda

DRC – Democratic Republic of Congo

RPF – Rwandan Patriotic Front

NGO – Non-governmental organization

UN – United Nations

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# **1. Introduction**

## **1.1 Introduction and Background to Research Area**

Sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) is not a new element of armed conflict, but has during the past decade received unprecedented attention, resulting in a new discourse on the definitions and perceptions of such violence. Rather than just being regarded as an unfortunate but inevitable by-product of war, the definition of sexual violence in conflict has expanded and shifted towards the perception of a targeted and organized strategy of war (Card, 1996, p.5; Seifert, 1996, p.35; Meger, 2010 p.119; Bartels, et al., 2010). Thus, although it is not a new phenomenon, it is only in the last few decades that the use of sexual violence in conflict has been recognized as a crime under international humanitarian law, and its causes and functions become the objects of research (Watson, 2007, p.21; Meger, 2010, p.119). Such a shift in thinking is much credited to the International Criminal Tribunals that were set up for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) in 1993 and for Rwanda (ICTR) in 1994, during which the definition attained legal significance and sexual violence was prosecuted as a crime against humanity and an instrument of genocide (Buss, 2009, p.145). Seifert (1996, p.35) offers two reasons for the growing awareness of the systematic use of sexual violence in war; the extreme use of such violence in for example the specific ‘rape camps’ set up in the former Yugoslavia, and the increasing amount of women in politics, media, academia and science that politicize this issue and question existing limited explanations of such occurrences.

According to Meger (2010, p.120), there are two common myths concerning sexual violence in conflict; the unfulfilled and uncontrollable sexual urges of soldiers, and the breakdown of ordinary social rules and norms in a chaotic conflict situation. However, when looking closer at sexual and gender-based violence in conflict, the complexity and interdependent factors of such violence are revealed. Sexual and gender-based violence can take many forms and occur in a variety of different situations. It can be used not only as a strategic weapon to gain political power, but also as a reward and motivation for soldiers, as a way to torture, humiliate and displace individuals and whole communities, and as a biological weapon by deliberately spreading sexually transmitted diseases (St. Germain, 2012, pp.1-2).

Seifert (1996, p.35) claims that the somewhat simplistic notion of sexual

violence as an inevitable and natural part of conflict has prevented a deeper understanding of such occurrences. In her work, she argues that such war crimes need to be analyzed within contexts of culture and symbols of the nation state and gender structures. It is difficult to draw generalizations from the occurrence of wartime sexual violence, since the use of it varies significantly in different contexts and among different actors (Meger, 2010, p.119).

The consequences of sexual and gender-based violence have a great impact on people and entire communities. Not only do many survivors suffer grave physical damage, but people who are exposed to sexual violence also experience psychological traumas, which often result in a negatively changed perception of a person's self image and social identity. Depression, anxiety, sleeping difficulties and nightmares, apathy and suicidal tendencies, are some commonly reported symptoms from survivors in the former Yugoslavia. In many places and cultures, social stigmatization is attached to this issue, and this has effects on the survivor's role and value in the community, which often leads to exclusion and a lowered social status and intrinsic value as a person (Josse, 2010, p.177-178; Seifert, 1996, p.40).

Women are particularly vulnerable, due to disadvantages both economically and politically, as well as an inferior social status as a result of unequal gender roles (Cannon, 2012, pp.479-480). However, this does not mean that men are not affected; men and boys are also victims of sexual violence in conflict. Such violence is often, but not always, directed towards a particular group of men, as a strategy to gain political and military power by humiliating, intimidating and displacing targeted groups (Adhiambo Onyango and Hampanda, 2011, pp.237-238). Further, a study by Kelly et al. (2012, p.291) shows that men also feel shame and stigmatization when women in their family are exposed to sexual violence, and that they often feel emasculated and unable to protect their spouse or family member.

The UN Security Council has stressed the serious and negative impact of sexual and gender-based violence on the recovery of post-conflict regions. The social instability and institutional collapse as a result of conflict is exacerbated by a constant fear of sexual violence affecting primarily women and girls, and greatly limits their mobility. Further, failing to prosecute perpetrators as a result of the lack of proper legislation, implementation and upholding of laws, heavily affects civilians' trust in the government's ability to protect its citizens (Goetz and Jenkins, 2010).

Despite such devastating impacts, which affect individuals as well as

communities and regions, impunity is still a common outcome of crimes of sexual violence in the DRC and few perpetrators are punished despite legislative changes (Meger, 2010, p.127). In eastern DRC, people are exposed to displacement, abductions and sexual as well as other forms of violence (Lwambo, 2013, p.49). Criticism has been raised concerning the inability to recognize the function of sexual violence in conflict, and the failure to address long-term impact of such violence in post-conflict areas (Mackenzie, 2010). Critique has also been directed towards the one-dimensional humanitarian responses and recovery programs set up in the DRC, which fail to incorporate men's needs and issues in programs and campaigns, and are thus not fully addressing the complex issue of sexual and gender-based violence and the interaction between feminine and masculine norms (Lwambo, 2013, p.49; Grey and Shepherd, 2012, p.116). Eriksson Baaz and Stern (2008, p.57; 2009, p.496) raise concerns about the way soldiers and men are portrayed in reports from eastern DRC, claiming that such a one-dimensional way of approaching the issue will only serve to maintain and strengthen conventional and racial stereotypes of African warriors as primitive savages, rather than tackling the problem. The United Nations' (UN) lack of attention to the role of gender in relation to conflict-related violence has also been highlighted and criticized (Grey and Shepherd, 2012, p.116).

This calls for a deepened discussion on the practice and influence of gender on sexual and gender-based violence in order to acquire a more nuanced understanding of such violence internationally. Without a relational approach to gender, and the recognition of gender issues as more than just women's issues, it is difficult to fully address the causes of gender-based violence and to be able to work towards an effective prevention of such violence, in the DRC and elsewhere.

## **1.2 Aim and Research Questions**

The aim of this thesis is to critically explore and analyze in what ways pre-existing gender structures affect and possibly exacerbate the use of sexual violence in armed conflict in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). Further, the objective is to examine the normalization and generalization of sexual and gender-based violence in the DRC, and the link between wartime and peacetime SGBV. By looking at such factors, the aim of the study is to contribute to the debate on the importance of gender equality for real and sustained peace and security. The study will take the form of a research overview based

on secondary data, and a theoretical framework providing tools to analyze the empirical material. It will apply a feminist approach and use gender inequalities and identities theory when analyzing, in order to examine not only gender constructions and narratives in war, but also the workings of power and politics behind such constructions.

The research questions are: *(1) In what ways are pre-existing gender norms affecting the use of sexual violence in the conflict in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC)? (2) What are the links between sexual violence within and outside the context of conflict in eastern DRC - how is gender inequality affecting the normalization of violence in the DRC?*

The importance of posing these questions is not only to look at why there is such a high prevalence of sexual and gender-based violence in eastern DRC, but also to explore the process of normalization making such extreme violence a part of everyday life. It could be argued that a change in policies and laws, or pursuing the full implementation of already existing laws, is just one piece of the puzzle in reducing or preventing sexual violence, in conflict as well as in other settings. Without a general change in attitudes towards the role and status of women in relation to men, it will be difficult to reach a long-term solution to this issue and to work towards a peaceful society. According to Mackenzie (2010, p.203), it is important to look at gender roles and structures and the long-term impact of sexual violence, in order to reveal the continuum between peacetime and wartime sexual violence.

