

RAPE IN THE EASTERN CONGO : ATTEMPTING A HEALING PROCESS IN A WOUNDED SOCIETY

1. Introduction

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On October 5, 2018, the world learned that the Norwegian Nobel Committee had awarded the 2018 Nobel Peace Prize to Dr. Denis Mukwege, a Congolese doctor who treats survivors of sexual violence in the East of the DR Congo, and to Nadia Murad, an Iraqi Yazidi woman who survived ISIS captivity and who now advocates for justice.

Those familiar with Mukwege's dedication to repairing women testify the difficult and tremendous job himself and his team are doing to give back life to raped women. Many also appreciate his activism to raise awareness worldwide about what is happening in eastern Congo. In fact, the eastern Congo qualified as "The World Rape Capital"¹. It has been portrayed as "one of the most dangerous places in the world to be a woman"². Statistics reveal the gravity of the situation on the ground. "About forty-eight women raped every hour"³ or "four women raped every five minutes"⁴, whatever the case, the situation is alarming and preoccupying ; it requires much more attention, deep reflection and appropriate actions.

This unnamed tragedy is still going on as these lines are being written. Women's lives are being cruelly damaged and destroyed. How come this has

- 1 Nicholas KRISTOF, "The World Capital of Killing", *The New York Times*, February 6, 2010, accessed December 10, 2016, <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/02/07/opinion/07kristof.html>.
- 2 "Case History : Rebeca Masika Katsuva," Frontline Defenders, February 8, 2016, accessed April 12, 2016, <https://www.frontlinedefenders.org/en/case/case-history-rebecca-masika-katsuva>.
- 3 Dearbhla GLYNN, "Congo War : 48 Women Raped Every Hour at Height of Conflict", *The Irish Times*, April 30, 2016, accessed December 10, 2016, <http://www.irishtimes.com/news/world/africa/congo-war-48-women-raped-every-hour-at-height-of-conflict-1.2629444>.
- 4 Jo ADETUNJI, "Forty-Eight Women Raped Every Hour in Congo, Study Finds", *The Guardian*, May 12, 2011, accessed December 10, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2011/may/12/48-women-raped-hour-congo>.

been happening for years ? And why have we been unable of stopping these horrible crimes ? It would be irresponsible to just say, 'this is not my problem', because whoever knows and keeps quiet shares the responsibility at some level. After all, this situation endangers everybody. Having these women badly treated like that, the whole Congolese society is in danger and its future is compromised. Can we just imagine the suffering and the trauma the victims go through ?

This paper intends to address specifically the trauma endured by the survivors. To attempt a healing process, this paper suggests *logotherapy*, a theory built up by Viktor Frankl (March 26, 1905 – September 2, 1997), an Austrian neurologist and psychiatrist as well as a Holocaust survivor. Deported in 1942, Frankl was held by the Nazis in four camps, including the infamous Auschwitz and Dachau. His parents, brother, and Mathilde his wife, were killed. Despite the unthinkable suffering and pain inflicted on him, he survived and published his book composed in the camps, "Man's Search for Meaning".

Logotherapy is a meaning centered psychotherapy ; a psychotherapy oriented towards the patient's future. In logotherapy, the patient is confronted with and reoriented towards the meaning of her/his life. To make her/him aware of this meaning can contribute much to her/his ability to overcome her/his neurosis⁵. The striving to find a meaning in one's life is the primary motivational force in human being especially in crisis' moments⁶.

Before getting to *logotherapy* as a healing tool, this paper offers first an overview of the context in which rape crimes are perpetrated in the eastern Congo ; it also tries to understand the dynamic behind this wartime related sexual and gender-based violence. How are the women themselves, and the whole community affected, wounded, and destroyed ?

2. What is Wrong with the Congo ?

2.1. A Rich Territory in the Heart of Africa

For the last twenty years, conflicts in the Congo have gone on side by side with an unprecedented rate of sexual violence against women perpetrated mostly by armed men. Repeatedly, the world is alerted, and the media echoes this gender-based conflict. Things are so complex on the ground that it is not easy to grasp the dynamic of the forces into play. As Jane Freedman puts it so well :

The current conflicts in the DRC are notoriously complex, resulting from a multiplicity of inter-connecting causes including (in order of priority of importance) struggles for control of natural resources, local land disputes, ethnic tensions, regional conflicts with neighboring states, political

5 Viktor EMIL FRANKL, *Man's Search for Meaning*, Mini book ed. (Boston : Beacon Press, 2006), 120.

6 *Ibid.*, 121.

violence and corruption, and the list goes on. The relative importance of these various causes and the way they interact changes over time and also varies between different regions of the DRC, with one cause being more important in certain regions than the others, which makes analysis and understanding of the conflict even more difficult⁷.

