Combating Violence against Women (VAW) in South Kivu: A Critical Analysis[1]

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Abstract

During the on-going civil conflict in eastern Democratic Republic of Congo (DR Congo or DRC), which has raged on and off since 1996 and throughout the post-2002 transition period, thousands of cases of rape and other forms of sexual violence against women have been reported. Drawing on secondary data and evidence from our own field research, this article describes and assesses aid delivery to victims of sexual violence. Aid practices on the ground, as well as the underlying policy framework are critically analysed through a gender lens. It is argued that the lack of a gender perspective in the relevant humanitarian and development policies, and in current interventions on the ground, may largely explain inadequacies of the responses.

Keywords: violence against women (VAW), gender, South Kivu, humanitarian and development policy

Introduction

Since the conflict began in eastern DRC, thousands of acts of violence against women have been reported in the province of South Kivu. Violence against women (VAW) is defined as, "any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or private life" (United Nations Declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against Women, adopted by the General Assembly on 13 December 1993). On the basis of a retrospective estimate by the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), 10 648 women had been victims of sexual violence in South Kivu between 2004 and 2006. Despite their public statements,[4] the Congolese government and the international community seem *ipso facto* unaware of the extent and serious nature of the problem. Local associations in particular, operating with UN and international funding, have rallied together to denounce this violence, offer immediate assistance to victims and carry out prevention work (Amnesty International, 2004; CEDAW, 2004; CEDAW, 2006). Evidence from our field work suggests that such efforts are limited mainly to piecemeal activities which do not truly address the multi-dimensional character of the problem. Further, we noted that

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[4] At a press conference in Kinshasa on 27 July 2007, the Special Rapporteur of the United Nations Human Rights Council on Violence against Women, Professor Yakin Ertürk, spoke about the sexual violence situation in both Kivus, calling it "the worst crisis I have encountered so far". On 6 September 2007, the UN Emergency Relief Coordinator, John Holmes, described sexual violence in the eastern Congo as a social cancer. A few days later, on 13 September 2007, Stephen Lewis, the UN's former Special Envoy for HIV/AIDS in Africa, held a press conference in Nairobi at which he condemned the international community's indifference to the seriousness of the situation.

the nature and causes of VAW are conceived differently between agencies, and that inter-organisation support for VAW is badly coordinated. More fundamentally, most organisations seem to misunderstand the root cause(s) of VAW and hence do not tackle VAW as an outcome of unequal and oppressive power relations between women and men. Consequently, current responses continue to foster unsustainable aid practices and reinforce gender-based inequality.

These observations and findings are certainly not unique to South Kivu. Although international support for VAW action has increased in recent years, it is still inadequate in view of the extent of the problem and its impact on human development (WHO, 2005a; 2005b; UNIFEM, 2003). Adverse repercussions are many and substantial. Victims need access to health care, psychological support, socio-economic assistance and legal aid. Primary prevention and education work is needed to combat sexist attitudes, beliefs and values among both men and women. Responses to sexual violence, therefore, needs to be coordinated, multi-dimensional and implemented at various levels (Morrison and Both, 2004; Ellsberg, 2006). In practice, however, support continues to be fragmented and badly coordinated across sectors (i.e. health, justice, social services, and economic development). The result is, at best, a partial solution to the problem when what is needed is an integrated and global approach.

Following a literature review of the nature and causes of VAW, and a description of inter-gender violence (in terms of unequal power relationships between women and men), we propose the adoption of a gendered approach when designing and implementing action plans to combat VAW. Our case study of South of Kivu, based on a combination of desk and field research[5], illustrates theoretical insights with concrete case study material. We describe evidence from the ground and then analyse the underlying humanitarian aid and development policies at play. Based upon the theoretical analyses and insights, we propose a number of recommendations.

