While sexual and gender based violence (SGBV) is a common characteristic of today’s “warscape”, the word gender is primarily, if not exclusively, associated with the identity of the victim as female, and its reference as a “weapon of war” is predicated on the atrocities being perpetrated by males against females. The spotlight on the normalisation of such atrocities, particularly in the context of the DRC conflict, has rightly prompted outrage and resulted in action on behalf of international and national governing bodies. Conversely, the perpetuation of SGBV against males is underreported, resulting in comparatively less attention, meager programmatic responses and fewer, if any, deterrent measures. This article argues that while the occurrences of SGBV against males may not be as prevalent as against females, it is also being used as a “weapon of war” in the DRC and is arguably a more lethal strategy used to annihilate the socially constructed notion of hegemonic masculinity. In this way, it is a weapon that effectively causes a deeper schism, or even a severing, between genders within a society, honing the perpetuation of fear, insecurity and hatred of “the other”, and in this way, aligns the conflict with Mary Kaldor’s “New War” Theory. The conflict is therefore, more intractable and makes peace far more tenuous.

1. Introduction

One day some men dressed in military uniforms and civilian clothes came to Y’s home demanding to see his father. The men entered Y’s home forcefully and tied up Y’s father, mother, siblings and him. Y’s mother was gang raped in the presence of her husband and children. Later, Y was forced to have sex with his younger brother. The soldiers beat Y and his brother on their penises repeatedly using a stick because they were not performing the sexual act as instructed. Y was 13 years old at the time. The soldiers then raped Y; he lost consciousness and awoke in the hospital. Upon regaining consciousness, Y was informed that his father had been buried a few days earlier and his sister had been taken away by the soldiers.¹

¹ Anonymous international NGO personnel, excerpts from interviews by personnel with survivors of sexual based violence from the DRC, interviewed by author via email, January 7, 2014.
In a country where there have been on average 15,000 cases of sexual violence each year since 2008, with 15,654 cases reported in 2012 (12,865 of which were rapes), this incident, as articulated by the victim to an international NGO worker, has become a normalised part of the “warscape” in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC).\(^2\) While numerous forms of sexual violence are being committed, it is unarguably being used as a “weapon of war”, and the application of this narrative has undoubtedly given birth to a much-needed momentum that has propelled both the international community and the national government toward dialogue, advocacy, resolutions, legislation and attempts at convictions.\(^3\) Yet such atrocities continue unabated. There has been a particular focus on sexual violence that is directed towards women and girls in the DRC, culminating in the unanimous passing of UN Security Resolution 1820 in July 2009.\(^4\) However, as evidenced in the aforementioned passage and by numerous studies, over the two decades of conflict in the DRC, sexual violence has known no prejudice, becoming widespread and systematic, affecting all genders, all ethnicities, all ages, civilians and combatants alike.\(^5\)

While most victims of sexual violence in the context of conflict have historically been females victimized at the hands of males, this article will focus on the “increasing evidence of violent rape and sexual assault against men and boys in the DRC” as it relates to hegemonic masculinity.\(^6\) However, given the hinging of hegemonic masculinity on the relationship between the genders, it is useful to look at the sexual violence committed against males juxtaposed to that of females. This juxtaposition does not intend to minimize the suffering of females in any way. Instead, it intends to demonstrate how sexual violence perpetrated by men against men is an even more lethal strategy used to target the socially constructed notion of hegemonic masculinity of whatever group or individual is being attacked, causing a deeper schism, or even a severing, between the genders and even more damage to the social fabric. By examining the damage in relation to the object of the attack, this article will argue that sexual violence, as it is being used as a “weapon of war” in the DRC to annihilate hegemonic masculinity, is an even more profound

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indicator of the intractable nature of the conflict. In this weapon’s perpetuation of fear, insecurity and hatred of “the other” through a disproportionate means, it aligns the conflict with Mary Kaldor’s “New War” Theory, going beyond Clausewitz’s notion of war being “a contest of wills” or a strategy to subdue a population and making peace far more illusive and tentative.7

The magnitude of the plight suffered by women and girls in this context has rightly captivated the attention of the international community. Very little attention, however, has been afforded the suffering of men and boys. This is partly due to a scarcity of data, a dearth of information resulting from their reluctance to report these occurrences because of the socially constructed ascription to the concept of hegemonic masculinity.8 In light of the connection between hegemonic masculinity and sexual violence as a weapon of war, this article will first offer a brief overview of the historically entrenched social constructions of femininity and masculinity through the framework of hegemonic masculinity as it is perceived in the DRC, and the impact of the conflict on this historical context for both males and females. The second section will focus on the function of sexual violence as a weapon of war within the context of hegemonic masculinity, its strategic purpose and the subsequent effects on men and women during and after conflict. Finally, the article will discuss how the pattern of sexual violence in the DRC and its use as a weapon of war align with the notion of “new methods” of warfare in Kaldor’s “New War” Theory.

