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'A Real Woman Waits' – Heteronormative Respectability, Neo-Liberal Betterment and Echoes of Coloniality in SGBV Programming in Eastern DR Congo

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ABSTRACT

Drawing on archival and field research, this paper critically examines the production and distribution of gender roles and expectations in SGBV programming, in particular in eastern Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). We find the underlying currents in some of these programmes reinscribe heteronormativity and focus on individual betterment which resonates with regulating gender and sexuality during colonialism. In some cases, strongly western-inspired norms of individual agency have been introduced, disregarding structural constraints of people's lives. To conclude, we explore alternative approaches to SGBV prevention, ones in which international approaches are re-defined and vernacularized for local use – but which also at times inform global understandings.

Introduction

Sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) remains an enormous problem in eastern Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and has, over the past decades, received a high degree of media and policy attention, if not always commensurate funding and support.[1] Much of this attention has been on conflict-related rape of women and girls by conflict actors (Eriksson Baaz and Stern 2013; Meger 2016). This focus has eclipsed other forms of gender-based violence such as physical, emotional and economic abuse, exploitation, discrimination and harassment based on gendered power differentials and/or one's sexual orientation and gender-identity (SOGI) – but also various forms of SGBV perpetrated by civilians. SGBV can and is directed against women, girls, men, boys or other gender identities, and even in conflict-affected countries like the DRC, the highest risk of violence is not from armed actors but from other civilians, including intimate partners and family members (MPSMRM et al. 2014; Tearfund 2017; cf. What Works 2017 for similar findings in South Sudan). In eastern DRC as in many other conflict-affected settings, these forms of violence have not captured the international humanitarian imaginary nearly as much as penetrational rape by conflict parties (Swaine 2018). The international response to SGBV in eastern DRC has nonetheless created a humanitarian 'industry' consisting of local and international actors, at times

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leading to a lack of support for other parts of the health sector (D'Errico et al. 2013; Douma and Hilhorst 2012).

Drawing on extensive archival and field research, as well as on one author's direct involvement in SGBV policy and programming, our purpose here is to examine the unspoken underpinnings of some of the interventions in this sector, of how wittingly or unwittingly they reproduce heteronormative and neo-liberal understandings of what a 'proper' individual and family should look like – and in doing so echo colonial-era interventions. With heteronormativity, we refer not only to the reification of heterosexuality over other sexualities, often involving the invisibilization or (literal) demonizing of the latter, but also the centring of particular heterosexual ways of being (e.g. the heterosexual, married nuclear family) as morally more virtuous than others. Heteronormativity not only includes the inherent discrimination and marginalization of non-heterosexual/non-cis-gender persons, but also does not reflect the lived realities of the various forms in which men and women regardless of their sexual orientation attempt to order their lives in the face of economic migration, violent conflict, environmental degradation and other dynamics affecting modes of living in eastern DRC (Kesmaecker-Wissing and Pagot 2015; Myrttinen and Lewis 2016). These various pressures and the gendered coping mechanisms people adapt mean that the ideal of a stable, heterosexual nuclear family is for many not a reflection of their lived reality. As discussed further below, the current heteronormativity as well as the introduction of certain regressive or progressive ideals of female chastity or empowerment, but also the imaginings of who is the (male) perpetrator, echo colonial era-concerns over the control of local sexualities and gender norms.

We argue to look beyond the focus on protection and rescue/saving and instead to analyze the political work of local and international organizations 'doing gender' and the gender norms produced by this as part of contemporary liberal humanitarianism. In so doing, we draw on and contribute to feminist and postcolonial scholarship that unpacks the colonial legacies of SGBV programming and gender egalitarian policies, and that scrutinizes the language and political work of neo-liberal gender equality and women's empowerment programs. Some of the adverse effects of sexual violence interventions outlined here are not necessarily due to the inefficiency of a certain organization but are intrinsic to the technocratic nature of humanitarian interventions (Fassin 2011; see also Veit 2019). They are part of a humanitarian government – a complex system of global governance – that aims to manage populations and individuals faced with violence, suffering and war, of which regulating sexuality and gender norms and practices are core features (Duffield 2001; Fassin 2011).

Providing empirical evidence from our work in eastern DR Congo, we trace the *longue durée* of promoting heteronormativity in current SGBV prevention campaigns but also suggest that 'progressive' women empowerment programs as well as men's programs resonate with colonial practices in their reproduction of existing states of vulnerability and inequality. This raises questions regarding the capacity of such programs to address the underlying structural issues that drive SGBV and discrimination. We argue that taking these critiques into account allows for interventions which are based on the lived realities of the affected communities in question – including their resistances to outside interventions – rather than on preconceived outside notions of what peoples' lives should look like.

In spite of our critique, we want to reiterate that we see work on SGBV prevention as necessary and worthy. In recent years, funding for this sector has been diminishing in eastern DRC (Hilhorst and Douma 2017; UNFPA 2017). It is therefore crucial that our critique of the gendered and racialized underpinnings being reproduced by SGBV programming is not misread as a plea for further reducing funding for such programs. On the contrary, both emergency and long-term SGBV programming remains essential – and needs to be expanded, not only for women and girls, but also for men, boys and other gender identities. Nevertheless, we do urge to reimagine SGBV interventions as sites of politics and power (re)producing gender norms and relations. To engage in gender means to engage in politics; more than humanitarianism's primary goal of saving lives, to tackle SGBV means to enter the domain of the political and the private, the domain of domination and power relations (Ticktin 2011). Recognizing the inherently political nature of gendered interventions involves taking into account as well as considering the consequences of the colonial durabilities of introducing western 'progressive' ideas and heteronormative gender norms in SGBV programs, as well as their sometimes inadvertent neo-liberal underpinnings, and heteronormative and colonial imaginaries. Our critique does not mean that we are equating current SGBV prevention programs with colonialism, neo-liberal or heteronormative agendas. Nonetheless, we do believe that these concerns need to be taken seriously, the implications discussed and the political nature of the work acknowledged. We firmly believe that this has the potential to lead to better more locally appropriate SGBV programming. This includes seeing Congolese women as agents and bearers of rights rather than as agency-less objects of charity (Davis, Fabbri, and Muthaka 2014), understanding and taking into account the gendered complexities of lived realities in DRC (Hollander 2014b; Lewis 2018; Veit 2017) as well as taking resistances to gender equality work seriously and working through these, rather than ignoring and/or tacitly accommodating them (Ratele 2015). Although we are speaking of SGBV programming in a broad and generalizing sense, (Pierotti, Lake and Lewis 2018) there are also important differences in the various approaches that are being employed in DRC, from ones focusing on prevention (e.g. through awareness-raising or behavioral change); medical, legal and/or social service provision; or judicial and security sector reform. Some are faith-based and others secular; some are long-term and others, for example, awareness-raising campaigns, last for less than a day. Some of the approaches are direct imports from elsewhere, others locally developed and yet others a combination of the two. Thus, our critique is directed at certain problematic underpinnings in some programs but at the same time fully acknowledges the variety in the sector.[2]

