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Responding to Sexual Violence: How (De-) Politicization and Technicalization Shape Donor-Funded Interventions

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ABSTRACT

This article introduces an analytical framework for studying and interpreting the sometimes surprisingly different ‘shapes’ (key topics and approaches) of donor-funded responses to sexual violence in and after armed conflict. Our framework highlights processes of politicization, depoliticization, and technicalization and their influence on interventions. Drawing on available studies, published documents, and our own field research in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and Sierra Leone, we show that donor-funded responses to sexual violence since the early 2000s have taken remarkably different shapes – despite the emergence of influential international policy narratives and roughly similar forms of sexual violence in both contexts. A focus on context-specific processes of politicization, depoliticization, and technicalization reveals how these differences came about and persisted over time. (De-)Politicization and technicalization of sexual violence as a ‘weapon of war’ in DRC have led to medicalized and security-centred statebuilding interventions in the country’s eastern conflict zones. By contrast, donor-funded responses in Sierra Leone framed and addressed sexual violence as ‘domestic violence’ even before the war had officially ended. We find that these different shapes emerged from initial differences in (de)politicization and technicalization processes driven by different ‘first responders’ in both contexts, which created enduring path dependencies.

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1. Introduction

Following the fusion of feminism, humanitarianism, and international security policy in the 1990s and early 2000s,¹ addressing the problem of sexual

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¹Veit, “Feminism in the Humanitarian Machine,” 408; Harrington, *Politicization of Sexual Violence*.

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violence has become a regular component of donor-funded interventions in and after armed conflicts. Crucial for its ascendance to a global problem were the recognition of sexual violence as an international crime in the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court (ICC) in 1998 and the adoption of the United Nations (UN) Security Council's Women, Peace and Security Agenda, initiated by Resolution 1325 in 2000.² Together, they have called for the prosecution of sexual violence as a crime against humanity and an international war crime and have emphasized women's vulnerability to conflict-related sexual violence³ as well as the need for adequate protection and women's inclusion and participation, e.g. in peace talks, peacekeeping⁴ and peacebuilding.

Viewed through well-established critiques of 'liberal' peacebuilding as top-down and over-determined by international norms and technical templates,⁵ these legal and policy developments would suggest a high degree of uniformity in donor-funded responses to sexual violence in (post-)conflict settings. Yet we demonstrate in this article that an empirical check may also reveal the contrary: global policy priorities can play out quite differently in specific intervention contexts. In DRC, sexual violence mostly came to be seen and treated as a 'weapon of war', demanding medical aid and security for female victims as well as the re-establishment of state authority in conflict-torn regions.⁶ By contrast, interventions in Sierra Leone addressed sexual violence predominantly as a problem of 'domestic violence', even before the war had officially ended. Unlike interventions in DRC, donor-funded responses to sexual violence in Sierra Leone focused on sensitization campaigns and women's rights.⁷

These differences are even more remarkable given that the violence committed in both contexts was roughly similar – at least similar enough that it would have been possible to find context-specific reasons for similar responses. For both DRC and Sierra Leone, there are documented instances of sexual violence that can be read as matching the 'weapon of war' narrative; and there are reports of everyday sexual abuse of female members of armed groups, of abuse by peacekeepers, and of civilian sexual violence that continued throughout the wars.⁸

²Engle, *The Grip*.

³Holvikivi, "Training the Troops," 187–90.

⁴Johnson, "Women as the Essential Protectors," 286–8.

⁵E.g., Autesserre, *Peaceland*.

⁶Human Rights Watch, *The War within the War*; United Nations Security Council, *Security Council Resolution 1820*.

⁷Schroven, *Women after War*, 97–103; Denney and Fofana Ibrahim, *Violence against Women in Sierra Leone*.

⁸Human Rights Watch, *The War within the War*, 2; Sierra Leone TRCa, *Witness to Truth*, chapter 3; Higate 2007, "Peacekeepers."

In this article, we draw on our own separate research and comparative discussions about donor-funded interventions in DRC and Sierra Leone, and we propose an analytical framework for studying and making sense of the ‘shapes’ – the specific topics and approaches – that come to dominate donor-funded interventions in different contexts. Our framework is grounded in insights from anthropological and sociological scholarship on professional aid and development work, which has problematized notions of a straightforward relationship between existing problems ‘on the ground’ and professional discourse and practice.⁹ This line of scholarship establishes that policy problems are not simply ‘out there’ to be discovered. Rather, they emerge from highly selective processes of picking and designing specific problems and solutions while persistently ignoring others.¹⁰

In the first part of the article, we elaborate our analytical framework, which links the concepts of *politicization*, *depoliticization*, and *technicalization*. Separately, these concepts have already proven fruitful in studies of policymaking and international interventions.¹¹ Taken together, they offer perspectives for identifying processes that produce differences in donor-funded responses across contexts. Such a focus on processes rather than on predefined actors behind politicization, depoliticization, and technicalization provides analytical flexibility for exploring what has been happening, ‘without deciding beforehand which foci of analysis are the most relevant’¹²

For example, it is sometimes assumed that differences across context must be mostly due to ‘local agency’¹³ – but this is not what we have found (and describe in detail in the second part of this article) with regard to different donor-funded responses in DRC and Sierra Leone. While domestic actors have certainly developed their own initiatives and have tried to influence donor-funded interventions, the power to decide whether and what kind of responses to fund and scale-up has fully remained with key donors and their professional staff. In DRC, we clearly see this with the persistent focus on sexual violence as a ‘weapon of war’, despite different initiatives and priorities by Congolese activists and policymakers.¹⁴ The same is true in Sierra Leone, where UK-led security sector reforms linked the focus on sexual violence as ‘domestic violence’ to an initiative by a female Sierra

⁹Ferguson, *The Anti-Politics Machine*; Escobar, *Encountering Development*; Mosse, *Cultivating Development*; Li, “Rendering Society Technical”; Krause, *The Good Project*.