Violence against Women: Towards a 'Gendered' Approach

Nature and causes of violence against women

Violence against women may take many forms, just as there may be many reasons for such violence. Although there has been a great deal of theoretical analysis of the nature and causes of violence, it continues to be very piecemeal. Various disciplines have examined sexual violence and have each provided a partial understanding of the problem (see e.g. Sobrino, 2006; Pickup et al., 2001). One of the exceptions which simultaneously highlights the many causes of violence is the "ecological framework" which Heise et al. (1999) applied to violence between partners and which Moser adapted using a gender framework (2001). According to the ecological framework of Heise et al. (1999), violence may be due to the interaction between a whole range of risk factors at different levels: individual, relational, community and societal. According to their analysis, the first level includes biological factors and factors connected with each individual's personal history. The second level is related to the closest social relationships, for instance relationships with family members, close partners and peers. The third level captures the community contexts, i.e. institutions and social structures, both formal and informal, such as neighbourhoods, workplaces, schools, etc., which provide the anchor

[5] The field research was carried out by one of the co-authors (Giulia D'Odorico).

for social relationships. The fourth level tries to ascertain the more general economic, social and cultural factors which have an impact on violence levels. At each of these levels, there may be factors which increase the risk that a person is a victim or a perpetrator of violence. When the model is applied to VAW, it highlights the complex nature of the problem. It is therefore of evident theoretical interest. Additionally, it is also very useful in practice when drawing up prevention and aid programmes and projects for perpetrators and victims. As Morrison et al. (2009: 4) state: "this kind of interpretation of the causes of gender-based violence leads in practice to multi-sectoral action which takes account of the many facets of violence and the different levels of action.[6]"

Moser (2001) supplements this model by including a more specific gender-based perspective making it possible to pinpoint more clearly the deep-seated 'gender-based' causes of VAW. While unequal power relations between men and women are often included among the influencing factors which may increase the risk of violence at the various levels (UN, 1993), Moser considers, however, that gender relations are not a cause of violence in themselves but a dimension of analysis that cross-cuts all risk factors (Moser, 2001: 40). She further confirms this view when she defines violence in terms of the power that the perpetrator of the violence is seeking to achieve or retain. Moser (2001: 36) draws a distinction between three categories of violence, i.e. political, economic and social. Given that gender concerns power relations, each of these three categories of violence is therefore necessarily linked to gender. The approach of Moser enables us, on one hand, to pinpoint the correlations between the different types of violence (political, economic and social) and, on the other hand, by integrating a gender perspective, ultimately to achieve a holistic understanding of the complex nature of violence against women.

Towards a "gendered" approach

It is important to understand the complex and gendered nature of VAW if effective and comprehensive responses are to be found. To date, the issue of VAW has been viewed mainly from a Women in Development (WID) or pre-WID perspective[7]. Those who adopt a (pre-WID) *welfare* approach generally consider VAW as a health issue, from the angle of the (WID) *anti-poverty* or *efficiency* approach, the focus is, respectively, on the poverty or the socio-economic cost it generates. What these approaches have in common is that they focus on 'women' and disregard the importance of 'gender' as a socio-cultural construct which determines the behaviour of men and women and their relationships. They emphasize women's practical gender needs and interests which may be realised within the boundaries of existing gendered structures[8].

Approaching VAW as a violation of human rights and a form of discrimination (see Vienna Declaration and Programme of Action, 1993) is most consistent with a WID *equity* approach; this challenges women's subordinate position and emphasizes strategic gender needs and interests (Moser, 1993). An equity approach considers top-down interventions, and more particularly legislative and political measures as the most

[6] This does not mean that every action has to be implemented at several levels, but that an action should have an impact at every level.

[7] See Moser (1993), Razavi and Miller (1995) for an overview of the different policy approaches in the area of women/gender and development.