In this article, we first, provide a brief historical trajectory of sexual violence interventions. Merging human rights discourse, public health and international criminal law, the 'violence against women' movement made the female body a key site of intervention and protection. Second, we trace the historical continuity of some colonial policies and regulations and examine how control over the 'native's'[3] sexual body was a key element of colonial power. Under the guise of 'liberating' women from the yoke of polygamy or 'civilizing' adulterous and promiscuous women and 'good for nothing' men, colonial interventions imposed European gender roles of 'docile wife' and monogamous and 'respectable' male breadwinner, living together in a heterosexual nuclear family. While in current SGBV programming, gender roles and expectations are introduced in a more benevolent, less coercive way through workshops, trainings and 'women's empowerment'

programs and public awareness raising campaigns, we find important similarities between colonial and current heteronormative discourses, as discussed in sections three and four. Apart from the problematic and mostly unacknowledged historical baggage, a focus on individual betterment/empowerment disregards men and women's struggle to live up to the programs' expectations whilst their everyday reality is defined by structural and legal constraints and material inequalities. Emphasis on stabilizing nuclear families, heterosexual couples and fatherhood fails to consider different living arrangements (extended families, patchwork families, singles, same-sex couples) and diverse sexual orientations, gender identities and expressions. In the final section, we explore alternative approaches to SGBV prevention, ones in which international approaches are re-defined and vernacularized for local use – but which also themselves at times inform global understandings.

Methods

We draw from qualitative data collected between 2012 and 2016 in eastern Democratic Republic of Congo. Mertens's PhD research consisted of interviews with key stakeholders of international humanitarian, local and UN organizations in Bukavu and Goma, in Belgium and Rwanda to examine policies and narratives of response to sexual violence in eastern DRC. Through in-depth participant observation of the work of a local NGO, Mertens explored community responses to international strategies on sexual and gender-based violence. In addition to interviews and participant observation, Mertens also participated in focus group discussions in collaboration with the local NGO. Conducted in eight different villages, the aim of the focus groups was to understand community members' experiences of violence in the context of insecurity and in the aftermath of a particularly violent encounter, notably the Minova mass rapes and lootings that occurred in 2012. The focus groups discussed the broader context of prolonged violence and insecurity and their effects on different communities. Focus group participants were also asked how they experienced the humanitarian response to the Minova mass rapes.

The historical section in this paper draws on research conducted at the archives of the Royal Museum for Central Africa in Tervuren, Belgium, which mostly contain material related to the former Belgian Congo.

The second author, Henri Myrttinen, has been working on SGBV prevention and broader SGBV research both for various INGOs and as a consultant for international agencies in various conflict-affected settings, including in the eastern DRC intermittently between 2013 and 2016. This work has included direct involvement in SGBV prevention programme design and implementation, but also on direct evaluations of programmes (including in DRC) as well as broader analyses of the SGBV field, and direct engagement in international policy fora on SGBV prevention and response, upon which the arguments in this paper also draw. This research included focus-group discussions and individual interviews with intended beneficiaries of SGBV programming in eastern DRC; participatory observation and self-reflection on the processes of designing, implementing and evaluating these programmes; interviews with implementers, programme designers and policy makers in Bukavu, Goma, Kinshasa and donor capitals; and assessment and analysis of programme and policy documents of local NGOs, INGOs, national governments and UN agencies.

The female body as site of protection and intervention

At a time when interventions on sexual violence are at the forefront of international discourse and humanitarian practice, it is more than relevant to ask about the political work of SGBV interventions. Before SGBV (particularly against women) became a humanitarian concern, it was conceptualized first and foremost as a human rights issue, that is, it was framed in the language of human rights (Ticktin 2011). The themes of violence against women and sexual violence were crucial in the success of the 'women's rights are human rights' movement in the 1980s (Miller 2004). Importantly, health (trauma science) and human rights discourse merged and joined with the women's rights movement of which violence against women was the main motor, making bodily harm the basis of this movement (Harrington 2010). 'Health responses became key services that had to be provided as elements of a rights-based remedy to violence against women' (Miller 2004).

In the 1990s with the Bosnia war and the Rwanda genocide, rape in armed conflict gained legal significance and became instutionalized as a legal category (Buss 2009). The establishment of the International Criminal Court (ICC) and the inclusion of gender in its statute marked a milestone in gender crime jurisprudence. In bridging human rights, international humanitarian law and international criminal law, and public health, sexual violence was no longer a mere human rights issue but also a legal, health and humanitarian issue. This move confirmed women's sexuality and the female body as vulnerable and thus a key site of intervention, protection and policing (Ticktin 2008, 2011), much like during colonial times where the regulation of sexuality, female bodies, domesticity and reproduction animated – indeed, defined – imperial power (see Stoler 1989, 2016). The effects of the merger of human rights, public health and international criminal and humanitarian law is echoed in current SGBV programming that generally offers remedial services to women and girls on four levels: medical, legal, psychological and socio-economic, all of these services firmly packaged within a human rights frame (see e.g. Engle 2017).

