

Militia in DRC speak about sexual violence

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A recent study sought to explore the internal dynamics of the Mai Mai militia in eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo, and to consider what factors might be most influential in restraining violence.

Non-state armed groups (NSAGs) in DRC have been implicated in perpetrating egregious human rights abuses, particularly acts of sexual violence, against civilians for more than two decades. These groups range from organised Congolese military units to small groups of armed militias from Rwanda and Burundi, to locally organised Mai Mai militias. Information emerging from the region underscores the pivotal role these groups play in perpetrating violence against civilians and precipitating mass displacement.

Recent research confirms the high number of rapes conducted by armed groups, citing between 54% and 88% of all such attacks reported by women being perpetrated by NSAG combatants.¹ The number of armed groups and the shocking levels of violence beg the question as to whether we can better understand how NSAGs view violence, their motivations for fighting, and possible points of leverage for improving their treatment of civilians. Work by Elisabeth Wood reveals that NSAGs can be highly organised and governed by a wide range of principles and motivations, suggesting that both the perpetration of violence, as well as restraint from using it, varies across groups and conflicts.²

Attitudes towards women and sexual violence

Mai Mai militia are a powerful force in eastern DRC and have been implicated in the looting, raping, abduction and mass displacement of civilians. Our study focused on two different sub-groups of the Mai Mai – the Shikito and the Kifuafua.³

Interviews with Mai Mai combatants revealed that soldiers hold generally highly stereotypical and dismissive views of women. Soldiers interviewed

for the project describe women's roles as cooking, cleaning, raising children and undertaking small commercial activities or farming to help support the family. In contrast, men are seen as the protectors of the family and the decision makers. Despite similarly rigid views about gender and the role of women, however, these two Mai Mai sub-groups seemed to differ in their attitudes towards sexual violence.

Interviewees from the Shikito consistently denied that they raped women. Soldiers cited both ideology – describing themselves as the protectors of the populations – and pragmatic reasons for this restraint. One Shikito soldier said, "Rape is forbidden since we know that we are here to protect the population." Another interviewee said, "... [I]f one person from the group decides to rape, or a fellow soldier rapes a woman, people will say that the group of Mai Mai is raping women. It becomes a problem for the whole group."

On a more practical side, a number of soldiers noted that rape could undermine their grass-roots support from host communities. Soldiers described how vital community support was for the Shikito. "There are women there who grow food in their fields in the surrounding villages; they assist us with food."

In contrast, interviewees from the Kifuafua were much more likely to describe raping women, kidnapping them for themselves or their commanders, or undertaking rape for individual reasons. Respondents described abducting women to be "given" to commanders as a spoil of war, noting how women were distributed according to rank. "[The commander] will have his [girl] brought first before he can ask

me to bring mine. ...if you refuse, it becomes an open conflict."

Kifuafua interviewees did not describe relying on the goodwill of civilians for support. While both groups tended to portray themselves as the "protectors" of the population, it was only the Shikito who talked about this in practical terms, citing the goodwill of civilians as a condition for getting vital resources like food and shelter.

Soldiers within both groups said they had heard information about sexual violence from the radio, suggesting that soldiers may have access to certain forms of popular media. Some soldiers also said they were aware of risks associated with sexual violence, both from potential infection and potential punishment from commanders. While soldiers may have offered biased or amended versions of what they actually believe, the consistency of information across interviews suggests a certain level of reliability and provides insight into possible points for intervention.

Leverage for change

These results speak to the importance of realising that NSAGs may differ greatly in their philosophies, practices, uses of violence, and attitudes towards the treatment of civilians. Recognising these differing attitudes and motivations may lead to more effective approaches to protecting civilians. It is also important to recognise that behaviours can change over time and space, just as they can vary from unit to unit within the same larger structure. For example, the attitudes of commanders and inculcation of soldiers about what is and is not acceptable behaviour all play a role in creating a sub-culture within units of command.

Questions remain about how best to engage groups that, by definition, lie outside traditional structures of law and political influence in order

to better promote the protection of civilians. In cases where NSAGs rely on civilian populations for access to resources, this dependence may act as an incentive to restrain the use of violence against civilians. The results of our research suggest that sexual violence and other forms of violence against civilians perpetrated by the Mai Mai occur for a variety of reasons, and that violence may be opportunistic or strategic.

Communicating the risks of perpetrating sexual violence through media like radio can get

to groups that seem difficult to reach. Reinforcing messages about the risks of violence – to both the perpetrators and the affected communities – may be a point of leverage to decrease sexual violence.

Groups may want to view themselves as the ‘defenders’ of a population, but this may not translate into protective behaviour without other concrete changes in attitude and behaviour. More research is needed to understand what factors are most influential in restraining violence.

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1. Harvard Humanitarian Initiative, 2009. *Characterizing Sexual Violence in the Democratic Republic of the Congo: Profiles of Violence, Community Responses, and Implications for the Protection of Women*. Boston: <http://tinyurl.com/HHI2009DRC> and Harvard Humanitarian Initiative and Oxfam International, 2010. *‘Now, the world is without me’: An investigation of sexual violence in eastern Democratic Republic of Congo*. <http://tinyurl.com/HHIandOxfam2010DRC>
2. Wood, E J, ‘Armed Groups and Sexual Violence: When Is Wartime Rape Rare?’ *Politics & Society*, vol. 37, no. 131 (2009).
3. Interviews conducted in three field sites in 2008 and 2009 by Congolese social workers trained in qualitative research techniques.