¹⁰See e.g. Cohen, March, and Olsen, “A Garbage Can Model”; Autesserre, “Dangerous Tales”; Koddenbrock, “Recipes for Intervention”; Veit and Tschörner, “Creative Appropriation”; Menzel, “Without Education.”

¹¹Ferguson, *The Anti-Politics Machine*; Li, “Rendering Society Technical”; Mac Ginty, “International Peacebuilding.”

¹²Salehi, “A Processual Framework,” 2.

¹³For a critical discussion, see Menzel, “The Perils of Recognizing.”

¹⁴République Démocratique du Congo, Ministère du Genre, de la Famille et de l’Enfant, *Strategie Nationale* women’s rights activists Goma and Kinshasa, LT personal communications, 2017.

Leonean police officer,¹⁵ which happened to match UK policy priorities and approaches at the time.

In the second part, we illustrate and discuss how different donor-funded responses to sexual violence emerged and consolidated over time in DRC and Sierra Leone, from the early 2000s up until 2017 – focusing on inter-linked dynamics of politicization, depoliticization, and technicalisation, the cornerstones of the proposed framework. We base our case studies on available scholarship, published and unpublished policy documents, our own professional experiences, and field research in DRC (Lisa Tschörner) and Sierra Leone (Anne Menzel).¹⁶ We find that differences in the responses arose because different ‘first responders’ connected with different policy narratives that co-existed in national and international policy circles in the early 2000s. This created path-dependencies in both contexts that have remained relevant until today.

Our main contribution in this article is that we describe initial processes of politicization, depoliticization, and technicalization and point out the striking continuities they have produced in DRC and Sierra Leone. Concluding, we also develop ideas about the concrete mechanisms that made different shapes of donor-funded interventions ‘stick’ over time. We suggest that this ‘stickiness’ was the result of several overlapping and more general tendencies, including (1) a tendency on the side of donors to stay in country contexts once they developed access and made initial investments;¹⁷ (2) knowledge hierarchies among donor-employed/commissioned professionals that privilege technical over context-specific knowledge;¹⁸ and (3) some readiness on the side of donor-employed/commissioned professionals to adjust to country contexts, if only in the sense of adjusting to the specific technical knowledge deemed professionally relevant for the contexts they come to work in. While the first two are already well documented, the third requires further research.

2. Linking Politicization, Depoliticization and Technicalization: An Analytical Framework

It is conventional to refer to donor-funded aid and development projects using the term ‘response’ – which implies that there are problems ‘out

¹⁵Albrecht and Jackson, *Security System Transformation*, 39.

¹⁶Anne Menzel conducted a total of twelve months of field research in Sierra Leone (2009–2017), mostly in rural and urban parts of Bo and Kono District and Freetown. This included field research for her doctoral thesis, two research consultancies for an international non-governmental organization, and field research for a research project on transitional justice at the Center for Conflict Studies in Marburg, Germany. Lisa Tschörner worked in aid and development programs in Sub-Saharan Africa (2009–2014). For her doctoral thesis on international interventions against sexual violence, she conducted field research in DRC (2016–2017) and interviewed staff of international organizations in headquarters in Europe and the US.

¹⁷Krause, *The Good Project*, 28–30; Menzel, “Without Education,” 446–8.

¹⁸Autesserre, *Peaceland*, 68–96.

there' that require attention and action. By contrast, we understand policy problems in a Foucauldian tradition as resulting from processes of (professional) problematization that come to constitute actionable problems, such as madness to be cured, crimes to be punished, or repressed sexuality to be freed.¹⁹ This understanding of the relationship between problems and problematizations (through professional discourse and practice) is, in short, the basis for the analytical framework we propose in the following.

Politicization, depoliticization, and technicalization describe different aspects of processes of problematization, including opening up the realm of the thinkable and doable – and reining it in. These dynamics do not necessarily follow one after the other. They may also take place simultaneously, and they are usually interlinked in the sense of having mutually reinforcing effects. For example, depoliticization consolidates instances of politicization by obscuring issues that might otherwise also attract attention, while technicalization reinforces both politicization and depoliticization by providing tools that enable only certain types of professionalized activities and not others.

2.1. Politicization

The term 'politicization' carries several meanings, including the diagnosis of an increased interest in formal politics.²⁰ However, for the purposes of this article, we understand politicization in a different and broader sense, referring to processes wherein something – some specific issue, relationship, grievance etc. – becomes considered and described as being political and thus changeable.

In some cases, acts of considering and describing problems as political are explicit and open up debates about the very meaning of doing 'politics'. This was arguably the case for the feminist slogan 'the personal is political' in the 1960s, which 'opened a new horizon for both acting politically and thematizing politics as a concept, which could then be used in different and even opposing ways'.²¹ For example, it became a political practice 'to bring female specificity into visibility and to rewrite the history of culture in terms which acknowledge the presence, the influence, and the oppression of women'.²² Some years later, feminists of colour and queer scholars/activists began criticizing this practice for having silenced the voices and eclipsed the experiences of those who deviate from 'the woman' as imagined by authors and activists of a particular background – often white, heterosexual,

¹⁹Koopman, *Genealogy as Critique*, 47–8.

²⁰Palonen, "Four Times of Politics," 181.

²¹Palonen "Four Times of Politics," 182.

²²Butler, "Performative Acts," 523.

and middle or upper class.²³ Their critique points to a typical feature of politicization: the very openings created already contain closures and exclusions.²⁴

Such always already bounded openings are also typical when politicization is not quite as explicit as in the above-described example. In such cases, we usually just see certain issues and topics appearing in the realm of ‘the political’ – without necessarily being named as political – in the sense that activists, experts, and/or policymakers come to frame them as requiring mobilization and/or government action, be it at the domestic or the international level. Past and ongoing efforts to put women’s experiences and agency on the agenda of international security institutions are excellent examples.²⁵ This type of less explicit politicization also dominates in our case studies of donor-funded responses to sexual violence in DRC and Sierra Leone.