In eastern DRC, humanitarian interventions on gender-based violence have largely focused on the harms of brutal militarized rapes conducted on female bodies by armed actors. Indeed, extensive donor attention to DR Congo's so-called 'rape crisis' has meant that large budgets go to projects specifically aimed at SGBV, with a particular policy and programming focus on conflict-related rape (D'Errico et al. 2013). This would often involve providing post-exposure prophylaxis (PEP) medicine and post-rape treatment for sexually transmitted infections and trauma. Even though gender is implemented in the mandate of most organizations working on SGBV, funding is largely earmarked for female rape victims (Douma and Hilhorst 2012). Scholars have critiqued the one-dimensional approach of such interventions as these ignore female agency and reproduce the dominant female victim subject (Davis, Fabbri, and Muthaka 2014; Freedman 2015), fail to address the structural, historical and local context in which sexual violence takes place (Eriksson Baaz and Stern 2013; Mertens and Pardy 2017) and do not take into account the varied gendered experiences of women and men, as well as other gender identities, be it as victims and/or perpetrators (Dolan 2010; Lewis 2018). As discussed by Veit in the introduction to this Special Issue, these adverse effects of SGBV interventions are common to the governmentality of humanitarianism. Victim rhetoric and normative

approaches to sexuality are essential traits of universal liberal projects and have been a topic of debate in much postcolonial literature (Jabri 2012; Kapur 2005).

Less studied, however, are the gender norms and roles being imagined and reproduced by SGBV programming (for a notable exception, see Lewis 2018). For the purpose of this paper, we are mainly interested in tracing what forms of masculinity and femininity are promoted and produced by gender-based reform and SGBV programs, the colonial durabilities of such practices and what these disavow. As the next section highlights, central to colonial rule, in which control of sexuality functioned as key site of imperial power, was the positioning of a European-defined understanding of 'respectability' as the ideal norm to be reached for and attained (Stoler 2016, 306).

Discourses and policies on sexuality and gender as tools of empire

To understand the ideologies that animated the exercise of colonial power one has to look at colonial struggles over sexuality and reproduction (Briggs 2003; see also Mertens 2017; Stoler 2016). In the Belgian Congo, the colonial regime was heavily invested in the sexual and reproductive health of women and girls (Hunt 1990; Jacques and Piette 2003; Lauro 2015). Colonial struggles over sexuality and gender were, however, not limited to the Belgian Congo. Throughout the nineteenth and twentieth century, European empires developed narratives and policies on gender and sexuality in order to intervene in and regulate the most intimate domains of both colonizer and colonized. Questions of domesticity, sexuality and gender in racialized terms dominated colonial politics. Stoler (1989, 635) has long argued how sexual control figured in the construction of racial boundaries and was indeed central to colonial power:

> [T]he very categories of "colonizer" and "colonized" were secured through forms of sexual control which defined the domestic arrangements of Europeans and the cultural investments by which they identified themselves. Gender specific sexual sanctions demarcated positions of power by refashioning middle-class conventions of respectability, which, in turn, prescribed the personal and public boundaries of race.

Particularly, the narratives and policies on regulating the natives' sexuality are illuminating in this regard. In the Belgian Congo, the colonial regime was greatly concerned for the status and wellbeing of the 'native' black woman (colonial documents refer to *la femme indigène* or *la femme noire*). Numerous documents discuss the *relèvement* or 'uplifting' of the indigenous woman (Terlinden 1954, 11), 'the Congolese woman and her evolution' (Lammerant 1958) or 'the evolution of the juridical condition of the indigenous woman in the colonies' (Sohier 1939).[4] Vicomte Terlinden (1954, 11), Belgian professor at the University of Leuven, during his three-month journey through Congo, is baffled by the 'primitive state of the indigenous woman' and expresses that she is, 'in terms of civilization, a century behind men'. A Congolese woman was described as 'inferior', 'vulgar merchandise', a victim of polygamy, who is exchanged amongst men and disposed of when no longer needed (Hennebert 1908). Perceived by colonials as a 'beast of burden' and a 'scapegoat for all catastrophes that befall a village', she is 'doomed to oppression without mercy' (Rustica 1925). 'In the Congo, the man is the master and the woman is the slave' (Hennebert 1908). Terlinden therefore stresses the importance of educating the native woman in order to become a 'permanent element of civilization':

> [Through] the development of a female, indigenous elite, civilization will penetrate the masses easily which will allow to educate mothers of educated families […] In this way the [indigenous] woman will become in Africa, what she has been to us since the Middle Ages, a permanent element of civilization. (1954, 12)

The colonial regime represented Congolese women first and foremost as victims of traditional African customs, notably polygamy (Mianda 2009; Sohier 1939; Van den Heuvel 1949), which then provided justification for intervention. Civilization became urgent.

From the 1920s onwards, faced with infertility, sterility and falling birth rates amongst the indigenous population, the colonial regime increased its efforts to eradicate polygamy (and prostitution) which were considered the primary causes of dwindling birth rates (Lauro 2015). Through regulating Congolese marriages (and practices of polygamy), the colonial regime (and this is by no means exclusive to the Belgian Congo) imposed a new culture, largely drawing on racialized and gendered discursive schemes and imagery that were already circulating in nineteenth century European thinking and had been re-employed during King Leopold II's rule of the Congo Free State. What colonial men found particularly remarkable was the assumed lack of the native woman's agency and her acceptance of polygamic practices. Jeener (1908, 210), editor of the *Bulletin du Foyer Intellectuel,* when introducing Captain Hennebert's experiences of his voyage through Congo, describes the abject situation of the black woman and concludes: 'What is most striking is that this situation [of polygamy] is accepted by the black woman as natural and that civilization will have to fight those practices for a long time'. Through suppressing and later prohibiting polygamy, the colonial regime hoped to eradicate certain Congolese customs and to impose European gender norms and customs on native women and men. Missionaries in particular considered polygamy to degrade a woman's dignity. Missionary Van den Heuvel (1949, 25) expresses his views:

> We are sometimes struck by the passive attitude of the black woman and we are inclined to attribute to her a soul of a slave. In reality, from when she was very young, she was trained to submit willingly to her husband to whom his clan has destined her and who bought her even before she was born […] Most often she joins the ranks of the harem of an old polygamous syphilitic whose favourite she will be for a couple of months before entering the ranks as worker. That she has been sold like a goat does not offend her, maybe she will even be proud of having been sold for more than other wives of her husband. The fact remains that she will never have a household/hearth (*foyer)* of her own, that she will never have her husband to herself, that she is condemned to a life full of disputes and rivalries.

