

# **Community Perspectives and Pathways to Reintegration of Survivors of Sexual Violence in Eastern Democratic Republic of Congo**

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## **ABSTRACT**

Survivors of sexual violence not only face physiological and psychological after-effects of abuse, they may also face community exclusion. Unlike other studies which have taken the perspective of the survivors, this study examines how the community perceives the reintegration process for female sexual violence survivors in the eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). We find a stark contrast between the perceived low prospects for reintegration in the relational sphere (i.e., community, family, and husband) and the relatively low barriers to reintegration in the professional sphere (i.e., market and job). Reintegration is also harder after rapes by soldiers than by civilians.

## **I. INTRODUCTION**

Sexual violence has gained international recognition as a serious human rights problem and an international security issue. Because of the considerable academic work, international activism, and policy debates cultivated in recent years,<sup>1</sup> it is increasingly apparent that victims (or survivors) of such violence often suffer various long-term medical and psychological problems resulting from the abuse. <sup>2</sup> Victims also report to suffer because of their communities' negative attitudes and stigmatization, leading to family and community rejection of the victim and creating difficulties in finding a husband (or wife).<sup>3</sup> Sexual violence can therefore have destructive effects well beyond the battlefield, and threaten the post-conflict stability, development, and basic rights of those affected.<sup>4</sup>

Sexual violence can have potential long-term consequences for the individual victims, perpetrators, the community, and for society as a whole. In the Democratic Republic of Congo, t international nongovernmental organizations (NGO), UN agencies, and scholarly community

often use conflict-related sexual and gender-based violence as *the* dominant framing when discussing the situation in the eastern part of the country. The civilian population has suffered from multiple different forms of violence and abuse. However, media and commentators typically identify the rape of women and girls in particular as one of the most prolific weapons of the war. In fact, rape is perceived as an effective means to ravage entire communities.<sup>5</sup> Studies report that soldiers from different rebel groups, militias, the state army, and civilians have committed sexual violence.<sup>6</sup> With such a large population of sexual violence survivors, we must ask what can prevent rejection of these survivors and facilitate the reintegration of sexual violence survivors into their communities? While sexual violence perpetrated by armed groups as a weapon of war has been the dominant framing of violence against women in eastern DRC, women also suffer violence and rape committed by civilian perpetrators. Rather than adhering to an arguably arbitrary or muddled distinction of what can be considered conflict-related sexual violence or not in the DRC (or what happens inside or outside of conflict), this article focuses on understanding whether this distinction is perceived as important for the members of the communities. Also, more importantly, to what extent and how is it relevant for the reintegration process?<sup>7</sup>

To answer these questions, this article draws attention to the critical, but often overlooked community perspective. This approach is important, we argue, as reintegration is a two-way street, where a dual focus is necessary—on those that are to be included (survivors) and those that need to welcome them (the community)—for reintegration to take place. This also adds a new perspective to previous studies of sexual violence in the DRC and elsewhere that focus either on the perspective of the survivors in particular,<sup>8</sup> or on the perpetrators of the violence, particularly soldiers.<sup>9</sup>

In addition, programs and policies targeting the problem of sexual violence often try to address the problem of community rejection and reintegration by focusing on survivors, and occasionally on perpetrators, rather than emphasizing the communities. Emerging studies capturing the survivor perspective suggest that support programs can have positive benefits, but also raise concerns about whether support programs are able to prevent rejection and promote social inclusion.<sup>10</sup> By examining the community perceptions towards sexual violence survivors and what possibilities the communities see for survivor reintegration, this article sheds some light on the obstacles and opportunities for successful support programs for sexual violence survivors in the region.

Nine focus groups with community members in and around Bukavu town in South Kivu, eastern DRC, carried out in August 2015, are the basis for the current analysis. Despite the significant NGO presence in this area, the group discussions reveal a highly negative image of survivors and their standing (or value) in the community, which is quite consistent across settings and groups. Overall, the respondents see the integration of female sexual violence survivors into the community as determined largely by the survivor's ability to hide what has happened and live up to the community's perception of the ideal women.

Different societal spheres have different potential for reintegration, however. Exclusion and negative views of survivors affect the more public arenas, such as the market, much less than the more private and social spheres, like the family and marriage. It is not clear whether successful integration in the economic sphere can spill over into the private sphere, but such spillovers seem unlikely from the respondents' views in this study.

The main implication of this study is that as long as community perspectives fail to be challenged, support programs for sexual violence survivors will likely face an uphill battle when

reintegrating survivors into the more private spheres. Therefore, until the community attitudes and behaviors towards survivors are addressed, reintegration and empowerment of sexual violence survivors in eastern DRC (and possibly elsewhere) will be difficult.

## II. UNDERSTANDING THE PROSPECTS FOR SUCCESSFUL REINTEGRATION

Survivors' self-reports are the basis for most evidence available about sexual violence survivors in the eastern DRC.<sup>11</sup> However, reintegration is a two-way process, encompassing both those integrated (the survivors) and those accepting the reintegration (the community). Our focus is on the community perspective. Only a handful of existing studies have taken such a perspective. One study found that sexual violence has become a societal phenomenon, associated with community isolation and shame; and that male focus group participants reported "feelings of shame and anger associated with knowing their female relatives were raped."<sup>12</sup> Another relevant and recent study focused on the disparity between *descriptive norms* and *prescribed norms* and on what would constitute justice for sexual violence survivors. This study found a negative perception of a survivor as "a person who should be pitied and who is sick, suffering, often abandoned and neglected, exposed to discrimination, and emotionally disturbed."<sup>13</sup> On the other hand, community members saw justice for survivors as including "compassion, empathy, egalitarian treatment, respect, and protection from taunting and labelling."<sup>14</sup>

In the current study, we focus less on the situations of sexual violence survivors in general terms of social isolation or the community's sense of justice, but rather on what the community members see as the necessary factors for reintegration and acceptance. In other words, what does the community perceive can facilitate reintegration and prevent rejection? Do

the circumstances surrounding the sexual violence event(s) matter for reintegration prospects, and are there different arenas of social life in which reintegration is more or less challenging to achieve?