[8] See Molyneux (1985) for the difference between '*practical*' and '*strategic*' gender interests.

effective means to achieve 'equity.' Although considering VAW as a human rights issue offers considerable opportunities for a gender-sensitive approach, previous research has shown that this is not automatically realized (see Charlesworth, 2005). The focus in a human rights based approach often remains on 'women' and on their rights which are related to the specificities of the physical and biological nature of women. As Charlesworth (2005, p. 11) puts it: "violations of women's human rights are typically presented as an aspect of women's inherent vulnerability, as if this attribute were a biological fact". There is attention to the subordinate position of women in particular contexts; but the focus is predominantly descriptive and often limited to 'numbers.' What is lacking most often is a more rigorous analysis in terms of underlying 'gender' relations.

Starting from Moser's (2001) gendered analysis of the nature of violence, our hypothesis is that adopting a "gender" perspective to devise interventions in the area of VAW may offer considerable help in reaching a deeper understanding not only of victims' practical gender needs, but also of the nature and causes of the problem, and hence of their strategic gender needs, and therefore in devising a more appropriate and complete response.

In this sense, actions and policies including a "gender" dimension make it possible for 'victims' to escape their situation and also to work towards further-reaching change geared towards constructing a fairer society. Violence against women may then open the door to more general questions about relations between men and women and sustainable human development. Women then become active protagonists of change and not just victims of sexual violence and passive beneficiaries of support programmes: taking up Kabeer's notion of '*empowerment*' (1994; 1999), women, previously deprived of their ability to make choices, re-acquire this ability. They can then try to share their new awareness with other women so that joint action can be taken to bring about change at a broader level.

Taking up the terminology used by Kabeer (1994; 1999), the process of empowerment then takes place at the level of: "*power to*", corresponding to intellectual and economic abilities, access to and control of production means and profits and the opportunity to use them; "*power within*", i.e. greater self-confidence and self-esteem; "*power with*", this being a form of social and political power emanating from a feeling of solidarity and enabling women to rally together for lobbying and negotiation purposes. Women who suffer violence are deprived of their ability freely to make choices (*power*) and therefore of any opportunity to play a full and active part in the development process. Projects to support women victims of violence, if drawn up using an *empowerment* approach, may therefore offer an answer to victims' practical gender needs, while paving the way for longer-term change by calling into question the existing social order and moving towards a fairer and more equitable society. Victims who have access to health and psycho-social care, who can return to work after attending training or receiving a loan, who can pursue their attackers in the courts (*power to*) and re-establish a feeling of self-esteem and self-confidence (*power within*) are women who can undoubtedly overcome their circumstances and again play an active part in the process of development. Moreover, they may well develop a new awareness of their rights and share this awareness with other women so that they can take joint action (*power with*) to bring about change within the community. In this sense, victims of gender-based violence who

participate at women's organizations may become active protagonists of the process of change towards a more equitable society. They can therefore take on, together with other victims and other women and men, a 'transformative' role with a view ultimately to eradicating violence from their society, along with its causes and consequences.

Gender-based Violence in South Kivu

During the conflict which has ravaged the eastern Congo on and off since 1996, armed groups have been conducting "another war" (HRW, 2002: 16), that of sexual violence against women and girls. This war is ongoing. Moreover, rape and other sexual crimes have been committed by the state security forces such as the FARDC (Democratic Armed Forces of the Congo) and the PNC (Congolese National Police) as well as by bandits and civilians[9]. All have profited from the widespread climate of violence and impunity to commit crimes of sexual violence (Erturk, 2007).

Women and girls have been raped in their homes, in the fields, and along roads when they were going to the forest to collect wood or to the market, and some women have been raped several times (AI, 2004). In other cases, the rape was committed during more sweeping attacks during which armed forces wounded and/or killed civilians, set fire to their homes and pillaged their property. A large number of rapes have been committed in public places (International Alert, 2005: 36)[10] and in the presence of witnesses, mostly family members or members of the immediate entourage. Some women have been victims of rape by a number of fighters. Many women have been abducted from forests by soldiers and put to work as domestics and sex slaves, in some cases for periods of more than a year. Also men and boys have been victims of rape. On the basis of the statistics provided by the Comité du Rayon d'Action Femme (CRAF), men account for 2% of rape victims (CRAF, 2005: 31). Rapes are in some cases accompanied or followed by other acts of astonishing brutality: soldiers beat, whip and torture their victims, shoot at them or mutilate them (HRW, 2002: 3). Despite the transition under way since 2003, the number of cases of sexual violence, especially rape, has not decreased; indeed, the problem is ongoing and very widespread. There are at present, however, no official, up-to-date and complete statistics[11]. On the basis of the retrospective estimate drawn up by UNFPA, there were 10 648 cases of sexual violence in South Kivu between 2004 and 2006, at a rate of 50 per month. During the first six months of the year, the Provincial Synergy to Combat Sexual Violence in South Kivu[12] has already recorded 4 500 cases of sexual violence. The real number of victims is undoubtedly much higher than this estimate, as it takes account only of women and girls able to seek aid.

