

# Colonialism in Africa: the impact on sexual and gender-based violence

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## Abstract

This project seeks to investigate how colonialism has influenced sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). Previous studies within the discipline of political science have not given enough attention to the role that historical experiences—notably colonialism—play in the causes of and responses to SGBV. While many scholars argue that the Rwandan genocide was the catalyst for SGBV in the DRC, this paper argues that the colonization of the DRC is when the country's issue of widespread sexual violence first became normalized. Further, the most influential framework for analyzing SGBV has been the weapon of war frame which argues that rape is a strategy of war, which minimizes and isolates sexual and gender-based violence before and after active armed conflict. Thus, this analysis offers an alternate framework for approaching the origins and potential solutions to SGBV, seeking to fill

this gap in the literature. Although focused mainly on the DRC, the need for greater attention to the impact of colonialism on SGBV also has implications for other African states with similar colonial experiences.

Oftentimes in the analysis of sexual and gender-based violence in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), the fault is almost exclusively given to the events of the Rwandan genocide, which fails to recognize long-term historical influences, particularly colonialism. Colonialism not only contributes to sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV), but it is also a factor in ethnic conflict and sexual and gender-based violence. I acknowledge that the violence (both sexual and non-sexual) during the Rwandan genocide built upon ethnic tensions that were created by Germany when they initially colonized Rwanda in 1884 and further maintained by Belgium once they took over power of Rwanda in 1916. As the conflict in Rwanda soon bled into surrounding countries,

any pre-existing tensions in said countries were only aggravated, leading to explosive conflicts like in the case of the Burundian Civil War. However, I argue that there also needs to be an analysis of sexual and gender-based violence in the DRC that begins prior to the Rwandan genocide, as colonial rule is where the culpability lies. Whilst the focus of this project will be on the DRC and to a lesser extent, Rwanda, the observations of this analysis can be applied to other former African colonies. As such, the terms of this paper propound that the only way to move away from standardized resolutions is to incorporate and consider the consequences of colonialism, especially concerning sexual violence.

It is first important to define key terms used throughout this analysis. In defining sexual violence, this study uses the definition provided by the United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner, which defines sexual and gender-based violence as “rape, sexual abuse, forced pregnancy, forced sterilization, forced abortion, forced prostitution, trafficking, sexual enslavement, forced circumcision, castration, and forced nudity” (2014). These crimes can and do happen to anyone regardless of gender and sexual orientation, however, in framing this research, I largely refer to women and girls. Additionally, it is

imperative to define neo-colonialism. Neo-colonialism is when a state is independent in theory with all the appearances of sovereignty, but its economic system and therefore political policy is directed from the outside (Nkrumah, 1965, p. 1). Economically, many different countries and corporations still take advantage of the plethora of natural resources (mostly mineral) located in the Eastern Congo. Rebel forces pillage and force occupants out of their villages near mines, so they can reap the benefits of the resources. These minerals are a large reason for the extractive economy that the DRC has presently.

Throughout this research the weapon of war frame as presented by Crawford (2017) is referred to, which classifies sexual violence as a weaponized existential threat that is well documented in academic literature (Buss, 2009; Merger, 2011; Baaz & Stern, 2013; Crawford, 2017). In previous work, Crawford (2013) largely bases her view of the weapon of war frame on the discussion by Buss (2009) regarding “rape as a weapon of war”. According to Buss, rape as a weapon of war or genocide occurs when sexual violence has a “systematic, pervasive, or officially orchestrated aspect” (Crawford, 2013). Rape and sexual violence in times of war is as ancient as war itself, but for far too long it has been

perceived as something that just happens during times of war, instead of a clear war strategy (Bergoffen, 2009). In times of conflict the body of a woman becomes a ceremonial battlefield of messages between men -- victory for one side and defeat for the other (Brownmiller, 1975). Sexual violence as a weapon not only negatively impacts the victim, but their family and community as well, which is why it is such a powerful weapon. The weapon of war frame has become synonymous with "rape as a weapon of war" in the international community and surrounding literature. The use of the frame has played a prominent role in both the Rwandan and Yugoslavian Tribunals, where rape has been prosecuted as a crime against humanity as well as genocide (Buss, 2009). Despite both this analysis as well as copious scholarship surrounding sexual and gender-based violence in times of active conflict deferring to the frame, it is not perfect. I recognize that it holds deep-seated Western bias, leaves out men, boys, and the LGBTQ+ community as victims of sexual violence, and uses rape to generalize all forms of sexual violence.

