



Rape as a weapon of war in eastern DRC and its impact on survivors' marital satisfaction

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Abstract – Rape in armed conflict is a major issue in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), where it is used as a weapon of war to dismantle social structures and inflict long-term trauma on survivors. This study examines the impact of rape on survivors' marital satisfaction, highlighting the differences between wartime rape and intimate or community-based sexual violence. The methodology employs a quantitative approach with a sample of 201 rape survivors from the South Kivu and North Kivu provinces. Data were collected using the Marital Satisfaction Inventory (MSI) and analyzed through statistical tests (ANOVA, t-tests). Contrary to initial expectations, the results indicate that rape committed by armed actors has a lesser impact on marital satisfaction than rape perpetrated by intimate partners or community members. The study also identifies key factors contributing to marital distress, such as repeated assaults, the time elapsed since the last incident, and the public disclosure of the rape. Finally, the findings highlight the importance of psychosocial support in improving survivors' resilience and strengthening post-trauma marital dynamics. These results underscore the need for targeted approaches in the care and protection of victims.

Keywords: Armed conflict, Marital satisfaction, Mental health, Psychosocial support, Sexual trauma, Wartime rape

Résumé – Le viol en contexte de conflit armé est une problématique majeure en République Démocratique du Congo (RDC), où il est utilisé comme une arme de guerre pour détruire les structures sociales et infliger des traumatismes durables aux survivantes. Cette étude examine l'impact du viol sur la satisfaction conjugale des survivantes et met en lumière les différences entre le viol de guerre et le viol intraconjugal ou communautaire. La méthodologie repose sur une approche quantitative, avec un échantillon de 201 survivantes de viol issues des provinces du Sud-Kivu et du Nord-Kivu. Les données ont été collectées à l'aide de l'Inventaire de Satisfaction Conjugale (MSI) et analysées à travers des tests statistiques (ANOVA, tests t). Contrairement aux attentes initiales, les résultats indiquent que le viol commis par des acteurs armés a un impact moindre sur la satisfaction conjugale que le viol perpétré par des proches ou des membres de la communauté. L'étude identifie également plusieurs facteurs de détresse conjugale, tels que la répétition des agressions, la durée depuis le dernier incident et la divulgation publique du viol. Enfin, elle met en évidence l'importance d'une prise en charge psychosociale adaptée pour améliorer la résilience des survivantes et renforcer la dynamique conjugale post-traumatique. Ces résultats soulignent la nécessité d'approches spécifiques en matière d'accompagnement et de protection des victimes.

Mots-clés: Viol de guerre, Satisfaction conjugale, Traumatisme sexuel, Conflit armé, Santé mentale, Prise en charge psychosociale

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I. INTRODUCTION

RAPE in the context of war, is a human tragedy that goes beyond the mere dimension of physical aggression. Used as a weapon of social destruction, it is not only intended to destroy the integrity of the victims, but also to break family and community ties. In many areas of armed conflict, particularly in the eastern Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), sexual violence has become a systematic instrument of terror. In addition to the physical and psychological injuries they inflict, these assaults have lasting repercussions on the married lives of survivors. Understanding how these acts affect marital satisfaction, and, by extension, the mental health of the women involved is key to better orienting psychosocial interventions and fostering their resilience.

A region marked by war and sexual violence

The eastern part of DRC is a region marked by recurrent armed conflicts for nearly three decades. This instability is rooted in ethnic tensions, foreign interference, and economic issues around natural

resources (Cuvelier & Marysse, 2004; Ilunga et al., 2023). In addition to the human and material losses, these conflicts have led to systematic violence against civilian populations, particularly through the use of rape as a weapon of war (Mukwege & Nangini, 2009). Thousands of women were raped by both armed groups and government forces (Van Wieringen, 2020).

Rape in this context is not just an act of individual brutality but a strategic tool to terrorize, destroy social structures, and humiliate targeted communities (Maisha, 2016). This phenomenon persists despite humanitarian interventions and protection policies put in place by international organizations (Conseil de sécurité des Nations Unies, 2023).