[9] In South Kivu and in Ituri, while armed militias unconnected with the state are the main perpetrators of sexual violence, close to 20% of all cases of sexual violence are, according to reports, committed by the FARDC and the PNC.

[10] According to the report by International Alert (2005: 36), 38% of the women interviewed said that they had been raped in a public place, while 61.8% had been raped somewhere more isolated.

[11] Studying the extent of the problem and producing reliable and comparable data on which policies can be based and their implementation monitored is a very difficult task: the various partners use different methods to collect data from different sources.

[12] The Synergy is a body bringing together representatives of the government, the United Nations and civil society and is accountable to the UNFPA.

Sexual violence has had very adverse repercussions on victims' standards of living, especially as they have been put to the test by over seven years of war and other forms of political, economic and social discrimination (Mossi and Duarte, 2006; CEDAW, 2004). In what follows we document and analyse interventions and policies which have been put to place in order to deal with VAW.

Methodology

This study combines analysis of policies and plans with stocktaking and analysis of experiences on the ground. More specifically, we have analysed the Humanitarian Action Plan (HAP), the Poverty Reduction and Growth Strategy Paper (PRGSP) and the Country Assistance Framework (CAF) through a gender lens. The desk study was combined with field research in Bukavu (South Kivu) where different groups of interviewees were interviewed using different types of interviews. First, semi-structured interviews with women rape victims belonging to a women's group were conducted using a guide questionnaire. Second, interviews with the leaders and officers of women's organisations and groups were conducted using pre-decided questions. In some cases, however, we preferred to give free rein to interviewees so that their answers were not influenced by directed questions and as much information as possible could be obtained. Third, interviews with officers of the United Nations Mission in the Democratic Republic of Congo (MONUC), the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) and other UN agencies, international organisations and other local civil society organisations provided complementary information which proved useful to triangulate with the information gathered from victims and women's groups.

The first group of interviewees included 32 women rape victims being assisted either by a women's group or a specific support programme for rape victims. The purpose of the interviews was to find out about the kind of aid they had been able to obtain (medical, psycho-social, socio-economic, legal), the kind of aid they considered to be a priority, the level of change they expected individually and as a group and their capacity for collective action. The 32 women, aged from 16 to 60, were members of six local organisations[13]. Most of these women came from the interior of the country (Walungu, Kabare, Mwenga, Shabunda) and had moved to Bukavu. This shows that rape is a particular problem in the interior of the province, where aid services are inadequate, forcing such women to move to the town, over and above the fact that they have been ostracised. Most of these women were illiterate and spoke only local languages (Swahili and Mashi). As a result, we often had to call on the services of an interpreter who was one of the leaders of the group to which they belonged[14].

The second group of interviewees included 12 leaders and officers of organisations supporting women rape victims. We were particularly interested in the kind of interventions offered, their conceptualisation of the underlying causes of VAW and the degree to which a gender perspective had been integrated.

[13] Both of the international organisations working in town that we contacted banned us from conducting interviews with women rape victims receiving assistance from their groups.

[14] Using leaders as interpreters for the interviews was the only viable option, albeit questionable in terms of objectivity. Most of these women were deeply traumatised and found it very difficult to talk about what had happened to them to people they did not know. As a result, the leader played a very important intermediary role.

