

Chapter 2

Suffering in Silence? The Silencing of Sexual Violence Against Men in War Torn Countries

Élise Féron

2.1 Introduction

Sexual violence against women within armies, or as a weapon of war in conflict zones such as in Syria, has recently attracted a large amount of media and academic attention. In the US for instance, a documentary film called “The Invisible War” was launched in 2012; it was widely acclaimed and has spurred various changes in how the US military deals with such crimes. However, much less has been said about the staggering figures published by the US Department of Defense about male soldiers as victims of sexual assault: of an estimated 26,000 soldiers who have been victim of sexual assault in 2012, 54 % were men (Department of Defense 2012). Similarly, a study conducted by Johnson et al. (2010) has reported that 23.6 % of men and boys living in Eastern DRC (39.7 % of women and girls) have experienced some form of sexual violence because of the conflict. This has not yet led to a major debate on how international funds for helping victims of sexual violence in that region were used. These examples highlight that victims of sexual violence, in its various forms such as rape, sexual torture, sexual mutilation, sexual humiliation and sexual slavery, can be both male and female. But why are we seemingly paying less attention to sexual violence perpetrated against men than when it is perpetrated against women? Is our understanding of sexual torture framed in such a way that it cannot be reconciled with situations in which men are the victims?

It is increasingly difficult to ignore a phenomenon that some researchers and NGOs have been describing and analyzing since the mid-1990s. As explained by Don Sabo, “whereas researchers and public health advocates began to recognize the sexual victimization of women in Western countries during the late 1960s, it was

É. Féron (✉)

Conflict Analysis Research Centre, University of Kent, Canterbury, UK

e-mail: E.Feron@kent.ac.uk

not until the latter 1990s that the sexual abuse of men began to receive systematic scrutiny from human service professionals and gender researchers” (2005: 338). In the wake of research on sexual torture of male prisoners during civil wars in Chile, El Salvador and Greece, reports have begun to unveil how widespread sexual violence against boys and men is in military settings and conflict zones. It has been a constant feature of most conflicts and wars, though most of the time silenced by political and military authorities, if not by victims themselves (Nizich 1994; Schwartz 1994; Stener 1997; Oosterhoff et al. 2004; Carpenter 2006; Sivakumaran 2007).

These publications have also begun to shed light on the extent, features, and consequences of this phenomenon through exploring the destructive power of such violence on individuals and communities. It has been shown that sexual violence against men is not unlike that committed against women in that it is mostly perpetrated by men in arms who belong either to armed groups or to conventional armies. The combination of rape and sexual mutilation has been described as the most prevalent form of sexual violence against men and boys, especially in detention (Carpenter 2006: 94).

Beyond these scattered publications, no major international or national campaigns or funding have been set up in order to adequately respond to the suffering induced by these acts of violence. A few organizations in the humanitarian field have admittedly begun tackling the matter. The UNHCR has issued guidelines in July 2012 for UNHCR staff and other aid workers on how to identify and support male victims of rape and other sexual violence in conflict and displacement situations (2012). Such initiatives are so far isolated. The media and international community are capable of functioning as receptacles and amplifiers of testimonies in regards to suffering, but the case of sexual violence against male victims is being ignored. But what is exactly triggering such a downplay? This contribution, based on data collected in the Great Lakes Region (specifically in the Democratic Republic of Congo, Burundi and Rwanda), argues that gender roles and discourses hinder the acknowledgement of the various types of suffering faced by male victims of sexual violence. After a section presenting an overview of the phenomenon, we will discuss different types of suffering it entails for the victims. The chapter then explores what accounts for the silencing of this suffering, from representations of sexual violence where men stand as perpetrators, to patriarchal cultures associating masculinity to strength, protection and invulnerability.

2.2 Methodology

This paper builds on data collected mostly in the Great Lakes region of Africa, where I have been spending between 3 weeks and a month per year since 2009. I have collected data in the Kivu region of DRC (both North and South Kivu), which appears to be one of the regions in the world where sexual violence against both males and females is the most widespread, as well as in Burundi, where it is

recognized as being one of the main features of the conflict that tore the country apart between 1993 and 2005. I have also used some data collected in Rwanda, and during interviews with Rwandan refugees settled elsewhere, on the issue of sexual violence during the genocide. All in all, my data includes more than 60 semi-structured as well as life-history interviews with combatants (former and still active) and refugees (both male and female), 30 semi-structured interviews with various local NGO leaders, doctors and surgeons, and numerous observation sessions. Some representatives of international organizations have also been interviewed.