Based on existing research and anecdotal evidence we assume that survivors in general encounter problems of social exclusion.<sup>15</sup> Drawing from Stella Babalola's research on the DRC in particular, one initial assumption is that the survivors are "subjected to neglect and taunting and discounted to a lower value, " and stigmatized as diseased—particularly that the survivor contracted HIV.<sup>16</sup> There are also assumptions that marriage prospects lower for unmarried women, or that survivors may be forced to marry their perpetrator against their will. Further, there is an assumption that husbands will taunt or desert the married women. Another expectation is that a "culture of silence" may be used as a way to normalize the situation after a sexual violence incidence, as was found among women in Sudan.<sup>17</sup>

### III. CONCEPTUALIZING COMMUNITY PERCEPTIONS

Despite a frequent use of the terms stigmatization and reintegration in the present literature on survivors of sexual violence in the DRC, their meanings are generally poorly developed.<sup>18</sup> Therefore, this article leans on insights from the conflict literature on reintegration of ex-combatants. Despite contextual and individual differences between that literature and this study, similarities arguably exist. Findings from the literature on ex-combatants show that they often face stigma and shame when trying to reintegrate into the community.<sup>19</sup> Reintegration within the conflict literature is often understood as a multidimensional process of adopting and developing a sustainable economic, political, and social civilian life.<sup>20</sup> Because the ex-combatants have been

physically away from the society and have had experiences and acquired habits that might not be compatible with peaceful civilian life, this is a necessary process. More importantly for this case, hostile attitudes towards the ex-combatants and lack of social acceptance because of perceived deviant behavior or conditions can strongly affect the process of reintegration. Specifically, the reintegration process aims at getting the ex-combatants involved in the community<sup>21</sup> and genuinely included and accepted into the social networks of family and community, rather than producing mere (physical) co-existence.<sup>22</sup>

For our work, we conceptualize *reintegration* as a process aimed at achieving the same opportunities and respect for survivors that other women in the community possess.<sup>23</sup> This means that survivors are becoming involved in the economic and social networks of the community, as well as accepted and included into familial relationships.<sup>24</sup> We also perceive reintegration as a process of separation between the person and the attribute of being a sexual violence survivor—in other words, being a survivor no longer defines the person. A non-distinction between the survivor and her (perceived) deviant attribute, we argue, hinders reintegration. This article refers to this concept as *negative perceptions* of certain views about roles and norms in the community.<sup>25</sup> In contrast, *neutral* perceptions imply an immediate *separation* of the deviant attribute *from* the survivor—it is not the rape that identifies her and her opportunities within the community. Reintegration can thus be understood as a process that moves community perceptions from negative to neutral (or positive) perceptions.<sup>26</sup>

#### IV. DATA AND METHODOLOGY

We take a qualitative approach to understanding the image of “survivors” and apply a

community perspective to determine reintegration potential, using focus groups as the method of collecting data. Focus groups are a highly useful research tool when “seeking to understand community dynamics and viewpoints,”<sup>27</sup> as they can be used to explore collective phenomena. This approach is particularly useful when exploring sexual violence, which is often seen as a societal challenge influencing the whole community.<sup>28</sup>

In August 2015, we conducted four focus groups in rural areas and five in urban areas<sup>29</sup> both in and around Bukavu city. The mix of rural and urban settings helps to account for possible differences in education levels and exposure to international NGOs and programming focusing on sexual violence survivors. We also assured for the representation of various age groups to account for the possibility that international influences and particularly the perspectives of international NGOs in the area might affect community perspectives amongst younger generations in particular. The study included men and women to assure the representation of different gender perspectives. We sometimes conducted separate focus groups for men and women in order to gauge how mixed gender settings versus single gender settings discussed these gender-sensitive topics.<sup>30</sup> Participants in the focus groups were members of communities where sexual violence and survivors are present, and above the age of eighteen. Due to security concerns, we conducted the focus groups in public settings, but that still allowed for private conversations. The discussions were in French and Swahili with the assistance of a trained, local facilitator.

The analysis uses thematic coding, combining an inductive approach where codes and themes emerge purely from the data with predetermined codes or themes arising from our reading of literature.<sup>31</sup> The literature review on sexual violence survivors in the DRC and

expectations based on existing studies are the basis for the first part of the analysis.<sup>32</sup> The second part of the analysis emerges from the focus groups' discussions.

## V. ANALYSIS

How do communities in the eastern DRC perceive survivors of sexual violence? The discussion around this was remarkably consistent across focus groups: she is referred to as *femme violée*—a raped woman. The name-calling implies *a non-distinction* between the survivor and her (perceived) deviant attribute; the survivor is not separated from the rape incidence. In the words of one focus group participant, “her name is like erased and people start calling her raped woman.”<sup>33</sup> Another respondent portrayed it in other words, “she has a mark, that mark, ‘raped woman.’”<sup>34</sup> The rape is now part of her perceived identity, an immediate negative attribute in the eyes of her community.<sup>35</sup> Another respondent described raped women as “just like a dog—you can do whatever to her, throw stones.”<sup>36</sup> Based on our material, we find that being a *femme violée* is construed to be deviant and highly negative because of perceptions about norms and roles in the community. The basic way of explaining the difference between a raped woman and other women is that she has “lost her value.” Or as one focus group participant stated:

a raped woman in this community is regarded as a women who lost her value totally. She loses all the chances that a woman can get or ever have. She has no place in the society.<sup>37</sup>

Having full value in the community means that you are meeting the community's standard of an ideal woman. The women in Muhungu explained that the ideal woman should stay in the house taking care of the children, giving birth, and most importantly, having a body that is



“not defiled”—either by retaining virginity or only having one husband.<sup>38</sup> Furthermore, the respondents in Nyawera explained how virginity is an important thing in the culture.