### **1.3 The Context of Eastern Democratic Republic of Congo**

The context of this study of sexual and gender-based violence is the complicated and protracted conflict in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). The conflict was initiated in the aftermath of the Rwandan genocide in 1994, and soon thereafter came to focus on the control of the valuable minerals in the area (Cannon, 2012, p.479). Sexual violence, militia activities and social chaos are still greatly affecting especially the eastern parts of the DRC, despite peace treaties in 2003 and 2008, and free elections held in 2006 (Bartels, et al., 2010, p.2; Eriksson Baaz and Stern, 2008, p.63). The widespread and strategic use of sexual and gender-based violence in the DRC is said to be unprecedented in other conflicts and is a much used strategy to suppress, humiliate and destroy families and communities (Meger, 2010, p.119). Understanding the social context in the DRC, in



which this violence takes place, is crucial when trying to understand sexual violence against women and men in this conflict (Ibid., p.127).

A number of conflicts have ravaged eastern DRC since the end of the Rwandan genocide in 1994 when many of the people responsible for the genocide, such as the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) forces, fled over the border to eastern DRC in order to avoid punishment. A range of both Congolese and foreign rebel groups and armed men have since then fought for the control of the area (Slegh, et al., 2012, p.2). Over 20 different armed groups have been active in the eastern regions in the last ten years. The long lasting conflict in eastern DRC has severely damaged local institutions and infrastructure, and greatly affected access to health care and other social services (Kelly, et al., 2011, p.1; Lwambo, 2013, p.49). The security sector has been functioning very poorly since the rule of Mobutu, during which it stopped receiving salaries and civilians as well as the military were encouraged to protect themselves in any ways necessary. This gave rise to a wave of harassment of the civilian population by the military, which has resulted in strained relations between the army and the population (Eriksson Baaz and Stern, 2008, p.65).

The continuing conflict in and around the Democratic Republic of Congo has been called the first African world war, because of several local conflicts in the area: the Rwandan genocide and its aftermath, and the Sudanese, Ugandan and Angolan civil wars (Meger, 2010, p.124). The unstable Congolese situation has been exacerbated by a slow decay of the DRC's institutions and formal economy, and the constant struggle, from both external and internal actors, to gain control over the natural resources in the area. Not only have the militia groups, such as the Mai-Mai, but also the Congolese army, FARDC, reportedly attacked the civilian population (Eriksson Baaz and Stern, 2008, pp.62-63; Cannon, 2012, p.479).

The situation in the DRC has been described as highly patriarchal. Economic and political institutions are dominated and controlled by men, as are land rights. This creates and maintains a system of great inequality in terms of opportunities, wealth and status between men and women (Cannon, 2012, p.479). Without proper infrastructure and political will to implement existing policies and legislation on gender equality and women's rights, it is difficult to change the situation for women in the DRC. Women are lacking the socio-economic means to gain access to political spheres, and are often excluded from decision-making. Women in Sub-Saharan Africa generally earn less than half than their male counterparts and have less access to health and education (Ibid.).

Among female-headed households, 61.15% are living below the poverty line, compared to 54.32% of the male-headed households (Freedman, 2011, pp.170-173).

#### **1.4 Delimitations**

It is important to note that both men and women are exposed to sexual and gender-based violence (Adhiambo Onyango and Hampanda, 2011; Bouta, Frerks and Bannon, 2005). However, women are to a much greater extent exposed to SGBV, which can be argued to be the result of socio-economic and political disadvantages, as well as pre-existing gender inequalities and norms (Cannon, 2012; Lwambo, 2013, p.49). Therefore a majority of the material regarding sexual violence in conflict portrays women victims and survivors.

This study uses material mainly concerning the situation in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), and much of this data is thus focusing on women, since most victims and survivors are women. Sexual and gender-based violence is a sensitive topic, associated with stigmatization, shame and ostracism for women as well as men. Therefore many people who have been exposed to such violence choose to remain silent, resulting in an underreporting of rape and other sexual crimes committed in the DRC and elsewhere (Slegh, et al., 2012, p.2; Kelly et al., 2011, p.1). Such challenges when it comes to gathering accurate statistics and data on this issue could have an impact on this study. Reported variations in the prevalence and situations in which sexual violence occur can be a matter of variation in the attention a certain conflict receives from international media and NGOs, rather than a higher frequency of such violence in particular areas. The definition of what constitutes as sexual violence will likely also have an impact on statistics and reporting in different societies. Since many people who are attacked do not seek medical care, wait for a long time before they do so, or die from their injuries before they have a chance to get medical treatment, it is difficult to know the full extent of the problem, and to account for every dimension of it. Such obstacles make it difficult to fully explain and analyze all aspects of this phenomenon.

Further, there is a range of different factors that can be seen as causes in conflicts in different areas of the world. The focus of this study is on the extensive use of sexual violence in the DRC, both in the context of conflict and in other situations, and will thus mainly explore the underlying causes found in this particular case. It is not intended

as a general explanation for conflict-related sexual violence, but will hopefully add to the debate on the importance of gender equality for peace, security and development.

## **1.5 Methods**

This study is carried out as a research overview, applying secondary data as the empirical foundation. The material used is from academic books and articles, newspaper articles, as well as United Nations resolutions and reports. The existing research is synthesized and analyzed using tools provided by a feminist theoretical framework. The research process has been that of a hermeneutic one, in which interpretation, clarification and contextual meaning have been in focus (Bryman, 2008, p.532; Widerberg, 2002, p.26). This has entailed that the research questions and the theoretical approach have been modified throughout the process.

The use of secondary material makes it possible to dedicate more time to interpretation and can allow for an in-depth analysis. New interpretations or theoretical approaches may be attained which could add to the understanding of an issue. However, there is always the aspect of attempting to interpret data that has been collected by another researcher, and which might be intended for a different purpose. This can pose some methodological or interpretational obstacles (Bryman, 2008, pp.296-300; Punch, 2005, p.103). Thus, since this study is using secondary data based on, or collected by other researchers, this means that the view presented here is my interpretation of this material. Further, when using secondary material it is important to ensure the quality of the data by applying source criticism and thoroughly assessing the material.

The research chosen for this study is mainly focusing on the Kivu provinces in the eastern parts of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), an area which has been called “the rape capital of the world” (Cannon, 2012, p.478). This area is chosen due to the extreme and widespread sexual and gender-based violence that is a part of the current conflict in this region. Further, it is chosen because it has been argued that extreme sexual violence in the DRC has expanded outside the context of conflict, and has become a normalized part of everyday life (Freedman, 2011, p.170). The study is mainly restricted to the eastern areas of the DRC primarily because of these reasons, but also to narrow the size and scope of the study in order to make it a feasible thesis project.

However, this does not mean that research on sexual violence in other places is

not taken into account, and some general concepts and theories used in relation to studies covering sexual violence in other conflicts and places will at times be used in this study, in which case this will be stated.

## 1.6 Definitions

In this thesis, a number of concepts and keywords will be used. As some of them can have different connotations or meanings in different contexts, this section will clarify how these key terms are defined and used in this study.

Understanding *gender* according to feminism, is more than the traditional assumption that gender is connected to differences of the biological sex; that is, denoting men as masculine and women as feminine. Rather, it is argued that gender is a set of socially constructed attributes “only *presumed* to be related to perceived membership in the biological categories of male and female” (Sjoberg and Via, 2010, p.3). What are perceived as male attributes connected to *masculinity* – strength, protection, rationality and leadership – are valued higher socially and politically than traits connected to *femininity*, such as emotion, compliance, passivity and care-taking. Gendered expectations of masculinities and femininities are not the same in different contexts and time periods, although a higher status of masculine attributes appears to be constant. The social categorization of people into different gender classes based on assumed group characteristics is known as gendering. In this sense, genders “are sets of discourses that shape, construct, and give meaning to social and political life” (Ibid., p.4).