The control of natural resources comes up first among the causes of conflicts in the Congo. This should not be neglected. The DRC is one of the richest countries in Africa in terms of natural resources, but paradoxically, this huge wealth has been seen throughout history as the source of major problems for the country⁸.

The Congo is potentially rich and many mineral resources are located in the eastern provinces. It has massive reserves of gold and diamonds, most of the world's reserves of Colombo-tantalite (an essential material for most electronic equipment), numerous mines of silver, cadmium, copper, zinc, and rare minerals such as cobalt, nickel, niobium, tantalum, beryl, cassiterite, and wolfram (used in high-technology industries)⁹. More and more, it is proved in various reports by the U.N. and other human rights organizations, that those resources are illegally exploited and looted by forces who create chaos in the region. The resources do not benefit at all the local population. While few people are making money out of violence, many are being killed and thousands of women are being raped.

The DRC is today made of twenty-six provinces. It shares borders with nine countries : Congo-Brazzaville in the west, Central African Republic and South-Sudan in the north, Uganda, Rwanda, Burundi and Tanzania in the east, Angola in the Southwest and Zambia in the Southeast. Sud-Kivu (South Kivu), Nord-Kivu (North Kivu) and Ituri are the eastern provinces mostly and currently affected by war and massive rape. They respectively share borders with Burundi, Rwanda and Uganda.

The dominant narrative on the recent Congolese wars usually begins with the spillover of the Rwandan genocide in 1994 when about 2 million (mainly Hutu) Rwandan refugees flooded the eastern Congo. According to many interpreters that was the breaking point. The refugees, along with about more than 50,000 armed Rwandan Hutus accused of being responsible for the genocide, gathered in large refugee camps located near the border in Nord and Sud-Kivu¹⁰. They formed armed groups, and survived through

7 Jane FREEDMAN, *Gender, Violence and Politics in the Democratic Republic of Congo*, *Gender in a global/local world* (Farnham, Surrey, England ; Burlington, VT : Ashgate, 2015), 4.

8 *Ibid.*, 10.

9 *Ibid.* "publisher" : "Cambridge University Press", "publisher-place" : "Cambridge ; New York", "number-of-pages" : "311", "source" : "Library of Congress ISBN", "event-place" : "Cambridge ; New York", "abstract" : "\"The Trouble with the Congo suggests a new explanation for international peacebuilding failures in civil wars. Drawing from more than 330 interviews and a year and a half of field research, it develops a case study of the international intervention during the Democratic Republic of the Congo's unsuccessful transition from war to peace and democracy (2003-2006).\""

10 Séverine AUTESSERRE, *The Trouble with the Congo : Local Violence and the Failure of International*

violence and looting. They attempted also to use the refugee camps as rear bases from which they could possibly launch raids on Rwanda.

Later, many more other armed groups developed with unclear agendas and rule over entire areas and regions where up to now the government have been unable to re-establish its authority. The Congo Research Group, which is an independent, non-profit research project dedicated to understanding the violence that affects millions of Congolese, issued a document in December 2015 entitled "The Landscape of Armed Groups in the Eastern Congo". In the document, "The Congo Research Group has mapped around seventy armed groups and their areas of influence in North and South Kivu... Most of these groups are small, not numbering more than 200 soldiers, and recruit largely along ethnic lines"¹¹.

The illegal exploitation of Congolese mineral resources holds a central motivation for violence waged by regional and national actors¹². That seems to be the main reason of creating a conflict environment. Taking advantage of the situation, violence has become a way of living in the eastern borders of the Congo. In areas where the State's authority is completely nonexistent, various armed groups and militias without faith and law are proliferating, looting natural resources and violating human rights. The tragic and violent conflicts in the DRC are known worldwide for their horrific stories of violence against women, involving rape, mutilation or even cannibalism.

In almost all arguments and analysis explaining recurrent conflicts in the eastern Congo, the issue of natural resources has always been seriously considered. It is frequently heard among the Congolese themselves that their country is blessed by a huge quantity of natural resources but, paradoxically, these are both 'a curse and a blessing'. "This so-called 'resource curse' which makes developing countries with high levels of natural resources particularly susceptible to civil war, would seem to be an apt description for the conflicts in the DRC"¹³.

Internal and external forces have always been there, even when the country was experiencing what might be considered as the most peaceful period of its history. For thirty-two years under Mobutu's dictatorship, the Congolese did not take advantage of their natural wealth. The whole political system was not at the service of the people. There was no significant

Peacebuilding (Cambridge ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 47, 2010.