Sexual trauma and mental health: A well-documented relationship

The sexual trauma of rape has a profound impact on the mental health of survivors. Several studies have demonstrated a high prevalence of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression, and anxiety among victims of sexual violence in conflict zones (Crocq et al., 2015; Moufflet, 2009). These disorders are exacerbated by social stigma and lack of access to appropriate psychological care (Salmona, 2015).

The impact of rape is not limited to the individual psychological sphere; it extends to the conjugal and family dynamics of the survivors. In societies where virginity and marital fidelity are highly valued, rape survivors are often perceived as soiled and rejected by their husbands and in-laws (Agino et al., 2022; Maisha, 2016). This rejection aggravates their psychological distress and can lead to total social isolation.

Sexual trauma and marital satisfaction: A Little-explored reality

Marital satisfaction is a key indicator of psychological and relationship well-being (Beaudry & Boisvert, 1988). It is defined as the subjective evaluation of happiness and harmony within the couple (Snyder et al., 2004). However, several factors influence this satisfaction, including communication, conflict resolution, sexuality, and emotional support (Bernt, 2001). In the context of eastern DRC, the issue of marital satisfaction of rape survivors remains understudied, even though it is a central issue in the psychological resilience of victims. Marital satisfaction is closely linked to mental health. A harmonious marital relationship is a protective factor against the development of psychological disorders, while a relationship marked by conflict and chronic dissatisfaction can worsen symptoms of depression and anxiety (Bloch & Tamisier, 2007). In this sense, the impact of rape is not limited to the direct psychological consequences, but is part of a marital dynamic that can, in turn, reinforce the psychological suffering of survivors.

Previous studies show that women who are raped in a context of war face marked difficulties in their marital relationships, particularly due to shame and community rejection (Bartels et al., 2013; Mukwege et al., 2010). However, the way in which these dynamics influence their marital satisfaction remains a dimension that is rarely addressed.

II. RATIONALE AND OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

Rape as a weapon of war is a strategy of social destruction that leaves deep scars in the lives of survivors. Existing research has extensively documented its psychological and physical consequences, but few studies have looked at its impact on marital satisfaction. However, this dimension is crucial to understanding the personal and family reconstruction trajectories of victims.

The objective of this study is to analyze the effect of rape in the context of armed conflict on the marital satisfaction of survivors. By highlighting the links between sexual trauma and marital dynamics, this research contributes to a better understanding of vulnerability and resilience factors. It aims to fill a gap in the scientific literature by exploring an often-overlooked dimension of the consequences of wartime rape. This perspective paves the way for recommendations for psychosocial care, integrating interventions that focus not only on the psychological well-being of survivors, but also on the restoration of their conjugal and social relationships.

III. METHODS

Target population

The study was conducted in eastern DRC, a region marked by protracted armed conflict and systematic sexual violence. The choice of this context is motivated by the high prevalence of sexual violence and the resulting psychological consequences for women survivors. The sample for this study is made up of women survivors of rape, aged 14 to 64, mainly from the territories of South Kivu and North Kivu. Participants were selected based on their experience of sexual violence and their marital status.

Participants

The sample required for this study was constituted by reasoned choice. The reasoned choice is since the participant would have to voluntarily agree to participate in the study and sign the free consent form after reading the newsletter. As shown in Table 1 below, we recruited a total of 201 rape survivors ranging in age from 14 to 64 years (mean = 26 years).

Table 1. Description of Sample Characteristics

Age of participants		Level of education		Participant's occupation	
<=20 years	65	No level	69	No occupation	45
21-40 years old	114	Primary	60	Commerce	42
+ 41 years old	22	Secondary	51	Agriculture and Crafts	93
		Graduate License	6 15	Teaching, Agent of the state or NGOs	21
Total	201		201	201	

Measuring instruments

For marital satisfaction, we used the "Marital Satisfaction Inventory" (MSI), developed by Snyder (Snyder, 1979) in its revised version (Bernt, 2001; Snyder et al., 2004). This 150-item scale assesses conjugal satisfaction as a whole through 11 dimensions, namely "Global Distress (GDS)", "Affective Communication (AFC)", "Problem Solving (PSC)", "Aggression (GA)", "Time Spent Together (TTO)", "Disagreement About Finances (FIN)", Sexual Dissatisfaction (SEX)", "Role orientation (ROR)", "Family History of Difficulties (FAM)", "Dissatisfaction with children" and "Conflict over the education of children". To collect as much information as possible on socio-demographic variables, living conditions and circumstances of rape, a general identification questionnaire was developed.