As such, the colonial regime vigorously promoted to eradicate 'this African evil' of polygamy through reproducing Christian European models of men (as head of household and primary breadwinner) and women (as docile wife and mother) and heterosexual, monogamous, patriarchal marriage. The education of indigenous women was framed as central to the civilizational advancement of the colony and its people. 'To educate a woman is to educate a people', wrote Yvonne Lammerant (1958), a social worker at the *foyer social* in Stanleyville – a phrase that continues to be extremely popular, in various iterations, among INGOs, UN agencies and national governments (cf. Jauhola 2011).[5] This education primarily involved training native women how to become good housewives and mothers. In the 1920s, the Union of Colonial Women established the first housekeeping and social welfare centres, initially run by nuns but later by social workers. The primary goal of the *Foyer Social* was to inculcate in indigenous women the domestic and familial activities of a

European wife and mother (Sohier-Brunard 1950). In promoting the model of the dominant European concept of a bourgeois nuclear family, *foyers sociaux* attempted to curb what was framed as 'primitive African sexuality' and emerging problems of adultery, prostitution and alcoholism in the urban centres. The native woman was to serve as an example of proper moral (European) standards and behaviour for men and children – within the civilizing frame of the nuclear family (see also Hunt 1990). This would permit her 'to respond to women's eternal calling in veritably every human society, which is not only to give birth to, but also to raise men' (Van Hove in Mianda 2002, 147). The colonial view on the matter was expressed quite clearly:

> Our African politics strive for the liberation of the indigenous woman as a beast of burden in order to give her the time and the energy to devote herself to the traditional role of wife and mother as in the civilised countries. (Van Hove in Mianda 1995, 54)

Native men also were expected to 'evolve' up the gendered civilizational ladder. By the end of the 1920s, the first associations of Congolese men emerged. These associations shaped the urban culture and gave rise to a Congolese middle-class, called the *évolués* (lit. 'evolved ones'). Being an *évolué* implied the acceptance of the Western Christian family model, education at one of the missionary schools,[6] a monthly income of no less than 1000 francs and a professional identity (Mianda 2002, 148). It also meant that the nuclear family, with the man as head of household and sole breadwinner, often replaced extended kin relationships that were fundamental in many African societies, (although colonial models such as the nuclear family were never fully internalized especially in rural areas) (Bouwer 2010). Belgian colonialism thus influenced and reshaped the indigenous gender order but did not cause its collapse. Rather, a hybridity of indigenous and colonial notions of gender and sexuality emerged (see also Hollander 2014a).

The amalgamation of indigenous beliefs, traditions and gender norms into a European patriarchal gender regime was, however, an essential element of colonial power, of which controlling and regulating the natives' sexuality was a fundamental component (Mama 2017). As Stoler (1989, 2016) suggests, the politics of empire have always been deeply sexualized. Yet, she also speaks of a historical continuity, arguing that colonial and postcolonial sexual politics and power struggles over gender norms are linked and must be seen as a mechanism of governing and managing bodies and sex. Indeed, Andrea Cornwall (2018) traces similar legacies in gender equality discourses in global development policies more broadly, and how they resonate with, among others, British imperial concerns about policing sexualities and genders. Tracing the links between colonial regulations around concubinage, polygamy and prostitution and current humanitarian efforts to tackle SGBV is not new and has been explored by various scholars (Billaud 2015; Briggs 2002; Fassin 2007; Shalhoub-Kevorkian 2009; Ticktin 2008). This does not mean that current SGBV interventions are inherently colonial. Rather, we are interested in what SGBV interventions authorize in terms of gender norms and discourses. We suggest that current efforts to battle SGBV by changing gender norms and promoting women's rights should be contextualized within modernizing and colonial development agendas that through a civilizing/liberating rhetoric introduced gendered, sexualized and racialized hierarchies (see Veit 2019).

Importantly, the Belgian colonial regime, consisting of the State, the church and industry entrusted education to the missionaries whose task it was to introduce dominant

European patriarchal and heteronormative norms to the Congolese. Girls were taught in their native language how to become perfect mothers and housewives while men were taught in French at the missionary schools. Girls' education focused on the acquisition of domestic skills according to Christian morality (Mianda 2002, 144). Perhaps more sustainably than the efforts of the colonial state, it is the gendered messaging of the Catholic (as well as Pentecostal and other) churches and missionaries today that continues in many ways to frame daily discourses of appropriate gender roles and norms in eastern DRC.[7] While some faith-based congregations have started taking steps towards SGBV prevention (Tearfund 2017), there have also been reports of churches speaking against women's reproductive rights (Hilhorst and Bashwira 2014) as well as their conservative approach to women in public life and political decision-making (Odimba, Namegabe, and Nzabandora 2012, 18–19).

In the next section we critically explore how contemporary interventions on sexual violence in eastern DRC, mostly based on a mixture of locally dominant and internalized, Western-defined concepts and ideas of heteronormative 'respectability' and individual empowerment, often inadvertently reproduce colonial tropes and practices.

Reproducing heteronormative 'respectability'

The sexual politics and dynamics which underlay imperial power continue as undercurrents in contemporary interventions aimed at addressing sexual violence in conflict settings. Although the tone of the language has changed, sentiments quoted above from colonial-era documents around the nature of 'the Congolese woman' and 'the Congolese man' – and the almost whole-sale invisibilization of other gender identities and non- heteronormative ways of being – continue to echo in some current reports, press releases and Tweets of INGOs and UN agencies (see also Lewis 2018).