2. Hegemonic Masculinity

2.1 Hegemonic Masculinity and “Doing Gender” Before the Conflict

As described by R.W. Connell in his groundbreaking work Masculinities, “hegemonic masculinity is not a fixed character type, [but]...rather, the masculinity that occupies the hegemonic position in a given pattern of gender relations, a position always contestable.”9 In terms of gender, R.W. Connell and James W. Messerschmidt contend that it “is always relational” and “socially defined in contradistinction from some model of femininity.”10 Given women’s centrality in constructing the masculinities of men, it is important to examine the concept of emphasized femininity and its compliance to patriarchy”, and the status of the concept both before and during the conflict in the DRC.11

Historically in the DRC, the concept of hegemonic masculinity was predicated on men being strong leaders and the primary decision makers at home and in the community. Aligned with these predications was also their responsibility to provide for and protect their families.12 Women, on the other hand, were expected to “be submissive, and not to take part in public life,” instead concentrating on domestic duties such as child rearing, food preparation and working in

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8 Moser and Clark, 8.
11 Ibid.
the fields. Therefore, the socially constructed notions of hegemonic masculinity and femininity that were manifested in DRC culture were such that men were expected to aspire to be “strong, independent, powerful, dominant, in control [and when warranted], aggressive,” and women should be “passive, dependent, powerless, weak [and] subordinate.” One important distinction worth noting is that besides the prescriptive elements to being feminine or masculine, “these idealized gender differences in temperament were prescriptive as well, for ‘an essential element in becoming masculine was becoming not-feminine.’”

2.2 Hegemonic Masculinity & “Doing Gender” During the Conflict

As the DRC has been embroiled in conflict in varying degrees and locations for close to two decades, with millions of internally displaced people (IDPs), and 71.3 percent of its citizens living below the national poverty line, these roles have invariably changed. As unemployment opportunities have become scarcer, men have been forced to succumb to the “rural-to-urban denigration” or have been forcibly or voluntarily conscripted into regular or irregular armed groups, increasing the number of women-headed households and resulting in women taking on more dominant roles in the family and in their communities. According to the Food and Agricultural Organization of the United Nations, women account for 73 percent of those economically active in agriculture, and produce more than 80 percent of the food crop for the country, making them the primary breadwinners in many families as more men are either out of work or not getting paid by their respective armed groups.

Displacement has also had an impact on women and men and their respective agencies. In some cases, due to the effects of the conflict, they move closer to urban and peri-urban centers, which unavoidably introduces new, more progressive ideas to those who have previously lived in more isolated, traditional communities. “[D]isplaced people, as actors in their own survival, show great resilience in adverse conditions, challenging their portrayal as vulnerable, passive victims.” Interestingly however,

... although the initial impact of violent displacement is more

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13 Ibid.
19 Oxfam, 5.
20 Moser and Clark, 9.
severe for women than for men, women tend to adapt more quickly to their new environment, finding new spaces through informal support networks to meet their families’ daily needs. Because their dependence on formal institutional support, men adapt more slowly, often resulting in ‘working women’ and ‘institutionally dependent men.’

This marked change in the lives of women and men inevitably highlights the importance of agency and how it “attributes to the actor the capacity to process social experience and to devise ways of coping with life, even under the most extreme forms of coercion.” Therefore, on some level, “doing gender,” or how one “facilitate[s] the ongoing task of accountability by demonstrating that one is male or female through concocted behaviors,” has been disrupted. For men in particular then, the impact of the conflict in relation to how they “do gender” has been catastrophic to the aforementioned pre-war notion of hegemonic masculinity, causing a “failed masculinity” of sorts due to the “lack of opportunity to live up to what is expected.” As the social situation has changed, the “normative conceptions, attitudes, and activities appropriate to one’s [gender]” have also changed, resulting in what Connell refers to as a “crisis tendency” that thereby “threatens [the historical] hegemonic masculinity.”

In this instance, one of two scenarios can occur in order to socially renegotiate the context. The first is the possibility that a more “modern,” alternative masculinity emerges that is “flatter” in its hierarchical structure due to the change in divisions of labor in the family. However, this risks “a weakening of patriarchal structures in general and certainly undermines . . . [the historic hegemonic] masculinity” by giving more power to women. The second is that men turn to war given that it is the only viable opportunity, in their view, to claim their masculinity, whether it be for physical or psychological survival. This option allows for men to not only not have to compromise on the aforementioned prescriptions, namely strength, independence, power, dominance, and aggression, but it allows them to relegate the prescriptive of self-control. In some ways then, this second option allows for the affirmation of the existing hegemonic masculinity by other means, thereby securing that patriarchy stays intact.