Virginity is the most important thing here. If you have no virginity, you are no longer a woman.<sup>39</sup>

For both married and unmarried women, rape results in the perception that the woman has lost her value and somehow is destroyed. The male respondents in the Panzi area focus group relate the negative perception of being raped to the norms in the community and discuss how a woman’s value and respectability is closely connected with her vagina:

The vagina of a woman is very important. It gives her a value, but when the vagina is destroyed, you know the dignity and respect is destroyed as well.<sup>40</sup>

As seen, the dominant perception amongst the community members is that it is problematic for them to accept survivors of sexual violence because she has suffered a particular form of abuse clashes with the important requirement for a woman to have “value”; which they see as a function of the woman being in line with the perceived ideal for how a woman should be in the community, and norms of virginity and respectability.

In discussions in the focus groups about factors that could facilitate or hinder reintegration, the respondents do not emphasize questions about guilt, or whether the survivors are somehow themselves responsible or to be blamed for being raped—this seems irrelevant. The view is that rape is something that could happen to anyone, anywhere, and it is impossible to prevent it. When it does happen, the victim will experience a negative attribute attached to her identity, even when she is not considered responsible for what happened to her. In other words, perceived innocence does not alleviate the negative mark as a raped woman. While the raped woman might receive pity, she will not receive respect. It does not matter whether a soldier or a

civilian commits the rape, in principle it is equally bad—both makes the survivor lose her value. However, the injuries and possibilities for reintegration may differ depending on the perpetrator's identity.

## VI. WHAT DOES THE COMMUNITY SEE AS IMPORTANT FACTORS FOR REINTEGRATION OF SURVIVORS?

The focus group discussions quite systematically conclude that the best, or almost exclusive, way for survivors to achieve reintegration in the community is by hiding or covering up your status as a raped woman. There are several ways this is perceived to happen.

First, the woman can avoid reporting the sexual violence. Several groups emphasized the challenges of reporting. The survivors know what destiny awaits if they report. A woman in Nyangezi explained how a raped woman tries to hide her assault so as to not face discrimination from the community.

I saw a woman who was raped but she didn't want to report her rape you know because she was afraid of the rejection from the community. Her rape was so terrible [. . .] but she didn't report the rape and later on she was taken to the hospital. You know some can be about to die but they don't report the rape.<sup>41</sup>

Second, to avoid rejection, the respondents suggest the survivor could move to a place where the locals do not know what happened to her:

this [get rejected] can happen in [a] case [where] the [woman] continues to live in that specific area in the same area, but if she moves to a different location, to a different place where she is not known, she can improve her life.<sup>42</sup>

Third, and related, getting married is seen as one way that a woman (or her family) could hide what has happened, and thereby overcome the risk of stigma. This also echoes findings

from another study that marriage in general, but also marriage to the perpetrator in particular, is a possible solution to the stigma.<sup>43</sup> Our respondents see getting married as the ultimate way to gaining respect and fully reintegrating into the community. For women, the status of being married overcomes the stigma of rape. If you move into town from a rural area or move to another area inside town, the chance of getting married and therefore becoming integrated increases because it is less likely that people know that you have been raped.

Furthermore, the communities view staying married as the better option if the husband is the perpetrator of sexual violence. The respondents explain that when your husband rapes you, you continue to live with him and this will help you in the community.

The rape committed by your husband will not affect your life, but the one committed by the soldiers is even more dangerous. The rape committed by your husband is balanced. Because, you know, later on you will forgive your husband because he is your husband. But an outsider, you don't know him, you don't know where he comes from. It is easier to be raped by your husband, because your husband you have to forgive.<sup>44</sup>

A difference between civilian and military perpetrated rape emerged within discussions relating to the possibility of hiding the rape, both in terms of not reporting and in terms of the marriage option. The respondents did not see a strong principled difference between rape by these different perpetrator types, however, it matters inasmuch as rape by civilians is relatively easier to hide compared to rape by soldiers. The rapes committed by civilians are often committed in houses and offices, and thus considered less public. It is also less brutal in the sense that it is "like sexual intercourse," in the words of one participant.<sup>45</sup> The rape committed by soldiers is on the other hand both much more public and more brutal—"beyond sexual intercourse"—sometimes involving objects and weapons inserted into the vagina. This makes the

option to not report more difficult, both because people see it and because the survivor is in greater need of urgent medical treatment.

The civilian-military differences are also pronounced in the discussions about the chances of getting married. According to the respondents, after a civilian rapes an individual, the option of marrying the perpetrator is a more plausible solution. In fact, the respondents note that the intention of civilian rape might often be to get the girl or woman to marry the civilian. Following the discussion about the importance of virginity, the respondents explained how a civilian perpetrator might achieve marriage if he rapes a girl. If she is raped, she is less attractive to others, and therefore marrying the perpetrator could be her only option for marriage. The marriage may also be the settlement between the girl's family and the perpetrator's family; as part of the reconciliation, the families agree on the marriage and the dowry to be paid.

Finally, the respondents emphasized not having a disease as facilitating reintegration. If the rape survivor did not contract any disease as a result of the attack, this can help her hide the fact that she was raped, and she might be able to avoid the stigmatizing "rape mark". The respondents highlighted that the community often finds it challenging to believe that a survivor may not have a disease, even when that is the case. In terms of diseases, a difference between civilian and military perpetrated rape also emerged, as the respondents mention that for military rape victims, name-calling such as being called an "HIV-positive person" and "Interahamwe's wife" is common.<sup>46</sup> The community *fears* the military rape survivor because of her potential for having a disease, and they "cannot trust whether she has it or not." Particularly if the survivor has been raped by a soldier, then "people will expect [her] to have [a] disease" (Katana; Walungu; ISP). In other words, discrimination against the victim by the community is not due to the conflict lines and having been defiled by "the enemy" or "outsiders," but rather because of

the assumed health implications of having been raped by armed group members. One focus group participant puts it like this:

[S]o the worst rape is that one, the rape committed by soldier because you know soldiers do not stay at one place. They move over all over, from time to time they move from different places, and people believe that they are infected by disease. But the civilian is here and he stays at one place.<sup>47</sup>

This pattern was consistent across many focus groups; if survivors have been raped by soldiers, the belief that they have a disease is very strong and is hard to dispel, even if the hospital proves that they are healthy. Therefore, if the family, community, and husband do not trust that the victim is free of disease, even after receiving treatment, medical assistance appears insufficient to solve the issue of a rape survivor's stigmatization in the relational sphere.