2.2. Depoliticization

Depoliticization describes processes of excluding groups/collectives/classes of people, relationships, histories, and experiences from the realm of the political.²⁶ A famous example of depoliticization is provided in James Ferguson’s work on ‘anti-politics’ in a 1970s rural development project in Lesotho, which was funded and designed by the World Bank and the Canadian International Development Agency.²⁷ The project was based on extensive donor-commissioned research, which depicted Lesotho as a ‘stagnated agricultural peasant economy which required only the correct technical inputs’.²⁸ These studies ignored available evidence that Lesotho was, in fact, an economy and society organized around migrant labour in Apartheid South African mines. Ferguson argues that these realities were not allowed to influence the development project and, in effect, became obscured, because they did not match donors’ mandate to promote rural development and would have drawn attention to problems for which there were no technical fixes.

Yet, as already indicated above, politicization and depoliticization are not exactly opposites but rather work together. Some closure is always already a by-product of politicization. For example, openings usually suggest that newly discovered problems, ideas, or solutions are more pressing or suitable than what had been done and considered before.²⁹ We see this, for example,

²³Ibid.

²⁴Palonen, “Four Times of Politics,” 184; Bates, Jenkins and Amery, “(De)politicisation,” 256.

²⁵Veit, “Feminism in the Humanitarian Machine”; Engle, *The Grip*.

²⁶Jenkins, “The Difference Genealogy Makes,” 160.

²⁷Ferguson, *The Anti-Politics Machine*, chapter 6.

²⁸Ferguson, *The Anti-Politics Machine*, 58.

²⁹Palonen, “Four Times of Politics,” 184.

in the ways in which international security policy discourse has depicted wartime rape and sexual violence ‘as the “worst crimes you can imagine”’,³⁰ drawing attention away from other types of violence and their victims.³¹

2.3. *Technicalization*

Technicalization describes how problems become workable in a concrete and specific way.³² Moreover, it affects the perception and understanding of a problem, often to the extent that the problem becomes closely associated with a certain technique.

Technicalization is also closely linked to politicization and depoliticization: it provides tools for doing professional activities in response to a policy problem, rendering alternative approaches invisible and/or implausible. For example, Roger Mac Ginty illustrates the technical, standardized character of liberal peacebuilding interventions invoking the metaphor of the Swedish furniture chain IKEA, in the sense that ‘the vision of peace is made off-site, shipped to a foreign location, and reconstructed according to a pre-arranged plan’.³³ Professionals often adjust technical templates to different contexts to some extent but largely stick with standardized elements. We see this, for example, in disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration programmes, security sector reforms, and in the ‘medicalization’³⁴ of sexual violence, which has been prominent in eastern DRC. Although technicalized peacebuilding has been widely criticized and it would be difficult to find either a scholar or practitioner who denies the need for context sensitivity, technicalization remains a key feature of peacebuilding, aid, and development practice.³⁵

2.4. *The Analytical Framework*

Each of the above-discussed concepts provides valuable perspectives into the emergence or production of actionable (policy) problems and the marginalization, exclusions, and erasures that are part of any process of problematization. Linked together, attention to politicization, depoliticization, and technicalization provides an analytical framework for identifying and making sense of the specific shapes that policy responses come to take in different contexts, even despite global policy priorities and some similarities

³⁰Engle, *The Grip*, 7.

³¹See also Autesserre “Dangerous Tales,” 215.

³²Li, “Rendering Society Technical.”

³³Mac Ginty, “International Peacebuilding,” 39.

³⁴Ticktin, *The Gendered Human*; Autesserre, “Dangerous Tales,” 216.

³⁵Autesserre, *Peaceland*, 92.

in the empirical phenomena to which they claim to respond. Moreover, the three combined concepts focus attention on processes of problematization rather than on predefined actors (or actor categories). This means that they do not predetermine who is shaping or not shaping these processes, a quality that enables inquiries that are more open-ended.³⁶

As a way to guide research on the shapes of policy responses, we suggest three sets of questions:

- (1) Which problems are dominant, i.e. well recognized and mostly acted upon in a given context? By whom? Who participated in defining and promoting these problems? (politicization)
- (2) How do dominant problems relate to or disconnect from problems raised outside of the specific circles that produced dominant problems? Whose problematizations are silenced, marginalized, excluded, or erased? How, why, and by whom? (depoliticization)
- (3) Which specialized techniques and forms of technical knowledge emerge alongside dominant problems? To what extent do they change or persist over time and in relation to new or revised problems? (technicalization)

In the following, we describe the results of our separate analyses and shared comparative discussions, in which we applied these questions to donor-funded responses to sexual violence in DRC and Sierra Leone since the early 2000s. Our key finding is that initial (de-)politicizations and technicalizations created path dependencies that remained significant over time.

3. How (De)Politicization and Technicalization Shaped Donor-Funded Responses to Sexual Violence in DRC and Sierra Leone

In this second part of the article, we illustrate and discuss how different dominant responses to sexual violence emerged and consolidated over time in DRC and Sierra Leone – focusing on interlinked dynamics of politicization, depoliticization and technicalisation, the key components of the above-proposed framework. In short, dominant responses in DRC have treated sexual violence as mostly conflict-related, associated with the notion of a ‘weapon of war’,³⁷ meaning an ‘organised, tactical or strategic practice of military organisations’.³⁸ By contrast, in Sierra Leone, responses have focused on sexual violence as ‘domestic violence’ against women (and children) related to the ‘continuum of violence’ policy narrative, which gained international momentum alongside the ‘weapon of war’ framing in

³⁶Salehi, “A Processual Framework,” 2.

³⁷Seifert, “The Second Front.”