Collecting data on the topic of suffering induced by sexual violence is far from being easy. Victims will rather talk about suffering inflicted upon others, than upon themselves. Similarly, perpetrators seldom acknowledge their direct participation and responsibility in these acts. They frequently use metaphors to speak about it, which is a good indication of the weight of the stigma surrounding these acts, but which also represents an obvious challenge when analyzing interviews. Moreover, fieldwork data on sexual violence perpetrated against men is difficult to gather because of the taboos surrounding that issue, but also because many people, including professionals in the field of gender, or in the medical field, are not familiar with the problem. I have often found, for instance, while trying to gather testimonies of doctors or of medical personnel, that many confused male on male rape with homosexuality. That was not the case of course in some highly specialized places such as the Panzi Hospital in South Kivu, well known for its expertise in dealing with the consequences of sexual violence, especially obstetric fistula. Public awareness on these issues seems to be a bit higher in DRC than in the rest of the sub-region (though still limited to hospitals and some specialized NGOs), but this is not a real surprise since over the past few years in DRC the issue has been brought up by some international NGOs such as Médecins Sans Frontières. In Rwanda, because of the numerous trials and cases involving sexual violence that have been examined by the traditional tribunals or *gacaca*, there is a growing awareness not only of the role played by women in violence (a fact which used to be taboo too), but also of the sexual violence perpetrated during the genocide on men, by both men and women. In Burundi, even those with a good awareness on issues pertaining to gender-based violence seemed to be totally unaware of the issue, and most people I spoke to even displayed surprise and dismay when I mentioned the matter and the cases or figures I had come across. This lack of awareness seems to be linked to the taboo existing around homosexuality, as well as to its penalization. (Homosexuality has been banned in Burundi since 2009. Those found guilty of engaging in consensual same-sex relations risk imprisonment of 2–3 years and a fine of 50,000–100,000 Burundian francs.)

Meeting perpetrators, and victims, has also been quite a challenge, since this is obviously not the kind of experience people would usually publicize and boast about. I have been quite lucky, though, since I first met several perpetrators and victims in 2009, while conducting several rounds of interview with former combatants (both male and female), on the issue of daily life within armed groups of the region. I subsequently decided to renew the experience, and, instead of conducting interviews on this issue of sexual violence only, met with combatants to speak more

generally of their experience “in the bush”. This was also a way for me to try to minimize as much as possible the risk of re-traumatizing my interviewees by asking questions that might have sounded intrusive or even offensive. In other words, a few spoke about it, most didn’t, and in the latter case I did not push the matter.

Much could be said about my position, as a white, western and female researcher gathering data on such issues in one of the most unstable regions of Africa. Some local researchers have already told me that, as a *Mzungu* (a Swahili word meaning “someone with white skin”), local people were a lot more likely to speak to me, in the hope either of getting some money in return, or of having their situation somehow improved as a consequence of my research. I however have no way to say whether such dynamics were indeed at play when I investigated this specific issue. It is thus very difficult for me to have a precise idea of the proportion of my “sample” who has indeed been victim of such a type of violence; however I do not consider this a problem, since my research belongs unambiguously to the qualitative realm, and its objective is to unveil and explain processes rather than to come up with figures, which a few others have begun to gather (see in particular Johnson et al. 2010). I have also spoken to numerous NGOs workers dealing with sexual violence, and they have told me the stories of some of the victims, and sometimes put me in contact with them. Quite obviously, I have anonymized my data, and some dates/places have been changed in order to protect my interviewees. I have almost never recorded the interviews, and instead used a paper notebook, which I thought was less likely to destabilize the interviewees. Worth mentioning also is the fact that in some cases I have had to use the services of an interpreter, as some of my interviewees were not proficient in French or English. This might have caused misunderstandings, since the word “rape” for instance, especially when applied to men, doesn’t have close equivalents in some local languages, for instance in Kirundi.