11 Jason K. STEARNS and Christoph VOGEL, "The Landscape of Armed Groups in the Eastern Congo" (Center on International Cooperation, December 2015), 5, accessed February 16, 2019, <http://congo-researchgroup.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/CRG-Armed-Groups-in-the-Congo.pdf>.

12 *Ibid.*, 62. "publisher" : "Cambridge University Press", "publisher-place" : "Cambridge ; New York", "number-of-pages" : "311", "source" : "Library of Congress ISBN", "event-place" : "Cambridge ; New York", "abstract" : "\"The Trouble with the Congo suggests a new explanation for international peacebuilding failures in civil wars. Drawing from more than 330 interviews and a year and a half of field research, it develops a case study of the international intervention during the Democratic Republic of the Congo's unsuccessful transition from war to peace and democracy (2003-2006).

13 *Ibid.*, 40.

war, but people were not at peace and not at all free to speak out against injustice. As long as those in power could accumulate wealth illegally for themselves without being accountable to anybody, silencing any attempt of protest, tensions were just contained and postponed until rebellions and armed groups broke through creating more chaos than ever. Many people are frustrated to see corrupted leaders taking advantage of their positions to accumulate wealth for themselves, their families, and friends while the majority are starving and living with less than a dollar a day.

This partly explains the escalation of violence where unemployed, hungry and desperate young men are frequently tempted to enroll in armed groups expecting to make money in rich mineral zones. In a country where leaders are not at all accountable, it is not surprising that the scandalous mismanagement of resources sets the ground for chaos and anarchy. Many reports from international organizations have made it clear how strong the link is between persistent conflicts and the exploitation of natural resources.

U.N. Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1653 acknowledges the link between the illegal exploitation of natural resources, the illicit trade in those resources, and the proliferation and trafficking of arms as key factors fueling and exacerbating such conflicts in the Great Lakes Region in Central Africa.¹⁴

Reflecting on the whole situation, it seems there are people who have everything to lose with peace and have too much to gain from war. Who are those ? And why are they fueling the conflicts ?

2.2. A Top-Down Problem ?

The whole dynamic of conflicts in the Congo leads to the assumption that reoccurring conflicts are not mere local conflicts of tribes fighting one another. Though this happens in a country where the authority of the government is not well established, especially in rural and remote areas, the ongoing instability in the DRC requires a deep understanding of the real dynamic of conflicts. It is not just the simple business of villagers fighting for their selfish interests. This occurs often but there is here much more. As Séverine Autesserre puts it, in the Congo, it is “a top-down problem”¹⁵. “Since the late 1990s, research on ethnic wars has further reinforced the tendency to explain violence through a focus on elite actions, providing a

14 Meredith TURSHEN, *Gender and the Political Economy of Conflict in Africa : The Persistence of Violence*, Routledge studies in African development (London: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2016), 6.

15 AUTESSERRE, *The Trouble with the Congo*, 41. "publisher" : "Cambridge University Press", "publisher-place": "Cambridge; New York", "number-of-pages" : "311", "source" : "Library of Congress ISBN", "event-place": "Cambridge ; New York", "abstract": "\The Trouble with the Congo suggests a new explanation for international peacebuilding failures in civil wars. Drawing from more than 330 interviews and a year and a half of field research, it develops a case study of the international intervention during the Democratic Republic of the Congo's unsuccessful transition from war to peace and democracy (2003-2006).

key intellectual tool to approach the unfolding events in Central Africa and around the world"¹⁶.

The true and invisible architects of conflicts in the Congo act from above. They easily manipulate impoverished people to do the dirty duty on the ground in creating chaos and desolation. Because in many cases, "ordinary people are neither inherently filled with hate toward their neighbors nor responsible for ethnic conflict. They wage violence only when incited by 'ethnic entrepreneurs' : elites – usually provincial or national politicians – who manipulate racial or ethnic identities in their struggle for political and economic power"¹⁷. Consequently,

Almost all of the international interveners understood violence in the Congo as a top-down problem. In this narrative, regional and national tensions determined local dynamics, and regional and national actors manipulated local entities. This framework of analysis informed most accounts of the crises, including those written in the U.N. Secretary-General's reports on the Congo, in U.N. Security Council resolutions in internal humanitarian agencies' reports, in news articles, and in many scholarly studies¹⁸.

Experience in the Congo has proved that in many circumstances, peace has been restored in troubled areas once the architects of conflict and manipulative elites have been apprehended. Manipulation by elites has become the central element of this top-down narrative of conflicts in the Congo. Unfortunately, manipulators have been found even among those whose mission is to stop the conflicts. As things are going, it will be hard to stop rape and other war crimes which otherwise are punishable by the law. These rapes and crimes are systematic and so organized that we need to understand the dynamic behind.

