

## Helpdesk Research Report

# Gender dimensions of conflict drivers and stabilisation in eastern DRC

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### Question

*What are the gender dimensions of conflict drivers and of stabilisation in the eastern DRC (Democratic Republic of Congo)? Include a very brief description of the state of research and evidence on these topics.*

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## 1. Overview

International actors in development, humanitarianism and peacebuilding now acknowledge the importance of gender approaches to successful action on conflict, peace and stabilisation (e.g. Goetz & Treiber 2012; Haider 2012a, 2012b, 2012c). Yet the systematic adoption of gender perspectives in international practice has remained elusive (e.g. Anderlini 2006; Haider *idem*).

This is illustrated by the case of the eastern Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), where a rapid literature search in French and English points to **large knowledge gaps** about the gender dimensions of conflict drivers and stabilisation<sup>1</sup>. Gendered **evidence is very limited and problematic**. Strikingly, it focuses largely on sexual violence against women and children, with most other dimensions understudied (economy, politics, land and agriculture, etc). International Alert (2012, 25) argues for more and better gender analysis, noting: 'A more subtle and detailed understanding [...], based on empirical research, would help provide a truly gender-sensitive response to the conflicts affecting the region'.

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<sup>1</sup> In this report, 'eastern DRC' is defined as the provinces of North and South Kivu, Orientale and Maniema.

The very limited evidence available points to the following findings:

▪ **On conflict drivers:**

- Gender is mostly discussed as a conflict driver in relation to the use of **rape as a weapon of war**, in two ways: it shapes the masculinity of male combatants and combat culture; and the gendered effects of sexual terror are sometimes sought instrumentally by armed groups to control or influence local communities and international actors.
- The social effects of sexual and gender-based violence have contributed to shaping conflict dynamics, by **replacing traditional authority with a violent, militarised form of social order**. For instance, sexual violence has become one way to determine power relations.
- **Many women have actively participated in the war**, in different roles.
- **Land, a known conflict driver in eastern DRC, has an important gender dimension**. Women, especially widows, are strongly disadvantaged by the persistence of local customs in inheritance and succession. The loss of land can fuel ethnic grievances and recruitment into armed groups.

▪ **On stabilisation:**

- **Political process:** women have been underrepresented and marginalised from national and local politics, quantitatively and qualitatively, except in a few positive experiences.
- **Security:** building capacity and accountability in the security sector institutions could help to tackle sexual violence. The Congolese army is a primary perpetrator of human rights abuses, and they operate under a culture of impunity.
- **Restoring state authority:** services such as healthcare are in a very poor state for all patients, including women. Economies of violence, including taxation, affect women. Any land reform has to be very carefully designed to avoid excluding women.
- **Return, reintegration and socio-economic recovery:** in reintegration, domestic violence and substance abuse have characterised the return of male ex-combatants. Non-combatant women who had been involved in armed groups were overlooked in the disarmament and demobilisation programme. With regard to socio-economic recovery, women's roles as producers and providers have increased during the conflict, especially for internally displaced and refugee widows. Women have assumed traditionally male roles and responsibilities, and can face a backlash for this. The main problem remains the very poor socio-economic situation for both men and women. The rural livelihoods and the health of the population, especially women and children, have suffered and been exploited severely.
- **Fight against sexual violence:** there is uncertainty over the numbers of victims of sexual violence. Gender-based violence goes beyond wartime abuse against women. Such practices need to be understood within the broader social context of widespread, socially normalised civilian and military violence. Holding civilian and military abusers accountable for their actions will require a gender-sensitive reform of the judiciary. Responses to sexual violence must take into account the collective dimension of trauma.

The Section 2 offers an overview of the state of the evidence on these issues. Sections 3 and 4 then present findings on the gender dimensions, respectively, of conflict drivers and of stabilisation.

## 2. The state of the evidence

Table 1 represents the state of the evidence ('large' means that the overall evidence available is based on a large number of quantitative and qualitative studies that point to consistent findings)<sup>2</sup>.