³⁸Veit and Tschörner, “Creative Appropriation,” 6.

the late 1990s and early 2000s.³⁹ The ‘continuum’ narrative holds that ‘women carry the harms of peacetime discrimination into every exceptional situation [such as war],’⁴⁰ so that peacetime discriminations escalate in war and continue into post-war periods.⁴¹

Initial differences between dominant responses in DRC and Sierra Leone emerged through different politicizations of sexual violence in the early 2000s and have shaped international engagement in both countries ever since. Although some new topics have emerged since then, they have neither fundamentally changed the dominant narrative, nor the established response approaches in either context. In DRC, donors and implementing partners have continued to focus on sexual violence as conflict-related violence in the country’s east, mostly via medical aid for survivors and state-building. In Sierra Leone, responses have largely remained within the framing of sexual violence as ‘domestic violence’ and have maintained a focus on legal reforms and changing women’s and girls’ attitudes and behaviours.

We begin by describing initial processes of politicization and technicalization, then turn to depoliticization, next point out moments of consolidation and expansion and, finally, highlight the persistence of initial framings and approaches.

3.1. ‘Weapon of War’ vs. the ‘Continuum’: The Initial Politicization and Technicalization of Sexual Violence in DRC and Sierra Leone

DRC and Sierra Leone both went through devastating internationalized wars, which involved not only armed groups with transnational connections but also interventions by external actors ranging from regional powers to UN peacekeepers.⁴² Both wars started in the 1990s and have in common that they often directly targeted civilian populations, including different forms of sexual violence.⁴³ However, at the level of established international policy discourse, interest in sexual violence was only emerging when both wars started and, initially, it did not much affect, let alone dominate the international perception of either war.

Although in DRC, UN reports had already highlighted the perpetration of sexual violence by government forces and rebel groups long before the end of the Mobutu Regime in 1997,⁴⁴ there were no specific donor-funded interventions to address it. A humanitarian aid worker deployed to DRC in the late

³⁹See for example Rehn and Johnson Sirlleaf, *Women, War and Peace*, 10–12.

⁴⁰Jaramillo Sierra, “Finding and Losing Feminism,” 457.

⁴¹See also Sierra Leone TRCa, *Witness to Truth*, 106.

⁴²Keen, *Conflict & Collusion*; Stearns, *Dancing in the Glory*.

⁴³See for example Physicians for Human Rights, *War-Related Sexual Violence*; Coulter, *Bush Wives*; Eriksson-Baaz and Stern, “The Complexity of Violence.”

⁴⁴See for example UN Commission on Human Rights, *Situation of human rights in Zaire*, 13–15.

1990s recounted that there was ‘not much talk’ about sexual violence, and no specific strategy to protect women existed at the time.⁴⁵ The mandate of the UN peacekeeping force MONUC, although paying attention to the specific needs of certain groups, such as displaced persons, refugees, and children, contained no single reference to the situation of women or the problem of sexual violence.⁴⁶

The situation was similar in Sierra Leone where the war spread throughout the country in the course of the 1990s. When a brutal invasion hit the capital city Freetown in January 1999,⁴⁷ international media attention for the conflict increased dramatically. Although a 1999 Human Rights Watch (HRW) report highlighted sexual violence, it received much less attention than the use of so-called child soldiers. Media coverage, such as a New York Times piece entitled ‘Sierra Leone Is No Place To Be Young’,⁴⁸ depicted the ‘character’ of wartime violence in Sierra Leone in terms of chaos created by ragged-looking drugged-up boys armed with AK-47s.⁴⁹

It was only in the early 2000s that wartime sexual violence in both countries gained significant international attention – alongside developments in the international policy sphere, most notably the criminalization of sexual violence in the Rome Statute and the adoption of Security Council Resolution 1325. But these developments did not lead to homogeneous responses in DRC and Sierra Leone. Rather, what happened in both countries was that different ‘first responders’ politicized different aspects of sexual violence that already co-existed in international policy debates at the time.

In DRC, the publication of a HRW report in June 2002 paved the way for the politicization of sexual violence as a ‘weapon of war’. Entitled *The War Within the War. Sexual violence against Women and Girls in Eastern Congo*, the report describes the widespread and systematic perpetration of sexual violence by warring parties in North and South Kivu since 1998 and requests a ‘prompt and focused international response’.⁵⁰ Earlier investigations of sexual violence in DRC’s neighbouring country Rwanda informed the analytical angle of the report. A driving force behind it was Alison Des Forges,⁵¹ a US-American historian and human rights activist who had become an internationally known voice for denouncing the 1994 Rwandan massacres as genocide and depicting sexual violence in this context as a political strategy.⁵² Framing sexual violence in DRC as a

⁴⁵Humanitarian aid worker, LT personal communication, 2019.

⁴⁶United Nations Security Council, *Security Council Resolution 1279*.

⁴⁷Human Rights Watch, *Sierra Leone: Getting Away*.

⁴⁸Goodwin, “Sierra Leone Is No Place To Be Young.”

⁴⁹See Hoffman, Danny. “Like Beasts in the Bush,” 302.

⁵⁰Human Rights Watch, *The War within the War*.

⁵¹HRW employee 1, LT personal communication, 2019.

⁵²Human Rights Watch, *Shattered Lives*.

'weapon of war' on Congolese soil in the aftermath of the Rwandan genocide helped to open up a discursive space. It not only fit the UN's Women, Peace, and Security Agenda but also matched the new 'Responsibility to Protect' with its orientation towards preventing international failures, such as the non-prevention of the Rwandan genocide.