While internationally funded activities in eastern DRC which focus on SGBV perpetrated by armed actors have mainly concentrated on combating impunity or the provision of medical aid to survivors, prevention programmes for the civilian population have often aimed at stabilizing the heterosexual nuclear family. This disregards the various forms of temporary and patchwork household arrangements so common in eastern DRC, often marked by fluidity and temporality but at times also of a long-term nature. These may well be same-sex living arrangements that have no sexual components to them, some coming about through friendship or convenience, some purely utilitarian; they may be intergenerational; they may be households run by siblings; they may be lesbian, gay, transgender or polyamorous. None of these are visible when applying a heterosexual nuclear family lens only – and the issues and challenges they may have, including domestic and intimate partner violence, have no space in the heteronormative SGBV programmes on offer. The promoted gender identities as well as the ideal of the nuclear family thus often clash with the lived gendered practices of the Congolese. Especially in larger cities, sexual relations are very often transactional in nature, often involving power, hierarchy and/ or violence, as well as women's tactical agency or positive choice. One study shows both the importance of transactional sex as an element in women's survival strategies and women's motivations and their agency in engaging in prostitution and transactional sex (Mwapu et al. 2016).

In eastern DRC, local and international humanitarian and development organizations play a key role in providing care for SGBV, especially rape, victims. While offering medical and psycho-social care is often the first line of response, in recent years, many organizations have extended their SGBV services to include gender programs specifically aimed at changing gender norms seen as contributing to violence (see Figure 1).

The below picture states *Un vrai homme ne viole pas* or 'a real man does not rape'.[8] It displays a broad range of men's roles in society: soldier, ordinary citizen, priest, teacher, politician, businessman, husband, doctor, policeman, farmer – all men in full employ, fulfilling the key gendered role expectation of being a provider that so many men in eastern DRC struggle with (Dolan 2010; Hollander 2014b; Lwambo 2011). It paints a static monolithic picture of modern Congolese 'respectable' men in society, which not only disregards the often complex living arrangements in which men may find themselves but also ignores the war torn society in which they inhabit these roles. The poster reaffirms stereotypes of 'real', upright men, with jobs and well-dressed, thus promoting a hegemonic form of 'strong', successful masculinity whilst also inscribing norms of benevolent masculine protection, control of emotions and heteronormativity (see also Salter 2016, 468).[9]

A disciplined police officer, a well-dressed soldier, a man and a woman holding hands, these images present an ideal world in which men are able to live up to their gender roles assigned to them by society, yet, these strongly clash with Congolese men's ordinary lives which are marked by everyday violence by police officers, soldiers, or family members, and structural constraints to achieving masculine-coded respectability.

Figure 1. Un vrai homme ne viole pas – A real man does not rape (Author's photograph).

These imaginaries of respectability also point to a further fundamental issue: class. Domestic and intimate partner violence, sexual exploitation and abuse occur in all sections of society, yet studies of SGBV and interventions tend to focus almost exclusively on the lower classes. Respectability, on the other hand, is linked to economic success or, at a minimum, seeking to gain success. While there are important reasons to examine the very real links between poverty, economic insecurity, food insecurity and SGBV (see for example Jewkes 2002), the lack of data on or interventions aiming at more elite men risks perpetuating stereotypes of poor and 'idle' men being the only perpetrators.

Class, gender norms, race and sexuality are also present in the following picture of a USAID billboard that promotes conservative/regressive norms of feminine chastity (Figure 2).

This billboard states: 'A real woman does not sell her self-esteem/self-respect for presents or money. A real woman waits. AIDS stops with me.' It promotes a conservative approach and puts the burden of SGBV and AIDS prevention on the woman who can only be protected from harm through abstinence and patience. The woman is expected to refuse money and/or presents until a 'real' good man turns up who is worthy of her love.

Yet the billboard also speaks to assumptions of masculinity and class. Particularly, in this case, it builds on more traditional ideas and practices in African society (and elsewhere), notably the possession of wealth which enables men to adopt a strong masculinity. These 'big men' can afford the luxury of multiple wives as money allows them to have more sexual opportunities (see also Mills and Ssewakiryanga 2005, 94).[10] Such campaigns reinscribe heteronormative ideas of female chastity while also reaffirming locally-defined notions of 'big men' masculinity. It also draws on and reproduces longstanding racialized images of black men's sexual behaviour, as having multiple wives whom they mistreat and

Figure 2. Une vraie femme attend – A real woman waits (Author's photograph).

dispose of when no longer needed. Such regulating of sexuality is integral to the neo-liberal development projects of the global North (Fassin 2007) and resonates with colonial practices that aimed to curb Congolese people's assumed 'primitive sexuality.' Through domestication, civilization or, in this case, through promoting regressive ideals of female chastity, such programs aim to regulate certain customs. Sexual and racial hierarchies are thus reproduced which could be seen as a 'postcolonial extension of colonial discourses of sexuality and morality that coded race and class in sexual terms' (Ticktin 2008, 865). Arguably, these notions of gendered respectability for men and women resonate with locally dominant notions, informed *inter alia* by Christianity and to a lesser degree Islam, tropes of modernity and the long shadow of colonialism, of what women's and men's roles, as well as their families *should* properly and ideally be like, and are therefore often embraced by the 'beneficiaries' of the campaign (see also Menzel 2019).