The third group of interviewees included various representatives of UN agencies, especially the UN Peacekeeping Mission in Congo (MONUC) and the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), as well as other international organisations, in order to gain an overview of the international community's response to the rape problem. We also interviewed other international and local organisations directly or indirectly involved in combating sexual violence in order to gain a more complete picture.

Findings and Discussion

Evidence from the field

A preliminary observation is that many victims have not received any form of support. This is particularly true in rural areas where local health centres often lack medicines and trained medical personnel. Further, psychological support for victims, in the form of counselling and trauma relief, is generally not very professional. While some distressed rural women are referred to specialist centres in Bukavu, they have to get their on their own, even if this means a walk of several days.[15] Obviously, only a small number of women get to town: most stay in the interior of the province either because they are too weak to walk such distances or because they are unaware that they may be entitled to free transport and services at urban reception centres.

Secondly, the support women receive through health centres, religious communities, NGOs and/or human rights defence groups, is targeted mainly towards specific short-term practical gender needs. Some interventions focus on medical, health-related and psycho-social issues; others emphasize socio-economic support or legal matters. Some representatives of the first group of organisations have themselves, over time, experienced the limitations of their approach. As a representative of an international NGO (i.e. Malteser) wrote,

> "… we particularly strive to guarantee access to medical care for the victims but the women themselves increasingly ask for socio-economic support."

This is particularly true for women who have been rejected by their husbands and families and/or stigmatised by their communities. They are often banished because they are considered 'carriers of death' (this reflects a fear of HIV/AIDS as well as a belief that their breast milk has been poisoned). As reported by several of our interviewees, most of these women can barely meet their own daily needs and those of their children whom they must often care for.

> *Jannine* comes from a village near Kalonge. She has been raped and shows some knife injuries. Her husband and family abandoned her. She lives with her neighbours and her 10 children. "The neighbours gave me a piece of land to cultivate. Sometimes I help people carrying goods to the market. In this way, I can feed and wear my children and send them to school."[16]

[15] For instance, it takes a week to walk from the town of Shabunda to Bukavu (interview with victims under the care of the Panzi Hospital, Bukavu, 10 July 2006).
[16] This interview has been realized in Bukavu at the Centre Olame the 25 june 2006.

> *Marie* comes from Maniema. She contracted HIV. Rejected by her husband, she received a credit from a local NGO with which she tries to take care of her 9 children. However, the money is not sufficient.[17]
>
> *Machosi*, a 40 year old woman, does not want to go back to her village of origin. She has had access to micro-credit through a local NGO, the CRAF. However, the money is not sufficient to support her 7 children.[18]

As evident from these testimonies, some organisations which focus on socio-economic support have, for instance, set up micro-loan projects (e.g. with loans in cash and/or in kind - e.g. pigs, rabbits, goats, etc.). Some organisations (i.e. the Centre Olame) also give non-repayable grants to victims. However, in most cases, the resources available are very limited and interventions, as structured, are not sustainable. On this issue, one manager of a local organisation (i.e. the CRAF), stressed,

> "… once the international funds finished, we were not able to go on with the income-generating activities. Therefore, the victims were again alone, without any support to survive and feed their children. There do not exist specific and long-term programmes to address poverty, in particular of these women who are extremely vulnerable."[19]

Few aid organisations handle legal matters for victims, and most women do not have the resources to pay for legal costs. Even when they are financially supported by a local or international organisation, there are often other obstacles. Identifying the perpetrator of the rape is often very difficult. Many women fail to report what has happened because they fear that they will be stigmatised or rejected. Those who are courageous enough to report the perpetrator of the rape generally suffer reprisals from the accused; who takes action against the family and/or the community in which they live[20]. Moreover, the legal system is very ineffective, corrupt and slow. From November 2004 to February 2006, the AED (Action for Rights to Education), a human rights promotion and defence association in Bukavu, identified 699 cases, 228 were accepted for trial but only 31 were settled. Some judges humiliate victims, and others hand down sentences which are derisory in comparison with the crimes committed[21]. Adoption of a new law on the repression of sexual violence (effective: 20 July 2006) is a step forward. However, until now, it is far from being effectively and comprehensively applied (Global Rights 2006, 6-7).