The notion of *masculinity* is based on attributes that are presumed to belong to males. Feminism argues that these traits are socially shaped norms, and thus cannot be regarded as natural characteristics; rather, masculinity is a set of expectations that have to be realized before other men as well as women (Meger, 2010, p.121). This study will use the feminist notion of *patriarchy* as a system of social, political and cultural institutions that enable men as a group to hold more power and social status than women as a group (Ibid.).

*Conflict-related sexual violence* includes any form of psychological or physical sexual comments and acts or attempts of sexual acts (WHO, 2003, p.6); “rape, sexual slavery, forced prostitution, forced pregnancy, enforced sterilization or any other form of sexual violence of comparable gravity against women, men or children” (UN, 2012).

*Hegemonic masculinity* refers to a concept of multiple masculinities which are part of a masculinity hierarchy. Such a hierarchy is a pattern of hegemony which entails cultural consent and support of a particular assertion of authority (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005, p.846; Leatherman, 2011, pp.17-18). As such, “hegemonic masculinity is defined more by its successful claim to authority than its use of direct violence. However, by linking hegemonic masculinity to masculinist power, hierarchies are created among masculinities that depend variously on complicity, control or disempowerment of males” (Leatherman, 2011, p.17). By allying with, and supporting some masculinities while subordinating or exploiting other, along with femininities, hegemonic masculinity arranges and maintains power relations which support this hegemony (Ibid., p.18). Since gender is a social construction, masculinities as well as femininities are constantly reconstructed, renegotiated and changed over time (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005, p.846; Leatherman, 2011, p.18).

### **1.7 Disposition of Thesis**

The first chapter of this thesis consists of an introduction to the research area and presents the context of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). The following section presents the theoretical framework that will be applied; gender inequalities and identities theory, the approach of violence as a continuum and the concept of hegemonic masculinity. These are chosen because the objective of this study is to look at gender norms and structures and their link to sexual and gender-based violence. Therefore, a feminist approach is applied since such a framework is believed to benefit the analysis of the research.

The second chapter consists of the literature overview. The literature is organized and presented according to a series of themes representing different aspects of sexual and gender-based violence in the DRC in relation to the questions asked in this study. The first part in the overview addresses different types and variations of sexual and gender-based violence, and gives a brief and general account of the spectrum of acts and situations incorporated in the definition. The second section focuses the attention to the ways such violence has been used in the conflict in the DRC, providing a background for the following parts in which the thesis questions will be further explored. The third part looks at gender roles and dynamics in relation to conflict and militarism, in order to explore how such gender relations affect the use of sexual violence in the DRC conflict.

The fourth section looks beyond gender roles in the context of conflict and investigates the connections between wartime and so called peacetime sexual and gender-based violence, and the underlying gender constructions behind such acts of violence.

The third chapter is the analysis, which will connect the research overview with the theoretical framework and analyze the presented data. The first section of the analysis will utilize the concept of hegemonic masculinity in relation to the global political economy of the conflict, in order to explore how gendered power relations at work on local, regional and global levels are spurring on the conflict. Linking such hegemonic masculinity to the DRC, the second section will discuss more in depth the issues that are being problematized in the first research question and introduced in the section on gender and war. The theoretical concepts of gender inequalities and identities as a factor behind sexual violence will be used when assessing interviews with both Congolese soldiers and civilians and their perceptions of masculinity and sexual violence in conflict. This is done in order to include the dynamics between genders rather than just focusing on the ‘weaker’ position of women. The subsequent chapter will focus on the second research question, in connection with the issues presented in the section on sexual violence in war and peace. This will be approached by incorporating the concept of violence as a continuum in the discussion. Lastly, a conclusion paragraph will summarize and conclude the empirical material and the analysis, and attempt to put this study in a broader context.

## **2. Theoretical Framework**

This part will present and discuss the theoretical framework and key theoretical concepts used in the study; gender inequalities and identities theory, violence as a continuum and the concept of hegemonic masculinity.

The theoretical framework consists of theories that are believed to offer complementing approaches when attempting to explain wartime sexual violence in this study. Gender inequality theory, violence as a continuum and the concept of hegemonic masculinity are concepts which are situated within a feminist framework. Explaining sexual violence in conflict with theories only concerning opportunity or a military strategy has been criticized for being too simplistic and excluding other dimensions of this phenomenon. While the function of sexual violence can at times be strategic, it has been argued that these perspectives and theories do not explain the multitude of collective,

individual, strategic and circumstantial aspects of using such violence in conflict (Wood, 2010; Eriksson Baaz and Stern, 2010). As such, the strategic function of wartime sexual violence only accounts for one aspect of the issue (Seifert, 1996, p.37). For example, using such a war strategy approach to explain the violence in the DRC does not account for the sexual and gender-based violence taking place during times of relative peace or in areas which are not directly related to the conflict (Eriksson Baaz and Stern, 2010, p.15). Further, it has been argued that the strategic use of sexual violence in conflict gains its effectiveness because there are such “pre-existing sociocultural dynamics that attach concepts of honour, shame and sexuality to women’s bodies” (Meger, 2010, p. 121). Thus, incorporating such sociocultural dynamics into a theoretical framework might result in a deeper understanding of the phenomenon, which goes beyond the use of sexual violence as merely a war strategy, and attempts to explore the reasons behind its effectiveness as a weapon.

The gender inequalities and identities theory and violence as a continuum approach offer a framework to look at the similarities and nexus between ‘peacetime’ and wartime sexual and gender-based violence presented in this study. Connected to the social, economic and cultural structures of a society, gender inequality can refer to a range of issues and take on many forms. Generally, women are less favored socially, politically and economically compared to men. Women tend to get paid less than men for the same work, or traditionally have jobs that are valued lower than those of men. Gender inequality is also evident when considering that boys generally receive more and higher education than girls, and that women make up two-thirds of all illiterate people in the world (Lorber, 2010, p.4). This is the case also in the DRC; women and girls get less education and 41.1% of the Congolese women are illiterate compared to 14.2% of the Congolese men (Freedman, 2011, p.172). Women are also repeatedly excluded from economic and political spheres (Cannon, 2012, p.479; Freedman, 2011, p.172).

The inequalities and identities approach is based on the concept of gender as socially and culturally constructed rather than biologically determined. As such, gender constructions are a force behind violence since “there are concrete and ideational power divides between the genders, which can be used instrumentally against victims and their associated communities” (Gerecke, 2010, p.141). In times of conflict, such unequal power relations are further divided, and the promotion of a militarized masculinity connected to aggression aggravates misogyny and sexual violence (UN OCHA, 2008, p.2; Gerecke, 2010, p.141; Cockburn, 2012, p.23). Moving away from the assumption of gender as

directly related to the biological sex incorporates the concept of ‘doing gender’, which helps to understand why not just women but also men are exposed to sexual violence. Sexual violence is a gendering act in which the roles of the perpetrator and victim are not determined by sex, but are “gendered into a powerful masculine role and a weak feminine role, respectively” (Gerecke, 2010, p.142). This theory will be applied and referred to in the discussion related to data on women’s status in eastern Congolese society, but also in the analysis of Congolese civilians’ and soldiers’ perceptions of masculinity and sexual violence, in order to explore the relational dynamics of gender constructions at play in the DRC.