Although the HRW report recognizes that rapes in DRC were also perpetrated by 'opportunistic common criminals and bandits',⁵³ sexual violence by civilians was by default excluded from the analysis. In line with HRW's mandate, the focus was on potential war crimes or crimes against humanity,⁵⁴ for which the 'weapon of war' rationale was essential.⁵⁵

Following a successful advocacy campaign, the necessity of fighting sexual violence in DRC entered the agenda of international organizations. In resolution 1468 (2003), the UN Security Council problematized 'sexual violence against women and girls as a tool of warfare' in the context of systematic violations of international humanitarian law in DRC.⁵⁶ In the same year, UN agencies and the DRC government commissioned a joint evaluation mission, which led to the development of the first multiparty intervention strategy.⁵⁷

The 'weapon-of-war' framing defined how donor-funded interventions approached sexual violence in DRC in the following years, connecting it with security-centred statebuilding and the provision of medical aid to survivors in the eastern, war-affected parts of the country.⁵⁸ The UN peacekeeping mission MONUC received a mandate to investigate and address sexual violence used as a 'tool of warfare' to end the impunity of perpetrators violating international humanitarian law, and to ensure the security and protection of women and girls from armed attacks.⁵⁹ Trainings and support to prevent sexual violence were offered to Congolese armed forces and law enforcement agencies in the context of the security sector reforms.⁶⁰ International humanitarian actors began providing medical aid, psycho-social support and legal assistance to female victims, following internationally recognized technical templates labelled 'multi-sectoral framework' or 'multi-sectoral approach'. These projects prioritized dealing with rape-related injuries and preventing the spread of HIV through the distribution of prophylaxis kits to victims, as HIV infections were estimated to be highly prevalent amongst military perpetrators.⁶¹

⁵³Human Rights Watch, *The War within the War*, 2.

⁵⁴HRW employee 2, LT personal communication, 2016.

⁵⁵Buss, "Rethinking 'Rape,'" 150.

⁵⁶United Nations Security Council, *Security Council Resolution 1468*.

⁵⁷Vasseur and others, *Evaluation Conjointe*, 13.

⁵⁸Eriksson-Baaz and Stern, "The Complexity of Violence," 14; Smits and Cruz, "Increasing Security," 2.

⁵⁹United Nations Security Council, *Security Council Resolution 1493*; United Nations Security Council, *Security Council Resolution 1565*; United Nations Security Council, *Security Council Resolution 1592*.

⁶⁰United Nations Security Council, *Security Council Resolution 1756*.

⁶¹Human Rights Watch, *The War within the War*, 2; Employee Belgian embassy Kinshasa, personal communication, 2017.

We now turn to the situation in Sierra Leone where the initial politicization of sexual violence produced different topics and approaches. Beginning in the early 2000s, donor-funded responses mostly framed sexual violence as an effect of the historical and enduring (legal) discrimination of women (and children) in Sierra Leone. In line with the ‘continuum’ narrative, sexual violence became connected to harmful structures and vulnerabilities, such as vulnerability to abuse by intimate partners and family members, which were said to escalate in the context of wartime violence and persist into the post-war period. The chapter on women and sexual violence in the report of the donor-funded Sierra Leone Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), published in 2004, provides a detailed elaboration of this policy narrative for Sierra Leone (alongside explications of how sexual violence had also been used and should be prosecuted as a ‘weapon of war’).⁶²

In many ways, the ‘continuum’ narrative provided the intellectual background for the politicization of sexual violence as ‘domestic violence’ in Sierra Leone. However, the politicization as such began earlier, namely, in the context of British-led security sector reforms, which began before the official end of the war in 2002. A key moment for the politicization of sexual violence in Sierra Leone was when British security sector advisors encountered a ‘domestic violence unit’ created by a female Sierra Leonean police officer, Kadi Fakondo. The British professionals were enthusiastic about Fakondo’s initiative and decided to support it and scale it up.⁶³

According to her own account, police officer Kadi Fakondo first had the idea for setting up her special police unit after she had participated in the UN World Congress on Women in Beijing in 1995⁶⁴ where sexual violence against women had been a key topic.⁶⁵ Then, in 1999, Fakondo became Chief Police Officer in a part of Freetown where many former combatants had settled. Her special unit initially focused on the situation of so-called ‘bush wives’ who had been abducted or (more or less willingly) recruited by armed groups during the war. Many such women and girls were then trained as fighters or spies and/or became (forced) domestic and sex labourers for male fighters.⁶⁶ Fakondo reckoned that women and girls living with newly demobilized combatants in her area had been ‘bush wives’, that they were now struggling to break free, and that ‘[t]his was what caused the high rise in domestic violence cases, which overwhelmed my personnel, and I decided to create a special unit to handle them’.⁶⁷

⁶²Sierra Leone TRCa, *Witness to Truth*, chapter 3; Menzel, “The Pressures of Getting It Right,” 313, 316–7.

⁶³Albrecht and Jackson, *Security System Transformation*, 39; Charley and McCormack, *Becoming and Remaining*, 31–2.

⁶⁴Fakondo quoted in Charley and McCormack, *Becoming and Remaining*, 31.

⁶⁵Engle, *The Grip of Sexual Violence*, 32.

⁶⁶Schroven, *Women after War*, 97; Coulter, *Bush Wives*, 95–134.

⁶⁷Fakondo quoted in Albrecht and Jackson, *Security System Transformation*, 39.

This special police unit attracted the attention of Keith Biddle, a retired British police officer appointed as Sierra Leone's Interim Inspector General of Police to oversee security sector reforms funded by the UK's Department for International Development (DFID).⁶⁸ Biddle appreciated Fakondo's initiative and decided to 'develop it into a bigger unit to handle all sexual offences and cruelty against children'.⁶⁹ A major factor in this decision was likely a recent 'Violence against Women Initiative' in the UK (organized by the Home Office), which focused on responding to 'domestic violence, rape, and sexual assault'.⁷⁰ This British initiative likely prepared the ground for the enthusiasm with which Fakondo's initiative was met.

Fakondo's unit became the first of several Family Support Units (FSUs) in Freetown and throughout the country. A Sierra Leonean physician and activist who had collaborated with Fakondo during this early phase remembered that Biddle frequently referred to St Mary's Sexual Assault Referral Centre in Manchester.⁷¹ This centre had been the first of its kind in the UK, combining forensic examinations with medical services and counselling.⁷² Yet Sierra Leone's FSUs focused on police work, likely because medical services were not part of the security sector reform mandate. FSUs were supposed to collaborate with Rainbo Centres, developed and funded by a different donor, which were to provide free medical services to survivors of sexual violence.⁷³ However, compared to the situation in eastern DRC, medical services for survivors in Sierra Leone remained a fringe and chronically underfunded endeavour.⁷⁴

The focus on sexual violence as a problem of women's protracted marginalization and vulnerability set the tone for subsequent developments in Sierra Leone over the coming years. Responding to sexual violence became a matter of specialized police work, legal reforms, and massive sensitization efforts to educate women and girls – so that they would come to know 'their rights' and change their attitudes and behaviours.