## VII. WHEN HIDING "THE MARK" IS NOT POSSIBLE: THE RELATIONAL VS. PROFESSIONAL SPHERE

Hiding the fact of being a survivor of sexual violence is not always possible. For example, this could be due to the public nature of the attack, related health problems, or receiving assistance from a medical facility or support program designated for survivors of sexual violence. In these cases, a woman's chance of reintegration and acceptance in the community depends on and the variation between two main spheres: the professional and the relational. There is a surprisingly strict separation between these two spheres, which relate to different degrees of intimacy.

In the *relational sphere*, a woman's relationship with her family and community, and especially her current or future husband, is important. The focus group respondents expressed how being raped affects relationships and possibilities for having a future husband, or staying with the current husband. A woman is judged by how she lives up to the expectations placed on

her as a woman; with cultural expectations such as the special importance of virginity and the sacred vagina being all closely tied to marriage. The rape is a huge obstacle in the sense that it is both hard for the survivor to access the relational sphere and hard for the family and community to accept her—because of the pressure that local customs and expectations exert on them.

The loss of a victimized woman's value as a result of the loss of her virginity was expressed by both unmarried girls (Nyawera; Muhungu) and unmarried boys (Panzi; ISP) as challenging for future marriage prospects and dating. The boy wants the girl to have high value, meaning that she should be a virgin. The quote below from one of the focus groups illustrates how the information about rape hinders a young man from marrying a woman, since the young man believes he should marry a virgin:

We young men, when we want to catch girls you know, sometimes we wonder, where do we find the girls we fall in love with? If we hear that there has been a beautiful woman here but she has been raped, you know, as a man, I cannot go in that house anymore.<sup>48</sup>

For a man, marrying a non-virgin will result in a loss of pride and respect; he will “feel shame,”<sup>49</sup> “lose his consideration among other men,”<sup>50</sup> and “not have courage to marry a raped woman.”<sup>51</sup>

Married men and women also stressed the problem they face when the wife has been raped and the rape is known. The respondents explained that when a woman is raped, her value decreases in the sense that someone, other than her husband, has accessed her vagina. Hence, after the rape, the dowry the husband paid is now considered too high. The woman has lost her value, and the husband's wife is of less worth:

[O]ne more thing about our community here. We work for women; we give money. We give dowry, some kind of dowry to get a wife, and then you know. You have been working hard to get her, and someone comes to destroy her

[laughter] this does not sound good.<sup>52</sup>

The respondents explained how rape affects marriage by referring to the local customs “in this/our community.”<sup>53</sup> In all of the focus groups, both men and women emphasized that most husbands divorce their wives if they have been raped and he or others know about it. This can happen for different reasons, but perhaps most interesting, is the question of whether the husband rejects his wife because he feels like he could not protect her or because the rape affects his relationship with her or his view of himself. When the authors asked questions about “what is this rejection about,” an often-received response given by both men and women was that “you cannot forget this.” When asked why they cannot forget, the respondents, both women and men answered in terms of how rape affected the husbands. The answer was that a man just cannot accept that his wife was with other men, even though this happened without her consent. In the eyes of the community, the value of the wife was viewed as a reflection on the husband.

I think the husband cannot accept. He cannot be in the relationship of such a woman. The first factor that can push the husband not to accept because you know the husband is afraid of his consideration among other men. You know other men will be telling him that you are stupid, your wife has been raped.<sup>54</sup>

It is important to acknowledge that the focus groups expressed sympathy for families that marginalize a raped daughter, husbands that shun their raped wives, and boys that avoid marrying raped, single females. This is not least due to the heavy social costs of pursuing alternative strategies. It is a circular trap in which neither survivors nor individual members of the communities have the power to break the cycle. Being raped leads to challenges in getting married and not being married (or getting divorced) leads to less respect in the community, as illustrated in the quote below.

She is not respected in the community because she will not get married. No man

will love her.<sup>55</sup>

In *the professional sphere*, respondents portrayed the chances of reintegration as relatively unproblematic. In the professional sphere, respondents believe survivors are judged by their abilities. The social relationships between the survivor and her potential customers or business associates are less close and thus her stigmatization as a rape survivor has less effect. In short, the loss of opportunities in the relational sphere does not seem to extend to the professional sphere, where individuals judge a survivor by her skill and capacity. This suggests a more neutral perception—that there is a separation between the deviant attribute (rape) and the survivor. In this context, the rape does not define the survivors' identity and the community sees her as a person just like anyone else.

But this does not have any implications or effect as far as work is concerned. You know in the professional setting people are, can't care about whether you have been raped or not. So if you have enough skills to do it, you can go.<sup>56</sup>

The respondents emphasized that if a rape survivor can do a good job, then people will give her access to the market and buy from her. Many support programs focus strongly on establishing livelihoods, providing micro-loans, and creating small businesses for survivors, assuming that survivors will be restricted and stigmatized in the professional sphere.<sup>57</sup> When questioning these programs in the focus groups, many respondents laughed and answered that it is only western people who think raped women are denied participation in the professional sphere. However, the respondents emphasized one limitation in this sphere, namely the possible physical and psychological damage of the violence. These damages may make the survivor unable to work because she has sustained injuries that may impede her from doing certain manual labor, walking longer distances, or performing other physical tasks necessary in the market in the Bukavu area, or because she suffers from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD),



or is otherwise affected. In line with the differences between reintegration and civilian or soldier perpetrated rape discussed above, mental health issues like PTSD are more common when a survivor has been raped by a soldier because of the characteristics and brutality of the rape.