I assert that the biggest and most pressing issue with the frame is that it does not consider any scholarship from outside of political science or International Relations. By stating that sexual violence is a weapon

of war, a problem arises in which sexual violence is no longer an unfortunate by-product of war, but a main feature of military strategy that the international community can regulate. This shields states' own armed forces from culpability for opportunistic sexual violence, as seen in Abu Gharib where United States (US) armed forces sexually violated imprisoned Iraqi citizens at their leisure. The punishments for the soldiers were extremely lenient for the war crimes committed as they were under such a shield. Opportunistic sexual violence carried out by authority figures is just as big of an issue, however, it is much less frequently discussed. Just as well, the weapon of war frame oversimplifies the complex dynamics of all forms of sexual violence and those who are involved, which can further lead to insufficient responses to sexualized violence (Baaz & Stern, 2013; Crawford, 2017). The weapon of war frame ignores sexual violence in times that the international community recognizes as peaceful, only giving attention to sexual violence in times of conflict. The frame only discusses sexual violence as a byproduct and fails to explore the historical origins of the issue.

The most prominent issue with the weapon of war frame is that it speaks to realist theories of International Relations as well as political science, not acknowledging

other beneficial fields such as history, feminism, economics, and anthropology. Commonly, the weapon of war frame is defaulted into the box of the realist paradigm. According to Bova (2016), realism was popularized post World War II and is “based on the assumption that international relations is a struggle for power among sovereign states” and it tends to dominate the discourse (p. 7). Realism is characterized by three core assumptions; the first is the nature of basic social actors, the second is the nature of state preferences being fixed and uniformly conflictual, and the third is that of the international structure itself, not solely the actors (Legro & Moravcsik, 1999). While these features can be applied to the weapon of war frame, the realist paradigm alone is unable to explore why such a power struggle exists in the Democratic Republic of the Congo in particular, without giving attention to a broader approach.

The feminist paradigm suggests that “traditional scholarship on international relations reflects a predominantly male perspective on the world, and that the inclusion of more women in positions of authority in international relations could change the way world politics is conducted” (Bova, 2016, p. 31). There is also an argument to be made that realists ignore the relationship of politics and the lives of women around the world.

When speaking to the gendered perspective of realism specifically, feminist scholar J. Ann Tickner, realism “claims to be universal and objective”, but in reality, the paradigm is “based on knowledge primarily from men’s lives” (2005, p. 2177). This means that the weapon of war frame caters to the male perspective of sexual violence, as opposed to the perspective of females, whom it affects the most. To better understand the issue of SGBV in the DRC, the weapon of war frame as well as the insights of realist scholars must be built upon, looking to a more multi-dimensional, interdisciplinary approach. In his work on History and International Relations: From the Ancient World to the 21st Century, Malchow (2016) claims that, “the study of politics.... can almost always profit from a more serious engagement with social and cultural contexts—a commonplace in the discipline of History” (p. IX). Thus, by drawing upon other disciplines, specifically history, this analysis will offer a more nuanced approach to sexual violence beyond just being an instrument of war. There is a glaring need for intertextuality in International Relations and political science. The weapon of war frame must be utilized from a constructivist lens, which will allow for an emphasis on the roles of human agency, norms, and identities in the construction of the character of international relations (Bova,

2016, p. 26). The constructivist paradigm can offer the perspectives of feminism, history, and political science which are all crucial to understanding the weaponization of sexual violence, which is the objective throughout this project.

On April 6th, 1994, the Rwandan genocide began, marking a horrific spree of murder and rape of Tutsis, Twas, and moderate Hutus lasting one-hundred days. The genocide caused a mass exodus of Rwandans to cramped refugee camps in the DRC, where rape and disease were rampant. Thousands more died in the refugee camps (Wilkinson, 1997). The issues of sexual violence literally and figuratively bled into the DRC, where they linger to this day. Of course, the international community has not sat by idly; the United Nations (UN) has intervened in numerous peacekeeping missions in both Rwanda and the DRC, before and after the Genocide. However, the current UN peacekeeping mission in the DRC, The United Nations Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, or MONUSCO, has come under great scrutiny. Citizens of the DRC feel that the UN Peacekeepers do not do much, which is not unfounded. In 2014, the Human Rights Watch accused peacekeepers of failing to respond to repeated calls for help during an attack in which thirty people were