16 *Ibid.*, 43–44. "publisher": "Cambridge University Press", "publisher-place": "Cambridge; New York", "number-of-pages": "311", "source": "Library of Congress ISBN", "event-place": "Cambridge; New York", "abstract": "\"The Trouble with the Congo suggests a new explanation for international peacebuilding failures in civil wars. Drawing from more than 330 interviews and a year and a half of field research, it develops a case study of the international intervention during the Democratic Republic of the Congo's unsuccessful transition from war to peace and democracy (2003-2006)."

17 *Ibid.*, 44. "publisher": "Cambridge University Press", "publisher-place": "Cambridge ; New York", "number-of-pages": "311", "source": "Library of Congress ISBN", "event-place": "Cambridge ; New York", "abstract": "\"The Trouble with the Congo suggests a new explanation for international peacebuilding failures in civil wars. Drawing from more than 330 interviews and a year and a half of field research, it develops a case study of the international intervention during the Democratic Republic of the Congo's unsuccessful transition from war to peace and democracy (2003-2006)."

18 *Ibid.*, 45–46. "publisher": "Cambridge University Press", "publisher-place": "Cambridge ; New York", "number-of-pages": "311", "source": "Library of Congress ISBN", "event-place": "Cambridge ; New York", "abstract": "\"The Trouble with the Congo suggests a new explanation for international peacebuilding failures in civil wars. Drawing from more than 330 interviews and a year and a half of field research, it develops a case study of the international intervention during the Democratic Republic of the Congo's unsuccessful transition from war to peace and democracy (2003-2006)."

2.3. Sexual Violence : Weapon, Strategy or Tactic of war ?

The twenty-first century has broken with the view of rape as a tragic but inevitable effect of war. “While other narratives of wartime rape surely resonate for many in various contexts, the storyline of rape as a weapon of war has become the most prevalent framing for understanding and redressing conflict-related sexual violence globally.”¹⁹

First, a clarification of terms is in order. About the concept rape as a weapon of war, some other concepts have been used and they all allude to the same reality. Maria Eriksson Baaz and Maria Stern help us to clarify the terms often used to qualify that reality. For them,

while accounts of the strategic functions of rape differ in wordings and typologies between writers, and in light of the very different contexts that they address, they also overlap. While some refer to rape as a ‘weapon of war’, some use the term ‘strategy’. Others, more recently, have referred to it as a ‘tactic’ of war. Often, however, these terms are used interchangeably ; little difference occurs in terms of the overall meanings imparted in the discursive formation²⁰.

Even if differences between the terms are important and meaningful, all of them depict rape in wartime as a devastating practice which is deliberately and systematically used to destroy. The occurrence of mass rapes in the Congo suggests inevitably that they are systematic and strategic.

“The term ‘weapon of war’ came into use during the trials in the Balkans and is still commonly used by popular media, U.N. agencies and academics alike to describe/characterize wartime rape”²¹. As a weapon of war, rape is considered as a tool that gives power to overcome whomever is the targeted enemy. In *The Nation* magazine, Margot Wallstrom, the former U.N. Special Representative of the Secretary General on sexual violence in conflict, defines sexual abuse as a weapon of war that is targeting not only women and girls but also men and boys. It is planned and designed systematically to control the territory, to instill fear, and to terrorize the population²².

Terrorism, torture, bombing, and using civilians as human shields are categorized as horrific acts openly decried in times of war but today, rape has been added to that list. Like a weapon of mass destruction, it leaves devastating imprints for years. As far as the Congo is concerned, many voices agree that “sexual violence in Congo has become so widespread, systematic and horrifically vivid that it has forced observers who would more typically dismiss rape as a natural byproduct of war to recognize it,

19 Maria ERIKSSON BAAZ and MARIA STERN, *Sexual Violence as a Weapon of War ? : Perceptions, Prescriptions, Problems in the Congo and beyond* (London ; New York, NY : Uppsala, Sweden : Zed Books ; Nordic Africa Institute, 2013), 42.

20 *Ibid.*, 46.

21 *Ibid.*, 49.

22 *Ibid.*, 46.

at least in this case, as a deliberate and highly strategic tool to achieve defined military objectives”²³.

Doctor Denis Mukwege, “the man who repairs women”²⁴, is among the rare gynecologists in the area who can perform reconstructive surgery on raped women in the eastern Congo. From his operating room, he has seen abominable things. About the rapists, he says,

They rape a woman, five or six of them at a time — but that is not enough. Then they shoot a gun into her vagina. In all my years here, I never saw anything like it... To see so many raped, that shocks me, but what shocks me more is the way they are raped. Each armed group has a trademark manner of violating...Burundians rape men as well as women. The Mai-Mai, local defense forces, rape with branches or bayonets, and mutilate their victims. The Rwandans, set groups of soldiers to rape one woman²⁵.