3. Sexual Violence as a Weapon of War

3.1 Technical Definitions

21 Ibid, 9-10.
22 N. Long, “From Paradigm Lost to Paradigm Regained?” in N. Long, and A. Long (eds), Battlefields of Knowledge: The Interlocking of Theory and Practice in Social Research and Development, Routledge, London and New York, as quoted in Moser and Clark, 4-5.
25 Ibid; See also Connell, Masculinities, 90.
26 Connell and Messerschmidt, 853; See also Morgan, 174.
27 Morgan, 174.
Though the more common moniker applied by the media and throughout the international community to describe the sexual violence in the DRC is “rape as a weapon of war,” it fails to include all forms of sexual violence that are being committed.\(^{28}\) For the purposes of this article, the definition of sexual violence “encompasses rape, sexual slavery, enforced prostitution, forced pregnancy, enforced sterilization, trafficking, [sexual mutilation], [sexual torture] and any other form of sexual violence of comparable gravity.”\(^{29}\) In terms of sexual violence being used as a “tactic of war” or a “weapon of war,” these terms refer “to acts of sexual violence that are linked with military/political objectives and that serve (or intend to serve) a strategic aim related to the conflict.”\(^{30}\) This is not to say that there are not other purposes guiding some of the sexual violence that is committed in the DRC. To clarify, this type of sexual violence is different than the historically perceived notions of rape as pillaging or lust rapes, driven by the male libido, which are now more categorized as a side effect of the war, not as a tactic or a strategic weapon per se.\(^{31}\)

3.2 The Strategy of Sexual Violence as a Weapon of War and the Guarantor of Hegemonic Masculinity

Though sexual violence as a weapon of war is being used against both males and females, the question remains: Are the strategic purposes served by sexual violence against males and females the same in the context of the conflict in DRC? The short answer to the question is yes, the predominant strategic purposes served by sexual violence cross cuts gender and does so by directly and affectively attacking hegemonic masculinity, the very foundation of the social fabric for both genders. In so doing, the overall strategic objective of crippling the enemy is attained. Where attacking just females undoubtedly injures both genders, undermines hegemonic masculinity and causes gender schisms, the attacks on males are an extension which serves to sever the schism and destroys the social fabric completely. From a tactical perspective, it is immensely effective in that while one episode of sexual violence reverberates through a family and a community, thousands of episodes against both genders act as an epidemic or disease that has the ability to infect generations to come. Furthermore, this weapon has an added benefit to the strategic value in that it serves to restore the threatened hegemonic masculinity of the perpetrator and his group.

In the DRC, the ways in which sexual violence committed against both males and females serves to damage hegemonic masculinity is both on an individual and group level. On the group level, sexual violence attacks hegemonic masculinity in two ways, through the “wrest of personal and [societal] assets” from the victims and through actual and symbolic ethnic cleansing.\(^ {32}\) Both genders have “sought-after” assets, which, as previously mentioned, are socially constructed and ascribed to their gender.\(^ {33}\) These assets benefit their society, or community, at large, and are needed for the prosecution of the war, particularly by those armed

\(^ {28}\) Ministre du Genre, de La Famille et de L’Enfant de La République Démocratique du Congo, Préface.
\(^ {30}\) Ibid, 5.
\(^ {31}\) Baaz, 497. See also HRW, “The War Within the War: Sexual Violence Against Women and Girls in Eastern Congo,” 1.
\(^ {32}\) Moser and Clark, 55.
\(^ {33}\) Moser and Clark, 55.
groups which are not state supported. Sexual violence is a method of warfare used to effectively “strip” men, women and their societies of these assets. While there are ranges of assets that may be different, and even predicated on gender, the strategic purpose of the sexual violence itself is the same.

Caroline Moser and Fiona Clark argue that women’s assets “reside in…their productive and reproductive labor power, their possessions and their access to valuable assets such as land and livestock,” which they control while the men are away. The males’ assets rest in their ability to fight, to be aggressive, to be dominant and ultimately, to protect their territorial property, being both land and the body of their women. The ability to protect these assets is central to the notion of the aforementioned hegemonic masculinity of the male victim and the relationship this serves to the female and her subordinate femininity.