3.2. The Depoliticization of Struggles for Gender Equality in DRC and for Post-War Empowerment in Sierra Leone

Politicization of sexual violence as a 'weapon-of-war' in DRC and as 'domestic violence' in Sierra Leone opened the horizon for donor-funded responses in both contexts. However, these interventions did not step into

⁶⁸Charley and M'Cormack, *Becoming and Remaining*, 18.

⁶⁹Fakondo quoted in Albrecht and Jackson, *Security System Transformation*, 40.

⁷⁰Lovet, Regan, and Kelly, *Sexual Assault Referral Centres*, i.

⁷¹Sierra Leonean physician and activist, AM personal communication, 2016; see also Menzel, *Sexual Violence*.

⁷²Lovet, Regan, and Kelly, *Sexual Assault Referral Centres*, xi.

⁷³Rainbo Initiative, *Strategic Plan 2020-2024*, 4–7.

⁷⁴Menzel, *Sexual Violence*.

a void. Rather, they pushed their own problematizations while ignoring and overriding existing grievances, interpretations, and aspirations when and where they did not match the dominant problems and policy narratives.

In DRC, women's rights groups had been active in fighting sexual violence long before the problem entered the agendas of multi- and bilateral donors.⁷⁵ They had approached sexual violence not only in the context of wartime violence, but – similar to the 'continuum' narrative – as related to gendered inequalities and discriminations deeply rooted in Congolese society. Seeking to break taboos, activists had problematized marriage arrangements without mutual consent and assisted women in getting access to justice in cases of intimate partner violence, denied heritage, or land ownership rights.⁷⁶ With the wars seeming to aggravate the perpetration of sexual and gender-based violence, civil society organizations had also already set up different local support mechanisms for victims.⁷⁷

While officially, donor-funded interventions against sexual violence sought to enhance cooperation and coordination amongst different actors, Congolese civil society organizations experienced the opposite. In one interview, a women's rights activist complained that local initiatives were 'taken hostage' by international entities. They devalued local knowledge or used it to access donor funds but, in her view, did not design appropriate response mechanisms.⁷⁸ As donors denied community-based organizations direct access to international funds,⁷⁹ Congolese activists saw themselves in 'combat' with international organizations.⁸⁰ While some local support groups decided to align with donor priorities to survive, others ceased to exist, caused also by the recruitment of activists into well-paid positions in international organizations and NGOs (e.g. as gender advisers).⁸¹

In Sierra Leone, the focus on 'domestic violence' and female vulnerabilities vis-à-vis husbands and patriarchal families depoliticized divergent or additional grievances, experiences, and aspirations, not least held by those women and girls who had survived the war as members of armed groups. As 'bush wives', they did not only face the problem of domestic/intimate partner violence. Unable to hide their past after the end of the war, many

⁷⁵Human Rights Watch, *The War within the War*, 76–8; Réseau des Femmes pour un Développement Associatif, Réseau des Femmes pour la Défense des Droits et la Paix, and International Alert, *Le Corps de Femmes*.

⁷⁶Veit and Bieker "Love or Crime?"; Women's rights activists Goma and Kinshasa, LT personal communications, 2017.

⁷⁷Women's rights activist Goma, LT personal communication, 2017 ; Employee Belgian Embassy Kinshasa, LT personal communication, 2017; Réseau des Femmes pour un Développement Associatif, Réseau des Femmes pour la Défense des Droits et la Paix, and International Alert, *Le Corps de Femmes*, 56–8.

⁷⁸Women's rights activist Goma, LT personal communication, 2017.

⁷⁹Vasseur and others, *Evaluation Conjointe*, 31.

⁸⁰Women's rights activist Kinshasa, LT personal communication, 2017.

⁸¹Ibid.

struggled to find a husband who would endow them with moral status and provide for them. Wartime experiences, including sexual violence but also active combat branded them as uncontrollable, lusty, and disobedient – certainly no wifely material. ‘In a society where the opportunities for women are few beyond the role of wife and mother, these girls and women became a social dilemma’.⁸² Some preferred to stay with their ‘bush husband’ rather than having no husband at all.⁸³

At the other end of a spectrum of divergent grievances, experiences, and aspirations, there was also the notion that the ‘bush wife’ label – which many international and domestic NGOs took up in search of donor funding⁸⁴ – eclipsed the challenge that female fighters presented to traditional gender norms in Sierra Leone. Anthropologist Anita Schroven describes the case of a former high-ranking female fighter who saw this challenge as providing an opening for women to play a more prominent and empowered role in post-war society. This woman was critical of the ‘bush wife’ label and saw it as a form of pushback into traditional roles.⁸⁵ It is worth noting that this sense of being stuck in traditions is still lamented today, especially among formally educated, self-identifying feminists in the capital city Freetown. As one activist put it in a recent discussion,

[I]f you’re just being yourself, they [other women, even nominal feminist] say, ‘Ah this feminism, you are getting sassy, and you do not care about marriage.’ Is it wrong? What is wrong with being single and choosing your goals and trying to be a better person?⁸⁶

3.3. The Consolidation and Expansion of Initial Stage (De-)Politicization and Technicalization in DRC and Sierra Leone

Throughout the 2000s, DRC and Sierra Leone saw increasing donor interest in sexual violence while initial (de-)politicizations remained key in both contexts. In DRC, donor funded responses to sexual violence as a ‘weapon of war’ became integrated into a broader stabilization programme for the conflict-torn eastern parts of the country, whereas in Sierra Leone, efforts to scale up FSUs became part of a broader rights-based approach, backed by recommendations provided by the Sierra Leone TRC. When and where there were attempts to introduce alternative problematizations, these did not break the persistence of initial-stage (de-)politicizations. Instead, some diverging narratives became absorbed into the dominant approach.