Mukwege noted that “sexual assault is comparable to biological warfare as an extermination tactic. There is a policy to make fathers and children watch the rapes. To render the woman sterile, the rapists complete the brutality by firing a bullet into the vagina or shredding its walls using a rifle butt or tree branch”²⁶. Mass rape is being a strategy of war as Eisenstein would argue, rape is “integral form of war rather than an effect of war, and women bodies are the battlefield on which this war is waged, as murderous misogyny is transformed into an organized military policy”²⁷.

In 2009, the U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton visited rape victims in the eastern Congo. She admitted that, though she had been in a lot of very difficult and terrible settings for many years, what she saw in the eastern Congo was just overwhelming. She called what is happening there evil in its purest form. “This is the military tactic of mass rape. Absent from ceasefire agreements, not subject to disarmament programs, and rarely mentioned at the peace-table, it is a war tactic that lingers long after the guns fall silent”²⁸. It is indeed a military tactic, serving as a combat instrument to humiliate and demoralize people, to tear families apart, and to devastate communities.

Rapists attack women and girls “as representatives of their communities, [and] intend through their injury and humiliation, to terrorize the women

23 Barbara CROSSETTE, “A New UN Voice Calls for Criminalizing Conflict Rape,” *The Nation*, September 10, 2010, accessed March 5, 2017, <https://www.thenation.com/article/new-un-voice-calls-criminalizing-conflict-rape/>.

24 I have translated literally into English the title of Collette Braeckman’s book “L’homme qui répare les femmes” recounting women’s testimonies and Doctor Mukwege’s struggle against mass rape in the Congo.

25 Stephanie NOLEN, “Not Women Anymore...,” 2005, accessed December 17, 2016, <http://www.msmagazine.com/spring2005/congo.asp>.

26 BAAZ and STERN, *Sexual Violence as a Weapon of War?*, 58.

27 Zillah EISENSTEIN, *Sexual Decoys: Gender, Race and War in Imperial Democracy* (Melbourne: Spinifex Press [u.a.], 2007), 28.

28 BAAZ and STERN, *Sexual Violence as a Weapon of War ?*, 45.

themselves and many others”²⁹. Women are targeted and destroyed as mothers, bearers of life and providers of food for their families. They are also attacking those to whom children’s care and education is entrusted to prepare the future of the community. This systemic rape has long-reaching consequences.

When this phenomenon came to be known worldwide, initially many analysts and reporters argued that these rapes took place without any other motivation than to hurt and to humiliate³⁰. The full gender dimension had been omitted. Today, it strongly appears that we are facing real gender-based violence. Violence against women accompanies armed conflicts in the Congo and is not mere personal violence but structural violence supported by a certain dynamic and ideology within armed groups.

Sexual violence during armed conflict is a worldwide issue, but in the DRC it is so endemic that it has earned the reputation as most dangerous place in the world for women. “The epidemic scale of rape in Congo, which seemed to reach a peak in 2007-2008, has caused great misery. In one report, 32,000 rapes were registered in the eastern district of South Kivu in the period 2005-2007. Another estimates rape among women aged 15 to 49 years, based on data for the year 2007, translates into 1,150 women raped every day”³¹.

According to testimonies of doctors at Panzi Hospital in Bukavu where many of these women are treated after they are raped, “seventy-two percent of women reported that they were tortured during the rape itself (beaten, wounded with machetes, genitally mutilated/burned by drops of plastic melted by flame), and 12.4% had had objects inserted into their vaginas (sticks, bottles, green bananas, pestles coated in chili pepper, rifle barrels) ; some women, after being raped, were killed by shots fired into their vaginas”³². With millions of people killed, tens of thousands of women raped³³ all within the past two decades, activists, analysts, and doctors have qualified this situation as an epidemic.

In a study published in 2005 by International Alert in the province of Sud Kivu entitled “Women’s Bodies as a Battleground”³⁴, the scholars identified four types of rape : individual rape, gang rape, forced rape between the victims (in which victims are forced to rape each other), and rape involving

29 *Ibid.*

30 Colette BRAECKMAN, *L’homme qui répare les femmes : Violences sexuelles au Congo, Le combat du Docteur Denis Mukwege* (Bruxelles : GRIP : André Versaille éditeur, 2012), 77.

31 TURSHEN, *Gender and the Political Economy of Conflict in Africa*, 25.

32 *Ibid.*

33 Concerning the numbers of both people killed in the conflict in Congo and women raped, there is no exact statistics. Usually mention more than five million dead and tens thousands of women raped.

