

Resources and Rape: Congo's (toxic) Discursive Complex

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Abstract: In the last decade, the rapes (of women) in, and the metaphoric raping (of natural resources) of, the Democratic Republic of Congo have received unprecedented attention from media, donors, and advocacy groups. Beginning in the early 2000s, these two narratives (the involvement of armed groups and state forces in illegal resource exploitation and the widespread prevalence of sexual violence in eastern DRC) merged to form a direct cause-consequence relationship, in which rape is framed as a tool for accessing mineral wealth. Through an analysis of media articles and reports of human rights organizations, this study traces the making of this rape-resources narrative, juxtaposing it with wider academic debates and critical scholarship. The narrative effectively focuses attention on a narrow set of actors and spaces in Congo's conflicts, highlighting each of those actors/spaces in particular ways while obscuring the role of others. Because of this, key dynamics are missing from the narrative, such as historical context, gendered conflict dynamics, and armed group/civilian activity and mobilization, which are critical to understanding the scale and scope of violence in the region more broadly and the perpetration of

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instances of rape more specifically. The unraveling of the rape-resources narrative reveals its toxicity in limiting effective interventions and in closing down alternative narratives.

Résumé: Au cours de la dernière décennie, les viols de femmes et les viols métaphoriques des ressources naturelles de la république démocratique du Congo [RDC] ont reçu une attention sans précédent de la part des médias, des donateurs et des groupes de défense. Depuis le début des années 2000, ces deux récits (l'implication de groupes armés et forces de l'État dans l'exploitation illégale des ressources naturelles et la prévalence généralisée de la violence sexuelle dans l'est du RDC) se sont assimilés pour former une relation directe de cause à effet, dans laquelle le viol est présenté comme un outil pour accéder aux richesses minérales. Par le biais d'une analyse d'articles de presse et de reportages provenant d'organisations de défense des droits de la personne, cette étude retrace la fabrication de ce narratif viol-ressources, le juxtaposant avec des débats académiques et d'études critiques plus vaste. Ce narratif attire efficacement l'attention sur un ensemble limité d'acteurs et d'espaces dans les conflits du Congo, soulignant chacun de ces acteurs/espaces de manières particulières tout en obscurcissant le rôle des autres. De ce fait, certains éléments clés sont absents de ce récit, tel que le contexte historique, la dynamique des conflits sexospécifiques et la mobilisation de groupes armés/civils, qui sont indispensables pour comprendre l'ampleur et la portée de la violence et cas de viol dans la région, plus précisément. L'exploration du récit viol-ressources révèle sa nocuité de par sa capacité à limiter des modes d'interventions efficaces et à réduire la possibilité de récits alternatifs.

Resumo: Na última década, as violações (de mulheres) na República Democrática do Congo e a violação metafórica (dos recursos naturais) do país foram alvo de uma atenção sem precedentes por parte dos *media*, dos doadores e das sociedades de advogados. Desde os anos 2000, a combinação destas duas narrativas (o envolvimento de grupos armados e de forças do Estado na exploração ilegal de recursos, por um lado, e a incidência generalizada da violência sexual na RDC oriental) criou uma relação direta de causa e efeito, na qual a violação é enquadrada como um instrumento para aceder à riqueza mineral. Através de uma análise de artigos de imprensa e de relatórios emitidos por organizações de direitos humanos, o presente estudo reconstituiu o percurso desta narrativa que liga violações e recursos, juxtapondo-a a um conjunto mais abrangente de debates académicos e de pensamento crítico. De facto, a narrativa foca-se num conjunto restrito de atores e de espaços dos conflitos no Congo, realçando determinados traços dos atores/espacos, em detrimento do papel desempenhado por outros. Por esta razão, há dinâmicas fundamentais que estão ausentes da narrativa, tais como o contexto histórico, as dinâmicas de conflito baseadas no género, bem como a atividade e a mobilização de grupos armados / civis, que são essenciais para compreender de um modo mais profundo a escala e a abrangência da violência naquela região e de um modo mais específico a ocorrência de casos de violação. Ao descodificarmos a narrativa que liga violações e recursos, revelaremos a sua toxicidade, quer dizer, o modo como ela limita a possibilidade de intervenções eficazes e impede a existência de narrativas alternativas.

Keywords: rape; Democratic Republic of the Congo; sexual violence; narratives; resource curse; mineral exploitation

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Introduction

In an interview with the *Guardian* in 2010, Dr. Mukwege, the renowned director of Panzi Hospital in eastern DRC's provincial capital of Bukavu, explained that the continuing war in the Congo had become a "gynocide," in which rape serves as a tool to "tear the bonds of a community apart and facilitate access to mineral wealth." Providing a historical-economic link to situate contemporary instances of brutality inflicted upon Congolese women, he suggests, "[a] century ago, the world needed rubber for tyres and ten million people died in King Leopold's plantations. Now it wants coltan ore for the microchips of phones and gadgets [...]" (Duval Smith 2010). Through much of the modern era, Congo has served as a site of resource accumulation and exploitation.¹ In earlier renderings of these exploits, however, rape remained just one of many atrocities committed, although its direct link to economic exploitation was unspecified. During the rubber regime of King Leopold II in the Congo Free State (1885–1908), for example, colonial officials and their sentries used rape as one method of coercion to collect rubber, along with mutilation, whipping, hostage-taking, and the burning of villages. It was not rape however, but the images of mutilated hands and feet that served as "humanitarian and metaphorical fuel" (Hunt 2008:244). Today, complexly layered war economies have shifted from a focus on the exploitation of rubber to minerals as engines of the violence and as a key factor in the prevalence of widespread rape in the region. As evident in the *Guardian* report, these two characteristics of the war have become intimately intertwined, giving new meaning to the enduring metaphor of "rape of the Congo" in the contemporary moment. Sexual violence in eastern DRC is now understood not only as a consequence of the conflict but as a mechanism—a weapon of war—directly linked to the exploitation of Congo's mineral wealth. For most of Congo's history, however, these phenomena remained separate, their recent convergence representing a new chapter in how Congo's violence is understood and framed.