Finally, it was a question of understanding how the circumstances of rape can influence the level of marital satisfaction of survivors. Here, factors such as frequency of rape, length of time since last incident, status of the perpetrator, means of coercion, location of the incident, psychosocial care, type of rape and fidelity to the spouse were taken into consideration.

IV. RESULTS

Rape as a weapon of war

To study rape as a weapon of war, we were interested in the nature of the aggressor, the place of the incident and the means of coercion used. To determine whether female rape survivors had the same level of marital satisfaction regardless of the status or nature of the perpetrator, a simple-design analysis of variance (ANOVA) was performed on MSI scores. The results show that there is at least one significant difference between the different types of aggressors, $F(3, 197) = 12.415$, $p < .001$. To determine which aggressors, differ more specifically from each other, a Tukey test (HSD) was performed. As can be seen in Figure 1 below, women who report being sexually assaulted by men in uniform or unknown and unidentified people complain less about their relationships than those who have been assaulted by their husbands, spouses or boyfriends; as well as those who cited well-known people as their attackers.

Regarding the means of coercion used by the aggressor, the analysis shows a significant difference between the different means, $F(3, 197) = 5.790$, $p < .001$. It appears, as can be seen in Figure 1, that women who report having been sexually assaulted with coercion with an arm or knife complain less about their relationships than those who have been assaulted by fighting, intimidation and false promises; as well as those who have been assaulted without coercion.

And for the place of the incident, there were also a significant difference between the different places of rape, $F(2, 198) = 31.005$, $p < .001$. The results show that women who report having been sexually assaulted in the forest (at the river or on the road) complain less about their relationships than those who have been assaulted at home.

These results show that rape as a weapon of war has less impact on marital satisfaction compared to marital and community rape.

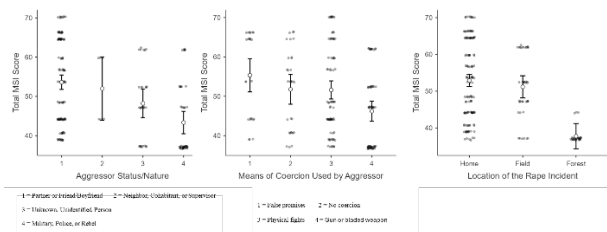


Figure 1. MSI scores based on the abuser, coercion, and location of the incident. The error bars represent the 95% confidence interval.

Factors of marital dissatisfaction in rape situations

Factors such as type of rape, infidelity, frequency of rape, length of time since last rape incident, and psychosocial care were checked for in this study. Regarding the type of rape, we wanted to check whether women survivors of rape had the same level of marital satisfaction depending on whether they had reported marital rape, extramarital rape known to all, without rape because they had not recognized any form of coercion, or extramarital rape not known to all. A simple-design analysis of variance (ANOVA) performed on MSI scores shows that there is at least one significant difference between the different types of rape, $F(2, 198) = 13.4, p < .001$. To determine which types of rape, differ more specifically from each other, a Tukey test (HSD) was performed. As can be seen in Figure 2 below, the results show that women who report having experienced an extramarital rape not known to everyone complain less about their relationships compared to those who have experienced extramarital rape known to all, marital rape or rape without rape (without coercion).

To find out whether survivors had the same level of marital satisfaction regardless of whether they had to cheat on their husbands, a *student's t-test* shows that there is a significant difference between the different frequencies of rape, $t(199) = -5.77, p < .001$. Women who reported cheating on their husbands 2 to 5 times complained more about their relationships ($N = 36, M = 59.1$) than those who had never cheated ($N = 165, M = 48.4$).