For a person who has been raped by a soldier you know, object such as knives, have been inserted in her vagina. Well, it is really hard for her to get a job because she is weak. Not because the community disregard her but you know, she is not physically strong to do that. So, and also her psychological state or mode are not good either. (. . .) That women can be stressed and that stress will cause her not to work for example a women who has been raped by 10 persons because she recalls, and she loses her consciousness and she is always isolated. She wants to stick with herself.<sup>58</sup>

However, there are no other perceived factors stopping her from participating in the professional sphere. Overall, the communities do not perceive survivors as discriminated against in the professional sphere. Therefore, increased education and providing women with skills that are in demand in the market may have a positive impact on community perceptions of survivors and may help in moving community members from negative perceptions towards neutral perceptions of victims, according to some focus group participants:

[O]r if that girl has some education, she, you know. If she has some education, some job, some employment this will help reduce the stigma as well because people will look at her job will look at her education.<sup>59</sup>

Our overall impression from the focus groups is that it is naïve to assume a seamless change of perceptions of the value of a woman in the private sphere based on successes in the professional sphere. Yet, we find *some* support in statements by our community respondents for the notion that education and professional success can help *reduce* stigma against sexual violence survivors.

## VIII. THE POSSIBILITIES OF NEGLECTING CIVILIAN RAPE

Based on the material collected for this study, we can conclude that civilian rape is more readily neglected by analysts, as it is easier to hide. A single focus on sexual violence committed by soldiers may conceal other forms of sexual violence, such as domestic violence. Survivors of civilian rape also struggle with many of the same medical and psychological issues suffered by other rape victims. The difference however, is that it may be easier, due to the characteristics of the rape, for a woman who has been raped by a civilian to achieve reintegration.

The general focus by NGOs, policymakers and scholars on rape perpetrated by soldiers may minimize the experience of women who are raped by civilians, leading them to question whether or not they have the right to get help. For example, Jocelyn Kelly highlights that in the DRC, a common perception is that services are only available for women raped by armed men. There is a lack of “awareness that abuse from family members, friend[s] or acquaintances is also rape, and that victims of this violence have a right to access SGBV services.”<sup>60</sup>

## IX. FACILITATING REINTEGRATION: DILEMMAS OF SUPPORT PROGRAMS

Public rape, disease, issues with reproductive health, and participation in support programs are strongly associated with rapes perpetrated by soldiers. These attributes may make it harder for the survivors of military rape to overcome the obstacles to achieve reintegration. This resonates with the conclusion in the other work that women who have been gang raped face more rejection as the possibilities of all these factors increases with gang rape.<sup>61</sup>

There is a strong presence of NGOs and hospitals working to assist survivors of sexual violence in the Bukavu area. The possible roles these organizations might play in the

reintegration of victims was a topic that emerged often in the focus groups. In regards to the differences between the relational and professional spheres explained above, the chances of success in reintegration, with the help of these programs, differs depending on the sphere.

Programs for sexual violence survivors focus on assisting victims with their medical and economic needs, teaching them skills that are useful in the market, and at times providing legal support for individual victims. If communities recognize women for their education or skills rather than the mark of the rape, then the support programs have made progress in the process towards reintegration. Some see the economic assistance many support programs offer as counteracting the negative mark of being a raped woman.

She loses her consideration because she has been raped. But when she get some skills, so she is meeting the market in the community. And she rebuilds her value in the community, and of course people will continue talking, but not to such a high level.<sup>62</sup>

The respondents also mentioned that it is good for the survivor herself to receive medical assistance. However, the community often does not believe that the woman is free of diseases after receiving medical attention, and is rather made aware of the victim's need for medical care.

Overall, the community will still have a problem fully accepting the rape survivor after she has received medical and socio-economic assistance. Respondents recognize that it is necessary and valuable for a victim to receive medical assistance and generate income. These types of assistance however, cannot address what respondents have emphasized as very important in the relational sphere—the fact that the raped woman is either no longer a virgin, or that another man, other than her husband, has accessed her vagina.

Furthermore, the communities mention that participating in support programs also signals that the survivor was indeed the victim of a rape. As such, the programs may have the

unintended consequence of increasing stigma by underscoring or confirming that the victim was involved in a rape incident, which gives her the mark of a raped woman in cases where the rape may otherwise have remained hidden. The respondents emphasized that, if a woman is in an assistance program the mark *femme violée* becomes more visible. Interviews with health workers, working to assist survivors of sexual violence in Bosnia and Herzegovina illustrates something similar.<sup>63</sup> The health workers were trying different approaches to decrease the stigma attached to the “rape centers.” According to them, the center became known as a center for raped women, which attached a stigma both to the survivors and the health workers, leading to a double stigmatization. In the current analysis, the respondents in the Bukavu area pointed to the same association with the Panzi hospital and the women staying there.

In the case of survivors of sexual violence in the DRC, and potentially elsewhere, what is required for a genuine reintegration into the relational sphere goes beyond medical and economic assistance and beyond focusing on the survivors’ needs. It seems clear that to achieve reintegration, the focus of support programs on interventions to help the victims of violence must be supplemented with more programs focusing on the community and on what community members perceive as the main obstacles to reintegration.

## X. CONCLUSION

This article has examined the often-overlooked community perspective in the discourse on reintegration of survivors of sexual violence. Focus group discussions with community members in both urban and rural settings in eastern DRC reveal a consistent negative image of survivors and their standing (value) in the community. According to the community members, a survivor’s

chances for community reintegration are largely determined by ability to hide what has happened to her and live up to the community-determined standard of an ideal woman.

When the woman is unable to hide the rape, the survivor's chances of being reintegrated are clearly different in the relational and professional societal spheres. In the relational sphere, being known as a raped woman has devastating consequences. In this sphere, it is challenging for the family and the community to receive her due to societal expectations—community members may feel shamed by association. In the professional sphere, a survivor is more easily accepted. Having the skills and the ability to work supersede the “rape mark” as defining factors of the victim. These findings have important implications. First, there is a clear risk of neglecting survivors raped by civilians. Due to the characteristics of the rape, it is easier for a survivor who was raped by a civilian to be able to hide and not report the rape, which is seen by the community members as the best option. This is likely to be associated with underreporting of civilian rape, made worse also by reported confusion in the community over whether victims of civilian rape are eligible to receive assistance.