Critical scholarship has, in recent years, problematized both the "rape as weapon of war" and the "conflict minerals" narratives on the Congolese conflict, yet notably few scholars have responded to the narrower rape-resources narrative.² Thomas Turner (2014) asserts that the now-popularized refrain "does your cell phone cause rape?" that has characterized much of the international campaigning against violence in Congo is "false and misleading." Jason Stearns (2010) similarly argues against such simple claims: "... militias in the Congo do not rape women just because they want to get their hands on minerals." Other scholarship, notably the work by Séverine Autesserre (2012) presents a more extensive analysis of Congo's dominant narratives and their dangerous consequences, of which illegal exploitation of natural resources (as cause), rape of women and girls (as consequence) are considered. Her research illustrates how such narratives have eclipsed competing frames of the Congolese conflict. Despite the importance of these scholarly contributions, these critiques have not been systematically

done, and/or they confront the two most dominant narratives separately, resources *and* rape.³ What remains unaddressed is a systematic analysis of the construction of the rape *with* resources narrative, which remains to date a popular frame through which Congo has been imagined and conceptualized.

This study addresses this gap through a critical analysis of primary and secondary “intersecting” documents that take either rape or resources (or both) in relation to the Congolese conflict as their subject matter. In particular, it examines policy documents, such as the reports of the UN Group of Experts on the DRC (2004–ongoing), the Reports of the UN Panel of Experts (2001–2003), the UN Mapping Report (2010), and the reports of the Secretary-General on Conflict-related Sexual Violence (2012–ongoing), as well as reports from international humanitarian organizations and NGOs, including International Alert, Global Witness, Human Rights Watch, and the Enough Project. In addition, we draw on research conducted by Congolese organizations such as the Goma-based Pole Institute. We also conducted a review of major French and English news outlets between 2000 and 2017. Our analysis of published work is further supplemented with testimonies gathered from scholars and practitioners with years of experience working in the region, along with a comprehensive review of existing literature, in order to better understand both the subjects of the narrative and the narrative itself within the region’s wider context of violence and humanitarian aid politics.

This study begins by tracing the emergence of what we from here on refer to as the “rape-resources narrative.”⁴ Through the reading of largely foreign humanitarian and media reports, we reveal how rape and (mineral) resources in the Congo conflict first became prominent themes in the narratives of NGO campaigns and media reports, and in statements from celebrity advocates as well as UN spokespeople, and how they later merged in a direct cause-consequence relationship in which rape is framed as a tool for accessing mineral wealth.⁵ Drawing from Kevin C. Dunn and Iver B. Neumann’s (2016) text on discourse analysis, we look first for *continuity* in how sexual violence and natural resources are drawn upon in Congo’s wider conflict narrative. We then identify *changes* within those different narratives and trace the emergence of new relations between them. Finally, we draw on the wider literature to investigate the *ruptures* or breaks within these narratives in order to understand how instances of sexual violence and mineral extraction are shaping and are shaped by the conflict. This analysis shows that from the mid-2000s onward, *change* can be observed when certain NGO campaigns, media articles, and UN spokespeople framed the Congolese conflict as a battle over the region’s rich natural (mineral) resources and as an explanatory factor for the high levels of sexual violence. We then juxtapose such representations of the conflict with wider academic debates and critical scholarship as well as other literature such as the UN Group of Experts reports which together *rupture* some of the claims made through the rape-resources narrative.

Drawing together the abundant literatures on wartime rape with scholarship on Congo's resource war, we focus the remainder of the article on a critical analysis of how the rape-resources narrative has obscured more complex and nuanced understandings of rape and its relation to resource extraction in the broader context of eastern Congo. Using the case study of the widely publicized Luvungi mass rapes of 2010, we argue that the narrative effectively focuses attention to a narrow set of actors (armed groups), spaces (mines) in Congo's conflicts, and a particular form of violence (sexual), and situates each of those actors/spaces/forms of violence in particular ways while obscuring the role of others (peacekeepers, fields, non-sexual violence). In particular, we contend that the narrative misses key dynamics, such as historical context, gendered conflict dynamics, and armed group/civilian activity and mobilization, which are key to understanding the scale and scope of violence in the region more broadly and the perpetration of instances of rape more specifically. In this manner, framings of the "rape of the Congo," the reductive impact of which has created a toxic discursive complex on the Congolese conflict, are de-essentialized. Inspired by Danny Hoffman's (2017) use of the term toxicity as "simultaneously material and metaphorical," we similarly make use of the term toxicity here in a dual sense. The rape-resources narrative is toxic/polluting in a metaphorical sense as it contaminates the discursive space and infects the understanding of the Congolese conflict by researchers, policymakers, and journalists, thereby shutting out alternative narratives and ultimately inhibiting effective interventions. Yet, toxicity also refers to the toxic effects of Congo's violent landscape on African bodies. "The present," in which for example, mercury poisons miners' bodies as well as the local environment, in which instances of rape tear women's bodies as well as at the social fabric of the community, "is toxic," and the violence experienced in and through these spaces is real.

The making of a discourse

In the late 2000s, various advocacy campaigns began attributing mineral resource exploitation to the wide scale of sexual violence in eastern DRC. According to this narrative, rape is strategically used as a weapon to displace local populations in order to gain unfettered access to and control of resource-rich areas, the profits of which fund the armed groups' activities.⁶ The rape-resources frame gained particular salience from 2009 onward through the successful campaigning of the Enough project and its subsequent framing of rape as the major consequence of mineral exploitation, which the campaign positioned as the root cause of the conflict (a position that it softened in later reports). In this study, we trace how both issues of rape and resources had been important factors of the conflict and had been circulating internationally and locally long before the Enough campaign and others merged them in a direct cause-consequence frame.

The rapes in Congo have received in recent years unprecedented attention from media, donors, and advocacy groups.⁷ Our review of humanitarian

and policy publications on the conflict demonstrate, however, that rape was pervasive during and in the aftermath of the Congo wars, yet it did not gain international attention until years later. The earliest publications by Human Rights Watch (HRW) on violence in Congo/Zaire in 1996 and 1997, which focused on the ethnic violence between Hutus and Tutsis in the Kivus following the Rwanda genocide, briefly emphasized the tactical use of rape within their reports (HRW 1996, 1997). Rape featured prominently in their 2002 report, which was the first HRW publication to focus solely on the widespread use of sexual violence against women and girls in eastern DRC (HRW 2002). Similarly, the UN Mapping Report (2010), which documents the most serious violations of human rights and international humanitarian law committed within the territory of the DRC between March 1993 and June 2003, highlights that rape was pervasive even during the war's earlier years. Sexual violence against women and girls, it argues, was of a "recurrent, widespread and [of a] systematic nature" since 1993 (UN Mapping Report 2010:15). Although the media and some other human rights organizations (see e.g., MSF 2004; Pratt & Werchick 2004) picked up on the wide prevalence of rape during and in the aftermath of the Congo wars, despite their efforts, the rapes did not receive any international attention until 2008 and onward.