Regarding the frequency of the rape incident, an ANOVA reveals the existence of a significant difference between the different frequencies of rape, $F(2, 198) = 16.424, p < .001$. The Tukey test (HSD) performed indicates that women who report a single incident of rape have fewer marital problems than those who report 2 to 4 ($p < .001$) and those who report 5 or more ($p = .003$). There was no significant difference between women who reported 2 to 4 incidents and those who reported 5 or more incidents ($p = .254$).

To determine whether female rape survivors had the same level of marital satisfaction regardless of the time elapsed since the last incident, an ANOVA shows that there is a significant difference between the different durations of rape, $F(4, 196) = 12.793, p < .001$. The results of the Tukey Test (HSD) show that marital difficulties set in as time passes after rape. In concrete terms, women who reported the last rape incident at less than three months of age had fewer marital problems than those who reported between 3 and 6 months, 6 months to a year, one year to 2 years, and 2 years and older, respectively ($p = .012$), ($p < .001$), ($p < .001$) and ($p < .001$). All these other durations do not show a significant difference. This suggests that marital difficulties set in and persist after 3 months of the rape incident (see Figure 2).

Finally, it was discussed whether women survivors of rape had the same level of marital satisfaction depending on whether they had received psychosocial care or not. To do this, a comparison of means to the MSI was applied using the *student's t-test*. The results of this test show that there is a significant difference between rape survivors who received care and those who did not, $t(199) = 4.42, p < .001$. Women who reported receiving care complained less about their relationships ($N = 93, M = 46.8$) than those who had not received care ($N = 108, M = 53.3$).

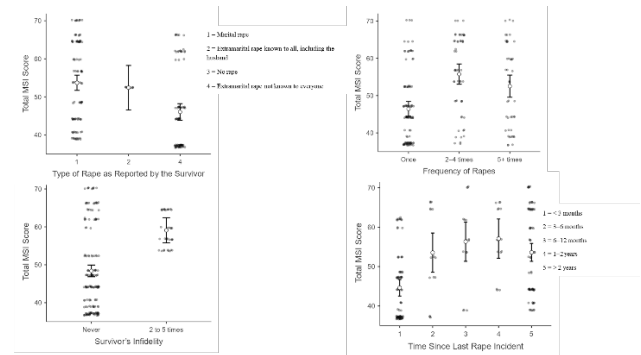


Figure 2. MSI scores based on type of rape, survivor infidelity, frequency of rape, and length of time since last incident. The error bars represent the 95% confidence interval.

V. DISCUSSION

In a context of wars and armed conflicts in eastern DRC, rape is used as a weapon of war. In our previous studies, we have shown that this rape negatively impacts the marital satisfaction of survivors compared to women without a history of rape (Kasali, 2019), and that the latter has effects on the emergence and maintenance of psychological disorders (Kasali, 2019), especially when rape is surrounded by other potentially traumatic events (Kasali, 2025). In this study, it was a question of understanding this impact of rape on marital satisfaction as a weapon of war. Our premise was that rape experienced as a weapon of war (by men in uniform or unidentified and using weapons to coerce their victims in the forests, in the field and in the river) would lead to more marital distress than other forms of rape (by boyfriend, spouse, neighbour or a well-known person). The results of the analyses prove the opposite. These analyses show that rape as a weapon of war does not particularly impact the marital satisfaction of survivors. People who have experienced this category of rape (by uniformed or unidentified men and using weapons to coerce their victims in forests, fields and rivers) have fewer domestic complaints compared to those who have experienced intra-communal or marital rape. On the other hand, rape becomes a threat to marital satisfaction when it is repetitive (characteristics of marital rape), is known to all (when it is extramarital), it lasts over time (because over time rape ends up being known to all) and involves the infidelity of the woman to her spouse (a sign of pre-existing marital difficulties in the couple). In all cases, psychosocial care has a great advantage for the marital balance after rape. One might wonder whether marital rape is a consequence of pre-existing marital difficulties or is it a factor. Practical implications arise from this research: giving importance to rape and intra-marital sexual violence, guaranteeing the safety and confidentiality of victims of extramarital violence, and in all cases, intervening or seeking help as early as possible.