Beyond these (mainly) one dimensional interventions, the Synergy, a joint VAW initiative was launched in 2004 comprising various national and international partners and government bodies[22]. Despite the intentions of the project to assist victims of sexual

[17] This interview has been realized in Bukavu at the CAMPS the 17 july 2006.
[18] This interview has been realized in Bukavu at the CRAF the 13 july 2006.
[19] This interview has been realized in Bukavu at the CRAF the 13 july 2006.
[20] Interview with a rape victim at the Centre Olame, Bukavu, 28 June 2006; interview with a representative of APRODEPED (Action pour la promotion et la défense des droits des personnes défavorisées – Action to promote and defend the rights of the disadvantaged), Bukavu, 17 July 2006.
[21] Interview with the VAW programme manager of a local human rights defence organisation, Bukavu, 10 July 2006.
[22] The project is being run by six government ministries: the Ministries of Health, Women's Affairs and the Family, Human Rights, Justice, Defence and Home Affairs. Other participants include agencies within the

violence on a multi-sectoral basis (i.e. medical/health, psycho-social, socio-economic, legal/advocacy assistance, etc.), the response remains fragmented. While all organizations struggle to address specific consequences of VAW, they do so from different perspectives and philosophies. Some of them adopt a pre-WID welfare approach, others a WID anti-poverty approach or an equity approach (see also section 2); this jeopardizes coordination among them.

A third observation is that there are few interventions which go beyond practical gender needs to tackle the root causes of VAW (i.e. related to underlying/unequal gender relations). This assertion is particularly true for those international organisations which tend to see women exclusively as 'victims' and 'beneficiaries,' and adopt a top-down approach to help them. Conversely, meeting strategic gender needs often necessitates a bottom-up approach and the creation of a space where women can collectively reflect on their individual experiences. It is particularly consciousness of the fact that 'individual' experiences are 'collective' and related to 'gender' that might trigger collective action to challenge existing gender relations. A founding member of a women's movement in Bukavu mentioned in this regard,

> "… the women, including as well the victims of violence, want (have) the need to express themselves, to be recognised and accepted. They start to organise manifestations in the streets, they want to participate in women's movements and be involved in public action for change."

Bringing about change in gender relations also necessitates developing activities targeted at society. A first step is often to carry out awareness-raising activities to combat some of the forms of stigmatisation and discrimination. Activities such as mediation work with husbands, families and communities of origin, awareness-raising activities targeted at political authorities, the police, security forces and officials, which are almost always exclusively male,[23] are a part of this.

However, so far projects and programmes which aim to tackle underlying gender relations are exceptional. As interventions on the ground are, to a large extent, shaped and influenced by policy framework(s), the next section analyses relevant VAW policies through a gender lens.

The Underlying Policy Framework: a Critical Analysis

Although there has been progress in recent years, much remains to do in the DRC as regards policies tackling VAW. As matters stand, there is no regional and national policy to combat violence against women. The larger-scale humanitarian and development plans in terms of human and financial resources are not paying enough attention to the problem. The result is a failure to comprehend the problem, which is vast and complex; this has a very serious impact on prevention, the fight against impunity and assistance for victims.

UN system (WHO, UNICEF, UNDP, UNIFEM, OHCHR, MONUC) and some national and international NGOs.

[23] For instance, Women for Women has a Men's Leadership programme which aims to make men more aware of the issue of rape and of women's rights (interview with a leader of the association, Bukavu, 11 July 2006).