One of the main lessons I learned while working on this issue is that, when it comes to sexual violence against men in conflict situations, the usual clear-cut distinction between perpetrators and victims often doesn’t stand. It appears that in the complex dynamics that characterize the situation in the Great Lakes region of Africa, some of the boys and men who had been, for instance, abducted, enslaved and raped by armed men (and, less often, by armed women), stayed in the group, and later became perpetrators themselves. The fact that a lot of authors who research sexual violence during conflicts tend to treat men as the obvious perpetrators has, in my view, veiled these interaction processes, and has prevented us from fully understanding these patterns of violence. This of course does not mean that I am trying to diminish or overlook the immense suffering induced by such practices.

2.3 Sexual Violence Against Men – An Overview

Reliable and precise figures on sexual violence against men are almost impossible to find. Some NGOs document an increase in such practices (Human Rights Watch 2005: 20), but it is difficult to say whether this is because such cases are indeed

more numerous, or simply better reported. This phenomenon has been present in the great majority of contemporary conflicts, and during the last decade only it has been reported in 25 conflicts across the world (Russell 2007: 22). This type of violence often occurs in captivity, and marginalized groups, such as members of minority ethnic or religious groups, are particularly vulnerable. Many NGOs report such practices and underscore the fact that, even if there has been an improvement in reporting over the past few years, a large majority of cases are neither recorded nor reported. In Eastern DRC, Johnson et al. (2010) reports that 23.6 % of men and boys of that region (39.7 % of women and girls) have experienced some form of sexual violence; in 90 % of the cases, the perpetrators were male compared to 59.9 % in cases of sexual violence inflicted upon women. In some cases, perpetrators might have been prisoners, forced to rape or sexually assault others. These instances complicate the results. In any case, sexual violence against men during conflicts is not anecdotal, and deserves more political, medical and academic attention than it has been given.

My fieldwork compellingly shows that in all three countries covered by my study, sexual violence against men and boys has been widespread and frequent during conflict times, though silenced and overlooked by both political authorities and non-governmental organizations. Dionise,¹ a former combatant in the Burundian rebellion, explains that when he was abducted and forcefully integrated within the ranks of the combatants, he was first treated with great brutality. He was beaten and tortured, but as with many other men, he had to choose between the acceptance of “being treated as a nobody”, “being used like a female slave”, or being killed. He has stayed 2 years in the rebellion, and now feels broken, and incapable to “resume a normal life”. Deo,² who used to be high in command in the Burundian rebellion, insisted that both men and women who had been kidnapped to be used as auxiliaries or as future combatants had “to be broken to be tamed.”

At the Panzi hospital in Bukavu, Eastern DRC, the chief doctor reported³ two cases that had been treated recently. The first involved a driver who had been stopped on his way to Bukavu by an armed group, and was forced to rape all the people, male and female, who were in his van. The members of the armed group then raped the driver. Interestingly, the doctor mentioned that none of the other male victims had come to the hospital, showing the low level of reporting of such acts. The second case included a young man who had been forced to help an armed group by carrying around goods they had stolen from various houses (including the young man’s) and had been subsequently raped by the members of the gang. In both of these cases, there is a deliberate wish to instill terror, and to inflict pain and public humiliation. According to a person working for the International Rescue Committee in the Great Lakes Region of Africa,⁴ sexual violence against men, and more

¹ Interview, Bujumbura, Burundi, 03 May 2011.

² Interview, Bujumbura, Burundi, 04 May 2011.

³ Interview, Panzi Hospital, Bukavu, South Kivu, DRC, 30 April 2012.

⁴ Interview, Bujumbura, Burundi, 12 May 2012.

specifically male on male rape, has become just another strategy of war for armed groups active in the region. Victims almost never report it, which makes this strategy increasingly successful. When this violence is perpetrated during raids on villages, males are often forced to rape their own family members (forced incest). This clearly entails humiliation, immense suffering and trauma for both the rapist and his victim, and family relations can never be fully mended. But in many instances, sexual violence happens during detention periods, or shortly after men and boys have been abducted by armed groups.