**Table 1: Evidence map of gender dimensions of conflict drivers and stabilisation in eastern DRC**

Evidence base	Conflict drivers		Stabilisation	
	Gender-blind evidence	Gendered evidence	Gender-blind evidence	Gendered evidence
<b>Global</b>	<b>LARGE:</b> (synthesis of knowledge in Haider 2012a, 2012b, 2012c)	<b>MEDIUM:</b> significant number of studies but not systematic (Anderlini 2006; Goetz & Treiber 2012; Haider <i>idem</i> )	<b>LARGE:</b> (synthesis of knowledge in Haider <i>idem</i> )	<b>MEDIUM:</b> significant number of studies but not systematic (Anderlini 2006; Goetz & Treiber 2012; Haider <i>idem</i> )
<b>Eastern DRC</b>	<b>MEDIUM:</b> many studies but disagreements (e.g. Autesserre 2010; International Crisis Group 2009, 2010, 2012a, 2012b)	<b>SMALL:</b> few references, uneven thematic coverage, contradictory, mostly on sexual violence against women as a weapon of war (see rest of report)	<b>MEDIUM:</b> many studies but disagreements (e.g. Autesserre 2010; International Crisis Group <i>idem</i> )	<b>SMALL:</b> few references, very uneven thematic coverage, contradictory, mostly on sexual violence against women as a key problem (see rest of report)

Source: Author's own

This suggests that **adopting gendered perspectives on conflict drivers and stabilisation in the eastern DRC could be fruitful, but that it has not been done significantly** until now. Indeed, all the experts who contributed to this report agreed that gender is relevant but that there is a paucity of evidence in this area.

**Producing strong, consistent evidence in the very challenging context of the eastern DRC is very difficult**, as noted in all literature reviewed for this report<sup>3</sup>. The evidence available can also be **hard to use**. Some of the literature on gender covers the whole DRC without disaggregating findings by region or province, making it difficult to ascertain if or how national findings apply to eastern DRC (e.g. in Omba Kalonda 2011)<sup>4</sup>. Moreover, some literature produces **contradictory findings on fundamental issues**, from basic facts to understanding dynamics and determining recommendations. For example, DFID and USAID both commissioned reports on gender inequality in the DRC. One report states that there is a striking

<sup>2</sup> This helpdesk report was completed through three days of desk-based research. The description of the evidence base on the eastern DRC is thus a preliminary assessment, not a systematic review.

<sup>3</sup> A DFID-commissioned study on delivering humanitarian aid to highly insecure environments also confirms that the quality of evidence is typically problematic in countries like the DRC (Schreter et al. 2013, 14-15).

<sup>4</sup> This is also the case with the DRC's national strategy to fight gender-based violence ([http://monusco.unmissions.org/LinkClick.aspx?fileticket=RxbG\\_S-GaVo=](http://monusco.unmissions.org/LinkClick.aspx?fileticket=RxbG_S-GaVo=)).

common picture throughout the DRC (Sweetser & Farzaneh 2012, 8), while the other emphasises significant differences among regions and provinces (McLean Hilker et al., n.d., 3).

In addition, the academic, practitioner and policy literature on gender in the eastern DRC has **overwhelming focused on the causes, manifestations and effects of sexual violence against women and children** – and even so, there are marked disagreements on findings and recommendations. The general picture that emerges is one where analysts seem to use a weak gender approach, often limiting gender issues to women’s victimhood and impoverishing analysis (Fanning & Hastie 2012; Lwambo 2013) – this is an international problem (Anderlini 2006). Other gender dimensions of conflict and stabilisation in DRC have been **understudied**. Much of the evidence is fragmented, covers the eastern DRC unequally (with most literature covering the Kivus region), and is of **uneven quality**. Evidence sometimes lacks independence in relation to international actors (e.g. NGO self-assessments) and to local actors (one expert who wishes to remain anonymous cautioned that all local NGOs are ‘politicised’ in ethnic and political terms). Lastly, the implications of the evidence are often not clarified. For instance, connections do not seem to be made systematically between the literature on economic and social gender inequality (e.g. in land, food security, and marriage) and the literature on conflict drivers and stabilisation.