As violence against women often reflects gender inequalities, action initially needs to be taken at that level if it is to be finally eradicated. Including a "gender" dimension in national policies and reconstruction and development programmes (Oxaal with Baden, 1997) could be of enormous help in identifying the various types of discrimination to which women fall victim, including violence, which need to be combated if there is to be any movement towards sustainable development. As the gender approach, by definition cross-cuts all social, economic and political fields, it makes it possible to identify and address all gender needs and interests in the various fields. Women, included victims of violence, called upon to take an active part in all project planning stages, can then emerge from their subordinate status and become active protagonists of change and again exercise their fundamental rights, including the right to be protected against violence.

It becomes evident however from a brief review of the country's humanitarian and development action plans that the gender dimension, as described in our second section, is lacking. Analysis of the action being taken to combat sexual violence shows in particular that the problem is far from being understood in a correct and holistic way. The Humanitarian Action Plan (HAP) for 2007 (OCHA, 2007) rallies a large number of stakeholders, including both UN agencies and international and local NGOs, Congolese government authorities and donors, around a common humanitarian strategy: it is a tool through which the various action plans can be coordinated and financed, using a cluster approach[24]. According to the Plan (United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, 2007), the gender dimension will be included in the programme cycle of all projects[25]. In the case of sexual violence, however, the problem is not addressed in terms of gender but is defined as an issue of health and violation of human rights. In practice, the clusters which will address it are Health, Protection and Food Security. Had the plan taken a gender approach, the problem of sexual violence would have been mainstreamed into all the various clusters. In contrast, however, the planned measures provide a response to only some of the many needs and interests of women which the plan has been unable to pinpoint because of the approach that it has taken. While, for instance, several of our interviewees have stressed that income-generating activities are a priority, they are not for the humanitarian and development partners. The "Return, Reintegration and Community Recovery" cluster, co-led by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), makes provision for only a tiny number of projects specifically for victims of sexual violence. Few development actors are located in return areas and very little funding is available for this kind of activity.

As 2007 was a key political and transition year for the DRC, development plans have a very important part to play in consolidating peace and reducing poverty. The Poverty Reduction and Growth Strategy Paper (PRGSP) and the Country Assistance Framework (CAF), which is based on the priorities set out in the PRGSP, are among the

[24] The "cluster" approach was launched in the DRC in February 2006 in order make humanitarian action more effective. A "cluster" is a group of organisations working in the same field of activity.

[25] The two humanitarian goals adopted by the humanitarian community for the DRC for 2007, i.e. emergency response to crises and support for a return to self-sufficiency "will integrate 'de facto' the gender aspect in the programme cycle, be it at the needs assessment stage, the preparation, the implementation and the monitoring and evaluation of the projects" (OCHA, 2007: 36).

most important development plans: both take a complementary approach to short- and long-term development goals and the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). The purpose of the PRGSP is to provide a single framework for development planning. In that sense, it offered a major opportunity to ensure that gender was included in the planning, implementation and monitoring of all projects. In practice, the PRGSP devotes only one paragraph to gender and does not define the issue in a precise and detailed way: gender is considered alongside other social sectors such as education, health and poverty and is not seen as a cross-cutting theme (Government of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, 2006). As in the Humanitarian Action Plan (HAP), the problem of sexual violence continues to be misunderstood in the PRGSP. It considers sexual violence a result of women's economic dependence on their husbands' income, while also drawing an explicit linkage with the spread of HIV/AIDS and the conflict situation (Government of the DRC, 2006: 43). The conception of the problem is obviously far from satisfactory and exhaustive and it justifies the lack of effective action to put an end to sexual violence. It obviously raises the question of how the PRGSP, whose goal is to achieve development which is sustainable, fair and equitable for all, can tackle a problem as vast and complex as sexual violence in the DRC, if it has only a limited and partial understanding of its deep-seated cause, i.e. existing gender inequalities, and sets out very few measures to bring it to an end.