Individual betterment and the politics of the body

In eastern DRC, an increased attention to SGBV has led to a large and wide variety of services offered to heal, support and empower women victims. Feminist scholarship has pointed to the opportunities that women empowerment programs may offer but also to their limitations in toppling patriarchal structures and institutions (Cornwall and Rivas 2015; Freedman 2015; Shalhoub-Kevorkian 2009; Menzel 2019). Similarly, programs aimed at promoting positive masculinities and certain gender roles (father, protector, breadwinner) often clash with the actual realities of men's lives, as outlined above. Indeed, opportunities for gendered change are scarce when, as in the case of eastern DRC, armed conflict endures.[11] Men and women who do choose to live more gender equitable lives may face ridicule, resistance and ostracism from peers, family and community members (Hollander 2014b; Myrttinen 2014). There is a huge gap between the well-meaning aspirational goals many interventions promote – for women victims to become survivors or 'thrivers';[12] for men to become successful and respectable agents of change – and the legal, structural and material constraints that women and men face in the everyday. By not recognizing these constraints, programmes risk placing the burden of success or failure of these betterment projects solely on the individual.

From victims to survivors to thrivers

The largely medicalized approach to the harmed female body and legalized approaches to the problem of rape – in the forms of ending impunity and seeing the perpetrator punished – remain stuck in their conception of SGBV victims as someone who needs services and protection only (see also Miller 2004). However, empowerment and women's agency are also important aspects of SGBV programs. A tension between women's agency and women's victimhood is at the core of SGBV programming. In particular, SGBV programs, which include women empowerment programs, in their focus on the injured female body both reinforce female victimhood and women's individual agency, promoting 'ideal types'. One respondent made this very clear when she explained that women who have been sexually violated are 'victims' when they are in hospital but become 'survivors' once they participate in women's empowerment programs.[13] Despite new opportunities offered by these programs, 'these seemingly oppositional labels become at once both feasible in application

while creating yet another source of oppression through the very applications themselves' (Shalhoub-Kevorkian 2009, 47). The binary victim/survivor that underwrites some of these programs in eastern DRC not only disregards that women inhabit both constructs at once but also overlooks women (and men's) daily struggles for survival. Victim claims can often be the only way for women, and to a degree men, who have experienced SGBV to be heard, and can for some be a form of agency – or 'victimcy,' to use Mats Utas' (2005) term. While the 'victim' label risks invisibilising some forms of agency and perpetrating tropes of helplessness, the potential over-celebration of agency and presumed resilience attached to the terms 'survivor', and even more the term 'thriver', risks going too far in the other direction, failing to acknowledge the immense impediments and barriers they face. These include the broader socio-economic constraints of living through decades of conflict and economic decline, exacerbated by the societal and structural dimensions of gender inequality which undermine women's strength and agency (Shalhoub-Kevorkian 2009, 48), and also the often debilitating stigma attached to having been a victim/survivor of SGBV – or even of having received support.

Framing women as victims of their own culture, which is cast as inherently violent, and then encouraging them to change this dysfunctional culture and 'lift' their communities through leadership programs and asserting their rights, involves risks. The woman survivor risks marginalizing and excluding herself from her own context, from her community, her family and often from her very identity as a Congolese.[14] It also places the burden for societal change on the women victims (cf. Jauhola 2011). Other villagers may look down upon a sexual violence survivor who has received training from international organizations. One respondent explains this behaviour:

> She has been 'privileged' because she has been raped. When returning to her village, she often endures the aggression of other villagers who have not been raped and have not benefitted from *caresse internationale* or international care but who are nevertheless equally traumatised.[15]

Interviews with NGOs advocating a community-based approach suggest that this method reinforces stigmatization. They are no longer perceived as 'one of them' and the female rape victim is left in a state of exile within her own homeland. This assertion of her rights can result in the loss of the only support system she has, ultimately silencing the ostensibly 'empowered' women.

In the case of one prominent project in eastern Congo, women are expected to return to society 'as agents of change' after a six-month intervention focused on building her income-generating skills and giving psycho-social support. Upon completing a leadership or empowerment program, it is then expected the woman applies those skills within her life and community. She becomes a 'thriver'. More than surviving, the rights-bearing woman is now actively promoting her rights and has thus reached the imagined pinnacle of the empowerment ladder. These interventions are designed to empower women victims of gender violence – to turn their pain into power.

Without denying the potential positive outcomes of such an approach, the risks and the states of vulnerability it perpetuates cannot be overlooked. The attachment to the wound/ injury becomes the basis for her identity and in doing so, the injured body of the female rape victim serves the function of marking the contrast between herself and the 'empowered woman'. Wendy Brown (1995) argues that organizing on the basis of identities such

as gender compulsively repeats the injury of women's subjugation rather than transcends it. She calls these politicized identities 'wounded attachments' (Brown 1995), reproducing the different forms of oppression and domination they seek to overcome. Brown pleads for a reconfiguration of categories based on injuries to categories of desire and to ask: What does the victim/survivor really want? The advancement of certain western notions of gender empowerment to the detriment of acknowledging the actual realities of women and men's lives not only resonates with colonial practices (in reproducing hierarchies and ideal categories of women and men) and promotes a neoliberal feminism, it often clashes with the desire of the SGBV victim/survivor. Indeed, focus groups conducted by one of the authors show that women survivors' primary concerns to return to their community and to provide education, food and security for their children and other family members were considered far greater than the need to be acknowledged for the harm that has been done to them.[16] Questions thus remain as to how her newly gained empowered position will protect her from violence and oppression in an insecure and violent warscape.

Moreover, what is often ignored is that the discursive constructs of victim/survivor serve the political purposes of organizations that have the power to circulate such categories in the first place. In clearly demarcating between the victim and the 'empowered woman', organizations and the interventions they authorize disavow the complexities, contradictions and challenges that women and men face in conflict zones, perpetuating states of vulnerability and hierarchies.