Contrary to this, the illegal exploitation of natural resources, especially in the second Congo War, did gain international prominence early on in the conflict. As several scholars have noted, minerals did not play a major role in the initial phase of the conflict. "It was," as Karen Büscher and Koen Vlassenroot (2010:261) attest, at the start of the second Congo War in 1998, "[that] the Congolese war acquired its image of a struggle among criminalised politico-military networks for control over DRC's vast natural resources." The year 2000, Goma-based Pole Institute suggests, "was the year in which coltan mining in the Kivu really took off" (Tegera, Mikolo, & Johnson 2002: no page number). It was around this time that the UN Panel of Experts in a series of reports published between 2001 and 2003 began documenting the wide involvement of companies, armed groups, and individuals in the exploitation of Congo's natural resources. The reports established an important link between resource exploitation and the continuation of the conflict. In these earlier UN reports, the exploitation of coltan was not singled out over other minerals. Even reports drawing attention to coltan situated the exploitation of the mineral in a much broader context of economic and food security. Pole's 2002 report, for example, notes in its introduction the involvement of armed groups in artisanal coltan mining and the use of sales revenues in prolonging the crisis and the war in the DRC, but this does not provide the main frame of their investigation. Rather, the report highlights how resource exploitation shaped ordinary civilians' economic strategies, with particular emphasis on the dangers and risks faced by civilian (male) miners and the implications of the abandonment of pastoral and agricultural activities for food and household security (Tegera, Mikolo, & Johnson 2002).

Catalyzed by these earlier UN reports on the militarization of ASM (artisanal and small-scale mining) and concomitant human rights abuses,

media and advocacy groups galvanized around a “no blood in my mobile” campaign, which painted ASM as the exclusive driver of conflict in Eastern DRC. In 2001, a coalition of Belgian NGOs launched an SMS-campaign “geen bloed aan mijn GSM,” “pas de sang sur mon GSM,” or “no blood on my phone.” It called upon consumers to petition the Belgian government to investigate and curb the involvement of European, particularly Belgian, corporations in the illegal exploitation of natural resources in Congo, triggering targeted policy intervention intended to stop the sale of “conflict minerals” and thus, stop the conflict. Despite the fact that the UN reports detailed the role of foreign companies and elite networks exploiting *all* Congo’s resources, the campaign focused on coltan because of its direct link to the mobile phone (Nest 2011:126). Furthermore, the campaign drew links between coltan and the violence in Congo, although not sexual violence. This clearly illustrates that rape at that point had not yet received the international significance/status it has today, so it was therefore not included in the campaign.

Importantly, not only the Belgian campaign but also the earlier HRW and UN reports made no connection between incidents of rape and the region’s rich natural resource base. Mention of any direct links between rape and resource exploitation during the Congo wars was rare and often indirect. Moreover, the Final UN report of the Panel of Experts on the illegal exploitation of natural resources and other forms of wealth in DRC that appeared in 2002 mentions sexual violence three times but does not establish a direct link with resource exploitation, that is, it does not frame rape as a strategic tool used by armed actors to access resources or to clear resource-rich lands. For example, rape and other forms of abuse are seen as part of widespread armed activity which is “characterized by opportunistic and chaotic encounters” (UN Panel of Experts 2002:23). Resources thus provided the backdrop against which human rights violations occurred but were not directly linked to the perpetration of sexual violence. A report from 2005 covering reported cases of sexual abuses in South Kivu between 1996 and 2003 illustrates this: “Others [respondents] see the acts of violence as a deliberate attempt to humiliate, through women’s bodies, the Congolese people and the whole country, which, they say, is coveted by its neighbors for its vast wealth of resources” (Réseau des femmes 2005:61).

The loose association between resources and sexual violence in these reports sharpened with the publication of a 2003 humanitarian report by Watchlist which noted: “Forced displacement, killings, sexual assaults and abuse of power for economic gain are directly linked to military forces’ control of resource extraction sites or their presence in the vicinity” (Watchlist 2003:7). Media articles published around this time began to capitalize on the rising attention to both conflict minerals and rape in the Congo in the broader international arena. One 2003 newspaper article stated: “As well as the plunder of diamonds, gold and the mineral coltan, savage sexual violence is one of the defining characteristics of the five-year Congo war” (Walsh 2003:15). Despite some attention to the wide prevalence

of rape in the Congo wars by the media-aid complex, international attention to rape was minimal. It is only when the UN Stop Rape Now campaign was launched in 2007 and UN Security Council Resolution 1820 (2008) reframed sexual violence in war as a major threat to peace and security when used as a tactic of war or as a part of a widespread or systematic attack that the rape narrative gained traction in relation to the Congolese conflict and that it became linked to resource extraction, particularly coltan, within the international domain (Mertens 2017). The rapes in Congo then became an important component of a much broader discursive and political formation on Congo that attempted to make sense of the horrific incidence of sexual violence committed by “greedy” and “savage” soldiers: Congo’s so-called resource curse.

On her visit to Congo in 2009, then-Secretary of State Hillary Clinton (2009) stressed that the “international community must start looking at steps we can take to try to prevent the mineral wealth from the DRC ending up in the hands of those who fund the violence here.” In the same speech, she declared that rape in the Congo was being used as a weapon of war and expressed serious concern at the reigning impunity and the lack of support for victims of sexual violence. Around the same time, the Conflict Minerals Trade Act (nd) engaged with three foci particular to armed groups in the region: the use of child soldiers, the exploitation of natural (mineral) resources, and the utilization of sexual violence. Within these examples, rape and resources stood *relationally side by side* rather than *causally attributed to one another*. Despite later claims, no direct link between sexual violence and conflict minerals was ever made through Clinton’s speech or the House of Representatives’ text.⁸ This was also true for early writings from the Enough Project that would later emerge as the driving force behind the rape–resources narrative. For example, in a 2008 strategy paper on sexual violence in Congo by Enough, neither natural resource exploitation nor conflict minerals are mentioned (Feeley & Thomas-Jensen 2008). Earlier, Enough activist briefs highlight the high levels of civilian abuse without reference to minerals (Seay 2012).