In addition to the wresting of assets, as reported in a study by the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, acts of sexual violence began to appear as a facet of interethnic conflict after 1993. While admittedly there are many competing interests and agendas in the DRC, some of which are solely based on gaining control of the country’s natural resources, ethnicity plays a predominant role in the conflict. As such, sexual violence as a weapon of war is used for the purpose of targeting opposing ethnicities. For women, who are seen as the reproducer of ethnicity, this attack can be carried out with the intent of forced impregnation “as a form of ethnic cleansing, because the woman is forced to bear a child that has been ‘ethnically cleansed’ by the blood of the rapist.” The reverberations emanating from the birth of a child from an attack by a man who is not the woman’s husband are profound on an individual level and a group level. In particular, this has a significant negative impact on the relationship with her husband, as it is then a physical manifestation of a challenge to his personal hegemonic masculinity by confirming his inability to protect her. “The effectiveness of rape as a strategy, or weapon, of war relies on the pervasive cultural norms that value women’s sexual virtue…[as]…public ownership…[and] makes it possible to translate an attack against one woman into an attack against an entire community or ethnic group.”

Conversely, a sexual attack on a man serves as symbolic ethnic cleansing, as it attacks the hegemonic masculinity of the enemy’s group. “Throughout human history, hegemony and domination have been justified by the judgment as to who are and who are not ‘proper men,’” who does and does not belong to the said ethnic group. In the DRC, it is through the father’s

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34 Ibid.
36 Ibid.
41 Ibid.
42 Moser and Clark, 77.
lineage that ethnicity is determined. “Sexual humiliation of a man from another ethnicity is, thus, a proof not only that he is a lesser man, but also that his ethnicity is a lesser ethnicity. Emasculation annihilates the power of the ethnic Other by annihilating the power of its men’s masculinity.” This emasculation, in a very heterosexualized society, thereby calls into question the victim’s sexuality by making him less masculine and thereby more feminine, shattering not only his self-esteem, but his status within his family and within his ethnic group.

Therefore, an attack on a woman is more expected and socially accepted in that it reinforces her assigned prescriptive of weakness and vulnerability; in other words, it is consistent with her femininity. Instead, an attack on a woman is more a reflection on her husband or the males in her family and their lack of an ability to fulfill the prescriptive of hegemonic masculinity. In this way, sexual attacks conducted against females in the context of armed conflict exacerbates pre-existing inequalities, causing a schism between the genders. Conversely, attacks on men are no reflection on women, but they are even more demoralizing for a man, given the inconsistency between masculinity and victim-hood. The acknowledgement that he has failed every prescriptive of masculinity, rendering him powerless and crippled, serves as an enormously effective weapon of war. When both genders within an ethnic group or a society at large are attacked, leaving both victims symbolically crippled to some extent, any sort of will to fight back is removed.

Additionally, as aforementioned, this weapon has an added strategic benefit in that it serves to restore the threatened hegemonic masculinity of the perpetrator and his group. While an attack on either a female or a male seeks to achieve this end, the attack on the male does so more effectively as the attack on a more dominant individual as opposed to a more vulnerable individual translates for the perpetrator into an “über-masculinity.” In her article, “Why do soldiers rape?” Maria Erikson Baaz relays the rationale of a combatant regarding so-called “evil rapes,” (as opposed to “lust rapes”) as intending to “destroy the human dignity of a person.” The symbolic taking of the masculinity from the victim, and its being transposed to the perpetrator, fulfills the ultimate strategic military objective of not just subduing a population for the sake of surrender, but through mass terror, “destroy[ing] the dignity of the person and thereby the community, annihilating their will to fight by defacing their hegemonic masculinity. Additionally, through its often public nature, the perpetrators seek to involve as many people as possible in order to establish a “shared complicity in these crimes,” which further sanctions

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43 Ibid, 78-79.
45 Sivakumaran, 270.
47 Sivakumaran, 270.
48 Ibid., 268.
49 Ibid, 270.
50 Bazz, 511.
violence against the “other” and “deepens divisions.”

In this way, the circumstances generated by conflict afford the more dominant groups the opportunity to repeatedly, with every attack, use their prescriptions to affirm their masculinity. As in the testimony in the opening of the article, the sexual violence targeted each gender of the family, and in particular the males in a public setting. Often, the attacks will take place not just in front of family, but in front of other community members. While this tactic has a multitude of benefits, namely to invoke humiliation and fear or to forcibly displace people for the purpose of gaining territory, the frequency of sexual violence and its institutionalization into Congolese armed groups are also indicative of how “military organizations, military successes, military pageantry and rituals” are providing an alternative way for their prescriptive attributes of masculinity to be affirmed.