Conceptualizing violence as a continuum, which is continuous across contexts of conflict and ‘peace’, Cockburn (2004, p.25) also argues for a relational approach to gender, which needs to incorporate men and masculinity to the same extent as women and femininity, as well as the power relations between genders. In her studies, Cockburn (2004, pp.43-44; 2012, p.26) suggests that gender connects violence that spans from personal and domestic, to public, international and conflict-related, in a continuum. Thus, Cockburn (2012, p.26) derives that women’s experiences of war as cultural, systemic and a continuum of violence calls for the need to look beyond the “political, institutional, calculated and organized nature” of armed conflict. This is important in order to recognize that gendered relations exist in social, economic and political spheres, which are all connected through a continuum of violence (Cockburn, 2004, p.43). Similarly, Kelly (2010, pp.114-122) challenges any fixed boundaries between contexts of war and peace and asserts that there is a connectedness between sexual violence in different contexts. A continuum approach, highlighting the importance of connecting work on preventing sexual violence across contexts is argued for. If the issues of impunity and injustice are not dealt with in peacetime, it is very difficult to establish justice and redress in post-conflict situations. Such a continuum approach, which entails issues of sexual violence to be addressed across all contexts, will be utilized in regard to the normalization of SGBV seen in eastern DRC, to explore further some mechanisms behind such normalization.

The concept of hegemonic masculinity shows the complexity of gender relations, in which multiple masculinities are conformed to a hierarchy controlled by a dominant masculinity that has hegemony over others, as well as over femininity. Such gendered relations are at play in militarism as well as global institutions and policy-making (Cockburn, 2004, p.26; Leatherman, 2011, p.132). This concept will be applied when discussing the impact of the global economy on the use of sexual violence in eastern



DRC, and also when looking at the complexity of masculine roles in the DRC conflict situation.

### **3. Research Overview**

#### **3.1 Variations of Sexual Violence**

Sexual and gender-based violence, both inside and outside the context of war, entails more than what constitutes as rape. It incorporates a range of different acts and can serve many purposes. Not only sexual violence, but also other forms of extreme violence such as cannibalism, butchery and torture have reportedly been used to terrify and oppress civilians in the DRC (Eriksson Baaz and Stern, 2008, p.58). Since the types of acts as well as the contexts and frequency of sexual violence vary greatly in different conflicts around the world, this makes it difficult to holistically understand and account for the factors and mechanisms behind this occurrence.

Sexual violence has by Seifert (1996, pp.40-41) been equaled with torture, in that it is an intentional act aimed at inflicting enormous pain and annihilation of a person's identity. Torture is often characterized by extreme, and what can be seen as futile, violence, in which the agony and pain of the victim is translated into power of the torturer. In this sense, acts of sexual violence are ultimately an expression of torture, a most intimate violation of a person's body, identity and dignity.

Feminist Cynthia Enloe distinguishes between three main categories of wartime sexual violence; *recreational rape*, *national security rape* and *systematic mass rape*. The first form of sexual violence, recreational rape, contains the notion of a biological urge for sexual release as a driving force behind the act. The second one, national security rape, is used both locally and nationally by military groups and governments as a form of punishment and humiliation of women who, by opposing or challenging ordinary norms of femininity and masculinity, are seen as a threat to national security and identity. Systematic mass rape can be used to humiliate and feminize certain ethnic or enemy groups by attacking their women, and thus attacking their national identity. It is based in "gendered nationalist discourses" and used in genocides such as in Rwanda and the former Yugoslavia (Eriksson Baaz and Stern, 2009, p.500). Enloe argues that the strategic use of sexual violence in conflict is often more prevalent when notions of gendered labor divisions are maintained by the groups exercising such violence (Meger, 2010, p.120;

Eriksson Baaz and Stern, 2009, pp.499-500). Thus, Enloe claims that in settings in which gender roles are perceived as noticeably divided and women have a clear and often submissive role, the use of sexual violence is likely to be more common.

The belief in the notion of an urge for men's sexual release as a rationale behind sexual violence is discussed and problematized by several feminists (Enloe, 1990; 2000 in Eriksson Baaz and Stern, 2009; Seifert, 1996; Meger, 2010). Seifert (1996, p.36) dismisses claims of sexual violence in conflict as an uncontrollable sexual urge, and argues for studies which have shown that "whether there is an irrepressible urge or not and what consequences it has, seems more likely to depend on the social conditions and on the construction of sexuality prevailing in a particular time and culture, which, in turn, has a considerable impact on the psyche and the emotional balance of the individual". Thus, it has been argued that rape is an aggressive rather than sexual act. Although strictly biological explanations of sexual urges are rarely used as a viable explanation anymore, this 'rape myth' (Meger, 2010, p.120) can at times still serve as an excuse for sexual violence as a natural occurrence in conflict. However, looking at existing statistics showing the disproportionate number of civilian casualties compared to military casualties in 20<sup>th</sup>-century conflicts makes it difficult to assume that it is merely a peripheral and unintended side-effect of fighting, rather than an implemented tactic (Seifert, 1996, pp.37-38).

Reliable statistics on sexual and gender-based violence in the DRC, as well as in many other conflicts, are rare, because of stigmatization attached to the issue and exposure of women and men speaking out or seeking care but also due to the general unstable and insecure situation in the region (Bartels, et al., 2010, p.2; Gottschall, 2004, p.129; Sleg, et al., 2012, p.2). The problem of underreporting and difficulty in gathering information about sexual violence is a considerable issue also in peacetime contexts and in countries with advanced infrastructures and legal systems. One issue is the legal definition of rape, which can be ambiguous or too narrow. Fear and shame might hinder people to report sexual violence, as might the difficulty to physically prove that a crime has been committed. Such obstacles are often further exacerbated in conflict situations, such as in the DRC (Wood, 2006, pp.318-319). The next chapter will look more closely at the use of sexual violence in eastern DRC.

### **3.2 Sexual violence in Eastern DRC**

Although finding reliable statistics on the actual number of acts of sexual violence committed in eastern DRC is difficult, it has become clear that it is a widespread and severe issue. Estimates based on surveys conducted in the area indicate that around 40% of women and 24% of men have been exposed to sexual violence, and a national survey from 2011 reported that around 1.69 to 1.80 million women in the country have been raped at some point in their life (Kelly, et al., 2011, p.2). In 2012 it was estimated that an average of 48 women and girls were raped every hour and that for every reported case of sexual violence, 20 rapes are not reported (Cannon, 2012, p.478). Acts of sexual violence have been committed by all armed groups involved in the conflict, including United Nations peacekeeping forces (Meger, 2010, p.126).

Health care services are very limited, but one important facility in Bukavu, eastern DRC, is the Panzi Hospital, which was founded in 1999, primarily to help and treat pregnant women. However, with the increasing number of people exposed to sexual violence, the hospital founded 'The Survivors of Sexual Violence Project' in 2004 and has currently treated over 30 000 survivors of such violence. The project aims to offer not only physical help, but also physiological counseling and legal and financial aid (Andersen, 2013).

In a mixed-methods study conducted by Kelly et al. (2011, p.3) at Panzi Hospital and the nearby area, two-thirds (68.9%) of the 193 raped women interviewed reported that they had been subjected to gang rape. Women, who identified their attacker as an armed soldier, reported being gang raped three times more often than women who said they were attacked by civilians. Armed groups were further associated with looting, public rape, rape with various instruments such as guns, and abduction. Family members of the survivors were often targeted as well, for example through physical abuse, execution or forced incest during which a family member was forced to have sex with the victim. Thus, it is possible to distinguish some patterns of the use of SGBV in the area. For example, gang rapes and public rapes seem more frequent among armed groups, while one assailant is reportedly more common when the perpetrator is identified as a civilian.