This changed when the Enough Project released its strategy paper in 2009 *Can You Hear Congo Now? Cell Phones, Conflict Minerals, and the Worst Sexual Violence in the World*, which directly connected Congo’s mineral economy, Western consumers, and the brutal and widespread use of sexual violence in the country.

Our insatiable demand for electronics products such as cell phones and laptops is helping fuel waves of sexual violence in a place that most of us will never go, affecting people most of us will never meet...There are few other conflicts in the world where the link between our consumer appetites and mass human suffering is so direct. (Prendergast 2009:1)

Multiple advocacy campaigns were quick to draw upon the story. Carol Mann (2011), president of FEMAID, speaks of “blood-gold, blood copper,

blood-coltan ...” and the “economic system that has taken the civilian population hostage especially in the mine-rich regions of the Congo.” In line with scholarship on rape as a weapon of war which highlights the strategic employment of rape, the Raise Hope for Congo (nd) campaign explains that “these mineral resources are financing multiple armed groups, many of whom use mass rape as a deliberate strategy to intimidate and control local populations, thereby securing control of mines, trading routes, and other strategic areas.” Hollywood celebrities including Nicole Richie, Ben Affleck, and George Clooney also got involved in spreading the rape-resources message, while top UN officials’ speeches relayed a similar story. Talking to the UN Security Council in 2010, former UN special representative on sexual violence Margot Wallström (2010a) painted a picture of the region in which endemic sexual violence linked to the control over mineral resources was an elemental explanation for the region’s lawlessness.

Once the use of sexual violence was directly linked to Congo’s mineral economy, it became an integral element of economic explanations of Congo’s enduring conflict. In other words, the conflict and its related violence were reduced to economic dimensions. This implies that since the mining economy is of great importance to the Kivus’s social, political, military, and economic landscape, and since natural resources are an important source of funding for armed groups and state forces, and since sexual violence occurs on a wide scale and is committed by all parties involved, then resource extraction and sexual violence are linked through a straightforward causal relationship (see Rustad, Østby, & Nordås 2016). For example, reports by the Enough campaign make a similar claim. In *Point of Origin* by Holly Dranginis (2016:6), for example, the assistant director of Panzi Foundation states: “The link between minerals and violence was something that became obvious, in a sense. The [sexual violence] victims were all coming in for treatment from areas with very active mining.” The campaign then used these and similar associations to make broader claims regarding the policies needed to end sexual violence in the area—because there is mining and because there is a high prevalence of sexual violence, regulating the mineral trade and demilitarizing the mines will stop the rapes.

Such representations linked rape and mineral resources in three particular ways. First, rape is presented as a tool to clear out resource-rich areas for illegal exploitation. In her testimony before the Senate Committee, Eve Ensler (2009), feminist activist and founder of V-Day, argued, “No one could rightly ignore femicide—the systematic and planned destruction and annihilation of a female population as a tactic of war to clear villages, pillage mines of their coltan, gold and tin, and wear away the fabric of Congolese society [...]” Quoting a Bukavu-based archbishop, Enough (nd) makes a similar causal claim: “The formula for exploitation has been to attack civilians. To do that, they harm the women. When women are raped, the men are forced to flee, the children can’t survive, and the village is abandoned—then the area is free for exploitation.”

Second, rape might serve to terrorize, pacify, and demoralize local populations to make them more compliant, and, hence, prevent them from obstructing the illegal economic activities of military groups (Shannon 2011). As noted by Marion Pratt and Leah Werchick (2004:9), “sexual violence has also been used to subjugate populations as a means of gaining access to valuable or scarce assets.” Sara Meger (2015:133) similarly claims that sexual violence is used “as an effective tool [...] restricting freedom of movement and regular economic activity, giving the armed group the liberty to take over control of that economic activity without interference.”

Third, rape may be used as retaliation or punishment for community inference in accessing resources. One UN report on Sexual Violence in Conflict (2013:3) states that in the DR Congo: “rape has been used by armed groups to punish civilians for preventing poaching and mineral trafficking.” It further states that the targeting of civilians by armed groups was done “systematically ... to control areas rich in natural resources ... and armed groups and elements of [the national army] retaliated against communities, often on the basis of the real or perceived ethnicity of the survivors, for supposed political and economic gain” (UN Security Council 2013:9).

Each of these reports highlights the instrumentality of rape as a particularly effective method of asserting control over resource-rich areas. As a group, they are also illustrative of how the rape-resources narrative often focuses on the mining economy. Work by Jane Freedman (2015:122) provides a case in point: “Rape serves as an intimidation tactic by rebels to access precious income-generating resources in mining region.” The focus on mineral resources has subsequently criminalized the spaces in which those resources are found. Using publicly available records from Panzi Hospital between 1999 and 2006, Denis Mukwege and Cathy Nangini (2009), correlate five areas of high mineral assets with what they term “rape with extreme violence” (REV) in South Kivu Province, concluding that the prevalence of rape is correlated to the presence of mines. Citing as evidence the armed-group controlled areas of Walungu’s gold and coltan deposits, and Kabare’s and Shabunda’s coltan-rich areas, Shelly Whitman (2012:139) similarly suggests a correlation “between the location of coltan mining areas and the incidents of sexual violence.” As further evidence, she notes that when the price of coltan rapidly increased from USD30 to USD380 per pound in 2000, a “dramatic surge upwards” in reports of sexual violence resulted. Using UN numbers from 2008 to 2009, she then draws a correlation between “the bloodiest attacks yet” resulting in high levels of refugee flows and sexual violence with the prediction of a shortage of coltan from Australia in late 2008 which led speculators to seek more coltan from the DR Congo.