34 Marie Claire OMANYONDO Ohambe, BAHANANGA MUHIGWA, and Barnabé MULYUMBA WA MAMBA, *Women’s Bodies as a Battleground : Sexual Violence Against Women and Girls During the War in the Democratic Republic of Congo*, ed. Galloy Galloy and Ndeye Sow, 2005, 33-34, accessed March 2, 2017, <https://repositories.lib.utexas.edu/bitstream/handle/2152/4949/4053.pdf>.

the insertion of objects into the victim's genitals. The situation is really alarming as a certain culture of rape has spread the region. Nowadays, even civilians are perpetrators of rapes in the area. Some women have been raped by neighbors or people that they know.

The use of rape sends a powerful message to the men of the community of which the rape victims belong. It is to humiliate their masculinity and make them confess their inability to protect their women and families. It is obvious : rape sends a psychological message to men through the physical brutalization of women. Therefore, wartime rape effects go beyond the victims themselves. It affects the whole community. Women are wounded, the whole community is torn apart and wounded as well. Thus, consequences are just devastating, and they leave indelible stains for years and make life meaningless for the victims.

3. When 'Sexual Terrorism' makes Life Meaningless

The frightening and unprecedented record of massive rapes in the Congo seems to have broken all records in terms of statistics and in terms of "the supposed bestiality of the rapists"³⁵. As it appears in various reports, the DR Congo « is perhaps the most infamous site of wartime related sexual and gender-based violence, given its recently won (and highly dubious) status as 'the rape capital of the world' »³⁶. We are here in presence of a phenomenon which can be qualified as "sexual terrorism", where women's bodies are used as a battlefield.

3.1. Consequences of Rapes in the Eastern Congo

The Congo's rape survivors face pain, shame and rejection. After they are raped, a common belief among people suggests that those women are "not women anymore". Attitudes toward rape victims are affected by many factors and may vary not only over time, but also across cultures³⁷. Physically, symptoms of sexual violence include lesions and scars on the body, tears in the vagina and anus, rectal and vaginal fistulas leading to chronic incontinence, dysfunction of the hip and legs, the contraction of numerous sexually transmitted diseases including HIV/AIDS, and unplanned pregnancies. Because of the broad lack of reproductive healthcare for women, many of these pregnancies lead to complications such obstetric fistula, and infant and maternal mortality.

Frequently observed psychological effects include intense feelings of worthlessness and shame, guilt and culpability, social isolation aggravated by family and community rejection, depression, paranoia, and apathy.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 25.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 16.

³⁷ Colleen A. WARD, *Attitudes toward Rape : Feminist and Social Psychological Perspectives, Gender and psychology* (London ; Thousand Oaks, Calif : Sage Publications, 1995), 39.

Often victims are left by their husbands, separated from their children, and reluctant to engage in normal daily activities to an extent they could say as Viktor Frankl asserts, “I have nothing to expect from life any more”³⁸.

3.2. When Life becomes Meaningless...

Working with the Jesuit Refugee Service (JRS) in the region of Masisi (North Kivu), for the last two years, I have been exposed to hear some rape stories in camps. Last December, among the internal forcibly displaced people we serve in 4 camps (Katale – 5882 people ; Kalinga – 5084 people ; Bukombo – 1840 people ; and Bushani – 1336 people), my team numbered in total 177³⁹ certified cases of women raped by militias.

One of the most devastating testimony, is the one of this woman in Bukombo. She shares a makeshift shelter with her 17 years old son who, two years ago, was forced by militias (4 of them) to rape her own mother after they had raped her themselves. Currently, both the boy and the mother are suffering from mental disorder due to the incident. The fact that they still live together in the same shelter, and see each other, does not help at all. They carry the psychological burden of what happened. For both, life has become just meaningless.

A parallel can be made between the situation of victims of rape in the eastern Congo and what endured Viktor Frankl in Concentration Camps. He survived the Holocaust. His story is scaring, but worthy of being told to those who search for meaning of life in suffering. In *Man's Search for Meaning*, Frankl tells how he survived the harsh condition of life in the Auschwitz Concentration Camp and he describes his psychotherapeutic method of finding a reason to live even in suffering.

Like Viktor Frankl, raped women deal with the great temptation to give up on life. That is what Frankl expresses when he says, “regarding our ‘provisional existence’ as unreal was in itself an important factor in causing the prisoners to lose their hold on life ; everything in a way became pointless.”⁴⁰ To some extent, suicide could have been a way out ; and many in Concentration Camps opted for that alternative.

