Violence in the Democratic Republic of the Congo

Sexual & Gender-based Violence in the Democratic Republic of the Congo
The exact extent of Sexual and Gender-Based Violence in conflict situations is not known. However, available information tends to indicate that the issue is a far-reaching and pervasive problem in many regions of the world...
“The armed men tied me up, one held me down while the other raped me in front of my children.”

Sexual and gender-based violence is still being used as a weapon of war in the Democratic Republic of the Congo.
“Soldiers were told that they did not need a firearm, that their sexual organ was also a weapon to be used.” Crimes against humanity such as rape and mutilation are being carried out in a systematic fashion. There are at least 40,000 survivors of sexual and gender-based violence in the Democratic Republic of the Congo.
“They made my parents have intercourse in public, then beat and buried them alive. I was later raped by thirty men.” To instil total fear into communities and as form of vengeance, women and children, representing the stable base of society, are being targeted.
“I was fourteen when I found out I was pregnant. I felt like dying. I didn’t want to have a child so early. I wanted to continue going to school.” The children of unwanted pregnancies are seen by their home community as offspring of the enemy and are often rejected and marginalised along with their mothers.
“They bound and tortured me for three days. All because I refused to give them my wife. They took her anyway.” Although most survivors are women and children, men are also subjected to torture and humiliation. No one is safe, children as young as 4 and adults as old as 65 have been victimized.
“I often feel very weak and still feel pain where they beat me. My injuries have never healed properly but I have no money to spend on treatment.” Survivors suffer from a number of health problems including damage to reproductive organs, fistulas in the case of women, STDs and HIV/AIDS. Many survivors have also been robbed of their possessions, can no longer work as a result of their injuries and cannot afford medical care.
“After the rape, I was in pain all the time and lost all sexual desire. Because of my chronic fatigue I could no longer work. My husband eventually abandoned me and the children.” Many survivors of sexual and gender-based violence suffer from psychological trauma expressed through symptoms such as chronic fatigue, anxiety, insomnia, depression, etc. Some have even resorted to suicide.
There is some help available. Albertine Wakusomba, President and co-founder of UMAMA, provides counselling to a survivor. UMAMA and other NGOs helping survivors of sexual and gender-based violence in Kindu have been trained in psychological counselling by WHO. Since 2003, UMAMA has provided counselling to 478 women.
A woman who was raped by soldiers seeks support from counsellor, Victorine Kyalimba, in a drop-in centre in Konya village. Victorine and others trained by WHO listen to survivors of sexual and gender-based violence. Those needing longer-term counselling or medical care are referred to NGOs like UMAMA.
WHO has trained staff in a number of health centres on the special health needs of survivors of sexual and gender-based violence. “The training taught us to understand the particular health concerns of rape victims. Most will not tell you they were raped and most don’t have money to pay for treatment. Before, patients like that risked being turned away,” says male nurse, Fazili Mwania, at Alunguli General Hospital. Through WHO’s financial support to NGOs like UMAMA, 216 women have received free medical treatment.
“By selling flowers, I am able to feed and clothe my children and they are all going to school. I have managed to save a bit which I invested in a goat. I feel like I am beginning to forget what happened to me. But I still worry for all the other women who haven’t had this support.” Recognizing the economic marginalization of survivors, WHO funds income generation projects through local NGOs like UMAMA. Through UMAMA, 250 women survivors have been afforded such support.
Peace has not yet its full meaning in Democratic Republic of Congo. Few perpetrators, if any have been punished for their crimes against humanity while most survivors have not received any support. WHO has not forgotten and intends to step up its efforts in addressing some of the needs of sexual and gender-based violence. The needs, however, remain huge requiring a concerted international effort to combat and to help survivors.
UMAMA president, Albertine Wakusomba, embraces a survivor she counsels.

Success stories from local NGO’s helping survivors of sexual and gender-based violence are a testament to how psychological and medical support coupled by a little financial assistance can help heal wounds and rebuild lives.

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