



Dr Denis Mukwege au forum Stand Speak Rise Up! en 20

The terrible reality of sexual violence in conflict zones

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Firstly, I would like to acknowledge the commitment shown by HRH the Grand Duchess of Luxembourg in using her influential voice to highlight the necessity of eliminating conflict-related sexual violence. This determination was reflected in 2019 with the organisation in Luxembourg of an International Forum aimed at ending sexual violence in conflict zones. This dedication was also behind her initiative to launch the association Stand Speak Rise Up! of which I have the honour of being a member of the Board of Directors. Our goals of supporting survivors, advocating for justice, and campaigning to eradicate rape as a weapon of war, bear similarities to my life's struggles.

For too long, indifference and inaction have prevailed. However, since the adoption of UN Security Council Resolutions 1325 and 1820, the link between sexual violence and international peace and security has been clearly established. The use of rape and other gender-based crimes as a war strategy have rightly been codified as a war crime in the Rome Statute establishing the International Criminal Court. Moreover, is a weapon that can be used in genocide.

This is a significant step forward, because to deal with a problem it must first be recognised.

Today, thanks to the evolution of the normative framework, no political or military leader can ignore or neglect the fact that it is against international law to use rape and sexual violence as a weapon of war, as an act of terror or to exterminate groups of people. What in the past was seen as an inevitable consequence of war is now avoidable.

These advances in international law (resulting from recent raised awareness of the seriousness of these crimes) should not obscure the reality of the widely prevalent scourge of sexual violence remaining a feature of all contemporary conflicts. We see it in Ukraine, Tigray and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), where the bodies of women and young girls are battlefields.

This method of warfare is cheaper than using conventional weaponry and is extremely effective. It causes enormous suffering and has dramatic consequences over the short, medium and long term: massive population displacement; demographic reduction; and destruction of the social fabric and economic capacities of affected communities.

This is not an acute humanitarian crisis, but a sustained emergency faced by all humanity. Yet there is a lack of funding to meet the challenges of combating sexual violence, both in terms of prevention, and care of the victims. Furthermore, a culture of impunity is still largely prevalent. So our struggle continues for a world in which every woman and girl has the right to live free from violence.

Where society has failed to protect women and children, it has a moral

« Survivors have the right to holistic care and also to justice »

and legal duty to provide all necessary care for victims, and to work to prevent the recurrence of these atrocities. This is what we have been striving to do for more than 20 years in Panzi, Eastern DRC. A cycle of violence persists there to this day, against a background of a volatile and deteriorating security situation.

To provide all necessary care for survivors, we have developed an holistic, comprehensive care package, at the hospital and the Panzi Foundation . This one stop centre model has been developed so as to meet in one place all our patients' different needs. They only have to tell their story once – thus avoiding having to repeat their traumatic stories – and are then guided through an internal referral system. They receive personalised support focused on their needs, which includes medical and surgical interventions, psychological support, social and economic reintegration, and legal aid for patients.

In addition, our care is not limited to the duration of hospitalisation but continues with support for our patients in their home environments. Through mediation and networking, the Panzi Foundation mobile teams contribute to the rebuilding of the family and community ties that have been severely tested by the barbarism of conflict. This includes repair of the social fabric as well as efforts to encourage socio-economic integration.

Our strategy aims to transform suffering into strength and pain into power. We want to equip women to develop their abilities to become independent. Holistic care helps women regain their confidence

and self-esteem. Furthermore, we are pleased to note that many of our patients – even after a few weeks or months of treatment, support, and capacity building – become committed women's rights activists, protecting not only their own rights, but also those of their children and their communities. They become agents for change in their environments.

The multidisciplinary care model for survivors of sexual and gender-based violence that we have developed is now used outside Panzi via one-stop centres, particularly in Kinshasa but also in Bangui, Central African Republic. Here women can find all the services they need in one place, including maternal and child protection care, prenatal consultation, help with childbirth, family planning, post-natal consultation, and a sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) package.

The victims' suffering is universal, and so is the holistic model of assistance based on four complementary pillars: medical, psychological, socio-economic and legal support. It is thus time that this holistic care be recognised as a human right, leading to the rehabilitation for all survivors of sexual violence, be it in times of war or peace. The concrete recognition of this right to rehabilitation will be a formidable tool, to not only restore women's dignity, but also to achieve many sustainable development objectives.

Secondly, in order to combat sexual violence and prevent its recurrence, it is essential to change attitudes within society as a whole. **Conflict-related sexual violence is only the visible expression of hidden violence and discrimination committed in times of peace.**

Education is one of the most important tools for preventing sexual violence and combatting harmful practices and customs which negatively affect women's rights. Awareness of gender equality must start at an early age and continue throughout life. Women cannot fix the problem of sexual violence alone. Since gender-based violence is linked to the power relationships between women and men in patriarchal societies, we must call on men to free themselves from toxic behaviours. They are also invited to become part of the solution by committing themselves to the advancement of a new paradigm, based on mutual respect and complementarity within the family, society and institutions. In this environment women will be equal to men, both under the law and in day-to-day life.

Finally, survivors are entitled not only to quality, all round care but also to justice, truth and reparations. As increasing numbers of survivors globally break their silences, and provide tangible evidence of these heinous crimes, effective legal responses are needed. The gulf between law and lived experience must be bridged.

Justice is not only a tool for punishing criminals; it is an indispensable tool for preventing the recurrence of violence and preserving the social contract. It draws a line between what is permitted and what is prohibited. Furthermore, reparations are essential for the acknowledgment of the harm inflicted on victims, thus helping with the healing process and facilitating reintegration into society with dignity.

Only with this holistic vision of justice - both retributive and restorative - can every conflict-affected society make lasting progress towards peace, which is the greatest aspiration of all survivors of sexual violence worldwide.

Thus, we call on the community of nations to act to ensure that both individuals and states that commit, order or tolerate the use of sexual violence as a method of warfare be held accountable. This will end the impunity that remains the norm rather than the exception for sexual and gender-based crimes.

It is with this in mind that we started the Red Line Initiative with the Mukwege Foundation, a project also backed by the Global Network of Survivors of Sexual Violence (SEMA). This is the process of drafting a new Survivors' Declaration on the Elimination of the Use of Sexual Violence as a Weapon of War. We are also working on the development of a guide for states on their existing international obligations to prevent, respond to, and punish conflict-related sexual violence.

We trust that these important advocacy tools will help raise global awareness and galvanise political will to provide robust responses to the pandemic of sexual violence in conflict. The time has come for the moral rejection of sexual violence as a method of warfare to be translated into effective legal tools. These will help with prevention and punishment, and backed with strong political will, should lead us towards the eradication of this scourge that shames humankind.

Survivors are not waiting for decision-makers and politicians to restate their concerns. Nor do they want to hear reiteration of commitments already expressed on many occasions. **They are waiting for these words to be translated into concrete action and results which will for once and for all draw a red line against the use of sexual violence in war.**