The thought of suicide was entertained by nearly everyone, if only for a brief time. It was born of the hopelessness of the situation, the constant danger of death looming over us daily and hourly, and the closeness of the deaths suffered by many of the others... The prisoner of Auschwitz, in the first phase of shock, did not fear death. Even the gas chambers lost their horrors for him after the first few days – after all, they spared him the act of committing suicide⁴¹.

38 FRANKL, *Man's Search for Meaning*, 98.

39 These figures are taken from JRS - Masisi: 2018 Annual Report.

40 FRANKL, *Man's Search for Meaning*, 37.

41 *Ibid.*, 36-37.

Researches on rape victimization attest that victims experienced the “rape trauma syndrome”, a combination of emotional and physical reactions to rape. As researchers affirm, “This syndrome of behavioral, somatic and psychological reactions is an acute stress reaction to a life-threatening situation”⁴².

Apart from people like Dr Mukwege and few other organizations, who else cares about the situation of those hopeless women ? Life becomes meaningless for them because they have lost everything, even family and friends. Most of them are traumatized and rejected. How should they be restored in their human dignity ?

When life has no meaning, it becomes empty. The women live in what Frankl calls an “existential vacuum”.⁴³ It is a state of inertia, boredom, and apathy experienced by them. If this state persists, it progresses into existential frustration, and eventually becomes a “noogenic neurosis”⁴⁴. Whether they blame themselves or not, victims’ stories indicate that the reality of rape is devastating and traumatizing. Thus, the question : how can trauma be healed and overcome ? This takes us to logotherapy, a tool suggested here to engage into a healing process.

4. Logotherapy Encountering Rape Victims

4.1. Why Logotherapy ?

The search for meaning in life is inherent to humankind; a human person is always reaching out for meaning, always setting out on his search for meaning. That is what Viktor Frankl calls “will to meaning”⁴⁵. According to him, that is even to be regarded as human being’s primary concern. Why am I still alive ? What is my destiny ? Why is this happening to me ? Am I born to suffer that much ? Does life give me any choice ? Am I a free person ? These are existential questions inherent to our human existence. Somehow, we have ever found ourselves facing these questions.

In African cultures, questions like, “why is this happening to me”, “what wrong have I done to deserve such a treatment” are frequent whenever somebody faces suffering and continuous tribulation. It is obvious that women raped in the eastern Congo, searching for meaning, ask themselves questions about their traumatising and desolating situation. Because any to this meaning is quite hard to be found by women themselves in their chaotic context, it seems crucial to help them have access to counselling sessions based on logotherapy.

⁴² A. BURGESS and L. HOLMSTROM, *Rape : Victims of Crisis* (Bowie, MD : Brady, 1974), 983.

⁴³ FRANKL, *Man’s Search for Meaning*, 128.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 123.

⁴⁵ Viktor E. FRANKL, *The Unheard Cry for Meaning: Psychotherapy and Humanism*, 1st Touchstone ed., A Touchstone book (New York : Simon and Schuster, 1979), 31.

After brutal and horrible treatment unjustly inflicted on them, women's lives need to be rescued. They need to be restored in their human dignity to discover a new meaning in life. Their "will to meaning" needs to be fulfilled. They should be helped each one to find her own meaning because a person who regards his/her life as meaningless is not merely unhappy but hardly fit for life. According to Viktor Frankl, "this is not only a matter of success and happiness, but also of survival. In the terminology of modern psychology, the 'will to meaning' has a survival value"⁴⁶. Logotherapy, as partly experienced in Masisi, has helped few women who went through the process to re-feel how useful they are despite what happened to them. That feeling brings out their human potential at its best.

Since there is a future to build by the women and by the whole Congolese society, despite what happened, the issue of rape in the Congo requires specific attention. The victims can be helped and oriented towards a future, towards a task, or a person waiting for them in the future, towards a meaning... If they are helped and if they want, they can come back to life and accomplish great things. Without support, rape victims cannot plan their future. With the humiliation, the trauma, the stigma and the rejection following rape, the chance is very high to lose hope and give-up on life.

Therefore, logotherapy can contribute to rebuild what has been destroyed. It can help women to find some meaning despite suffering, pain, and bad memories. In the midst of crying, suffering, sorrows, hopelessness and despair, they need true counsellors and people who can make them reflect, talk, find meaning and reasons to live again. Dr. Mukwege, worldly known as an uncontested reference in fighting sexual violence, helps the victims to restart a new life. Offering medical care and counselling sessions in his hospital, he has saved and brought back to life thousands of women. They are now new persons, completely repaired and ready to tell their stories for the purpose of raising the world's awareness and helping others to heal from rape trauma.