Second, based on the community perceptions emphasized in the interviews, the survivor seems especially powerless to reintegrate and avoid rejection in the relational sphere where local customs concerning the status of women are particularly important. These dynamics are of less importance in the professional sphere, and hence, the survivor has more power to secure her own reintegration into this sphere.

Last, the research has implications for support programs. On the one hand, support programs may increase or highlight the negative mark of being a raped woman. On the other hand, support programs often assist with the professional sphere and assuring livelihoods for sexual violence survivors through income-generating activities. This support may not be enough

however to address the women's need for social reintegration in the relational sphere. It is not conclusive from the material collected here whether successful integration in the economic sphere can spill over into the more private sphere, but such spillovers seem unlikely based on the views of the respondents in this study. Regardless, support programs for survivors of sexual violence are likely to face an uphill battle to reintegrate women, particularly in the more private spheres, as long as the community perspectives are the ones presented in this study. Unless more focus is placed on changing community attitudes towards survivors, reintegration and empowerment of sexual violence survivors in eastern DRC (and possibly elsewhere) will be difficult.

Future research should focus on documenting and analyzing community perceptions systematically across a larger sample of respondents. Another avenue for further studies should be to investigate the possibility of spillover effects from reintegration in the professional sphere to the relational sphere. More research could help identify conditioning factors that could potentially facilitate a transfer of respect and integration to the relational sphere from the professional sphere.

## APPENDIX

### List of Interviews

Date	Place	Respondents
11.08.2015	Panzi area Bukavu	Number: six Gender: males Age: 22-28
13.08.2015	Nyawera area Bukavu	Number: six Gender: females Age: 18-24
17.08.2015	ISP area Bukavu	Number: six Gender: males Age: 22-30
18.08.2015	Katana, rural area	Number: seven Gender: mixed Age: 31-54
20.08.2015	Kavumu, rural area	Number: seven Gender: females Age: 22-45
24.08.2015	Kadutu area Bukavu	Number: eleven Gender: mixed Age: 18-60
26.08.2015	Nyangezi, rural area	Number: eight Gender: females Age: 19-47
28.08.2015	Walungu, rural area	Number: ten Gender: mixed Age: 20-65
31.08.2015	Muhungu area, Bukavu	N: five Gender: females Age: 21-24

## Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> See generally Carlo Koos, *Sexual Violence in Armed Conflicts: Research Progress and Remaining Gaps*, 38 THIRD WORLD Q. 1935 (2017).

<sup>2</sup> Survivors also feel negative long-term effects such as trauma and social integration problems.

<sup>3</sup> Roos Haer, Tobias Hecker, & Anna Maedl, *Former Combatants on Sexual Violence During Warfare: A Comparative Study of the Perspectives of Perpetrators, Victims, and Witnesses*, 37 HUM. RTS. Q. 609, 611 (2015); see also Koos, *supra* note 1, at 1941.

<sup>4</sup> See Haer et al., *supra* note 3, at 611; Michele Leiby, Gudrun Østby, & Ragnhild Nordås, *The Legacy of Wartime Violence on Intimate-Partner Abuse: Microlevel Evidence from Peru, 1980-2009*, INT’L STUD. Q. (2019).

<sup>5</sup> Sara Meger, *Rape of the Congo: Understanding Sexual Violence in the Conflict in the Democratic Republic of Congo*, 28 J. CONTEMP. AFR. STUD. 119 (2010); MARION PRATT & LEAH WERCHICK, U.S. AGENCY FOR INT’L DEV. (USAID), SEXUAL TERRORISM: RAPE AS A WEAPON OF WAR IN EASTERN DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF CONGO: AN ASSESSMENT OF PROGRAMMATIC RESPONSES TO SEXUAL VIOLENCE IN NORTH KIVU, SOUTH KIVU, MANIEMA, AND ORIENTALE PROVINCES 14 (2004).

<sup>6</sup> Dara Kay Cohen & Ragnhild Nordås, *Sexual Violence in Armed Conflict: Introducing the SVAC Dataset, 1989–2009*, 51 J. PEACE RES. 418, 418 (2014); Ingrid Samset, *Sexual Violence: The Case of Eastern Congo*, in THE PEACE IN BETWEEN: POST-WAR VIOLENCE AND PEACEBUILDING 229, 233-34 (Astri Suhrke & Mats Berdal eds., 2012).

<sup>7</sup> Aisling Swaine emphasizes the importance of broadening the perspective beyond strategic rape and to challenge arbitrary distinctions between before, during, and after conflict in her discussion of what counts as conflict-related gender violence under international law. See generally Aisling Swaine, *Beyond Strategic Rape and Between the Public and Private: Violence Against Women in Armed Conflict*, 37 HUM. RTS. Q. 755 (2015).

<sup>8</sup> Susan A. Bartels et al., *Sexual Violence Trends between 2004 and 2008 in South Kivu, Democratic Republic of Congo*, 26 PREHOSPITAL & DISASTER MED. 408, 409 (2011); Nancy



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Glass et al., *A Congolese–US Participatory Action Research Partnership to Rebuild the Lives of Rape Survivors and Their Families in Eastern Democratic Republic of Congo*, 7 GLOB. PUB. HEALTH 184, 189-90 (2012); HARVARD HUMANITARIAN INITIATIVE & OPEN SOC’Y INST., CHARACTERIZING SEXUAL VIOLENCE IN THE DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF THE CONGO: PROFILES OF VIOLENCE, COMMUNITY RESPONSES, AND IMPLICATIONS FOR THE PROTECTION OF WOMEN 4 (2009); Aurelie K. Kasangye et al., *Sexual Violence at the Eastern Region of the Democratic Republic of Congo and its Public Health Implications*, 3 WORLD J. PUB. HEALTH SCI. 1, 1 (2014); Jocelyn T. D. Kelly et al., “*If your Husband Doesn’t Humiliate You, Other People Won’t*.” *Gendered Attitudes Towards Sexual Violence in Eastern Democratic Republic of Congo*, 7 GLOB. PUB. HEALTH 285, 285 (2011); J. T. Kelly et al., *Experiences of Female Survivors of Sexual Violence in Eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo: A Mixed-Methods Study*, 5 CONFLICT & HEALTH 1, 2 (2011); Anna Maedl, *Rape as Weapon of War in the Eastern DRC? The Victims’ Perspective*, 33 HUM. RTS. Q. 128, 128 (2011).