### 3. The gender dimensions of conflict drivers

#### Evidence base

There is an **overall lack of evidence** on the gendered dimensions of conflict drivers in the eastern DRC. This is part of a well-documented international problem that exists beyond the case at hand. Anderlini (2006) conducted a widely cited mixed-method study on mainstreaming gender in conflict analysis. Her characterisation of the **general weaknesses of international approaches to conflict** describes the state of analysis on the eastern DRC very well. Looking at eleven international conflict analysis frameworks (agencies, donors, NGOs and policy institutes), Anderlini (2006, i) found that most conflict assessment frameworks either neglected or included only cursory treatment of gender issues. Gender variables were missing due to a tendency to conflate gender with women, to insufficient information on the gendered impact of the development-conflict-poverty nexus, and to covering gender under social issues rather than mainstreaming it. She argues that analyses tend to offer a macro-level strategic assessment of conflict drivers, which can skew the understanding of the situation; gendered perspectives, on the other hand, provide a more ‘people-centred’ approach. However, Anderlini (2006, i) cautions that including only limited gendered considerations is not enough. For example, often, analyses have *ad hoc* mentions of violence against women or youth unemployment, without an understanding of their impacts or their gendered nature. There also remains ‘very limited understanding of the impact of conflict on men and their capacities to adapt to changes in socio-economic and political conditions’. Anderlini (2006, i) concludes that a gender analysis of conflict drivers means a strong ability to analyse and link gender issues to the broader picture.

In the large body of literature about conflict drivers in eastern DRC, **very few adopt a systematic gender approach**. As an assessment of the literature for this report, a selection of widely cited literature was examined for gender perspectives on the conflict drivers: one academic (Autesserre 2010), and two policy advice institutes (key reports from International Crisis Group and Rift Valley Institute, 2008-2013)<sup>5</sup>. Much

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<sup>5</sup> A word search was used to identify possible gender perspectives in these selected references. The words used were: gender / gendered, women, girls, sex / sexual.

of the literature is gender-blind on conflict drivers (International Crisis Group 2010, 2012a & 2012b; Paddon 2013; Stearns 2012a, 2012b, 2013a & 2013b; Stearns et al. 2013; Tamm 2013a & 2013b). None adopts a systematic gender approach in analysing conflict drivers – for example the UNIFEM approach (Goetz & Treiber 2012)<sup>6</sup>. Most often, **the macro, meso and micro causes of conflict are discussed in gender-blind terms.**

These difficulties are **compounded by persistent contention around understandings of the conflict in the eastern DRC**, even without the issue of gender - a 2012 literature review by DFID, the UK FOC and the UK Ministry of Defence found there is no consensus on the conflict drivers in DRC (N.A. 2012). It identified four overarching perspectives on the conflict: (1) as a product of competition for natural resources and economic gain; (2) as an expression of local grievances, most notably competition for land; (3) as a function of the weakness of the Congolese state; and (4) as a product of regional dynamics, most notably the influence of Rwanda. Additionally, the authors of the review argue that none of these perspectives are sufficient to explain ongoing patterns of violence. They state that there are many simultaneous conflicts taking place at the same time, each subject to different drivers. In their view, efforts to address one particular conflict or conflict driver 'have been repeatedly undermined by a resurgence of others' (*idem*, 1).

As a result, there is a **remarkably small and uneven evidence base** available on the gender dimensions of conflict drivers in eastern DRC. Within this available evidence, the only topic where gender is seen as a *driver* is sexual violence – the gender *implications* of conflict are mostly treated under stabilisation issues.