Combatants perpetrating such acts undoubtedly wish to emulate the hegemonic masculinity model (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005) embodied by their military leaders. In impoverished countries torn apart by decades of warfare, few men have the opportunity to attain the traditional model of masculinity promoted in their communities. In order to “be a man” in traditional cultures, one has to find a house (or build one), marry, have children and be able to feed and protect them. But conflict dynamics have complicated the fulfilling of such “simple” wishes. Parents often cannot help their children anymore, so young men have to find the money for building or buying a house, which is extremely difficult considering the tough economic conflict conditions. As a consequence, men marry and enter symbolic “manhood” later. Men also have trouble finding work, even in the sector of agriculture, and the lingering issue of land scarcity deprives them of a main source of power. Losing access to land implies a loss of control over economic and sometimes political resources. These difficulties explain why some men adopt a violent behavior as a way to gain or regain “respect”. Men who do not comply with the conception of “hegemonic masculinity” are marginalized by the other men and face the harshest judgments, which in turn generate low self-esteem, sexual violence, and participation in armed groups. Getting involved in armed groups, and perpetrating atrocities, is seen as a way to reaffirm one’s masculinity—even on individuals whose personal situation is very similar. Such processes might also explain why some male victims of sexual violence can turn into perpetrators, since this exercise of domination over both women and “weaker” men symbolically empowers the perpetrator and underscores his retrieved masculinity.

Strikingly, men who have been raped, forced to rape family members, or been mutilated, do not describe this as sexual violence. It is as though this concept is reserved to women only. Repeatedly, the men I talked to confused sexual violence against males with violence in general, or with homosexuality. According to a local source quoted in a report by OCHA (2011), “Men do not use the word rape, which is too hard. They prefer to talk about torture, abomination”. My interviewees were no exception. In a sense, I had the feeling that it was less an attempt to euphemize what had happened, than an indication of their own incapacity to recognize that such a thing had happened to them. My interpretation of the metaphors and verbiage they used was made easier by the parallels they made between female prisoners and themselves. In that sense, it is clear that the main consequence of these acts – and probably also one of their main purposes – is to break their gendered male identity.

There are a few NGOs, like SERUKA in Bujumbura, that try to help both men and women of all ages who have been through such traumatic events. According to the person with whom I spoke,⁵ only 5 % of the victims they receive are men and boys. In all of these cases, the major obstacle is that adult victims experience difficulty speaking about it and more so in sharing it with their wives: “How can I tell my wife than I have been turned into a woman?”⁶ The taboo around homosexuality in extremely patriarchal societies partly explains their reluctance to ask for help, and some of their difficulties in coping with the suffering. Male victims of rape feel ashamed and mocked, and can be excluded from their local communities if the fact becomes public.

2.4 How the Suffering of Male Victims of Conflict-Induced Sexual Violence Is Silenced

As underscored by Ronald E. Anderson (2014: 8–27), suffering is not just physical, it often occurs with mental and social suffering. While many authors have highlighted such physical (e.g. fistula, HIV infection), mental (e.g. anxiety, humiliation) and social (e.g. social rejection, distrust) consequences for women who have been victim of sexual violence, including in conflict settings (see for instance Okot et al. 2005), research on what it entails for male victims is still lacking. For male survivors, suffering spans across these three dimensions too, with dire consequences.

First, as with female victims of sexual violence, male victims suffer from various types of physical pain, which can be related to castration, genital infections, ruptures of the rectum, and physical impotence. Because they are too ashamed to ask for help, many victims prefer to bear the suffering on their own with sometimes fatal consequences: “Aid workers here say the humiliation is often so severe that male rape victims come forward only if they have urgent health problems, like stomach swelling or continuous bleeding. Sometimes even that is not enough” (Gettleman 2009). The lack of training and of preparation of medical staff and health care professionals explains how these physical symptoms are often overlooked, and thus often not addressed in time. Communities in some regions where sexual violence against men is widespread, such as in the Great Lakes Region of Africa, do not view men as a possible victims of rape. In a rural hospital of South Kivu for instance, one of the doctors I spoke to did not understand when I was asking him about sexual violence against men. He thought that I was speaking about forced incest, or of cases where men have to watch other female family members being raped.⁷ As a consequence, victims and sometimes health care professionals prefer to use more abstract categories for describing the abuse that veil its sexual nature, such as torture.

⁵ Interview, Bujumbura, Burundi, 25 April 2012.

⁶ Interview, Bujumbura, 25 April 2012.

