The Depraved Will Play   
by Amy Kaslow and R.E. Boenigk

It’s 2:45 in the morning local time in the North Kivu province of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). Rapid machine gun fire and angry, deafening shouts from the men wielding the AK-47s awake a 6 year-old girl and her widowed-mother who were sleeping in a hut in the village. Fearing what is all too common in this province of the DRC, the mother wraps her frightened daughter in her arms and whispers, “Ni kwenda sawa. Kila kitu kinaenda kuwa sawa.”[[1]](#footnote-1)

Suddenly, armed men enter their home and begin shouting. One man, clearly the leader, commands the others to separate the mother and the daughter. With every ounce of strength in her body, the mother tries to protect her daughter, to preserve not only the little girl’s life but her innocence. The men overpower the mother and pull her daughter away. The men then use anything and everything to rape the woman and her 6 year-old little girl—each taking his turn, each taking his time using what, in his mind, is rightfully his. A penis, a gun barrel, a candle stick and a baton all serve the same purpose—violation, in the most disgusting and depraved way.

When the men are finished, they move on to the next house, the next village, never worrying about prosecution, never paying for their crimes. They leave behind the mother and daughter, broken, beaten, violated in ways that no human should ever experience. The physical mutilation caused by the violence means that neither of them will bear children. They will struggle with the emotional and mental damage from this horrific violation of human rights for the rest of their lives.

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| **Conflict** | **Victims of Sexual Violence** |
| World War II | 2,258,140 |
| DRC | 200,000 |
| Former Yugoslavia | 50,000 |
| Sierra Leone | 64,000 |
| Rwanda | 500,000 |

This story is not about one particular family in the DRC, but many, hundreds, thousands, tens of thousands even. Armed conflict has raged in the DRC since 1998 claiming hundreds of thousands of lives. Sexual violence during this conflict has claimed more than 200,000 victims at a rate of nearly 1,100 victims per day.

Sexual violence at the hands of soldiers and militiamen is not a new phenomenon, and it is certainly not unique to the DRC. In the Twentieth Century, militaries or paramilitary forces used mass rapes as a weapon of war in a staggering number of countries and conflicts: Belgium and Russia during World War I; Russia, Japan, Italy, Korea, China, the Philippines, and Germany during World War II; and since World War II, during conflicts in Afghanistan, Algeria, Argentina, Bangladesh, Brazil, Burma, Bosnia, Cambodia, Croatia, Cyprus, East Timor, El Salvador, Guatemala, Haiti, India, Indonesia, Kuwait, Kosovo, Liberia, Mozambique, Nicaragua, Peru, Pakistan, Rwanda, Serbia, Sierra Leone, Somalia, Turkey, Uganda, and Vietnam.

We performed a qualitative study[[2]](#footnote-2) to better understand the causes of sexual violence against women in conflict zones. The study echoed two resounding causes of sexual violence in conflict zones:

1. Ethnic divisiveness in a conflict increases the likelihood of sexual violence occurring in a conflict.
2. Conflicts that occur in societies with engrained gender inequalities are more likely to have sexually violent incidences.

Evidence from all sides of World War II, the civil war in Former Yugoslavia and the ongoing conflict in the DRC indicate that both ethnic divisiveness and gender inequality are positively correlated with increased sexual violence in war torn areas.

During World War II, the Japanese army regulated the rape of women. Our research indicates that Japanese men felt superior to the Chinese and Anglo women they were raping and used their superiority as an excuse to continue the violence. In Nazi Germany, even with laws banning sex between Aryans and Jews, German soldiers raped Jewish women and girls. The low racial status of Jewish women in Nazi-controlled lands only encouraged their sexual exploitation by German soldiers. It seems the ethnic divisiveness between Germans and Jews not only encouraged violence but actually legitimized the sexual violence as genocide.

Ethnic divisiveness in Former Yugoslavia began with deportations, but quickly escalated to rape and systematic sexual violence. A rise in nationalism furthered the ethnic divisiveness of the state and led to the victimization of women. Because the war in the former Yugoslavia was so nationalistic in nature, it increased the number of incidents of sexual violence against women. Evidence shows military forces used sexual violence strategically to terrorize the civilians and ethnically cleanse the state. One survivor bravely explained that soldiers used rape to impregnate women of the other ethnicity and simultaneously destroy the woman’s ethnic ties by forcing her to raise a baby of her rapist’s (rapists’) ethnicity.

In the DRC, members of the enemy forces use sexual violence to display their superiority over another ethnic group’s civilians. Enemy groups use sexual violence to destroy communities of other ethnicities. While the good men are away, the depraved will play.

Our research shows that gender inequality in a society leads to an increased level of sexual violence during conflict. The increased masculinity and patriarchal society found in the Stalinist Soviet Union as a cause of mass rapes throughout World War II. Additionally, former Japanese comfort women state that the Japanese soldiers used “limitless power over women’s bodies.”

In the former Yugoslavia, an increase in masculinity and misogynist ideals increased the number and intensity of rapes during the conflict. Sexual violence as a form of ethnic cleansing was furthered by not only the increase in nationalism, but also the shift in the former Yugoslavia to more traditional gender norms, forcing women to be submissive to men. As the conflict increased in intensity, the society shifted to a patriarchal society, further exacerbating sexual violence against women. Women were seen as being beneath men, even considered property. A woman’s lower status in the society justified the sexual violence in the minds of the perpetrators.

Lastly, with regards to the DRC, conflict has reinforced conceptions of women being submissive to men as they are forced into more “traditional” gender roles. As seen in the Former Yugoslavia, backward movements in women’s equality led to an increased risk of sexual violence against women.

So, what can we do? What can we, as concerned citizens of not just the United States, but of the world, do to prevent further violations of human rights in conflict zones across the globe?

Our study shows several possible routes for addressing sexual violence against women in conflict zones. First, we need to better understand the details of the violence. How, when, why, how often does it occur? This substantial lack of reliable data severely inhibits our ability to prevent and address the brutality. As such, additional research and data collection should be done as to better assess the causes of sexual violence against women in conflict zones.

Additionally, because the overwhelming evidence shows that conflicts involving ethnic divisiveness are much more likely to involve sexual violence against women, NGOs and non-profits should focus their attention on these conflicts in their attempts to not only treat victims of sexual violence but to also prevent sexual violence against women.

Our study shows, gender inequality in societies leads to a greater likelihood of sexual violence against women during conflicts. Thus, women’s organizations and other organizations seeking to improve the equality of women across the globe should continue and expand their efforts. By increasing equality for women across the world, there should be an inverse effect on the likelihood of sexual violence against women.

This is not a sob story to tug on your heartstrings. This is not the article you read to discuss with friends over dinner. This is a call to action.

For too long we, Americans, have stood by and allowed sexual violence to rock the realities of women, men and children across the world. It’s time that we the people, we the privileged, stand against the injustice, the depravity, the degradation of the most basic of human rights—life.

1. Swahili to English translation, “It’s going to be okay. Everything is going to be okay.” [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The complete study is a content analysis of the causes of sexual violence against women in conflict zones. For more information about the study or for a copy of the study, please contact R.E. Boenigk by email at rboenigk@gmail.com. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)