

If Not a Strategy, What Else? Sexual Violence in the Context of Contemporary Warfare

Lisa Tschoerner¹ and Alex Veit²

¹Eirene, Niamey, Niger

²University of Bielefeld, Bielefeld, Germany

alexander.veit@uni-bielefeld.de

According to UN Security Council resolution 1820 (2008), sexual violence committed in the context of armed conflicts has in some situations been commissioned and applied as a systematic tactic of war. The resolution confirms observations of activists, scholars, international commissions and journalists who categorise mass-scale rape in contemporary armed conflicts as a truculent instrument that serves to fulfil a strategic goal.

In the first part of the paper, we aim to criticize this approach. We argue that to call sexual violence a war strategy is incoherent and ambiguous, because it takes a structure of command behind the atrocities for granted. Yet strategic intention in the form of hierarchically transferred orders within the structure of military organizations is mostly unverifiable. Defining rape as strategy of warfare seems to blur intention and consequence (i.e. the psychological weakening and destruction of communities). It also neglects the historically confirmed general occurrence of sexual violence produced by warfare.

In the second part of the paper, we aim to sketch a research framework, which allows appropriate analysis of the causes of sexual violence during warfare. As the occurrence of sexual violence in the context of war strongly varies between cases, we aim to detect mechanisms that may explain why in some cases sexual violence occurs particularly often. We propose to take the gendered dimensions of sexual violence seriously, and systematically ask how gender relations and roles in a given society impact on the occurrence of sexual violence in warfare. We propose that gender relations and roles, and their impact on sexual violence, need to be analysed in three regards: 1) Gender in a given society before the outbreak of military hostilities; 2) Gender roles as established in this society's armed organizations, including regular armies and irregular groups; 3) The influence of the particular armed conflict on the development of gender relations and roles, both inside and outside armed organizations.

The paper employs case studies from the Democratic Republic of Congo, since conflicts in this country produce not only a very high rate of sexual violence, but also a variation of types of warfare and armed organizations.