killed. Peacekeepers were only five and a half miles away but arrived two days later (“DR Congo”). Additionally, MONUSCO, as well as peacekeeping operations since the 1990s in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Cambodia, East Timor, Haiti, Liberia, Sierra Leone, Somalia, Rwanda, the Central African Republic, and South Sudan, have faced allegations of sexual assault and exploitation of women and girls (Human Rights Watch, 2016). During the preceding peacekeeping mission in the DRC called MONUC, girls as young as thirteen were interviewed by the Human Rights Watch (HRW) claiming to have been raped by peacekeepers (hrw.org, 2005).

In discussing the issue of sexual and gender-based violence in the DRC, it is crucial to study the transition of colonialism to neo-colonialism and how that has created persistent issues within the scholarship. Neo-colonialism is not singularly defined, but it is commonly agreed upon that it occurs when a state is independent in theory with all the appearances of sovereignty, but in actuality, its economic system and therefore political policy is directed from the outside (Nkrumah, 1965, p. 1). Seeing as much of the work conducted by scholars has a Western bias, the issues of neo-colonialism are often ignored because they prove critical of the Western world, “the global economy today is a profoundly uneven

terrain of resources and power, more neo-colonial and American-dominated than global in any real sense” (Bockman, 2015, p. 110). With this, it is imperative to study path dependency and the legacies of colonialism; however, it serves to strengthen the argument by putting current literature in conversation with scholars from other fields as they have a lot to offer to the current discourse. Malchow posits that “to understand causation is to learn from history about the present and from the present about history” (Malchow, 2016, p. 6). Therefore, without the use of history especially, the weapon of war frame alone will remain ineffectual to provide language that can assist the international community in offering a holistic response to sexual violence.

Although many scholars agree that the whole of the continent of Africa -- besides Liberia and Ethiopia -- were colonized, Seger (2018) points out that the “sovereignty” held by the two countries was questionable. When broken down into numbers, it is difficult to grasp the atrocities that happened and what allowed them to happen under colonial rule in Africa. In the DRC alone, millions died under the rule of King Leopold, numbers possibly rivaling the Holocaust, but it remains a largely unknown piece of history (Hochschild, 1999). The mistreatment of Africans was encouraged by the scientific

community, specifically anthropology (Baker & Patterson, 1994). In relatively the same period as the “Scramble for Africa,” anthropologists began to falsely connect race to biology, as many were searching for a biological underpinning to man-made racial categories. At the time, anthropologists presented “scientific” evidence that white Europeans were superior, associating African people with lower intelligence and laziness. Many Europeans felt their intentions of making Africans more “civilized” like themselves and less “primitive” were justified by science (Miller, 1995).

Only recently has the cruciality of women’s roles in sustaining the human species been recast into the picture of prehistoric record, as it was commonly believed by the scientific community that women were “side-kicks” to men, so to speak, as shown by the popularity of the “hunting hypothesis” (Zihlman, 1978; Hill, 1982). For thousands of years in human evolution, which began in Africa, men and women were far more egalitarian (Zihlman, 1978; Dyble, et al., 2015). Western gender roles and the narrative of women as “lesser than” has been only recently introduced in comparison. The most explicit source of female oppression, in present and colonial times, is sexual violence. Male colonizers not only raped the land of the Congo but the women as well, which was normalized for

Congolese men for decades and is still perpetuated (DR Congo: 'Widespread and systematic' violence, 2021). Often, in formerly colonized countries the fear of being sexually violated prevents girls from getting an education like their male counterparts and keeps women from going to work and becoming financially independent (Cartner, 2019).

Along with racism, colonialism brought Westernized gender norms, reinforced for centuries in Europe. Standifer (2017) writes,

Colonial officials shaped policies on the incorrect assumption that Congolese gender dynamics were identical to European tradition, where women did not work and had no independence, and violent chastisement, or even murder, of women was a man's traditional right. Those policies created systems where women had no recourse to combat violence and power disparities, even where remedies had once been available outside of colonial systems. By the dawn of independence, many Congolese accepted this mythos, and continued the oppression of women as African tradition (p. 4).