The subsequent tightening of the rape-resources narrative to a “coltan ore politics” frame not only narrowed attention to particular mineral resources but also implicated western consumers and corporations as equal stakeholders in the violence (Global Sisterhood Network nd). Like the 2001 campaign of Belgian NGOs, the focus was on coltan and its use in the mobile phones of western consumers; however, this time rape had become

an integral element of this narrative. The rape of Congo's women in the pursuit of mineral wealth is then not simply about the economic greed of particular groups within the Congo, but should be situated within "the global assembly line of capitalist production" (Meger 2015:416). As asserted by Carrie Giunta (2013), "[v]iolence and brutality in the DRC is proportionate to the demand [...] for the country's rich mineral deposits." In other words, it is not simply the presence of mining, but the (international) demand that drives the violence. Rape then has become an outcome of international market economies whereby "greedy" actors and the burden of blame are scaled up and shifted from the shoulders of local militia to western consumers and to the electronics and military industries. Eve Ensler (2009) is emphatic in her testimony

International mining companies have significant economic investment in the DRC and I fear they privilege economic interest over the bodies of women. We in the west with our cell phones and play station and computers filled with minerals extracted on the bodies of women.

Whereas western news outlets rarely mentioned earlier reports from HRW and others that cited the wide prevalence of violence, including sexual violence, during the Congo wars, they quickly picked up and sensationalized the link between rape and coltan (and thus cellphones) following these advocacy campaigns. Notwithstanding some early media pieces linking rape and mobile phones, a search of major English and French news outlets between the years 2000 and 2017 reveals that most media reporting on the link followed directly on the heels of the Enough Project publications from 2009 onward and the campaigns it in turn influenced. During this period (2010–2011), we observed a noticeable spike in online media outlets implicating mobile phone users in Congo's rape crisis: "Mobile Phones and Rape: the Congo Connection," "How Your Mobile Phone Fuels Rape in Congo," and "Is Your Cell Phone Fueling Rape and Murder in the Congo?"—many of which directly link to advocacy campaigns such as Raise Hope for Congo (sponsored by the Enough Project). Newsprints that once reserved their admonishment of consumers for contributing to the violence in the region through their electronic purchases were now admonished buyers for their complicity in Congo's rape "epidemic" (see Anonymous 2010a; Cox 2016).

Evident within this discourse is the reproduction of what Makau W. Mutua (2001) calls the "savages-victims-saviors" complex, a racialized, gendered, and sexualized three-dimensional metaphor for the human rights project. In the case of Congo's rape-resources narrative, it establishes a clear hierarchy which first paints a caricature of Congo's social disorder framed through the passive helplessness of African women and Congolese soldiers/rebels as inherently greedy predators with criminal, apolitical, and morally bereft behavior—a mimicry of the colonial imagery of the black savage male.⁹ It then positions its solution within the "liberal 'zone of peace'" (see Selby 2014) via western consumerism. Such representations fit a

longstanding colonial imaginary of Congo, and Africa in general, as a place of sexual aberration, brutal savagery, and mismanagement of the region's environmental wealth. While we do not dispute that rape has been used by armed forces and rebels within a punitive logic or as part of a military or political strategy to clear out resource-rich areas, our analysis shows that both elements of rape and resources were important factors in the conflict long before advocacy campaigns merged them in a direct relationship. Furthermore, expressions of direct causality between rape and resources fail to take into account the varied and indirect ways in which rape and resource exploitation may in fact be linked. Drawing on critical scholarship and the UN Group of Experts reports, we turn now to consider a case study of the region's most notorious reported instance of mass rape—and the place of resources within it to demonstrate this point.

The case of Luvungi: Remapping Complexities of Rape and Resource exploitation

In eastern DRC, nearly all armed groups and state forces have been or are directly or indirectly involved in illegal natural resource extraction.¹⁰ When not directly involved in resource extraction, armed groups or soldiers are indirectly involved through pillaging and taxation (UN Group of Experts 2016; Murairi, Schouten, & Kubuya 2017). Similarly, all parties to the conflict, armed groups, state forces, and civilians, have committed rape. However, when we turn to the question of sexual violence and its use in relation to resource extraction, the actual link between both becomes much less clear. An exploration of the internationally reported mass rapes of Luvungi—widely considered as the archetypal example of the use of rape as a weapon to access minerals—provides a case in point (Global Witness 2010).

In August 2010, over the course of four days in Luvungi in the Walikale region of North Kivu, rebel groups perpetrated a “brutal spree of raping and looting” (Anonymous 2010b). A UN report estimated that a coalition of Mai-Mai, FDLR, and some former CNDP combatants (who deserted from the Congolese army earlier in the year) raped 387 people including three hundred women, twenty-three men, fifty-five girls, and nine boys within the vicinity of the valuable Bisie mine near Luvungi (UN Joint Human Rights Office 2011). In a briefing Margot Wallström (2010b) clearly framed the mass rapes, in conjunction with looting and pillaging, within an instrumental logic to access minerals:

The area is an important commercial centre for lucrative mining activities, with armed actors vying for control of minerals such as cassiterite and coltan. The Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Rwanda (FDLR) and the Mayi-Mayi, have employed sexual terror to control coveted territory.

While this may reveal the economic motivation behind the violent attack, it does not necessarily explain the high levels of sexual violence, particularly

as the high number of rape figures associated with the Luvungi attacks have been vigorously debated (Heaton 2013; Lake 2018). Much of the debate over the “true” number of the Luvungi rapes centers not on the falsification of the numbers of rapes per se but rather on the veracity of the claims of rape themselves, which locates rape within a broader political economy whereby rape *as* resource is actively drawn on by Congolese women seeking access to humanitarian aid as well as by organizations seeking funding and fuelled by personal and organizational incentives (Heaton 2013; Eriksson Baaz, & Stern 2013). Despite these contested claims, the mass rapes of Luvungi became shorthand for the systematic use of rape as a strategic tool for accessing resources, which further buttressed the rape and resources narrative and sidelined a complexly layered reading of the attack.

Multiple published reports show a much more complex picture of the Luvungi rapes. A UN report, for example, added that the mass rapes and looting operations at Walikale were ordered to punish local populations for liaising with the 212th FARDC brigade that had been controlling the Bisie mine.