## Sexual violence as a weapon of war

The gendered conflict driver that is most frequently mentioned is the use of **sexual violence as a weapon of war** (Autesserre 2010; Dolan 2010; Eriksson-Baaz & Stern 2010; International Alert 2012, 24; International Crisis Group 2009, 2010, 2012a, 2012b; Moufflet 2009). Specifically, it has been used as a means of 'ethnic cleansing in pursuit of territorial domination' (International Crisis Group 2009, 5), 'to destroy communities socially and psychologically, and to put down all forms of local resistance' (International Alert 2012, 24). The vast majority of victims are women and girls, although men and boys have also been victims (International Crisis Group 2009, i).

**Gender norms of masculinity and femininity are at play in armed groups** (Dolan 2010). This has been documented in the construction of the identities of members of armed groups, in relation to men and boys (Eriksson-Baaz & Stern 2011; Trenholm et al. 2013) as well as women and girls (Eriksson-Baaz & Stern 2013).

## Sexual violence as a tool for power and social status

In turn, the **social effects of sexual and gender-based violence** have contributed to shaping conflict dynamics (Dolan 2010). Lasting war and the intense, daily violence have resulted in an extensive

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The policy reports are available at <http://www.riftvalley.net/?view=publications> and <http://www.crisisgroup.org/fr/regions/afrique/afrique-centrale/rd-congo.aspx>.

When gender was not mentioned as a part of conflict drivers, this has not been counted. For example, references often mention sexual violence as a practice in the war, and the negative consequences of sexual violence, but not as part of the analysis of conflict drivers.

<sup>6</sup> The overall literature usually discusses gender not in conflict causes, but in the effects of the war on populations (women and girls as victims, especially of sexual violence) and, sometimes, in the dynamics this creates (such as prostitution to gain access to survival resources such as money and food, or early marriage).

transformation of traditional social structures, undermining social cohesion by directly attacking kinship (International Alert 2012, 23-24; Trenholm et al. 2011). International Alert (2012) argues that warlords, 'the possession of a weapon, the invention of new rituals associated with war, youths and children' play a primordial role in this new set-up which is violent and is not bound by older customary traditions. The authority of traditional leaders (i.e. customary leaders and community elders), has declined in favour of new, more violent and militarised leaders. International Crisis Group (2009, i) thus notes that rape, practised against women, girls, men and boys, has become more than a weapon of war: **sexual violence is 'a widely-practised procedure for determining power relations'** that illustrates 'the dramatic breakdown of Congolese society'.

Further, Moufflet (2009, 129) and Eriksson-Baaz & Stern (2010) note that sexual violence is **part of a larger pattern of generalised violence against both women and men**. This pattern belongs to a long history of violence in eastern DRC (slave trade, colonisation, post-colonial dictatorships) that has lent credence to the idea that violence is the only effective and legitimate means for change and social status (Moufflet (2009, 129). Sexual and other forms of violence are gendered when they target men as well as when they target women (Eriksson-Baaz & Stern 2010).

## Land

Land is another conflict driver with a recognised gender dimension. International Alert (2012, 21) notes that 'across all ethnic groups, women are the first to fall victim to the duality in land management principles' (local customs versus modern laws). Women are responsible for 70 to 75 per cent of food production in rural areas and play a central role in the subsistence economy. In principle, the 1973 land law recognises the right to use the land in rural areas. However, **traditional customs and practices discriminate against women** and exclude them from inheritance and succession. Huggins (2010) explains that customary land systems tend to favour men's claims over women's; widows, women separated from spouses and female children are often denied their land rights. This gender dimension in turn intersects with the ethnic dimension, but it has received very little attention in analyses of land conflicts (International Alert 2012, 21).

Huggins (2010, 34) warns that **women are losing their precarious hold on land**. The few "safety nets" for women within customary systems 'are eroded due to the decrease in availability of vacant land, and the state system is prohibitively expensive and generally benefits male family members rather than women'. As a result, the 'children of landless women (such as widows, separated or divorced wives, informal wives, etc.) grow up in poverty with few off-farm livelihood options'. **This fuels grievances** from ethnic groups who feel they have lost land to others, which can motivate civilians to join armed groups.