Mendoza (2016) similarly notes that European gender roles had a significant impact on the relations between men and women within the colony (Coetzee & du Toit, 2017, p. 221).

It is impractical to purport that sexual violence did not exist prior to colonialism, however, as the colonial process advanced, women of the colonized peoples were no longer in positions of power, nor were they independent. They were introduced to a way of life rife with degradation. It is no coincidence that the systems of oppression and domination used to colonize are practically identical to the strategies European, male colonizers used to dominate and oppress indigenous women (Moane, 1966; Kanuha, 2002). Mies (1986) points out that the process of European colonization is quite hypocritical in that, "while African women were treated as 'savages', the women of the white colonizers in their fatherlands 'rose' to the status of 'ladies'" (p. 95). The polarization of "savage" versus "civilized", or "us" versus "them", was and continues to be a deeply ingrained structural principle within global society. Such examples can be seen in the media in terms of how Black women may be portrayed as opposed to their white counterparts. This is not to say that white women were not oppressed in Europe, Mama (1997) adduces that women, particularly of the working class, were deleteriously exploited sexually and economically (p. 49). Mama further contends that the exploitation and oppression of white women in Europe was subsequently "perfected" when performed on African women. While

the West aims to look for solutions to sexual and gender-based violence, it is also important to note the impact of Western colonialism. If international organizations do not fully assess the causes of gender-based violence, this will ultimately limit the effectiveness of the solutions.

In a talk he gave in 1986, scholar Michael Parenti said, “Poor countries are not ‘under-developed’, they are over-exploited.” The systems that colonialism created and the extractive economy that neo-colonialism maintains, are the reasons for Congo being so minerally rich, yet the second poorest country in the world. The World Bank estimates that in 2018, 73% of the Congolese population, 60 million people, were living on less than \$1.90 a day (2021). Economist Joseph Stiglitz postulates that the International Monetary Fund is also insensitive to the histories of former colonies, an assertion which underscores that such an approach is seen across an array of international organizations, not just the United Nations (2002). People in the DRC are murdered every day -- 48 are raped every hour -- but the international community continuously turns a blind eye, and the DRC is in a hopeless position due to political and economic decline aggravated by neo-colonialism (Peterman, et al., 2011, p. 1064). Possible reasons could be elements of racism

in responses, or that the Security Council consists of former and current colonizing powers, or the issue of profits over people (Companies Protect Profits over People, 2012). An additional reason that is not often addressed, however, is the lack of an in-depth holistic discussion on sexual violence in the Congo.

The dire situation that women and girls in the DRC are facing must be addressed. With the constant risk of conflict there is an added challenge of getting aid to people who have contracted the Ebola virus or COVID-19, both of which are easily spread, especially in places where education on the matter is greatly lacking (Oppenheim, 2019). This could lead to the manifestation of new strains, which would prove deadly on a global scale. Without serious change, the people of the Congo don't just suffer, the entire world suffers as well. Additionally, Africa is a leading example for managing easily transferable diseases, which is especially important to note during the COVID-19 pandemic. Thus, this is one area where research can be expanded upon outside of the findings of this paper in the future, as well as further exploration and collection of data of sexual violence in the DRC against men, boys, and the LGBTQ+ community.

Practically speaking, the benefits of solutions for the obstacles discussed



heretofore would allow for safer working conditions not only in the DRC, but other formerly colonized African countries with similar struggles as well, which would allow them to economically prosper. This would benefit the global economy and offer a better understanding of how to proceed in correcting many of the issues laid forth in this paper, as they are truly of global concern. The international community addresses, frames, and seeks solutions for gender-based violence from a Western perspective and ignores the history of colonialism, perpetuating the cycle of violence. Repeatedly, the international community (the UN in particular) has used a singular approach for issues of sexual violence all over the world when each instance occurs for different reasons. This is largely because the scholarship surrounding sexual violence within political science and International Relations in “developing” countries largely fails to account for outside fields. Each additional field incorporated, such as history, women and gender studies, and anthropology, would prove to be a huge asset, as opposed to addressing superficial issues instead of addressing the root cause. Whilst being attentive to the different historical pasts of all African countries, an acknowledgment of the overarching impact of colonialism on sexual and gender-based violence is applicable to other countries dealing

with similar issues. That is why this research is so crucial, as more nuanced scholarship will help create a greater response from both the international community as well as the general, global public.

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