Reoccurring issues in these studies are stigmatization and rejection, both by the survivor's family and their community (Kelly, et al., 2011; Slegh, et al., 2012). Of the women interviewed by Kelly et al. (2011, p.4), 29% reported being rejected by their families, and 6.2% were ostracized by their communities, after being raped. The women

participating in the focus group discussion often expressed that they were being treated as adulterers, without any consideration for the fact that they were being forced. As adulterers, they are traditionally believed to bring bad luck to the household, and are often rejected by their husband or family. Thus, cultural traditions further exacerbate the shame and stigmatization that many women are exposed to after being the target of sexual violence.

The use of conflict-related sexual violence in eastern DRC is said to be more widespread and frequent than in any previous or current conflict (Meger, 2010, p.119). However, it has also been argued that SGBV and intimate partner sexual violence (IPSV) is generalized and widespread; more so than what has been previously estimated. Thus it has been suggested that the battling of conflict-related sexual violence should be combined with efforts to prevent abuse within families, and eradicate impunity and the acceptance of violence (Peterman, Palermo and Bredekamp, 2011, p.1060).

Despite several peace agreements during the last decade, the situation in the DRC is still unstable, especially in the eastern Kivu provinces (Bartels, et al., 2010, p.2). Currently, a rebel group called M23 increasingly gains power over areas surrounding Goma in eastern DRC. Peace talks with Kabila's DRC government are tentative and reports of mass rapes and killings of civilians in the Kivu provinces point out M23 as well as government soldiers as perpetrators (Borger, 2013). It is estimated that hundreds of women and children were exposed to sexual violence in late November 2012, when thousands of Congolese Army soldiers stopped in the town Minova in the Kivus, after being defeated in battle by M23 rebels. The government and the army are now claiming that justice will be done, even threatening to arrest officers who do not control their troops. However, few arrests have been made so far (Jones, 2013). One soldier, who was asked why the troops committed these acts, replied "we could do whatever we wanted" (Ibid.). Such a view does not seem to be rare among men in the DRC; reportedly 34% of Congolese men confess to having committed some type of sexual violence, either in a domestic setting or in a conflict-related situation (Slegh, et al., 2012, p.8).

A growing concern about the high level of impunity and acceptance of violence in the DRC poses questions regarding gender norms as exacerbating such violence. Such constructions of gender and the way gender norms are structured and perceived in relation to violence and conflict will be further discussed in the following section.

### 3.3 Gender and War

Feminism challenges the conventional assumption that gender and gender differences are directly related to differences of the biological sexes. Instead, gender and the attributes associated with femininity and masculinity, are regarded as social constructions shaped by society. It is argued that such gender characteristics are not value-neutral; traits associated with masculinity, such as strength, protection, rationality, domination and leadership are valued higher in social and political life than feminine attributes such as weakness, vulnerability, emotion, passivity and submission. The characteristics of gender categories vary in different times, cultures, places, religions, and contexts. However, social and political gender subordination of femininities to masculinities seems to remain the same. Thus, it is possible to distinguish genders as sets of discourses, since perceptions vary in different cultures and situations (Sjoberg and Via, 2010, pp.3-4). Such gender constructions exist in both theory and practice in international discourse (Watson, 2007, p.22). It has also been argued that “gendered expectations of human behavior have long been central to narratives justifying or explaining wars” (Sjoberg and Via, 2010, p.4). Often, portraits of the man as the strong, aggressive protector and the woman as vulnerable, caring and in need of protection, can be distinguished in military discourses (Eriksson Baaz and Stern, 2008; Sjoberg and Via, 2010).

Seifert (1996, pp.39-40) argues that “the social construction of the feminine implies a ‘vulnerability to assault’, something that the construction of masculinity does not include”. Women are to a much greater extent than men exposed to violence within their own culture or community, whether in peace or conflict. In war, the reproductive and caring role of females in many cultures results in women as the symbols of their community or nation, and thus in need of protection. As such embodiments of the nation, women are targets of violence aimed at destroying a culture or community (Seifert, 1996, pp.39-40; Buss, 2009, p.148). The role of men as protectors and women in need of protection has been argued to further exacerbate the use of sexual violence in war, as the rape of women can be considered an attempt to humiliate and feminize men by attacking “their women/nation/homeland, and proving them to be inadequate protectors” (Eriksson Baaz and Stern, 2008, p.67)

It has also been argued that without incorporating an element of hostility in gender constructions, it is difficult to fully account for explicit violence against women. Many atrocities in the DRC revolve around feminine body traits; cutting off breasts,

tearing apart the vagina with weapons or other objects, and slicing open stomachs. Such violence is difficult to explain without including the aspect of hatred or animosity towards femininity (Seifert, 1996, pp.37-38).

The description of Post-Cold War conflicts as ‘new wars’ comes from the shift from predominantly interstate wars to state-based conflicts, such as guerilla groups fighting government forces. These types of ‘new wars’ have resulted in new types of warfare, which involve new strategies and new types of weapons. Conflicts today are no longer predominantly ideological and state-driven, but are often characterized by resource claims and illicit funding. Increasing access to small and light arms and the possibility to easily move them around on foot or by car in rural and enclosed areas has led to an increase in intimate and localized violence (Leatherman, 2011, pp.37-42). Such a type of conflict involving intimate and decentralized violence can be discerned in South Kivu, eastern DRC, where many survivors of sexual violence have reported being attacked in their homes, often at night and with their family present (Bartels, et al., 2010, p.9).

Freedman (2011, pp.171-173) claims that pre-existing gender roles in eastern DRC are exacerbated by sexual violence, and that linking the continuous gender inequalities of wartime and peacetime is crucial. The connection between wartime and peacetime sexual violence as a continuum of violence will be the focus of the following section.

### **3.4 Sexual violence in War and Peace**

It can be claimed that unequal gender constructions are often deeply rooted in social and economic structures, and thus greatly dominate everyday life. Whether it occurs in conflict or in other situations, SGBV impacts social institutions, such as family and community relations and structures. As studies have shown, it is possible to argue that there is a link between gender inequality and poverty, conflict and poorly functioning institutions, since the areas with the highest rates of gender inequality and injustice are also places with significantly high rates of poverty, ‘weak’ states and conflicts (Leatherman, 2011, p.4). This is important to consider, since this entails that the promotion of gender equality is important not only in terms of women’s rights and living conditions, but also concerns society as a whole.

It has been argued that the extreme and severe sexual and gender-based violence

emphasized as a major component in the conflict in eastern DRC “is just one part of a continuum of social structures within the country that perpetuate gender inequalities and forms of domination”, and the need to incorporate such social circumstances in policies and recovery programs is somewhat overlooked internationally (Freedman, 2011, p.170). If this is the case, then it is possible to argue that sexual violence in conflict is closely related to sexual violence in other situations. Meger (2010, p.121) argues that the frequency of sexual violence in conflict goes beyond such a context and is connected to the status of, and attitude towards, women in peacetime, which makes it difficult to separate sexual and gender-based violence in conflict and in peacetime contexts. Thus, the violence occurring in wartime is a mere continuation and exacerbation of the violence women are exposed to in times of peace. If this is the case, this would entail that a holistic understanding and effective prevention of conflict-related sexual violence is not possible without dealing with this issue in a more general sense, by putting it in a broader context of global gender inequality and by questioning patriarchal structures.