## Other gender dimensions

Several sources warn that the international focus on **sexual and gender-based violence 'as almost the only prism** through which DRC is depicted distorts and limits any deeper understanding of what causes and drives conflict' (International Alert 2012, 24; see also Autesserre 2010 & 2012; Lwambo 2013). This impedes better understanding of the complexities of the socio-political context, including conflict dynamics, and thus impedes the formulation of better adapted and more effective interventions. The social construction of masculinity, femininity and gender roles in the eastern DRC, and how this interacts with a context of mass poverty, unemployment, violence, loss of livelihoods, are important considerations (Dolan 2010; Lwambo 2013).

International Alert (2012, 25) notes that **many women, while being a minority in the armed groups, have actively participated in the war**, especially on behalf of the Mai-Mai militia. A few have taken up arms; most have provided logistics services to support other fighters. Laudati (2009, 40-41) notes soldiers' wives have sometimes attacked local aid distribution sites to protest being neglected in favour of populations such as the displaced. More broadly, 'women have been prominent actors in Congo's illegal trading networks' (*ibidem*).

## 4. The gender dimensions of stabilisation

The pervasive neglect of gender in relation to peace, documented by Anderlini (2006, i), is relevant in the eastern DRC context. Anderlini (2006) argues that more 'people-centered' gendered perspectives allow a better exploration of the drivers of peace and prevent 'overlooking critical elements in society that are withstanding or resisting conflict' (*ibidem*). A rapid literature search points to the following state of gendered evidence on stabilisation<sup>7</sup>.

**Table 2: Evidence map of gendered dimensions of stabilisation in eastern DRC**

<i>Gendered</i> evidence base	Eastern DRC
<b>Political process / democratic dialogue</b>	Small
<b>Security</b>	Medium <i>with a focus on boys and men as actors of violence and on women and girls as victims<sup>8</sup></i>
<b>Restoring state authority</b>	Small
<b>Return, reintegration, socio-economic recovery</b>	Small
<b>Fight against sexual violence</b>	Large <i>with much descriptive evidence documenting sexual violence and the health/humanitarian response, but without analysis beyond this</i>

Source: Author's own

The five pillars of the UN strategy for stabilisation are discussed below. They are presented separately, but many of the gender issues are **interrelated**, for instance on the links between economy, security and the fight against sexual violence (Dolan 2010).

### Political process and democratic dialogue

International Alert (2012, p.51) argues that any effort to define a broad, long-term, **shared vision of lasting peace** in the eastern DRC should draw on practices established and valued by Congolese actors. All those 'who have a concrete impact, whether positive or negative, on the conflicts and the social,

<sup>7</sup> Here again, a large evidence base means the overall evidence available is based on a large number of quantitative and qualitative studies that point to consistent findings. This is a rapid assessment.

<sup>8</sup> Most of the literature on security and security reform in the eastern DRC discusses armed groups with predominantly male leaders and members - but this is not discussed in gendered terms. This gender-blind literature has therefore not been included in this table.

political and security-related dynamics' must be included. 'Careful attention must also be paid to the **role of women in these power dynamics** – beyond the key role they play socially and economically'.

The 'poor level of female representation' at governmental and parliamentary level shows the '**lack of political will to allow women access to the corridors of power**' (International Alert 2012, 30; see also Davis 2011; Fanning & Hastie 2012). The principle of parity 'is neither reflected in the electoral code nor adopted by the political parties'. This is especially true in electoral lists, with many political parties refusing to place women in advantageous positions. By 2012, there had even been a regression compared to the general elections held in 2006. Women's rights organisations in the eastern DRC 'are worried that the percentage of female candidates in the provincial and local elections in 2013 and in 2014 will be even lower'. Beyond quantitative representation, Davis (2011, pp.5-7) stresses the importance of women's meaningful participation in political processes. She notes that prevailing local and international stereotypes of women 'prevent an in-depth understanding of the roles women play in conflict and deny women's agency'. Women are treated as a homogenous block and expectations placed on them are 'unrealistically high'. Rural women's views remain largely unknown (*ibidem*).