From assumed perpetrator to partner and role-model

Over the past decade or so, local and international actors have increasingly been engaging with men and masculinities as partners in SGBV prevention, including in eastern DRC (Duriesmith 2017; Flood 2015). The ways in which this occurs differs greatly, as witnessed by one of the authors on the way to an interview with a local NGO in Goma: while waiting for an interview with one local organization who has spent years developing a locally-applicable multi-month curriculum on transforming masculinities, a street parade passed consisting of young men in freshly-printed 'engage men to prevent SGBV' t-shirts funded by an INGO. The spectrum of 'engaging men' thus runs from publicity-oriented awareness-raising stunts and campaigns to comprehensive programmes, from one-off workshops for men in security forces to 1.5-year behavioural courses for men together with their partners. Some are narrowly focused on one issue, for example positive fatherhood, others comprehensive; some are secular, some deeply Christian. Common to them is a belief that changing men's behaviour is key to ending SGBV, but the degree to which they foreground men and their agency varies. As noted elsewhere for Burundi and Uganda (El-Bushra, Myrttinen, and Naujoks 2014; Myrttinen and Nsengiyumva 2014) but also more broadly on a global scale (Duriesmith 2017; Flood 2015; Myrttinen 2018), there is a risk of a celebration of men's agency and their incremental personal change, a side-lining of women and the cementing of a 'kinder, gentler patriarchy' in place of actual transformation. This only partial questioning of men's power, privilege and patriarchal behaviour, and the promise of a more respectable/respected masculinity can in fact be a key incentive for men to participate in such programmes (Myrttinen 2019).

Where men in eastern DRC have actively engaged in internationally supported gender norm change programmes, they have at times sought to control the degree and pace of change, undermining efforts at a broader transformation of patriarchal power dynamics (Pierotti, Lake, and Lewis 2018). Furthermore, projects focusing on individual change, stressing particular practices such as positive fatherhood only or celebrating men who may have embraced change as 'role models', risk falling short if they do not address the fact that these changes for a better life, which men may genuinely desire when they participate in a workshop, may be near impossible to sustain in environments hostile to these changes (Dworkin, Fleming, and Colvin 2015; Gibbs et al. 2015; Ratele 2015).

Questions remain as to how campaigns that target 'harmful' gender norms or promote notions of empowerment or positive masculinity also address structural gender inequality. Imported models of simply 'engaging men as partners for change' may not take into account the variety of gendered, localized experiences of protracted conflict, poverty, neglect and reactions to real and perceived powerlessness, and may thus miss their goal of SGBV prevention – especially if these projects remain short-term and superficial. They risk ignoring how 'violent masculinities may be emerging in response to deep structural issues such as histories of colonialism or centre/periphery tensions which can privilege older city elites over younger men at the margins' (Duriesmith 2017).

Instilling peaceful masculinities in men or promoting empowered 'ideal types' of women also ignores the effects of race, ethnicity, nation and class. The concept of gender should always be seen in context with other power variables that might shape and give meaning to gendered identity and differential experiences of agency and oppression (see also Dolan 2016; Cornwall and Rivas 2015).

Local vernacularisation

Given the extent and outreach of SGBV interventions in eastern DRC, it is worth noting that the international vernacular on gender norms and roles is now embedded in local discourses and practices, primarily in urban settings of the Kivus. This, we feel, may offer a possible partial way out of the problems of coloniality, heteronormativity and neo-liberal framings raised above. It would be disingenuous to pretend that it would be possible to strip away the impacts of colonial and neo-colonial encounters from Congolese society and culture – and that this would automatically lead to a more gender equitable, 'authentic' society.

As in other societies, Congolese peoples' lived realities today are firmly embedded in highly dynamic, globalized discourses and processes of meaning-making, and in our mind this needs to be embraced and worked with, rather than wished away. Even more remote communities in DRC are regularly exposed to international gender discourses, norms and practices.[17] Policy tools, such as UN Security Council Resolution 1325 which calls for an increased representation of women in conflict resolution and post-conflict peacebuilding, are widely known in both rural and urban settings. The local implementation and adaptation of international norms and approaches is thus not a simple meeting between a 'global' untouched by anything that could be termed 'local' and a 'local' unsullied by outside influences. Rather, both are already hybridized themselves (see Richmond 2014). Nonetheless, the 'global' often plays a strong role in defining the extent to which SGBV prevention takes account of the local needs and conditions,

leading to the 'the logic of the *project* quickly outpac[ing] the logic of the *principle*,' leading to narrow definitions of what constitutes violent behaviour, and a de-coupling SGBV from underlying factors such as women's social and political participation and the economic conditions in which people live (Abramowitz and Moran 2012, 130–131).

Processes of vernacularisation thus come with both inherent risks as well as possibilities. NGOs - operating within their own cultural frameworks of human rights discourses and international humanitarian law – will often 'map local voices onto their global template of expectations about GBV practices' (see Abramowitz and Moran 2012, 140 for the Liberian context). As Abramowitz and Moran demonstrate, this may lead to a 'distorted depiction of local "cultures" as the "root cause" of the violence that NGOs and local populations seek to eliminate.'

Successful SGBV approaches should draw on local innovations as well as local vernacularisations of approaches from elsewhere and adapt them locally to the gendered needs, fears and wishes of men, women and other gender identities in eastern DRC, the locally gendered dynamics of SGBV, and importantly also take seriously the locally articulated resistances to social engineering approaches being imposed by often well-meaning outside and generally more powerful actors.[18] A number of eastern DRC NGOs have started doing this, together with international partners, using methods developed in Burundi, South Africa and Uganda, for example, but also from further abroad from Indonesia, Sri Lanka or Brazil, and vernacularizing them, often with international agencies playing key mediating roles. These approaches should not be a priori seen as being in and of themselves better simply due to their globalized process of coming into being, but do offer a potential way out of using colonial, heteronormative and neo-liberal tropes, and having more equal discussions about approaches to SGBV prevention. They are also reflective of the ways in which eastern DRC society, often depicted locally and externally as being cut off from broader global processes, is in fact deeply embedded in these. Examples of promising approaches to SGBV prevention have begun to emerge in eastern DRC, and notably they tend to take an approach that combines gender norm change with efforts to tackle economic precarity and women's socio-political disempowerment, work together both with women and men, and combine local understandings and vernacularisations of gender issues with elements adapted from tested approaches from elsewhere.[19]