According to local sources, the attacks were a punitive strike intended to subjugate local communities living along the Kibua-Mpofi axis, considered as ‘traitors’ for reportedly sympathizing with Government forces [...] the armed groups allegedly decided to scare them forever through extremely humiliating acts, hence the planning of mass rapes. (UN Joint Human Rights Office 2011:13)

By this argument, any direct link to resource extraction is rather suggestive, and instead the mass atrocities committed in Luvungi appear to be a retaliatory attack. Yet these arguments miss a more compelling piece of the story, which addresses not whether natural resources played a role, but rather how natural resources did in fact shape conflict dynamics and violence production. The UN Group of Experts (2010:par 146) points out that while the different armed groups involved may “agree on the tactical objectives of the operation (e.g., looting),” they each retain their own strategic agenda such as to disrupt FARDC deployments or to “garner international attention for political ends”; “these different agendas influence the behavior of each group’s combatants during the operation.” Conflicts over natural resources thus shape conflict dynamics and deployment patterns, which in turn influence violence production. As explained by Congo scholar Judith Verweijen:

Violence [in Luvungi] was facilitated by the absence of certain FARDC brigades due to deployment patterns following revenue generation rather than civilian protection logics. Of course, this is no direct link, and it is certainly not a causal one, but it does indicate how conflicts around resources (natural or otherwise) do seem to shape patterns of violence in complex and often indirect manners, by influencing military and armed group presence and activities. (Personal Communication, March 19, 2017)

Furthermore, research has demonstrated that in many cases, effective resource extraction involves cooperation with local authorities and civilians. In these cases, abuses and violence against civilians work counter-productively to armed group aims (Laudati 2013; Kalyvas 2009). Nicholas Garrett, Sylvia Sergiou, and Koen Vlassenroot (2009:2) argue that the non-integrated 85th FARDC Brigade in Walikale around the Bisie mine (before the Luvungi rapes of 2010) established “a coercive (security) governance” which translated

into a more secure environment for the population in the territory under its control. This confirms observations made in civil wars that the behaviour of armed groups is not limited to the exploitation of resources but in many cases may also include strategies to instigate regulatory structures in order to consolidate control over social and economic spaces.

Armed groups’ activities around valuable mining sites (such as Bisie), contrary to previous assumptions, may thus increase the protection effect, thereby reducing violence around the mine(s). The Luvungi case is thus not simply a question of how mineral exploitation is linked to the mass rapes at the time of the incident, but how mineral exploitation is equally linked to why mass rapes did not occur prior to the Luvungi incident.

The Luvungi example is admittedly but one case and certainly not representative of the majority of rape cases in the Congo. It does, however, illustrate that the dynamics that produce violence are much more complex than simplistic portrayals of rape as a tool to access resources or claims of direct correlations between rape and minerals. Indeed, the mineral economy is made to appear as a place of criminality, illegality, and missed opportunities for development, intricately linked to the wide prevalence of rape. This overlooks credible research which shows that mining is an important livelihood strategy for many Congolese (Geenen & Byemba 2009), including women who sometimes migrate to mining sites that are under armed presence, as this might provide security (Maclin et al. 2017).

Even more, the Luvungi case and other instances of rape show that rape very often accompanies a vast range of non-sexual abuse, in particular looting, killings, and forced labor, which problematizes framings of sexual violence as *the* major form of violence that takes place in and outside of mining areas. In some cases, there is more evidence to suggest that sexual violence is not used as the most important instrument to gain access to resources. Rather, it coincides with other forms of coercion as a general pattern of civilian abuse.¹¹ Dominant forms of violence committed by armed groups and the FARDC against civilians in mining areas, for example, are beatings, taxation, and forced labor of *creuseurs*/diggers.¹² Recent evidence from mining sites in North and South Kivu gathered by Christoph Vogel, Josaphat Musamba, and Ben Radley (2018) has revealed that even sites that have received “conflict-free” validation continue to suffer from varying levels of human rights violations, from severe violations of forced labor to

arbitrary arrest and imprisonment at the hands of the police, beatings by FARDC soldiers, mineral theft, illegal taxation, and safety incidents at the mine. Instances of militarized mass rapes have occurred in the vicinity of mines, yet they do not necessarily present the greatest threat to those working in mining sites. Women, in particular, face specific gendered vulnerabilities in mining sites that go beyond conflict rape and rebel predation and are more related to access to employment, working conditions in the mines, prevalent gender norms and beliefs, and weak political institutions (Bashwira et al. 2014; Kelly, King Close, & Perks 2014). Despite international framings of women as passive victims of rebel predation in mining sites, Beth Maclin et al. (2017:117) assert, “participants felt safer under the protection of an armed group in an ASM site, as this was a deterrent to predation by other armed actors, than being in an unclaimed or disputed space.” These findings complement work by James Smith (2011) which finds that ASM sites were found to be more attractive workplaces than the fields because the former offer protection while the latter expose people, especially women, to violence. The fear of sexual violence during conflict was specifically mentioned as a motivating factor for the movement of women into mining sites and a decline in agricultural activities (Perks et al. 2018).

Mining sites in eastern DRC and elsewhere demonstrate a wide variety of gender-based violence, including the phenomenon of transactional sex (often blurred with consensual and coercive sex), which enhances the conceptualization of mining sites as “markets of violence” where sex—and the body—is a commodity. Some women engage in transactional sex, “simply to survive, but it could also serve as a way to carve out a space and gain patronage in the fluid social context of mining towns” (Kelly, King Close, & Perks 2014:100). Women provide sex to gain access to employment, which further underscores the link between sexual and economic exploitation, particularly common in mining sites. In these cases, sexual violence and mining are directly linked but not in ways as proposed by the rape-resources framework. While rape in mining sites tends to be specifically associated with armed men, a World Bank report (2015) found that civilians, often miners (*creuseurs*) are more often linked to sexual abuse. As noted in an interview with a Global Witness researcher, women working as transporters of minerals are raped by unidentified assailants, mineral traders (*négociants*), as well as by [civilian] miners themselves. “Most women,” she noted, “talk about sexual abuse as a daily hazard rather than as a thing being perpetrated by armed groups” (Interview, December 4, 2017). These findings highlight the problem of civilian rape in and around mining sites (and non-mining sites), an under-researched topic due to the limited focus on conflict-related rape (Interview Bashwira, March 7, 2017). This is particularly disturbing, given that the World Bank research revealed that while sexual predation by armed men was viewed as a concern, it was generally seen as less pressing than the everyday violence and abuse that women suffered from miners and other civilians.

These everyday sufferings may be tied to local belief systems. As Sara Geenen (2016) explains, ritual practice or fetishes and luck are embodied in the miner's lifeworld. These beliefs often embody elements of sexuality. Through the telling of miners' stories of female mining spirits whom they believe to be the supernatural guardians of the copper and cobalt reserves, Jeroen Cuvelier (2011) argues that sexuality and mining are strongly linked and suggests that, in some cases, such beliefs may have an influence on the maltreatment of women outside of mining areas (Interview, March 29, 2017; see also Cuvelier 2011).