Davis (2011, 7) states that women's **participation** in mixed peacebuilding structures and in sector-specific, women-only groups have proven helpful. International Crisis Group (2009, 18) recommends the establishment of a **Truth, Justice and Reconciliation Commission**, to deal with sexual and gender-based violence, among other issues. Parliamentarians from the eastern Congo and civil society organisations, with international support, should lead a national debate to build a consensus on creating this commission 'with a mandate free from short-term partisan interests' (*ibidem*).

## Security

International Crisis Group (2009, ii) recommends focusing security sector reform on **building capacity and accountability, which will also help tackle sexual violence**. It also advocates 'a specific plan for fostering reconciliation and **human security** that concentrates on judicial accountability and the requirements of refugee and IDP return and reintegration. Lessons from Oxfam UK's protection programme in the DRC show that in a situation of widespread abuse of rights, '**empowering women often means including and empowering men in the humanitarian response too**' (Fanning & Hastie 2012, p.1). The approach to gender and women's rights must be a sophisticated and context-specific, considering short-term and longer-term strategic needs together.

International Crisis Group (2009, pp.16-17) emphasises that improving security means acknowledging that '**the Congolese army is a primary perpetrator** of human rights abuses' whose culture of impunity must be eradicated. The group argues that army reform must include:

- 'Comprehensive training in human rights and international humanitarian law'.
- 'The systematic prosecution of culprits by the military justice system'.
- Reinforcing and enforcing legislation forbidding sexual violence by the military.
- Internationally-supported units for investigating and prosecuting sexual crimes within the military police and military justice systems.

Eriksson Baaz and Stern (2011) caution that, given male soldiers' social representations, the feminisation of the armed forces to render men less violent might not have the desired pacifying effect.



International Crisis Group (2009, 20) also stresses that resistance to coordinated security system reform and adequate judicial processes against the perpetrators of mass crimes and sexual violence must be met with **international resolve, through political, economic and judicial accountability**. For example, the group suggests Kinshasa should receive financial support only if it assumes the responsibility to protect its own citizens and contributes significantly to the fight against impunity. The inclusion of a comprehensive judicial component in security system reform and reconciliation efforts ‘should be non-negotiable conditions for such aid’ (*ibidem*).

## Restoring state authority

In terms of public services, several authors note that the current focus on health and humanitarian responses to conflict-related sexual violence against women is too narrow, counter-productive and stigmatising for women and men. **Services such as healthcare are structurally in a very poor state for all patients, including but not limited to women** (Autesserre 2010; Chu et al. 2010; D’Errico et al. 2013; Eriksson-Baaz & Stern 2010; Kelly et al. 2011; Kohli et al. 2012). Communities have self-organised some alternative support mechanisms for physical and mental health, including women’s health (D’Errico et al. 2013).

Laudati (2013) notes rebel groups have created ‘**economies of violence**’ that go much beyond minerals. These groups have, among other activities, taxed civilians at roadblocks and on their property, agricultural products, and even livelihoods. Women have been affected. For example, in Shabunda (South Kivu), women ‘were routinely forced to hand over as much as 50 per cent of the fuelwood or foodstuffs they transport between their fields and the marketplace’ (Laudati 2013, 36).

Huggins (2010, 11) warns that, without very **carefully designed land reforms**, smallholders, women, orphans and other vulnerable categories ‘may lose control or access to land, as parcels are registered in the name of men and those most able to “work the system” ’.

## Return, reintegration and socio-economic recovery

**With regard to reintegration**, International Crisis Group (2009, p.17) notes that too often, reintegration is forgotten, with high costs: ‘ex-combatants are potentially dangerous for other civilians’ and need far more than a few months of training and employment to once again become accepted in their communities. In particular, ‘**a pattern of domestic violence and substance abuse has characterised the return of male ex-combatants** to communities that have learned to live without them’. According to reports cited by International Crisis Group (2009, p.17), ‘demobilised men are very often guilty of sexual violence’: although the vast majority of rapes are committed by members of armed groups, ‘civilians are increasingly responsible for sexual violence, some of whom are demobilised militia members’. These reports argue that reintegration seems to have **failed to adequately address justice and social order** or follow up what happens after ex-combatants return to the community (*ibidem*).