<sup>9</sup> Maria Eriksson Baaz & Maria Stern, *Why do Soldiers Rape? Masculinity, Violence, and Sexuality in the Armed Forces in the Congo (DRC)*, 53 INT’L STUD. Q. 495, 495 (2009); RACHEL BRETT & IRMA SPECHT, *YOUNG SOLDIERS: WHY THEY CHOOSE TO FIGHT* 29 (2004); Mats Utas, *Victimcy, Girlfriending, Soldiering: Tactic Agency in a Young Woman’s Social Navigation of the Liberian War Zone*, 78 ANTHROPOLOGY Q. 403, 409 (2005).

<sup>10</sup> See, e.g., Christine Amisi et al., *The Impact of Support Programmes for Survivors of Sexual Violence: Micro-level Evidence from Eastern Democratic Republic of Congo*, 34 MED. CONFLICT & SURVIVAL 201 (2018); John Quattrochi et al., *Empowerment at the City of Joy?: A Study of the Effectiveness of a Leadership Program for Survivors of Sexual Violence in Eastern DRC* (Presented at the 1325 Working Group Meeting, Vienna, 2016).

<sup>11</sup> See sources cited *supra* note 8.

<sup>12</sup> See Kelly et al., “*If your Husband Doesn’t Humiliate You, Other People Won’t*,” *supra* note 8, at 285.

<sup>13</sup> Is this quote from a focus group or an independent source?

<sup>14</sup> Stella Babalola et al., *Perceptions about Survivors of Sexual Violence in Eastern DRC: Conflicting Descriptive and Community-Prescribed Norms*, 43 J. COMMUNITY PSYCHOL. 171, 171 (2015).

<sup>15</sup> See sources cited *supra* note 8; Quattrochi et al., *supra* note 10, at 189.

<sup>16</sup> Babalola et al., *supra* note 14, at 178.

<sup>17</sup> See generally Marian T. A. Tankink, *The Silence of South-Sudanese Women: Social Risks in Talking about Experiences of Sexual Violence*. 15 CULTURE, HEALTH & SEXUALITY 391 (2013).

<sup>18</sup> Many studies mention the words “stigmatization” and “reintegration” by referring to the responses from the respondents or as descriptive words without elaborating on it, see Babalola et

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al., *supra* note 14, at 176 (does not mention reintegration, but develops an “attitudes toward [survivors of] SV” scale used in her survey). See generally Kelly et al., *Experiences of Female Survivors of Sexual Violence in Eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo*, *supra* note 8; Kelly et al., “*If your Husband Doesn’t Humiliate You, Other People Won’t*,” *supra* note 8. In Kohli et al., 2013. *Family and Community Rejection and a Congolese Led Mediation Intervention to Reintegrate Rejected Survivors of Sexual Violence in Eastern Democratic Republic of Congo*, HEALTH CARE FOR WOMEN INTERNATIONAL 34:9, 736-756 the authors acknowledge that reintegration has multiple components, but in the analysis reintegration refers to whether the survivor lives with her spouse, regardless of the change in the relationship, p. 742.

<sup>19</sup> See generally Mary E. Burman & Susan McKay, *Marginalization of Girl Mothers during Reintegration from Armed Groups in Sierra Leone*, 54 INT’L NURSING REV. 316 (2007); Joanne N. Corbin, *Returning Home: Resettlement of Formerly Abducted Children in Northern Uganda*, 32 DISASTERS 316 (2008); CHRIS COULTER, BUSH WIVES AND GIRL SOLDIERS: WOMEN’S LIVES THROUGH WAR AND PEACE IN SIERRA LEONE (2009); Macartan Humphreys & Jeremy M. Weinstein, *Demobilization and Reintegration*, 51 J. CONFLICT RESOL. 531 (2007); Oliver Kaplan & Enzo Nussio, *Community Counts: The Social Reintegration of Ex-combatants in Colombia*, Address at the Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association: Community Counts (2 Sept. 2012); DYAN MAZURANA & SUSAN MCKAY, WHERE ARE THE GIRLS? GIRLS IN FIGHTING FORCES IN NORTHERN UGANDA, SIERRA LEONE AND MOZAMBIQUE: THEIR LIVES DURING AND AFTER WAR (2004); Milfrid Tonheim, “*Who Will Comfort Me?*”: *Stigmatization of Girls Formerly Associated with Armed Forces and Groups in Eastern Congo*, 16 INT’L J. HUM. RTS. 278 (2012); Milfrid Tonheim, *Genuine Social Inclusion or Superficial Co-existence?: Former Girl Soldiers in Eastern Congo Returning Home*, 18 INT’L J. HUM. RTS. 634 (2014).

<sup>20</sup> See, e.g., Michael J. Gilligan et al., *Reintegrating Rebels into Civilian Life: Quasi-Experimental Evidence from Burundi*, 57 J. CONFLICT RESOL. 598, 601 (2012); Humphreys & Weinstein, *supra* note 19, at 531; Kathleen M. Jennings, *Unclear Ends, Unclear Means: Reintegration in Postwar Societies—The Case of Liberia*, 14 GLOB. GOVERNANCE 327, 329 (2008); MILFRID TONHEIM, CTR. FOR INTERCULTURAL COMM., REINTEGRATION OF CHILD SOLDIERS: A LITERATURE REVIEW WITH PARTICULAR FOCUS ON GIRL SOLDIERS’ REINTEGRATION IN THE DRC 53 (2009); GUNHILD ODDEN & MILRID TONHEIM, FILLES EX-SOLDATS DU CONGO: LA ROUTE CAHOTEUSE DE LA RÉINTÉGRATION (2013).