The results of this study shed new light on the relationship between rape as a weapon of war and the marital satisfaction of survivors. Contrary to initial assumptions, it appears that rape perpetrated by men in uniform or unknown persons using weapons to coerce their victims in remote areas (forests, fields, rivers) has a lower impact on marital satisfaction than intramarital or community rape. This observation suggests that the perception of rape in a war setting differs from that of rape in a domestic or social setting, where the stigma and consequences on the couple relationship are more marked (Maisha, 2016; Mukwege & Nangini, 2009).

These findings are part of a perspective where the context and social recognition of rape influence the psychological and relational impact of survivors. In conflict zones, sexual violence is often perceived as an act of war rather than an individual transgression, which can reduce the guilt and shame felt by victims. On the other hand, sexual violence perpetrated by close relatives (spouse, neighbour, community member) is more likely to be associated with social and marital rejection, thus

aggravating the distress of survivors (Bartels et al., 2013).

On the other hand, several factors contribute to survivors' marital dissatisfaction. Repeated rape, particularly in a marital setting, is a major factor in relationship tensions and persistent conflicts. Similarly, the length of time that has elapsed since the incident significantly influences the couple's perception, with a gradual deterioration of the marital relationship over time. Disclosure of rape and its impact on the social reputation of victims also play a central role: women whose experience of rape is known to the public face more marital difficulties than those whose history remains private (Salmona, 2015; 2022).

Our results also highlight the importance of appropriate psychosocial care. Survivors who received counselling report improved marital satisfaction, highlighting the effectiveness of interventions focused on resilience and identity rebuilding (Mukwege et al., 2010). This study thus contributes to a better understanding of the relational dynamics after rape and highlights the need to adapt care policies according to specific contexts.

Theoretical implications

From a theoretical point of view, this study enriches the literature on the psychosocial consequences of rape in contexts of armed conflict. It highlights the differentiated impact of rape according to its context of occurrence, thus highlighting the need to integrate a contextual approach in the study of sexual violence. In addition, it highlights the importance of trauma and marital resilience theories to better understand the relationship dynamics after sexual assault (Herman, 2015). Our results also indicate that attachment theory may be a relevant framework to explain differences in trauma response depending on the nature of the relationship between the victim and the perpetrator (Bowlby, 1969).

Practical implications and recommendations

The results of this study have important implications for psychosocial and humanitarian interventions. First, it is essential to recognize the specific impact of marital and community rape on survivors' marital satisfaction. This involves the implementation of awareness-raising programmes aimed at deconstructing social norms that reinforce the stigmatisation of victims. Second, care policies should include marital and family support to help couples rebuild their relationship after sexual trauma. Finally, survivors' confidentiality must be better protected to minimize the deleterious effects of the disclosure of rape on their marital and social life.

Limitations of the study

This study has certain limitations that should be highlighted. First, as the sample is exclusively composed of rape survivors living in eastern DRC, the results cannot be generalised to other contexts of armed conflict. Second, the methodology relies mainly on self-reports, which can introduce a social desirability bias into participants' responses. In addition, we did not consider the evolution of marital satisfaction over the long term, which would have allowed us to observe more nuanced trajectories of relationships after rape.

Research perspectives

To overcome these limitations, several avenues of research deserve to be explored. A longitudinal study would make it possible to analyze the evolution of the survivors' conjugal relationships over several years. In addition, a comparative approach that includes other contexts of armed conflict would make it possible to determine whether the trends observed in eastern DRC can be generalized to other regions of the world. Finally, it would be relevant to examine the role of male survivors of sexual violence and to assess the impact of rape on their own marital well-being.

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VII. CONFLICT OF INTEREST

There are no conflicts of interest in this article.

VIII. DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Data are available upon request.

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