Furthermore, Geenen notes, mining sites are vastly different which impacts the level of violence experienced at individual sites. The level of sexual violence in mining areas, she contends, "really depends on the site and the demographic composition of the site" (Interview, March 16, 2017; see also Geenen & Claessens 2016). She provides two contrasting examples. In "rushed sites" such as Mukungwe, the population is made up of largely young males. "There are no families and they are all temporary settlements. No solid buildings, no school, no health center, no families because of the insecurity in the area. So there are many prostitutes there." The violence associated with the site, "is because of the minerals. Two families fought for control of the mines and then they linked up with armed groups and the fighting became part of the regional conflict." Developed in the 70s and 80s, Kamituga presents a stark contrast. Largely populated by families, mining is integrated into the town. Unlike Mukungwe, where settlements are largely temporary, Kamituga has more permanent settlements as miners reside there with their families (Interview, March 16, 2017).

Moreover, our analysis of research by the United Nations, Congolese research bodies, and NGO publications documenting instances of rape demonstrates that rape is not tied to particular economic geographies nor is it tied to particular resources. A multitude of reports have established that acts of sexual violence have occurred during every phase of the conflict;

during the fighting, during the withdrawal of combatants, after the fighting, in areas where troops were stationed, in occupied areas, during patrols, during reprisals against the civilian population and during raids conducted by isolated and sometimes unidentified armed groups. (UN Mapping Report 2010:287)

Rapes occur "at roadblocks, near military camps, during patrols, during prison visits, at police stations and in the homes of both victims and perpetrators" (UN Mapping Report 2010:324; see also UN Group of Experts reports). Nor is rape tied to particular resources. Indeed, much more research is needed on the links between the region's broader natural resource economy—in which land, cattle, timber, minerals, other commodities and services feature prominently as important aspects of capital accumulation for armed groups and civilian populations—and the production of violence, particularly sexual violence.

It is puzzling, then, that rape and resources merged in a direct causal relationship, although practitioners on the ground and scholars speak of the complexity and plurality of violence, multi-scalar conflict dynamics, and multiple causes. As one respondent explained:

Whenever rape occurs in or near mining sites, critical analysis disappears and they are immediately linked in a direct cause-consequence relationship, which does not necessarily reflect realities on the ground. Mines and rape are sexy themes that sell well. (Interview Tegera, November 22, 2017)

As Congo scholar Sara Geenen notes (Interview, March 16, 2017), the narrative “presents an attractive cause and consequence story,” and because it was built on such a simple narrative it was incredibly effective and proved beneficial to Congolese-based humanitarian and NGO industries, as other scholars have extensively argued (see Chase 2015; Seay 2012). One researcher at Global Witness further noted how the focus on rape in mining areas obscures other issues of importance to local populations in mining areas, including environmental degradation and poor working conditions:

Most people in the Congo have a brother or mother involved in mining (most of the population is involved in some way in mining) and they tend to have a view that there are still armed men involved [in mining activities] but they also want to talk about the pay and working conditions. Most recently people have been talking and complaining to me that trees are being cut down, raising concerns and questions about where do I get my firewood from and charcoal prices have increased, and local organizations have been on the radio talking about water pollution. Industrial mining is moving in and causing extensive environmental damage and people are talking about how their water was poisoned and cattle were killed. There are lots of other things going on. (Interview, December 4, 2017)

The narrative effectively focuses attention on a narrow set of actors and spaces in Congo’s conflicts, and roots each of those actors/spaces in particular ways while obscuring the role of others. Firstly, the focus on ASM sites in particular builds on a broader problematic narrative of artisanal mining as a space of criminality and illegality which overlooks the “ambiguity” of the mineral economy for men as well as women as a space of opportunity (Vogel & Musamba 2017) as much as a space of risk, as previously noted. It further constructs ASM sites as *the* space of violence linked to minerals and sexual violence. Little work has been done looking at the perpetration of (sexual) violence associated with formal mining sites despite a rich literature that critically examines the violence associated with state and corporate extraction of other high-valued resources such as oil (e.g., see Reed 2009 for a discussion of this in the context of oil in Angola). This further attaches the exercise of violence to armed (conflict) actors such as rebel groups and the military acting on their own directive and fails to consider (sexual) violence enacted by other actors associated with the extraction of minerals in

the DRC such as corporate, government and state agents, and foreign NGO's (including humanitarian staff and peacekeeping units). Secondly, focusing on rape (as a form of violence inflicted on women in particular) limits women to the position of victim, disregarding the active role women voluntarily seek and play in mining, and in extractive communities in general (see Maclin et al. 2017; Bashwira et al. 2014; Perks et al. 2018). Women occupy positions and spaces in mining communities in various ways and at different levels of power; including as potters, food vendors (Perks et al. 2018), *négociantes* (Vogel & Musamba 2017), *twangaises* (grinders), *transporteuses* (transporters), *hydrauliques* (water carriers), *songeuses* (ground preparers), *laveuses* (sand washers), and also but less so as *creuseurs* and mine bosses (Côté 2014). While recent scholarship increasingly engages with women's roles, and with male identification of female's place, in mining communities, gender remains an underserved area of inquiry as spaces of mineral exploitation continue to be largely conceptualized as male spaces. Much more work needs to be done to understand how gender informs practices of violence in and related to resource extraction.

In addition, during interviews it became clear that both dimensions of "international discourses" should be emphasized. When discussing the possible detrimental impact of the rape-resources narrative on the ground, some respondents pointed out how the rape-resources narrative interacts with and shapes local narratives (see e.g., Abramowitz & Moran 2012 for a discussion on this in the context of Liberia). While much scholarship has demonstrated the negative impact of resource regulation on Congolese livelihood conditions (see Vogel, Musamba, & Radley 2018), less reported is, for example, how the rape-resources narrative has fueled anti-Rwandan sentiments thereby "provid[ing] ammunition for anti-Rwandan lobbies" (Interview Tegera, November 22, 2017; Interview Bashwira March 6, 2017). Deeply entrenched in Congolese minds and culture is the perception that Rwandans have brought in sexual violence after the genocide and are responsible for these atrocities. A study by Aloys Tegera and Onesphore Sematumba (2015:14) found that 58 percent of respondents considered the Rwanda genocide a major source of conflict in North Kivu (22 percent thought it an important source of conflict). This local explanation leads to a general perception among the Congolese that sexual violence is an "imported crime" (Douma & Hillhorst 2012:22). Similarly, multiple Rwandan invasions as well as evidence of the illegal exploitation of Congo's resources by multiple armed groups backed by Rwanda and Uganda feeds into discourses of autochthony and invigorates such tensions. More research is thus needed into understanding the impact of the rape-resources narrative, how it has intersected and influenced local narratives but in turn and equally importantly, how local actors have shaped the narrative.