4.2. Healing the Trauma

How better can victims of rape be helped to find their own meaning and overcome trauma ? How can they be helped to overcome their meaninglessness of life⁴⁷ ? If their trauma appears with upsetting memories, thoughts or flashbacks, nightmares, insomnia, stress/anxiety disorders, panic attacks, anger, despair, depression, loss of self-esteem...this can last for many years, and if unresolved, it can even become more damaging than the original traumatic event.

Since there are so many rape cases in conflict zones in the eastern Congo, there is an urgent need of having "crisis Counsellors" to deal with trauma

⁴⁶ FRANKL, *Man's Search for Meaning*, 37.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 41.

symptoms experienced by individuals and by the whole community. The use of logotherapy in counselling is not a ready-made solution for those facing despair and hopelessness. Though the issue here is rape of women, each life situation is unique, and it has its unique meaning. To be successful, logotherapy requires patients' entire cooperation.

As horrific as the traumatic event of rape could be, it is not actually the event itself that causes victims' trauma. It is the personal internal reaction to the event that determines the degree and intensity of trauma to experience. As an illustration, two women raped in the same way, or by same people, might be affected and traumatized differently.

Having group hearing sessions with rape victims in Masisi, it appeared clearly that they do not react the same way. Some of them tell easily their stories without being emotional while others do not even know where to begin from... they need more time to process and name what happened. This shows how unique is each one's story requiring a personal encounter with a trauma counsellor. Since the women experience lack of safety as a result of rape, the trauma counsellor begins by establishing a sense of safety for her. The whole process can take time and it requires a lot of listening and support from the counsellor.

However, the question remains : how can traumatized women find meaning in life while the situation they are facing is unlivable ? Frankl points out three ways that he calls, the "meaning triangle"⁴⁸ :

– *Creativity* : giving something to the world through self-expression : using our talents in various ways ; i.e., the work we do, the gifts we give to life ; – *Experiencing* : receiving from the world : through nature, culture, relationships, interactions with others and with our environment ; – and *Change of attitude* : even if we can't change a situation or circumstance, we can still choose our attitude toward a condition ; this is often a self-transcending way of finding meaning, especially in unavoidable suffering⁴⁹.

Through counselling and logotherapy, raped women can learn to release their emotional binds and just as the physical wounds of trauma eventually heal, so will the psychological scars. The raped woman's self-esteem can be rebuilt in the process. Her tears of desolation can be removed. If she is opened to counselling, she will learn to say and confess, 'I am still a human being, I am still a woman ; I have a future. I can go back and take care of my family or what remains of it'.

Go back and take care of her family ! Is it possible in an environment where rape victims face severe social barriers ? Is it possible when the husband is not ready to take her back ? There is no doubt, the husband is also negatively affected. Having his wife been raped is indeed a humiliation

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 133.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

for him also. We have seen it in Masisi, husbands rarely support their raped wives. The crisis brought by rape pushes them to react that way. Pushing away the wife seems to be the last authority the husband remains with after having been unable to prevent what happened, sometimes in his presence. Accepting the wife back is felt even worse than the act of rape itself. It is a greater humiliation. Like the wife, the husband also needs serious counselling sessions to get over trauma and find a new meaning to life. This can be extended to families and to the whole community.

Conclusion

This reflection is a contribution to bring more awareness on the issue and urge governments, civil society and various organizations that something more needs to be done. Inspired by Viktor Frankl's Concentration Camps experience, we have suggested counselling based on logotherapy as a way of helping the victims to find meaning in their life. The whole reflection aimed to heal the trauma of rape, trying to restore hope and meaning through logotherapy. Therefore, it is unfortunate that counsellors are missing on the ground. The few available are overwhelmed by numerous patients.

Also, we do believe that prosecuting seriously the perpetrators can support the victims' healing process. Unfortunately, that is not always the case. How can victims feel good while the perpetrators are put in custody and released the following day without serious punishment ? This affects the victims strongly and it delays their psychological healing.

Studying Viktor Frankl's theory of logotherapy, we have come to learn that the meaning of life is found in every moment of living ; life never ceases to have meaning, even in suffering and death. Facing what life becomes after rape, women should be helped not to give up. Their future will consequently be shaped by the choices they make today. They still have possibilities to choose within their area of freedom. They must choose the most responsible option ; make the best choice, not only for themselves, but also for those they love most and care for. Thus, logotherapy offers a space for a dialogue where the therapist and the client together try to find a meaning in life and meaning cannot be given, it must be discovered.

To women who believe in God, a special pastoral care can be provided to help them look at a "super-meaning"⁵⁰. Therapeutic effect of their religious convictions can be used. Above all, there is the Supreme Being who does not reject those who suffer. This way, the meaning of life can be found in faith. ■

50 FRANKL, *Man's Search for Meaning*, 141.