A recent study, the International Men and Gender Equality Survey (IMAGES) carried out in Goma in North Kivu in the DRC, aims to look at the relations between genders and to investigate men’s perception of the situation and the violence. The study shows that 34%, more than one in three, men confess to having committed acts of sexual violence in various forms and settings (Slegh, et al., 2012, pp.2-8). It also confirms what other studies have pointed out; that SGBV in the DRC is a problem not only in relation to conflict, but has become normalized in everyday life, greatly affecting not just women and girls, but also men and boys (Slegh, et al., 2012, pp.2-8; Freedman, 2011, pp.170-171).

A correlation between committing gender-based violence and men witnessing their mothers being exposed to such violence in the past could be discerned in the study. Associations were also distinguished between SGBV and perpetrators of higher age, with less education and who use alcohol. Many men and women also reported being exposed to sexual and other forms of violence in their childhood. A general acceptance of violence against women and children could also be derived from the study (Slegh, et al., 2012, pp.8-9). For example, many men did not consider coerced sex in marriage as rape, rather that it is the man’s right to have sex with his wife. Others expressed views that any woman who acts in a ‘provoking’ manner, wants to have sex (Ibid.). The study also concludes that many men feel negatively or skeptically about SGBV laws or gender equality. Few men and women could conceptualize equality as meaning equal roles, responsibility and power, and felt that gender equality was not applicable to Congolese

society. Many men regarded gender equality as “something only for the rich” and could not envision such equality in a conflict situation characterized by oppression and power hierarchies (Slegh, et al., 2012, p.10).

Thus, it is possible to discern patterns of underlying gender structures, structural violence and a general acceptance of violence, which has been exacerbated by the extreme violence occurring as a part of the protracted conflict. The cycle of violence, which starts with structural discrimination of women and children, manifests itself in the way violence is reproduced and perpetuated in everyday situations. The links between violence perpetrated in the absence of conflict and in war situations, will be further discussed in the analysis.

## **4. Analysis**

### **4.1 The DRC and the Global Political Economy**

To understand the mechanisms behind, and the purpose of, using sexual violence in the conflict in the DRC, Meger (2010, p.120) argues that it is important to take into account the interaction between the social constructions of masculinity and the political economy of the conflict. Placing the DRC conflicts in a context of globalization enables the understanding of some aspects of the underlying forces driving on the conflict. The militarized notions of masculinity and femininity in the DRC are a result of a mixture between local Congolese norms and sexist discourses and power hierarchies which are found in globalized discourses that construct notions of militarized masculinity and heterosexuality (Eriksson Baaz and Stern, 2009, p.499). The context of globalization is also visible in the way the global economy is inextricably linked to the illicit exploitation of natural resources in eastern DRC (Leatherman, 2011, p.116).

It has been suggested that the situation in the DRC has conditions that together aggravate the use of sexual violence in conflict. Such conditions include the history of the region, along with the political economy and the institutions. Historically, violence has been a central part of the region’s politics, discernible from the exploitation during the slave trade, throughout the period of King Leopold’s Congo Free State and the dictatorship of Mobutu, until the current conflict revolving around the area’s natural resources (Cannon, 2012, p.479; Leatherman, 2011, p.138).

There is little doubt that the political economy of the conflict benefits from the



social and institutional breakdown and the displacement of communities which is the result of years of sexual and other types of violence in eastern DRC. International standards of warfare make little difference as states increasingly lose their monopoly on violence since rebel groups have become more common in the post-Cold War conflicts. Such conflicts have been characterized by intrastate wars signified by highly localized violence. These 'new wars' increase the risks for civilians, as they become central to such a political economy of violence (Leatherman, 2011, pp.55-56; Ohambe, Muhigwa and Wa Mamba, 2005, p.11). Thus, there are no longer any clear distinctions between soldiers and civilians in war (Cockburn, 2004, p.35).

It has been suggested that many of the conflicts in Africa and other places can be directly connected to the global political economy. Postcolonial states were in the 1980s introduced to the global economy through structural adjustment programs which were implemented at the expense of national control of the own economy and infrastructure (Leatherman, 2011, p.40). The vast amount of natural resources found in eastern DRC is one main motivation for external actors to get involved in the conflict (Meger, 2010, p.125). Behind the fighting swarm of armed groups trying to profit from the minerals trade, international economic interests can be discerned (Cockburn, 2012, pp.28-29). International mining companies have been accused of financing the conflict in eastern DRC, since a violent environment and the displacement of people create access to the mines in the area (Leatherman, 2011, pp.133-135). Research has shown that targeting civilians in intrastate wars is more common when there is an economic incentive to maintain a chaotic situation, such as with the minerals trade in eastern DRC. However, it has been argued that such existing research has overlooked the gendered nature of such violence (Meger, 2010, p.131). Two of the most violent military groups, the Congolese Army, FARDC, and the Rwandan Hutu militia, FDLR, are both deeply involved in the illegal minerals trade, which connects to the global marketplace through local, regional and international networks in this 'shadow economy' (Meger, 2010, p.131; Leatherman, 2011, pp.116-118).

Approaching the global political economy within a feminist framework entails the recognition of global arenas as gendered. Such arenas include international relations and policy making, the global neoliberal market, international corporations and the global media (Leatherman, 2011, pp.131-138). In such a gendered global hierarchy, hegemonic and allied masculinities exploit and suppress others, especially marginalized masculinities, for the sake of profit (Ibid., p.116). For example, such exploitation is discernible when

considering the involvement of multinational corporations, working together with military groups in order to gain access to the mineral extraction in the area. The role of such corporations is seldom taken into account in reports on the illicit mining in the area (Meger, 2010, p.131). The global political economy thus shapes economic incentives for armed groups in eastern DRC, and together with the hyper-masculinity that is created and reproduced in militarist discourses, power hierarchies are formed, in a merge of legal and illegal measures. This allows hegemonic masculinities, in cooperation with allied masculinities, to exploit marginalized and chaotic areas. Sexual and other types of violence is at times a way of “empowering otherwise marginalized men and for motivating them to fight and to clear the land for economic interests” (Leatherman, 2011, p.148).

Thus, it can be argued that underlying gender structures and inequalities create and maintain power hierarchies in the global political economy and that such power structures spur on conflicts for the sake of profit, and utilize the effectiveness of sexual violence as a means to do so. Further, globalized militarist discourses of hyper-masculinity influence the ways in which masculinity and femininity are perceived in eastern DRC. Such perceptions and the way they are experienced by Congolese men and women, will be further explored in the next section.

#### **4.2 Perceptions of Masculinity in the DRC**

Although the strategic function of sexual violence in the DRC is part of the explanation of why this violence is such a widespread issue, it does not explain why it is such a successful weapon in the conflict (Meger, 2010, p.129). Attempting to incorporate the aspect of gender structures and the perceptions of masculinity and femininity into the discussion on sexual violence in the DRC might facilitate in the distinguishing of a link between gender relations and sexual violence in conflict. One aspect seldom included in studies concerning conflict-related SGBV is the perspective of the perpetrating soldiers. According to Eriksson Baaz and Stern (2008, p.57) it is not possible to fully understand the factors behind sexual violence in the DRC without taking into account the view of the soldiers committing such acts of violence. Only looking at the women’s situation in the DRC is not enough to account for the interplay between masculine and feminine roles, and will fail to address important underlying dynamics behind the use of sexual violence. Further, Western media and policy reports concerning the DRC often depict a colonial

portrait of the African wars as particularly barbaric and primitive, creating a “process of Othering” (Ibid., p.58). Such depictions focus on a gendered picture of African men as barbaric perpetrators and women as vulnerable victims, and fail to incorporate the global political and economic factors spurring on the conflict, aspects which were briefly discussed in the previous section.