⁸²Coulter, *Bush Wives*, 212.

⁸³*Ibid.*, 219.

⁸⁴Schroven, *Women after War*, 97.

⁸⁵*Ibid.*, 102–3.

⁸⁶Fofana Ibrahim and others, “Making Sense of Girls Empowerment,” 373.

In DRC where fighting continued in the east, attention for conflict-related sexual violence became so overwhelmingly prominent in international media, academia and policy circles that critics denounced it as ‘pornography of violence’,⁸⁷ ‘SGBV (Sexual and Gender Based Violence) tourism’,⁸⁸ ‘fetishization’,⁸⁹ or ‘hype’.⁹⁰ Echoing the initial ‘weapon-of-war’ politicization, the dominant narrative now portrayed sexual violence as a strategic tool used by armed groups to access mineral resources in the wake of ‘Africa’s World War’.⁹¹ Within this limiting frame, racialized and gendered colonial imaginaries played a crucial role and enabled mobilizing donor funding for response activities in eastern DRC, which was depicted as the ‘rape capital of the world’.⁹² Helping female victims of wartime rape became a particularly important and meaningful mission for multi- and bilateral donors. One diplomat on a visit to Goma explained that international attention for conflict-related mass rapes in eastern DRC in 2006 led to parliamentary discussions and internal pressure on her country’s government to act. This was framed as a duty in line with her country’s values.⁹³

In 2007, the UN Security Council requested the development of a mission-wide strategy against sexual violence.⁹⁴ The ‘Comprehensive Strategy on Combating Sexual Violence in the Democratic Republic of the Congo’ was launched two years later. In line with path breaking UN Security Council Resolution 1820 (2008),⁹⁵ which recognized the strategic character of wartime sexual violence and its threat to international security, the ‘Comprehensive Strategy’ situated the fight against sexual violence at the heart of attempts to restore state authority in the conflict-torn eastern provinces. Although the strategy mentioned the need for a context-sensitive problem analysis,⁹⁶ it also predefined ready-made solutions in the form of a wide-ranging technocratic policy agenda. These solutions combined different standardized statebuilding components, such as strengthening the rule of law, security provision, and service delivery.⁹⁷ No single reference to gender or the status of women in Congolese society can be found. One UN employee explained,

[M]any societies have many problems. But if you have a justice system that works, you can contain these problems (...). Solving all the other problems

⁸⁷Stearns, “Are We Focusing.”

⁸⁸Eriksson-Baaz and Stern, “The Complexity of Violence,” 7.

⁸⁹Meger, “The Fetishization.”

⁹⁰Hilhorst and Douma, “Beyond the Hype?”

⁹¹Laudati and Mertens, “Resources and Rape”; Prunier, *Africa’s World War*.

⁹²Eriksson-Baaz and Stern, “The Complexity of Violence,” 12; Mertens and Pardy, “‘Sexurity’ and Its Effects,” 957; Mertens, “Undoing Research,” 663–4, 667.

⁹³Diplomat donor country, LT personal communication, 2017.

⁹⁴United Nations Security Council, *Security Council Resolution 1794*, 5.

⁹⁵United Nations Security Council, *Security Council Resolution 1820*.

⁹⁶Office of the Senior SV Advisor and Coordinator, *Comprehensive Strategy*, 6.

⁹⁷*Ibid.*, 2–3.

in society is another issue, and that is something you [international organisations] have no control over.⁹⁸

What was different from previous humanitarian intervention approaches was that the Comprehensive Strategy sought to engage the Congolese government in fighting sexual violence.⁹⁹

A few months later, the Congolese government launched its own National Strategy against Sexual and Gender-Based Violence.¹⁰⁰ In contrast to the Comprehensive Strategy, the National Strategy incorporated a narrative promoted by Congolese women's rights activists, which conceptualized sexual violence as a recurrent threat to women's lives in the entire country. The National Strategy highlights the inferior status of women, harmful socio-economic and cultural practices, as well as institutional discriminations as causal explanations. In addition to rape, the document problematizes forced prostitution, early marriage, sexual harassment, and domestic violence.¹⁰¹ International responses are criticized for not always reflecting national priorities in the fight against sexual violence.¹⁰² And yet, on the final page, it states that, in the short- and medium-term, the implementation of the National Strategy should be guaranteed through the Comprehensive Strategy.¹⁰³ These contradictions make sense once we consider the limited resources at the hands of the DRC Gender Ministry in charge of implementing the National Strategy.¹⁰⁴ The uneasy alignment with donor agendas likely seemed the only realistic option for pursuing national priorities in fighting sexual violence.

In Sierra Leone after the official end of the war in 2002, the consolidation and expansion of initial (de-)politicization and technicalization took place in the form of a rights-based approach to sexual violence. This approach emerged not so much by design but rather organically and (selectively) inspired by the 'continuum' narrative, as donors were broadening their scope and selecting domestic partners. It envisioned massive social engineering through national legislation to create rights; plus sensitization to make women aware of their rights; and institutional reforms to ensure service delivery/access to justice so that women would actually get their rights.¹⁰⁵

A key document informing this approach was the final report of the Sierra Leone TRC, published in 2004. Based on descriptions of pre-war discriminations

⁹⁸UN employee, LT personal communication, 2017.

⁹⁹Employee UNFPA, LT personal communication, 2016; Vasseur and others, *Evaluation Conjointe*, 13.

¹⁰⁰République Démocratique du Congo, Ministère du Genre, de la Famille et de l'Enfant, *Stratégie Nationale*, 7.

¹⁰¹Ibid., 13–14.

¹⁰²Ibid., 22.

¹⁰³Ibid., 35.