Additionally, it reinforces that “militarism [is] the ultimate form of disciplined masculinity and ignores the contradiction that militarism [has] in fact [become] a celebration of the most extreme form of violence,” causing intractable schisms between genders and ethnicities. Whereas militarism has traditionally been tasked with protecting a state’s people, in the DRC, it has become synonymous with abuse and insecurity. This so-called extreme form of violence is then a symptom of what Kaldor refers to as “a new type of organized violence” in today’s “New Wars.”

4. Hegemonic Masculinity, Sexual Violence and Today’s “New Wars”

The main criticisms plaguing Kaldor’s “New Wars” Theory are based on her use of the word new. Primarily, critics emphasize that many of the features of the so-called “new” wars can be found in earlier, “old” wars. However, Kaldor clarifies that her use of the word new was intended to distinguish today’s wars from the prevailing perceptions that earlier wars, or “old wars,” were mainly “drawn from the experience of the last two centuries in Europe, in which war consisted of a conflict between two…states or proto-states with legitimate interests.” These wars were further characterized by ending in a clear victory or negotiation. In this context, the majority of today’s wars, like the DRC, do not fit this description.

Instead, today’s wars are characterized by a different logic. As in the case of the DRC, today’s wars involve a myriad of actors, from state to non-state to private companies, all armed, some with legitimate interests and some not. Instead of a Clausewitzian “contest of wills” whose purposes are to win, they are “mutual enterprises” whose purposes are “war without end.” In the DRC, this is evidenced in multiple failed peace agreements, ceasefires and the need for peacekeepers. While many of the features that Kaldor attributes to today’s new wars are in fact present in the DRC conflict today, a brief examination of how the sexual violence that is

53 Ibid, 435.
55 Ibid, 203.
56 Ibid.
57 Ibid.
occurring falls into her theory and how it illuminates the intractable nature of the conflict insofar as it relates to hegemonic masculinity.

What were once considered to be “undesirable and illegitimate side-effects,” such as targeting civilian populations or sexual violence, “have become central to the mode of fighting in the new wars.” 59 Today, as has been demonstrated, sexual violence is, despite being a violation of international law, deemed to be a legitimate use of force by those in the armed forces. 60 It is used to symbolically maim a civilian population or an opposing armed group. It is used to take over territory in a psychological way, by rendering it “uninhabitable,” as Kaldor says, “by instilling unbearable memories of what was once home, by desecrating whatever has social meaning.” 61 Additionally, she points to the identity feature in today’s conflicts, which is not only reflected in the DRC, but as has been demonstrated, is specifically targeted by sexual violence. 62 People are attacked not for what they believe in or what ideology they subscribe to, but instead, on the basis of “what one is born as” (i.e. ethnicity or gender), which cannot be changed. 63 While this is not to say that peace cannot be made between those with different identities, when the strategic purpose of the attack has gone beyond a “contest of wills” for the purpose of achieving a political goal, to harming one’s person, family and community for the explicit purpose of mere affirmation of one’s own or one’s group’s dominance, the hatred of “the other” is far more intractable. 64 As such, traditional policies and conflict resolution mechanisms may need to be rethought; this includes the inclusion of all parties to the conflict deserving a seat at the negotiating table, or positions in the post-conflict government. 65

5. Conclusion

In its juxtaposition of the effects of sexual violence on both genders in the DRC, this article has illuminated the way in which war has served as an alternate framework through which hegemonic masculinity can be affirmed without alterations to the original prescriptive. Particularly effective in securing this hegemony has been the sexual violence perpetrated against men. Though admittedly not as widespread, its proven ability to cripple the enemy while simultaneously transferring power to the perpetrators hones its effectiveness as a weapon of war. In some ways, its precision as a weapon is analogous to the advancements made in the use of drone technology used to conduct targeted killings. While this by no means relegates the atrocities suffered by women, it serves to highlight not only the more intractable nature of the conflict, but the deeper schism or possibly complete severing of gender relations due to the debilitating effects on a society’s notion of hegemonic masculinity. As such, whatever peace process ensues will not only have to take into account political discord, but will also need to expediently tackle the reformulation of hegemonic masculinity in terms of creating more peaceful opportunities through which men’s masculinity can be affirmed while taking into careful consideration of new gender inequalities that have emerged as a result of the conflict. If

59 Ibid, 106.
60 Ibid, 105.
63 Ibid.
this is not achieved relatively quickly, the legitimacy of the hierarchy will once again be questioned, which when under threat, often behests a return to violence.
6. Bibliography


Anonymous international NGO personnel. Excerpts from interviews by personnel with survivors of sexual based violence from the DRC. Interviewed by author via email, January 7, 2014.