Conclusion

Evidently, much is new since colonial times and current approaches have moved away from coercive domesticating humanitarianism. Local NGOs, civil society actors and grassroots organizations now share the international political stage with national governments and UN agencies. In eastern DRC (and elsewhere), a mixture of locally and western defined gender norms such as the male breadwinner, the 'real' man and the domesticated 'good' woman are dominant. In some cases, strongly western-inspired norms of individual agency have been introduced, calling for men and women to become leaders or agents of change or 'thrivers,' at times with little regard for the material and structural constraints of people's lives. SGBV programming may reaffirm both progressive and regressive ideas of gender norms, such as heteronormativity, and attitudes towards women and men and their sexuality. While we welcome approaches that bring in men as well as women into the work on preventing SGBV, these can not be successful if they side-line women's agency

nor if these approaches are based on models defined from the outside and based on colonial-era assumptions of what Congolese men and women 'are' or 'ought to be' like; ignore the multiplicity of forms of living as humans regardless of one's gender identity; and ignore the structural realities of life in eastern DRC. They also need to take the risk of stigmatization of persons who become visibly labelled as SGBV victims/survivors as well as take seriously the potential for social envy and conflict if and when victims/survivors are given support while others in the community are not.

Outside interventions and approaches often lack an understanding of the relationships between humanitarian discourses and past practices of empire, and post-colonial modernizing and development efforts (see also Briggs 2002). The colonial trajectory should not be forgotten when we consider how contemporary interventions regulate gender norms and roles, no longer through coercion but through more bureaucratic practices such as workshops, trainings and programs (see also Billaud 2015). Importantly, it reminds us, scholars and practitioners, to take seriously the risks involved in current SGBV interventions that impose ideal norms on gender and sexuality and may thus reproduce colonialism's language and practices of 'civilizing' and 'liberating' women and men in formerly colonized countries.

Notes

1. For the purposes of this article, we take a broad definition of SGBV, along the lines of the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC 2015, 322), including domestic and intimate partner violence.
2. Given the sensitivities around the issues raised, we do not single out particular interventions by name for critique but rather examine broader trends in the whole sector.
3. In using the word 'native', we draw on Said (1978, 92) who suggested that the 'Oriental' or the 'native' refers to a category of people, not necessarily contained to a geographical area, but constructed as inferior and belonging to a particular race.
4. The authors translated all archival sources from French into English.
5. *Foyers sociaux* were training centres where indigenous married and 'free' women were taught home economics and maternal hygiene. In promoting the model of the nuclear family, *foyers sociaux* attempted to curb African primitive sexuality and emerging problems of adultery, prostitution and alcoholism in the urban centres and instill a European way of life.
6. Education was the responsibility of the missionaries, by virtue of the convention concluded between the Catholic Church and the Independent State of the Congo on 26 May 1906 (Mianda 2002, 145). Missionary schools taught the men French, the language used by the European elite. Girls were taught in their native language how to become perfect mothers and housewives. Girls' education focused on the acquisition of domestic skills according to Christian morality (Mianda 2002, 144).
7. Author's focus group discussions in Bukavu and Goma.
8. The slogan later became part of a UN prevention campaign but under a slightly different form. Featuring Antonio Banderas, his message 'real men don't hit women' became *the* slogan of the HeForShe website of UN Women.
9. See also El-Bushra, Myrttinen, and Naujoks (2014) and Myrttinen and Nsengiyumva (2014) for Uganda and Burundi, respectively, of critiques of approaches of INGOs centring on foregrounding men's changed behaviours. In particular in the Burundian case, men repeatedly re-iterated the importance of their new, clean clothing to them as a visible marker of new-found masculine respectability.
10. The practice of having girlfriends on the side is sometimes referred to as *le deuxième bureau* (literally the 'second office'). Up to this day, the official matrimonial system in Congo is monogamy but polygamy, although officially illegal, is widely practiced. Having multiple wives is

seen as a token of wealth, a factor which enhances a stronger masculinity. The phenomenon of *le deuxième bureau* whereby a married man enjoys extramarital relationships with several women, is widespread but particularly common among rich men and Congolese politicians (see also Verhaegen 1990).

11. Although it should be noted feminist scholarship has pointed to the transformative opportunities created by war which may disrupt the existing gender order (see e.g. Tripp 2015).
12. The victim-survivor-thriver comes out of western therapeutical approaches, and can have quite strong under-tones of blaming victims for 'remaining stuck' in their victim status, see for example 'Victim, Survivor, Thriver: A New Perspective on Grief' accessed at https://donnagore.com/2018/01/24/victim-survivor-thriver-a-world-of-difference/
13. Interview Bukavu, Sept 2012.
14. Interviews with local NGOs in Bukavu and Minova Sept 2012; focus groups June 2016.
15. Interview Mudaka Oct 2012.
16. Focus groups June 2016.
17. Focus groups June 2016.
18. On local resistance to externally imposed interventions, see Autesserre (2014) who argues that disregard of local knowledge and lack of local ownership are the main triggers of resistance. Participant observation at a Congolese community-based organization alongside interviews with other CBOs conducted by one of the authors in 2015 showed resistance to international approaches to sexual violence. In response, some CBOs adopted an approach of proximity while promoting the importance of the natural environment to aid recovery from sexual violence (see Mertens and Pardy 2017).
19. These include for example the work of the Goma-based Institut Supérieur du Lac with, HEAL Africa, Benenfance and the US/Brazilian INGO Promundo (https://promundoglobal.org/2016/02/09/thousands-celebrate-nonviolence-in-democratic-republic-of-the-congo-second-round-of-living-peace-groups/), the Tushiriki Wote project co-ordinated by the UK-based INGO International Alert with a consortium of local, eastern DRC NGOs (https://www.international-alert.org/projects/12927); the work of the Congo Men's Network COMEN which collaborates with a range of Global North and Global South-based NGOs (http://menengage.org/regions/africa/dr-congo/) or the work of IRC (Pierotti, Lake, and Lewis 2018) or Tearfund (2017).

Disclosure statement

Acknowledgements

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