Therefore, Eriksson Baaz and Stern (2008; 2009; 2010; 2011) have conducted several studies in which they interview soldiers in the DRC, in an attempt to reveal the complex situation of the conflict and how the soldiers perceive the violence taking place in eastern DRC. These soldiers come from the Congolese army, FARDC, which is being formed from several previous militia groups and government forces and is reportedly one of the main perpetrating parties in the conflict. The integration of the militia forces has not been as successful as hoped, with problems concerning the chain of command, but also a lack of food and supplies, such as salaries for the soldiers (Eriksson Baaz and Stern, 2008, p.64). The interviews with the Congolese soldiers uncover a complex picture of the reality facing many soldiers in the DRC. Soldiers belong to the poorest group in the DRC, which results in a high rate of mortality and very low rates of school enrollment among soldiers’ children. The ideal masculinity conveyed by the soldiers reflects a modern ideal associated with material wealth, stemming from the views of the global capitalist economy intermingled with local Congolese culture. A clear sense of frustration over their inability to provide for their family was expressed by many of the interviewed soldiers. Further, there is deep disappointment concerning the great divergence between the envisioned picture of themselves as educated, respected and successful soldiers, compared to the actual reality of army life, and this picture consequently remains as an ideal that is unattainable. Although this in no way excuses the violent acts committed by these men, it might facilitate a more complete understanding of some of the underlying causes of the sexual violence in the DRC, and help in policy-making and when implementing recovery programs in the region (Ibid., p.71).

It is possible to distinguish both individual and structural causes behind the sexual violence in eastern DRC. That the perpetrators have an individual responsibility is clear, however, Meger (2010, p.121) has argued that “key to understanding the politics of sexual violence in conflict is the concept of masculinity”. Within military institutions and the process of militarization, gender structures are amplified; to protect a nation-state, an ideal 'hyper-masculinity' is connected to aggressiveness and the ability to be violent, while feminine characteristics are devalued. This form of masculinity, associated with violence,

fighting and protecting, is complemented by the role of women or femininity, functioning as peaceful, caring and in need of protection (Eriksson Baaz and Stern, 2008, p.66; Meger, 2010, pp.121-122). Such gender constructions are not only the reflection of local Congolese gender norms, but are also influenced by global cultural perceptions of masculinity and femininity (Eriksson Baaz and Stern, 2008, p.70). It is here, in the dynamics not only between masculinity and femininity, but also in the interplay and power structure between different masculinities visible in most military systems, that one important underlying factor is discernible; a male-centered system which entails “a hierarchy between men, producing different and unequal masculinities, always defined in relation not only to each other but to women” (Cockburn, 2004, p.29). Connell and Messerschmidt (2005, p.846) point out that the hegemonic masculinity is not necessarily the one most commonly represented in a society, but rather the production of symbols of an idealized masculinity, which is dominant even though most men and boys cannot meet the expectations of such a masculinity.

Similar feelings of frustration are demonstrated among civilian men in eastern DRC, as is evident both in the study by Lwambo (2013) and the survey by Slegh et al. (2012). What can be derived from these studies is that the hegemonic ideal masculinity affects both men and women, as such masculine models are difficult to realize. In Lwambo’s (2013, pp.52-53) study from North Kivu, both men and women express the notion of a good man as a provider and head of the household, a peaceful and responsible community member, and having a good income. Such criteria are not easily realized in a situation of social, economic and political instability, which is currently the case in eastern DRC. If these qualifications cannot be attained, it can result in feelings of weakness and emasculation. Women also face divergences between cultural expectations and reality, making it difficult to take on traditionally ‘male’ roles, often necessary in conflict, such as being the household provider, while at the same time the idealized femininity is seen as caring, sexually and socially submissive, and dependent on men. Consequently, “economic poverty and political instability thus polarise gender roles at the same time that they limit opportunities to perform them” (Ibid., p.54).

The virile, wealthy, provider and protector, idealized as a ‘real man’ is complemented by the role of the woman as caring, nurturing and keeping the community together. Such roles expose women to sexual violence in conflict, as attacking them symbolizes an attack on their community, and displays the men of that community as weak and less masculine, due to their inability to protect the women. This makes sexual

violence a particularly effective weapon (Meger, 2010, pp.129-130).

The sense of entitlement to sex expressed by men in the DRC (discussed in Eriksson Baaz and Stern, 2009; Lwambo, 2013; Slegh, et al., 2012), is rooted in unequal gender relations and has been further aggravated by the aggressive masculinity that is connected to, and ‘learned’ through, militarist discourses. The perceptions of Congolese men and women show that a relational approach, incorporating the dynamics of gender relations, is necessary in order to understand the practice of ‘doing gender’ and the ways in which idealized masculinities and femininities are constructed, reconstructed and negotiated over time. Including men’s as well as women’s needs in prevention and recovery plans in the DRC could thus allow for an understanding of the power dynamics of gender, which shape relations between and among men and women. Such an understanding could possibly facilitate the awareness that is needed to reshape gender relations.

### **4.3 The Continuum of Violence**

In recent years, many feminists have argued for a continuum approach to sexual violence in peacetime and in conflicts (for example: Kelly, 2010; Cockburn, 2012; Freedman, 2011). It is argued that the ‘normalization’ of peacetime rape and gender-based violence is a significant factor to take into consideration when looking at conflict-related sexual violence. In the case of eastern DRC, this approach is of particular interest, since, as previously discussed in this study, several reports from the area indicate a high prevalence of sexual and gender-based violence not only in conflict, but also in other settings (Slegh, et al., 2012; Freedman, 2011; Cannon, 2012). The breakdown of social norms, rules and institutions that is often the result of long and protracted conflicts can be considered as part of the reason why violence increases in the daily lives of people living in conflict areas. However, it does not explain why women and girls are particularly exposed, or why sexual and gender-based violence seems to be more common among the civilian population than other forms of violence in eastern DRC. Such explanations need to incorporate the aspect of gender dynamics and its impact on gender-based violence.

By looking at the norms of masculinity and femininity in terms of a protector and a person in need of protection, this might enable a better understanding of the function of sexual violence as more than a war strategy. Such norms could be argued to expose

women to acts of sexual violence, for example when considering the woman as the embodiment of the nation, as in Seifert's (1996) discussion presented earlier in this study. However, searching beyond the context of conflict is crucial in order to fully realize the extent of the impact of such gender structures. Kelly (2010) argues that although there is a difference in terms of contexts in which acts of sexual violence take place, there are links between the problematization of rape in war and in peace that are important to consider. One such link is the narrow definition of rape, which preserves the notion of 'real rape' by regarding extreme acts of sexual violence as more 'real' than for example rapes occurring in everyday relations between women and men. Such a limited perception of rape is prevalent both within and outside the contexts of conflict. Therefore, the perception of wartime and peacetime sexual violence as separate issues will ultimately fail to recognize and problematize the underlying causes and structures of all acts of sexual violence, and why some rapes are regarded as more 'real' than others (Ibid.). A similar assessment is conveyed by Wood (2006) in her discussion regarding the difficulty of gathering data on sexual violence even in countries with well-functioning infrastructures. Much of this difficulty is argued to be due to the definitional ambiguity that exists in and across many societies, and is also a problem which further increases the difficulty to prosecute perpetrators. In the DRC, rape is a criminal offense; however, its definition is rather narrow as it is regarded as "a crime against the honour of the husband" (Meger, 2010, p.130). Further, marital rape is not considered as a crime and is not against the law, despite the passing of new legislation on sexual violence in 2006 (Peterman, Palermo and Bredenkamp, 2011, p.1066).

