Rape is being used to terrorise the population, says Democratic Republic of the Congo gynaecologist

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http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/may/22/rape-congo-doctor-denis-mukwege

At least [100 women were brutally attacked in the South Kivu](http://www.msf.org.uk/article/drc-more-than-100-women-raped-after-armed-attack-in-south-kivu) province of Congo last week – yet another atrocity amid more than a decade of sexual violence that has earned the region the title “rape capital of the world”.

Many of the victims are being treated at a free hospital run by Denis Mukwege, a leading Congolese gynaecologist and rights activist who has been working in the region for the past 18 years. His Panzi hospital is in Bukavu, [the epicentre of the ongoing conflict](http://www.theguardian.com/world/2008/may/16/congo).

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In a region critically lacking basic healthcare, Mukwege, an expert in reconstructive surgeries for rape victims, has saved the lives of more than 40,000 women – the majority of them victims of brutal gang rapes by soldiers and militias that started during the second Congo war in 1998, and have continued to the present day.

In 2014 Mukwege was the recipient of the EU’s highest human rights award, [the Sakharov Prize](http://www.euronews.com/2014/11/26/denis-mukwege-sakharov-prize-winner-and-champion-of-human-rights/).

Having treated women at different thresholds of psychological and physical suffering, Mukwege has been a prime witness to rape used as a weapon of war.

“It is a method of torture. It is a way to terrorise the population. When I see some of the injuries on the women and children, I realise this type of violence has little to do with sex and much more with power through a sort of terrorism,” says Mukwege.

According to a report, [48 women were raped every hour in Congo](http://www.theguardian.com/world/2011/may/12/48-women-raped-hour-congo) during the height of the conflict in 2006-7. Recent reports from local health centres in South Kivu claim that an estimated 40 women continue to experience sexual violence every day.

Mukwege has little doubt that rape is the “monstrosity of the century”.

Alongside his medical work, Mukwege has campaigned for Congolese women’s rights at national and international levels. [Photograph: MONUSCO Photos/flickr](https://www.flickr.com/photos/monusco/15599236231/)

## Broken promises

“The most difficult reality for us is when we help a woman give birth to a daughter, born as a result of rape, and then years later we have to treat the daughter who is also raped. These are very difficult and painful moments for the whole medical team,” explains Mukwege.

This year on 8 March, the UN commemorated 20 years of the Beijing Declaration, still deemed the most progressive blueprint for advancing women’s rights across the world. The event also marked the beginning of a new platform for action, called Beijing +20. However, despite politicians reconvening to renew commitments to gender equality, [most states have fallen woefully short of promises](http://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2015/mar/09/un-declaration-step-backwards-for-womens-rights-csw) made in 1995.

The International Federation of Human Rights [reports](https://www.fidh.org/International-Federation-for-Human-Rights/women-s-rights/beijing-20-broken-promises-women-s-rights-under-threat-across-the) that due to ineffective domestic laws and weak international conventions, “rape and other crimes of sexual violence continue to be committed on a massive scale”, particularly in conflict situations. The report cites Congo as a prime example of colossal and continued failure to protect.

For most Congolese women, reporting rape is unthinkable. Aside from social stigmatisation of victims, going to a police station could put them at greater danger. Perpetual violence against women has eroded whole communities, with no effective social or legal remedies.

# Aftermath of mass rape in Congo - in pictures

View gallery

Mukwege insists that the domestic laws are present, they are simply not used. Many of the perpetrators occupy high-ranking positions in the government and armed forces. Not bringing them to justice has institutionalised rape.

He believes that ignorance and desensitisation have created a deep divide between the genders.

“The concept of equality begins in children’s minds with the very first contact. We usually tell girls to dress a certain way and instill fear in them that if they don’t, they might be attacked. But we don’t tell boys about how to behave and consequences of bad behavior,” he says.

It is this dearth of medical infrastructure and collective social responsibility for the safety of women that compelled Mukwege to fight for change. An obstetrician by training, he entered the medical profession with the desire to “aid the formation of life”. But witnessing his first gang rape victim made him realise that there were existing lives that needed to be saved and sustained.

Alongside his medical work, he has campaigned for Congolese women’s rights at national and international levels. But he believes change does not simply mean protecting women.

Movements geared towards educating men about sexual violence have emerged in recent years in Congo. Along with psycho-social support for victims of rape, Mukwege advocates help for those men who have left the armed forces, helping to reintegrate them into their communities.

Demobilisation is a psychological process that requires long-term counselling, he says.

“It is obvious that when a young boy is recruited and learns to rape, kill and destroy women, we need to integrate him. Shedding the uniform does not mean that this ingrained mentality has changed,” says Mukwege.

Peace in Congo, Mukwege contends, will require rehabilitating the men and reinforcing the voices of women. He has organised groups where men and boys discuss the violence that has pervaded their societies, while women gather to demand justice and reparations.

“If you destroy wombs, there will be no children and no future,” he says.

For Mukwege, it is simply a matter of “saving the common humanity” of Congo.