⁷ Interview, FOMULAC Hospital, Katana, South Kivu, DRC, 29 April 2012.

Most programs on sexual violence set up by international or national organizations in conflict areas specifically target female victims of sexual violence, and men may not be accepted in these facilities, thus impeding their access to adequate and indispensable medical care. As underscored by Chris Dolan, director of Uganda's Refugee Law Project: "There are indeed more raped women. But 100 % of raped men need medical help. It is not the case for women" (Dumas 2011).

Physical pain is often accompanied by mental and psychological suffering, which is similar to what female victims of sexual violence have to face; loss of appetite and sleep, exhaustion, anxiety, suicidal thoughts, and nightmares are the most commonly reported symptoms, all consistent with a post traumatic stress disorder syndrome (Christian et al. 2011: 236). While there are places where raped women can go and get some psychological help – though admittedly many of them don't or can't take advantage of these facilities – nothing of that sort exists for men. Even if there was, many of them would be too ashamed to ask for help. They struggle against a feeling of emasculation, of shame, of guilt, and they fear retaliation by perpetrators. Victims also often blame themselves for what happened and fear that they no longer will be able to function as men. In many patriarchal cultures of the developing world, a man is defined by his ability to cope with what befalls him. Male victims of sexual violence often think that they have to bear the mental and psychological suffering just as they have coped with the physical pain. Seeking help and speaking out would be another acknowledgement of the fact that they cannot act as men anymore. As a consequence, isolation, self-imposed exile, and flight often characterize the experience of survivors.

Suffering is also evident at the societal level. Social suffering, as defined by Ron Anderson (2014: 11), includes "suffering whose sources are social collectivities and/or social institutions. (...) Research on social suffering has uncovered that those affected by such dreadful events suffer in part from a devastating loss of their identity as human beings". Male victims may experience marital problems, alcohol and drug abuse, lack of trust, but also ostracism, segregation or even discrimination. When they speak out, they are often ridiculed by others, and many are left by their wives: "Not only do other adults mock survivors and their wives, children in the village will say to the children of male survivors, 'your father is a woman', stigmatizing the children of survivors" (Christian et al. 2011: 239). I have heard several stories of men being ostracized by their own families and wives after their "unfortunate experience" became known: "My wife and children thought it had happened because I was homosexual. I could not be their father anymore".⁸ Since support mechanisms are almost non-existent for male victims of sexual violence, this societal suffering is not addressed either. Criminal justice systems are not taking the matter seriously because these cases of violence are not reported, so perpetrators are not prosecuted. This creates a climate in which sexual torture of men can become more widespread. Victims risk being accused of having engaged in illegal homosexual acts, making reporting and prosecution of sexual violence difficult.

⁸ Jean-Claude, interviewed in Bujumbura, Burundi, 04 May 2011.

This would have both penal and social consequences for the survivor. He may be condemned to pay a heavy fine, or jailed, and he would also have to bear the stigma of being labeled homosexual in a homophobic society.

2.5 Men Are Assumed to Be Perpetrators, Not Victims

Research on sexual violence during conflicts, as well as international programs that address this type of violence, focus mainly on female victims. Girls and women indeed make up the great majority of victims of such type of violence, to the extent that “rape as a weapon of war” has almost become synonymous with sexual violence against girls and women during conflicts. The idea that the rape of women can be used as a weapon of war has become popular since the UN Resolution 1820 (2008) on Women and Peace and Security noted that “women and girls are particularly targeted by the use of sexual violence, including as a tactic of war to humiliate, dominate, instill fear in, disperse and/or forcibly relocate civilian members of a community or ethnic group.” Although researchers and NGO workers have tried to raise awareness of male victims there is still no facility, clinic or hospital service specifically targeting men and boys.

Men are often viewed as the perpetrators of sexual violence and not the victims. Several factors can explain this myopia. First, no Human Rights instruments explicitly address sexual violence against men or male sexual abuse. Further, it seems that international law acknowledges men only insofar as their participation in preventing violence against women: “Men, like boys, are typically only included in language about violence in their instrumentalist capacity – as actors who are important to its reduction” (Stemple 2009: 623). The current international human rights framework is inadequate in addressing the problem and raising awareness about it. But international law is simply a mirror of national law. Many countries do not include male victims in their legal definitions of sexual violence, thus implicitly refusing to consider them as potential victims of that type of suffering. The only exception is sexual violence against boys in industrialized societies, whose suffering is fully acknowledged: “Where do male victims rank in the sexual violence hierarchy? Boys, with innocence still intact, certainly stand high above men, and arguably, very close to girls. But adult men are viewed as the aggressors” (Stemple 2009: 629).