International Alert (2012, 25) notes that obscuring the roles played by women in the dynamic of conflict has led to **blind spots in the disarmament and demobilisation programme**. The premise of ‘one man (one woman) = one weapon’ has deprived thousands of women who had been involved in armed groups, but not directly in the fighting, from assistance as they tried to reintegrate into civilian life. This is despite these women often needing assistance due to social stigmatisation in their communities.

**With regard to socio-economic recovery**, International Alert (2012, p.25) confirms that the conflicts ‘have had an **impact on the gender division of labour**’ and **on the traditional gender roles**. While women

had 'always played a key role in the subsistence economy and food production in rural areas', this role was accentuated by war as women took on greater responsibilities to provide. Furthermore, the many internally displaced and refugee widows 'have had to become their family's main earner' and assume traditionally male roles and responsibilities. These changes can provoke a backlash against the increasingly prominent role played by women and lead to an increase in violence against them (*idem*; Dolan 2010; Lwambo 2013). International Alert (2012, p.25) notes these changes have been ignored in international programmes.

Omba Kalonda (2011) shows that the severe socio-economic impact of the conflict has significantly **affected the rural livelihoods and the health of the population, especially women and children**. Rural populations have had to abandon farming – their main source of employment, food and income. The consequences include decreased food production, worsening food insecurity and malnutrition, reduced household income, and inadequate health care leading to epidemic outbreaks of diseases. Further, Laudati (2013, p.40) reports that women have sometimes been forced to provide foodstuff to armed groups and to prepare it – they are **forced to labour without pay or food**. Omba Kalonda (2011) argues that, next to achieving peace, priorities should be to multiform assistance aimed at restarting the economy and ensuring food self-sufficiency. **The main problem encountered in reintegrating former combatants and returning refugees relates to the very poor socio-economic situation** (International Alert 2012, p.40). Given 'the precariousness of their economic and social status', demobilised men and women continue to be easily mobilised by warlords.

## Fight against sexual violence

Widespread and extreme sexual violence against women and girls in the armed conflicts in eastern DRC has been intensively documented and denounced internationally for the past decade. Beyond taking note of this, the evidence offers a richer, more complex picture. The strongest message from the literature is that **efforts to fight this violence need to be informed by and embedded in broader understandings** of the social context, with regard to gendered violence, the role of violence in society, economy and politics, and the state of public services and community support (Dolan 2010; Eriksson-Baaz & Stern 2010; International Alert 2012, p.24).

Most of the literature emphasises that any **numbers about victims are to be treated with caution** – but for two distinct reasons. First, there is a consensus in the literature that under-reporting is significant, due to the social and security risks of coming forward. This means that numbers based on victims who self-report or seek help are underestimations (International Alert 2012, p.24; International Crisis Group 2009, p.4). Second, as the local health care system is largely inadequate and there is some specific medical support for rape victims, some women in need of health care have claimed rape to get medical care they could not afford otherwise (Autesserre 2010; Dolan 2010; Eriksson-Baaz & Stern 2010). The same cases may also be counted several times, as 'victims access medical, legal and psycho-social services from several local NGOs' (International Alert 2012, p.24).