<sup>21</sup> Kaplan & Nussio, *supra* note 19, at 3.

<sup>22</sup> Tonheim, *Genuine Social Inclusion or Superficial Co-existence*, *supra* note 19, at 639.

<sup>23</sup> Women can be perpetrators and men victims. However, our respondents identified only male civilian and soldier perpetrators, and female survivors. We therefore focus on female survivors.

<sup>24</sup> Tonheim, *Genuine Social Inclusion or Superficial Co-existence*, *supra* note 19, at 639.

<sup>25</sup> ANTON J.M. DIJKER & WILLEM KOOMEN, STIGMATIZATION, TOLERANCE AND REPAIR: AN INTEGRATIVE PSYCHOLOGICAL ANALYSIS OF RESPONSES TO DEVIANCE 6-7 (2007)

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<sup>26</sup> One could also think that having a “rape mark” would be positive; the survivor has overcome a terrible situation, she is a martyr in wartime, war hero, etc. INGER SKJELSBÆK, *THE POLITICAL PSYCHOLOGY OF WAR RAPE: STUDIES FROM BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA* 99 (2012).

<sup>27</sup> *DOING DEVELOPMENT RESEARCH* 153 (Vandana Desai & Robert B. Potter eds., 2006).

<sup>28</sup> Kelly et al., “*If your Husband Doesn’t Humiliate You, Other People Won’t*,” *supra* note 8, at 285; Kelly et al., *Experiences of Female Survivors of Sexual Violence in Eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo*, *supra* note 8, at 1; Kohli, *supra* note 8, at 1.

<sup>29</sup> A list of the interviews can be found in the appendix.

<sup>30</sup> Overall, what we learned about community perceptions is quite consistent irrespective of whether the groups were of mixed gender or not.

<sup>31</sup> COLIN ROBSON, *REAL WORLD RESEARCH: A RESOURCE FOR SOCIAL RESEARCH METHODS IN APPLIED SETTINGS* 474 (3d ed. 2011).

<sup>32</sup> In particular Babalola et al., *supra* note 14, at 182; Kelly et al., “*If your Husband Doesn’t Humiliate You, Other People Won’t*,” *supra* note 8, at 287; Kohli, *supra* note 8.

<sup>33</sup> Interview with Focus Group I, in Panzi, Bukavu (11 Aug. 2015).

<sup>34</sup> Interview with Focus Group III, in ISP, Bukavu (17 Aug. 2015).

<sup>35</sup> In our material, other negative words such as “witch” or “slut,” as found by Babalola et al., *supra* note 14, at 178-79, did not appear either as something our respondents used to characterize raped women, nor as something people in the community say about the raped women.

<sup>36</sup> Interview with Focus Group I, *supra* note 33.

<sup>37</sup> *Id.*

<sup>38</sup> Interview with Focus Group IX, in Muhungu, Bukavu (31 Aug. 2015).

<sup>39</sup> Interview with Focus Group II, in Nyawera, Bukavu (13 Aug. 2015).

<sup>40</sup> Interview with Focus Group I, *supra* note 33.

<sup>41</sup> Interview with Focus Group VII, in the rural area of Nyangezi (26 Aug. 2015).

<sup>42</sup> Interview with Focus Group III, *supra* note 34.

<sup>43</sup> See Babalola et al., *supra* note 14, at 173.

<sup>44</sup> Interview with Focus Group II, *supra* note 39.

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<sup>45</sup> Interview with Focus Group V, in the rural area of Kavumu (20 Aug. 2015).

<sup>46</sup> The definition of Interahamwe is often used as a label referring to a mixture of refugees, former rebels, and their families as well as Rwandan political opponents forced to flee. The group may also include Congolese Hutus. *See* HUMAN RIGHTS WATCH, *THE WAR WITHIN THE WAR: SEXUAL VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN AND GIRLS IN EASTERN CONGO* 15 (2002).

<sup>47</sup> Interview with Focus Group IX, *supra* note 38.

<sup>48</sup> Interview with Focus Group I, *supra* note 33.

<sup>49</sup> Interview with Focus Group IX, *supra* note 38.

<sup>50</sup> Interview with Focus Group I, *supra* note 33.

<sup>51</sup> Interview with Focus Group IX, *supra* note 38.

<sup>52</sup> Interview with Focus Group VI, in Kadutu, Bukavu (24 Aug. 2015).

<sup>53</sup> Is this a quote from a Focus Group?

<sup>54</sup> Interview with Focus Group I, *supra* note 33.

<sup>55</sup> Interview with Focus Group VII, *supra* note 41.

<sup>56</sup> Interview with Focus Group VII, *supra* note 52.

<sup>57</sup> The focus on such socioeconomic oriented support programs could also be a way to counterweigh the potential economic difficulties for women whose husbands desert them or lose their marriage potential, and therefore have to be sole breadwinners.

<sup>58</sup> Interview with Focus Group III, *supra* note 34.

<sup>59</sup> Interview with Focus Group I, *supra* note 33.

<sup>60</sup> Jocelyn T.D. Kelly, Alexandria King-Close, & Rachel Perks, *Resources and Resourcefulness: Roles, Opportunities and Risks for Women Working at Artisanal Mines in South Kivu, Democratic Republic of the Congo*, 62 *FUTURES* 95, 99 (2014).

<sup>61</sup> Kelly et al., *Experiences of Female Survivors of Sexual Violence in Eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo*, *supra* note 8, at 3-5, 133; Kohli, *supra* note 8, at 87-88.

<sup>62</sup> Interview with Focus Group IV, in the rural area of Katana (18 Aug. 2015).

<sup>63</sup> SKJELSBÆK, *supra* note 26, at 100.