Second, the understanding and framing of suffering induced by sexual violence in conflict areas is tightly related to how Third World masculinities (and related Third World femininities) are viewed. This is not to say that violent conflict only happens in developing countries, but rather that our understanding of sexual violence in conflict areas is shaped by accounts from Eastern DRC, Uganda or the Central African Republic. Women in developing countries are usually viewed as victims of a patriarchal order, in which men are preoccupied by struggles for power and domination: “How are we to understand “black men”? This is not a question that has received the attention it deserves, as the focus of gender work in underdeveloped world contexts and in terms of race has been insistently on women.

An ironic consequence has been to silence or to render black men invisible” (Morrell and Swart 2005: 96). When attention is drawn to men in conflict areas, they are usually seen as responsible for the very high levels of violence against women, as well as against other men. Such narratives explain that men are excluded from accounts on sexual violence in conflict areas; they also feed the assumption that sexual violence is a phenomenon only relevant to women and girls.

Third, it seems that speaking about sexual violence against men would undermine policies and programs designed to fight rape of women during wartime, through demonstrating that women are not the only victims – and might even also be perpetrators – of sexual violence. For instance, a UNHCR worker interviewed by Charli Carpenter argued: “I recognize our discourse is a bit outdated. But it’s very difficult because as soon as you stop talking about women, women are forgotten. Men want to see what they will gain out of this gender business, so you have to be strategic” (Carpenter 2006: 99). It is true that the recognition of the plight of women during conflict times is relatively recent, and arguably still fragile. This feeds a competition between categories of victims, which is useless. Consequently, the suffering of men is almost completely invisible in the sexual and gender based violence narrative. Some authors even assert “health care workers have internalized stereotypical gender roles (men as aggressors, women as victims), to the extent that they are unable to recognize male victims of sexual violence who seek help, and may even dismiss them” (Oosterhoff et al. 2004: 68).

2.6 Men Should Be Strong and Able to Protect Themselves

Patriarchal cultures usually assign a role of protectors to men; they have to be strong and unyielding in order to protect themselves, their family, their community, but also their nation or State. Men who have been victim of sexual violence have failed to protect themselves and are thus less likely to be able to protect their family, provided that their family still accepts them. Male survivors have essentially failed to emulate the model of hegemonic masculinity that assigns to men the most important positions within the family, as backbones of their family and community. They are not “real men”. Whether such sexual violence happens under the eyes of external witnesses or not is clearly important for understanding the victims’ reaction and his ability to cope with the suffering – many male victims of rape flee their regions of origin or commit suicide.

The consequences on future gender relations, and society are severe. The figure of a glorified combatant is that of a cruel, fearless and extremely violent man, who intends to dominate physically but also psychologically all the individuals he is in contact with. In other words, this conception of masculinity gives birth to an extremely hierarchical social order, where “real” masculinity is defined by the ability to dominate others physically, men and women alike: “Yes, such things have happened, but not because we liked it, but because some combatants thought it was

the only way to get local men to obey them”.⁹ The amount of frustration and resentment that is created by such practices is incommensurable; it also gives birth to a vicious circle by generating further episodes of symbolic and physical violence, either from the local communities on the victims themselves, or between spouses.

In this “exercise of power and humiliation” (Russell 2007: 22), one of the main goals seems to be the “feminization” of the victim and the “masculinization” of the perpetrator. Sexual violence against men and boys embodies the ultimate expression of hegemonic masculinity, as it has the power to symbolically turn male victims into women and to reinforce the masculinity of the perpetrator. The men with whom I spoke had the feeling of having been “homosexualized”. Many of them find it impossible to report such acts, as complaining would symbolically reinforce their “feminization” by taking on the status of victim that is usually reserved to women: “They are treating only women over there. They do a good job, but this is not a place for me”.¹⁰ Most international programs dealing with sexual violence during conflicts focus on women and indeed tend to imply that only women can be victims. This leads to devastating consequences for male victims. They think that these programs are “made for women” and do not dare come forward. Male victims feel as if their own suffering was ignored, silenced, or too outrageous to even be spoken about. The equation that is made between women and victims further alienates them, because it confirms what most of them are already feeling—that having been raped or mutilated has “turned them into women”, into “lesser men”. The focus put on female victims of sexual violence furthers the suffering of male victims, by reinforcing the “de-masculinization” and “feminization” induced by what they went through.