The Country Assistance Framework (CAF), which covers the period 2007 to 2010, based on the priorities set out in the PRGSP by the UN Agencies in consultation with the World Bank, the European Commission and the larger donors, is an important document from the point of view of planning aid and funding. In practice, it provides a framework which should ensure convergent strategic views on the use of a large proportion of official development aid. A framework which could be of enormous help in achieving the goal of equality between men and women if it took a gender approach. The CAF does not mention gender, however: it talks very generally about an "equitable" approach to development under which the most vulnerable social groups are to receive additional social protection (UNDAF and CAF, 2007: 21). It recognises that women and children are the main victims of the conflict (UNDAF and CAF, 2007: 12) and they are grouped with vulnerable people, thereby ensuring that they have easier access to basic services and the benefits of economic growth (UNDAF and CAF, 2007: 71). Victims of sexual violence are perceived as a group more at risk than others of contracting HIV/AIDS and are included under activities designed to improve safety conditions and promote reconciliation (UNDAF and CAF, 2007: 83).

Here again there is a misunderstanding of the problem of sexual violence and, as a result, limited measures stemming from the failure to take gender into account in strategies. In practice, the Ministry for Women and the Family and the UNDP have drawn up a strategy to include gender in the country's development policies: they envisage adopting a gender approach through which

> "the concerns and experiences of men and women can be mainstreamed into the formulation, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of policies and programmes in all political, economic and social spheres so that men and women benefit in an equal way and so that inequality is not perpetuated" (Ministry for Women and UNDP, 2004: 6).

The document stresses the importance of participation by men and women. An approach which, were it to be applied to victims of sexual violence, would be of great help in taking effective and full account of their needs and interests. However, when it effectively comes to planning activities for victims of sexual violence, the document gives priority to medical and health-related care and psycho-social assistance for victims and the creation of reception centres (Ministry for Women and UNDP, 2004: 36). This national mechanism to promote women also suffers from a lack of authority and adequate human and financial resources, detracting further from its effectiveness (CEDAW, 2006: 5).

Lastly, there seems to be no real political will on the part of the government to commit itself to effective mainstreaming of the gender dimension in its development policies and programmes. Although the commitments entered into Articles 12, 13 and 14 of the new Constitution guarantee equality between men and women and prohibit gender-based discrimination, discrimination against women is not explicitly defined in the country's legislation. Moreover, legal provisions, especially in the Family Code, the Labour Code and the Criminal Code, continue to foster this discrimination (CEDAW, 2006: 4-5). If the government does not consider promoting equality between men and women a priority, it is unlikely that it will elaborate and effectively implement government programmes to combat sexual violence which are inspired by a gender perspective.

Conclusions

When war broke out in the east of the Democratic Republic of Congo and with it violence against women, civil society associations, and women in particular, rallied together to address the issue of sexual violence, a process that was nevertheless fraught with problems and contradictions. However, the indifference of the international community and, as a result, the scant financial resources and the few and in some cases not very professional technical resources made available to organisations made it impossible to offer full and effective support for victims and to implement effective policies to combat violence against women. Very little attention continues to be paid to VAW in the political, social and economic spheres. In our opinion, this is the result of a limited understanding of the problem of sexual violence by the humanitarian aid and development partners and the Congolese government as well as a lack of participation by women, especially women belonging to women's movements, in all the stages of drafting, implementation and monitoring of policies, programmes and aid projects.

Current humanitarian and development programmes are focusing their activities for victims mainly on health and social protection aspects and seem to perceive victims simply as beneficiaries of support projects. As a result field organisations have also increasingly focused their activities on these aspects, for which most technical and financial resources have been earmarked. Victims' other needs and interests, and particularly their strategic gender needs, have received less attention.

On the basis of these findings, our view is that if humanitarian and development plans had taken a gendered approach, and more specifically an "empowerment" approach, violence against women would have been understood differently and in a more correct way, making it possible to pinpoint the practical and strategic interests of women, especially victims of violence, and to transform them into planning needs in an

appropriate and comprehensive way. A bottom-up approach of this kind would have enabled all women, including victims of sexual violence, to play an active part in combating violence and, more generally, all forms of discrimination. Sexual violence then has the potential to be "transformatory": it makes it possible to raise other questions linked to gender inequalities which, if addressed, could help to combat violence against women.

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