Many authors emphasise that the explicit focus on focus sexual violence only as rape committed against women and girls as a weapon of war is reductive. It has generated a number of counter-productive effects or problematic incentives for local and international actors, both civilian and armed (Autesserre 2010 & 2012; D'Errico et al. 2013; Dolan 2010; Eriksson-Baaz & Stern 2010; International Alert 2012, pp.24-25; Lwambo 2013; Moufflet 2009). **Violence against women is broadly practiced and embedded socially:**

- **Armed groups and national troops remain the primary culprits** (Dolan 2010; International Alert 2012, 24).
- However, violence and sexual abuse is also committed by a significant number of civilians (Dolan 2010; International Alert 2012, 24; Moufflet 2009). **Sexual violence is 'indiscriminate'**, beyond its use as a weapon of war. Domestic sexual violence seems to have increased (International Crisis Group 2009, 4), but it has been widespread throughout the DRC (Peterman et al. 2011).
- more broadly, **violence against women has become profoundly normalised**, endangering the foundations of social relations, writes International Crisis Group on the Kivu (2009, i). For example, in 2008, NGOs in Goma observed an increase in sexual crimes committed by minors and estimated that 90% of imprisoned minors had been convicted of rape (*ibidem*). Prevalent gender norms shame and exclude victims of any type of sexual violence (Moufflet 2009).
- Sexual violence needs to be understood in the **context of widespread human rights violations** (Dolan 2010; Eriksson-Baaz & Stern 2010; International Alert 2012, 24).
- Despite unprecedented international condemnation, **impunity remains widespread** (Dolan 2010; International Crisis Group 2009, 5).
- International Crisis Group (2009, 17) argues that **long-term peaceful settlement** will be problematic if impunity for sexual violence is not ended.

Several authors note that **gender perspectives should not be reduced to 'women's issues'** (Autesserre 2010 & 2012; Eriksson-Baaz & Stern 2010; Lwambo 2013). First, men and boys have been direct victims of sexual and gender-based violence (though in lesser numbers), and have also been affected by being witnesses to sexual violence (Christian et al. 2011; Eriksson-Baaz & Stern 2010). Second, representations and practices of masculinities and femininities have shaped both the exercise of sexual and gender-based violence and individuals' and communities' responses to it (Lwambo 2013; Moufflet 2009).

Recommendations on fighting sexual violence include **holding civilian and military abusers, especially leaders, accountable** (International Crisis Group 2009, i, 17; Kelly et al. 2012). International Crisis Group (2009, i) advocates involving both international and national judicial mechanisms. ICC arrest warrants are one tool to attack impunity and deter future abuse, but 'need to be accompanied by a **reform of the Congolese justice system**, including establishment of a civilian court of appeal for victims of sexual abuse to replace the military court'. As victims often fear a rise in community tensions or their social rejection after denouncing sexual abuse, the international community should help create an administrative environment in the judiciary that inspires victims' confidence (*ibidem*). International Crisis Group (2009, 17) argues that UN strategies against sexual violence will only make a difference if they **deliver concrete improvements with respect to impunity and protection of civilians**. These efforts will fail if they are 'not supported by robust political engagement at all levels of the Congolese civilian and military bureaucracy, and culprits are not systematically put behind bars'. UNIFEM and DPKO (2010) have documented best practices in peacekeeping to address conflict-related sexual violence.

Interventions have been very focused on individual rape survivors, with **little effort made to address the collective trauma** related to sexual and gender-based violence (Christian et al. 2011; International Alert 2012, 24; Kelly et al. 2011 & 2012). Trenholm et al. (2011) confirm some local leaders deem this approach inadequate in the face of the traumatising entire communities have suffered. Rape victims need better access to healthcare and to psychosocial, medical and legal services (Omba Kalonda 2011), as well as income-generating training (Christian et al. 2011; Kelly et al. 2012). Dolan (2010) offers detailed recommendations.

## 5. References<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> The literature was searched in both French and English. References on eastern DRC are usually available in both languages; the versions listed here are in English, to be consistent with the overall language of the report.

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## Key websites

- International Alert - DRC: <http://www.international-alert.org/ourwork/regional/greatlakes/drc>
- Oxfam International – Policy & research: <http://www.oxfam.org/en/policy>
- UN Women - Women, War & Peace: [http://www.unifem.org/gender\\_issues/women\\_war\\_peace/](http://www.unifem.org/gender_issues/women_war_peace/)

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