2.7 A Collective Suffering

Some of my interviewees believe – and the existing literature tends to agree with them – that raping men stems from a similar strategy to that of raping women: an ethnic cleansing.¹¹ In societies where ethnicity is seen as being transmitted by males only, it is efficient to target specifically the bearer of ethnicity and hence destroy his own capacity to perpetuate his ethnic group. Sexual violence against men and boys can be considered as another weapon, both physical and psychological. It is thought to be more effective than sexually assaulting women as it targets the ones who are supposed to protect their community and to perpetuate the ethnic group (Zarkov in Moser and Clark 2011: 78). In that perspective, groups to which male victims of

⁹ Jean-Baptiste, interviewed in Bujumbura, Burundi, 05 May 2011.

¹⁰ Aimable, interviewed in Bubanza Province, Burundi, 18 April 2010.

¹¹ This was mentioned to me by an interviewee from the International Rescue Committee (Bujumbura, Burundi, 12 May 2012) as well as by another working for Caritas International (Goma, North Kivu, DRC, 03 May 2009).

sexual violence belong are also targeted through these practices, and they would rather silence these attacks that deeply undermine them.

This capacity of sexual violence against men to destroy family and community linkages is striking. In the Great Lakes Region of Africa, just like in most patriarchal societies (Sivakumaran 2007: 268), men are expected to protect their wives, their children, their aging parents, but also their whole community. If they cannot protect themselves, then their ability to protect the rest of the group can also be questioned. The suffering induced by sexual violence against men expands to include the whole community, which is left humiliated, unprotected and disempowered. As a result, the communities to which they belong lose their ethnicity. They symbolically become communities of women, of homosexuals, symbolically and psychologically deprived of any ability to regenerate and perpetuate themselves.

As I have discussed elsewhere (Féron and Hastings 2003), this type of violence is part of a repertoire where the perpetration of unforgivable and imprescriptible acts signals a rationale of a “definitive breach” of barbaric extravagance. In highly and traditional societies where sexuality remains extremely taboo, sexual violence against men and boys seems to embody the ultimate transgression. It will underline the omnipotence of the transgressor, while depriving the victim of the means and the will to revolt. It is a form of territorial domination that builds on the destruction of core political, cultural and social links. Sexual violence against men and boys, alongside that exerted against women and girls, thus illustrates the link underscored by Haugen and Boutros (2014) between the spread of violence and of other violations of human rights, as well as the deterioration of political and social orders. Communities and individuals alike are broken, more malleable, and less likely to revolt against the armed groups or armies that rob, loot, abduct, rape and seize precious natural resources.

2.8 Conclusions

Sexual violence against men and boys during conflicts is a tactic developed by armed groups in order to enforce domination on local men through a suffering that is symbolic, social, psychological, and physical. In many ways, it pushes the logic of gendered violence during conflicts to its utmost limits. Because this type of violence directly targets the ones who are considered to be the bearers of ethnicity and the protectors of their communities, it deeply breaks down the spirit of local populations by destroying core social links. It further deprives the victims and their families, and empowers the perpetrators, at the individual as well as at the collective level. It causes traumas that are almost impossible to overcome, and that may in turn feed the cycle of conflict. This type of violence is thus a product of the conflict as much as it produces it.

A series of assumption regarding “typical” masculine values and behavior however impede a wider recognition of, and response to, this suffering. Many also fear that acknowledging the suffering of men, or paying “too much” attention to it will

distract attention from the suffering of women. However, this research highlights the multiple links and common characteristics existing between the suffering induced by sexual violence against women and girls, and that against men and boys. Just as sexual violence against both men and women has to be tackled jointly, an encompassing approach to the various categories of victims concerned has to be promoted, taking notice of the extreme complexity of such a phenomenon.

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