The conflict in the DRC has been characterized by extreme and brutal acts of sexual violence. Armed groups often use gang rape and public rape as a means of humiliation and to evoke fear. In such a setting, where extreme violence has been a constant feature for over a decade, the rapes conducted by civilian men could thus be seen as 'less real' than for example gang rapes committed by militias. This violence is normalized not only through the conflict-related attacks on civilians, but also through the existing gender norms that rationalize violence against women and men that are 'less masculine', in a futile attempt to realize the characteristics of an ideal masculinity. In their studies, Eriksson Baaz and Stern (2008; 2009) express concern for the way the sexual violence in the DRC is portrayed in media and in international policy discourses, a process of 'othering' which reinforces the perception of brutal, public rapes committed by strangers as more real than the sexual violence that is part of everyday situations. In

relation to this concern, it is possible to relate to Buss' (2009) discussion, and argue that such a 'hyper-visibility' of extreme conflict-related violence results in the 'un-visibility' of other acts of gender-based violence.

In fact, it has been argued that SGBV, from the brutal acts seen in conflict, to everyday 'mundane' coerced sex are just examples of different acts situated across a continuum of violence. This calls for the need to explore the continuity between women's exposure to SGBV in wartime and peacetime (Kelly, 2010). The failure to prosecute perpetrators of sexual violence is not a problem only in conflict situations; the lack of a properly functioning legal framework belongs to the continuities of wartime and peacetime sexual violence. Legal consequences of rape in conflict-related situations, as well as in other contexts, are permeated by the notion of 'real rape'. However, it is other types of sexual violence, across the continuum, that are more complex and difficult to define and prosecute, which reveal the primary underlying issues of existing gender norms and interactions (Ibid.). In the DRC, very few perpetrators are actually arrested and prosecuted, which has partly resulted in the perception among soldiers and civilians that acts of sexual violence can be committed without any punishment of the perpetrator, and it has also created great mistrust in the justice system (Meger, 2010, pp.127-128).

The inferior status of women and children to men is entrenched in social, institutional, political and legal structures in the country, entailing less access to education, healthcare and political as well as economic spheres (Meger, 2010, p.129; Cannon, 2012, p.479; Freedman, 2011, p.171). Thus, it is possible to connect this with the concept developed by Galtung (1990), and argue that acts of sexual violence in the DRC are taking place within a larger context of structural violence. Galtung's model includes acts of direct violence, committed by individuals, and structural violence, which is built into social structures and institutions, visible in poverty, exploitation, starvation and skewed labor divisions. Structural violence limits people's choices and capacity to realize their potential. Cultural violence is the use of symbols to justify and rationalize direct and structural violence (Galtung, 1990; Cocks, 2012, p.222; Leatherman, 2011, pp.64-65). Incorporating the aspect of gender into such a concept could help to better explain "the mechanisms that lead to structural violence, and how, indeed, structural violence is itself gendered" (Leatherman, 2011, p.65).

Thus, it is not far-fetched to speak of a continuum when discussing the violence taking place in eastern DRC. Gender inequality and generalized violence pervade the societal context (Lwambo, 2013, p.49). Gendered structural violence allows impunity and

thus exacerbates sexual violence in- and outside the context of conflict in current DRC. As the study by Slegh, et al. (2012) shows, there is a general acceptance of violence against women and children, and women's sexuality and bodily integrity is taken away from them through social and cultural norms that rationalize and legitimize such violence and preserve the inferior social roles of women.

## **5. Conclusion**

The issues problematized in this study concern the ways in which pre-existing and underlying gender norms affect the use of sexual violence in the conflict in eastern DRC, the links between wartime and 'peacetime' sexual violence, and how such sexual violence has become normalized in everyday life in the DRC. The sexual and gender-based violence seen in the conflict in eastern DRC can be argued to have roots in unequal gender constructions, which are further polarized in the presence of war. Exploring gender norms and the relations between men and women in the DRC suggests that these norms are influenced by both local Congolese norms, and a hegemonic masculinity developed from global discourses of masculinity and femininity. Further, it has been shown that the notion of hegemonic masculinity can be discernible in the economic aspect of the conflict, as a feminist approach argues that the global power dynamics inciting the conflict are also gendered. Through allied masculinities, such as military personnel in the eastern DRC minerals trade, dominant hegemonic masculinity can exploit and suppress marginalized masculinities and femininities for the sake of profit. Utilizing such an approach might facilitate an understanding of the power structures that allow the global market to exploit and suppress marginalized regions. It further calls for the need to highlight the ways international corporations profit from chaotic and unstable situations, to increase the awareness of the role of consumers and the accountability of corporations as a first step to challenge such gendered power hierarchies.

Most existing prevention and recovery programs focus explicitly on the needs of women and girls, and are thus ignoring men's needs and experiences. This results in inadequate responses to deal with such violence, in- and outside the conflict situation, as the relational aspects of gender are overlooked. As this research overview implies, idealized notions of masculinity posed by men as well as women put pressure on men to realize such ideals. In an economically and socially unstable society, such as the one in



war-torn eastern DRC, such masculine characteristics are even more difficult to attain, resulting in many men feeling emasculated, weak and frustrated, feelings that sometimes manifest themselves through aggression. Gender inequalities and identities theory conceptualizes unequal power divides between genders as instrumental in the utilization of sexual violence in conflict. Conclusions drawn from this study suggest that the 'weaker', caring role of femininity, often taken on by women, and the role of a masculine protector and provider, expose primarily women and girls to wartime sexual violence, much due to women's symbolic representation of their community. Further, these roles are often reinforced and more polarized in the context of war, partly connected to the promotion of a militarist and aggressive masculine ideal, and the devaluation of what is considered as feminine traits.

When exploring the normalization of violence taking place in eastern DRC, utilizing the concept of violence as a continuum enables a discussion that looks beyond the situation of conflict in order to more holistically recognize the extent of underlying gender structures. In regard to this, the issue of impunity both in the presence and absence of conflict is highlighted and problematized in this study. This issue can be connected to the narrow definitions of rape which preserve the perception of 'real rape'; that is, extreme and brutal acts committed by strangers are considered more 'real' than for example rape by a partner. Such a notion of rape is widespread both in- and outside contexts of war. Therefore, it is argued that failing to connect acts of sexual and gender-based violence in war and peace will overlook the underlying gender structures and causes that enable all acts of sexual violence. The extreme conflict-related sexual violence that is taking place in the DRC could thus be reinforcing the notion of 'real rape', while the generalization and normalization of SGBV outside the war context is perceived as less extreme, and thus, less real or serious. Regarding all these acts of sexual and gender-based violence in- and outside the war context as a continuum, calls for the need to place this violence in a broader societal context. The embedded inferior status of women and children, discernible in eastern Congolese social, institutional, legal and economic structures, makes it possible to refer to Galtung's model of structural violence, which could help explain why impunity and acceptance of violence are prominent in today's eastern DRC.

What can be derived from the research is that an approach to end conflict-related sexual violence in the DRC needs to be multidimensional. The conflict in the DRC is much incited by the global political economy, which profits from the exploitation of people and land. International awareness is needed in order to challenge such gendered

power hierarchies, and to give the country of the Democratic Republic of Congo a chance to rebuild. Attempts to stop sexual and gender-based violence should further incorporate the dynamics of masculinity and femininity, and the ways in which these dynamics are exaggerated and affected in the conflict, but also challenge the unequal pre-existing and underlying gender norms that allow men to maintain superior status over women. Doing this entails the inclusion of both women and men in order to reshape gender dynamics and structures that enable and maintain violence, discrimination and impunity in the presence as well as absence of war.

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