Conclusion

While the rape-resources narrative found its greatest popularity within media and humanitarian reports at the turn of the last decade, no less spectacular

renditions of the narrative have found their way into recent ethics discussions in college classrooms and published academic work. Kevin Bales's book, *Blood and Earth* (2016:69), for example, asks readers, "What would our response be if half the women and a quarter of the men in Connecticut were suffering rape and sexual violence? And what would we feel if this violence was being carried out in part to provide components for our phones and computers?" Such provocations point to the appeal and importance of the rape-resources narrative, its endurance, and how it continues to do political work today. This study therefore presents a timely attempt at deconstructing this narrative.

This study has sought to trace the emergence of the rape-resources narrative, juxtaposing it with other competing frames and in doing so de-essentializing the framings of "rape of the Congo," in which armed groups use rape against civilians in a quest for its mineral wealth. In the last decade, both the involvement of armed groups and state forces in illegal resource exploitation, along with the widespread prevalence of rape in eastern DRC, committed by all parties to the conflict, have merged in a direct cause-consequence relationship in which rape is framed as a tool for accessing mineral wealth. The rape-resources narrative became a political-discursive substitute for managing the complexity and messiness of warring and rape. In place of an analysis of historical context, gendered conflict dynamics, armed group/civilian activity, and mobilization, the narrative reflects a highly simplified version of a multifaceted reality.

What emerges through this analysis is that this narrative shuts out competing narratives, thus preventing further understandings of how rape and resources are in fact linked. While our examination shows how the relationship between rape and mining is overstated, further research is needed on the extent to which the different discourses analyzed here do in fact correspond to the lived realities of people affected by this violence as well as how the discourses themselves have transformed the conflict environment and local people's perception thereof. Armed actors are major players in the perpetration of sexual violence and resource exploitation, yet neither their presence in mining areas nor their attachment to profits is indicative of the pursuit or commitment of acts of sexual violence, as the Luvungi case study shows. This does not mean, however, that conflict over resources does not play a role in the production of violence. Indeed, the use of sexual violence *is* shaped by conflict over resources, looting operations, military logics, and deployment patterns, as well as ethnic and opportunistic motivations, all of which should be embedded in the broader structural and historical context of the conflict. Economic gain may be a contributing factor; however, a range of dynamics are at play that eclipses purely economic motivations of rape.

There is also a real danger that the narrative will shift our imaginary of these "conflict" items, whether coltan, gold, or cell phones, such that their association with violence overshadows their potential for contributing to the region's security and development, and for aiding those affected by sexual violence. For example, a project by Physicians for Human Rights sought to

use mobile technologies to record incidents of sexual violence, thus building evidence for legal action against those perpetrating these acts. “The roads in the DRC, if they exist, are extremely poor [...] yet the mobile-phone penetration is deep and wide [...] mobile technology could also support the evidence collection, documentation and preservation needed in sexual violence cases,” said a Physicians for Human Rights spokeswoman (McClelland 2016). Our critique of the rape-resources narrative is not aimed at the convergence of these two thematic phenomena but at the causal inferences of their linkages which dismember both wartime rape and resource exploitation from the actual Congolese context in which they are ultimately embedded. The rape-resources relationship is thus not a “ready-made” analytic, which entails violence of its own, nor is the story of rape-resources a closed chapter; it is simply an incomplete one.

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Notes

1. In World War II it was Congo that provided the uranium (from the Shinkolobwe mine) used in the Hiroshima atomic bomb (Van Reybrouck 2010). Today Congo serves as an important world source of industrial diamonds, germanium, manganese, tin, zinc, and cadmium, in addition to "the coltan used in computer chips and mobile phones, the cobalt and nickel used in jet engines and electric car batteries, the copper for bathroom pipes, the uranium for bombs and power plants, and the iron for nearly everything" (Epstein 2018).
2. On the rape-weapon narrative, see Eriksson Baaz, and Stern (2013); Moufflet (2009); Mertens and Pardy (2017). On the conflict minerals narrative, see Laudati (2013); Vogel and Raeymaekers (2016); Cuvelier (2013). On the emergence of both narratives, see the first section of Bashwira et al. (2014); Kelly, King Close and Perks (2014); Autesserre (2012).
3. A notable exception is provided by Buss (2018).
4. We use the broader term resources in line with UN reports and recent scholarship that emphasize the wider repertoire of natural resources drawn upon in Congo's conflicts (see e.g., Laudati 2013). However, the rape-resources narrative generally limited its use of the term to mineral resources as this ultimately became the focus of foreign attention.
5. The rape-resources narrative is understood here as a discursive formation or complex, a cluster of statements, images and ideas to represent the Congolese conflict and through which "truth" is produced (Foucault 1977).
6. See e.g., Prendergast (2009); Meger (2010); Mukwege and Nangini (2009); Brown (2012).
7. For a critique, see e.g., Eriksson Baaz, and Stern (2013) and Douma and Hillhorst (2012).
8. Turner (2013) makes a similar claim.

9. Research, however, on Congolese armed forces and rebel groups demonstrates that their behavior cannot be ascribed to pure greed and rebel predation, even though income-generating activities are important motivations (Stearns, Eriksson Baaz, & Verweijen 2013).
10. A noteworthy exception is M23, which financed its rebellion not through mining but primarily by levying taxes and looting local populations. The M23's predecessor, the CNDP, derived less than 15 per cent of its revenue from the mineral trade (see Garrett & Mitchell 2009:6).
11. See the many incidents quoted in Interim report of the UN Group of Experts on the DRC (2008a: par. 82; 2008b) and other reports by the Group of Experts.
12. See the many incidents quoted in Interim report of the UN Group of Experts on the DRC (2008a; 2008b; 2010) and other reports by the Group of Experts.