¹⁰⁴Employee Ministère du Genre, Famille et Enfant, personal communication, 2017; Employee Centre de Documentation de l'Enseignement Supérieur, Universitaire et Recherche Kinshasa, LT personal communication, 2017; Hilhorst and Douma "Beyond the Hype?" 89.

¹⁰⁵Denney and Fofana Ibrahim, *Violence against Women*, 6-7; Menzel, "'Without Education,'" 446–7.

that fed into wartime violence against women, the report provided concrete recommendations for legal reforms.¹⁰⁶ Donors and Sierra Leonean activists used these recommendations to put pressure on the Sierra Leone parliament and president. Their lobbying eventually resulted in three ‘Gender Acts’ adopted in 2007 and the ‘Sexual Offences Act’ adopted in 2012, which criminalized various forms of sexual violence as well as underage sex and created inheritance rights for widows.¹⁰⁷

Donor-funded sensitization about women’s rights already began in the early 2000s, well before these laws came into existence.¹⁰⁸ The 50/50-group, an organization of university-educated women in Freetown with connections into rural areas, was founded in 2001 and emerged as a key implementing partner. Donor interest in funding sensitization – mainly campaigns, workshops, and trainings – was massive, and the term ‘50/50’ became known as a shorthand for women’s empowerment throughout Sierra Leone.¹⁰⁹ Domestic violence remained a key focus: men and women were encouraged to view domestic abuse as a crime, and FSUs were portrayed as service deliverers for women (and children) to turn to in case of abuse.¹¹⁰

Yet actual service delivery and access to justice remained scarce from the beginning and have remained so and even deteriorated in the 2010s. In rural areas, people rarely ever had access to a nearby FSU and existing FSUs have been notoriously underfunded – especially since the early 2010s when donor-funded security sector reforms had come to an end and donors expected the Sierra Leone government to assume responsibility and assign regular funds to maintain FSUs. This did not happen, which had drastic effects on service delivery. Although reporting of domestic and other sexual violence has been increasing, most cases never make it to court, because survivors would have to pay police personnel and provide them with materials such as pen and paper, fuel etc. to go about investigating their cases (not even mentioning that, especially in cases of domestic violence, most survivors have nowhere to go).¹¹¹ The exceptions usually involve women who have their own income or can rely on a relatively wealthy and supportive family to assist them in seeing their cases through.¹¹²

Given this situation, some Sierra Leonean activists and professionals in the field of sexual violence became increasingly annoyed with donors’

¹⁰⁶Sierra Leone Truth and Reconciliation TRCb, *Witness to Truth*, 170–6.

¹⁰⁷Denney and Fofana Ibrahim, *Violence against Women*, 6; Schneider, “Partners as Possession,” 139.

¹⁰⁸Schroven, *Women after War*, 103–4.

¹⁰⁹Denney and Fofana Ibrahim, *Violence against Women*, 7.

¹¹⁰Menzel, “Betterment versus Complicity,” 92–5.

¹¹¹Denney and Fofana Ibrahim, *Violence against Women*, 13; Menzel, “Without Education,” 447; Menzel, *Sexual Violence*.

¹¹²Schneider, “Partners as Possession,” 132, 141–2.

preference for funding sensitization rather than service delivery.¹¹³ As the director of a national NGO put it during a conversation in November 2016, ‘Everybody always wants to do sensitization. It is easy. You hold a workshop and print some T-Shirts and then you have assisted 150 people. [...] That is why donors prefer sensitization’.¹¹⁴

3.4. *The Persistence of Once Established Techniques*

Both in DRC and in Sierra Leone, initial (de)politicizations saw challenges and lost some of their appeal over the course of the 2010s. Donor attention shifted to somewhat new topics, which retained notable continuities. Yet in both countries, continuities are most prominent in dominant technical approaches.

Beginning again with DRC, we see that widely publicized findings from a nationwide study, which made headlines in 2011, challenged the notion that sexual violence was primarily a ‘weapon of war’. Drawing on data from a nationwide household survey, the study suggested that civilian sexual violence outnumbered sexual violence by military groups, even in the eastern war zones.¹¹⁵ It introduced statistics according to which 48 women were raped every hour, not just in the east but also throughout the country.¹¹⁶ However, this data achieved little in terms of changing the perception of sexual violence in DRC.¹¹⁷ Paradoxically, it was often used as proof in international media and policy circles to highlight the character and exceptional-ity of rape as a ‘weapon of war’ in eastern DRC.¹¹⁸

Yet, eventually, donor-funded projects began to refer to these empirical findings and especially more development-oriented actors increasingly analysed sexual violence as a problem rooted in society-wide gender norms.¹¹⁹ Their project rationales, however, restructured rather than abandoned the ‘weapon-of-war’ narrative.¹²⁰ They claimed that decades of violent conflict had let to the brutalization of society and to feelings of disempowerment amongst men, resulting in increasing amounts of sexual violence directed towards women. In sum, the war still figured prominently as the causal explanation for sexual violence.

On the technical level, the new notion of sexual violence as a society-wide problem brought about some changes in donor-funded responses. Some projects began to include attempts to reshape gender norms and practices in

¹¹³Menzel, *Sexual Violence*.

¹¹⁴NGO director, AM personal communication, 2016.

¹¹⁵Sweetser and Farzaneh, *Gender Assessment*; Ministère du Genre, de la Famille et de l’Enfant, *Ampleur des violences sexuelles*.

¹¹⁶Peterman, Palermo, and Bredenkamp, “Estimates and Determinants.”

¹¹⁷Kirby, “Ending Sexual Violence”; Mertens and Pardy, “‘Sexurity’ and Its Effects,” 957.

¹¹⁸Mertens “Undoing Research,” 664.

¹¹⁹Hilhorst and Douma, “Beyond the Hype?” 89–90; Mertens and Myrntinen, “A Real Woman Waits,” 10.

¹²⁰Veit and Tschörner, “Creative Appropriation,” 9.

eastern DRC and broadened the targets of socio-economic assistance beyond female victims of sexual violence to include women more generally.¹²¹ In addition, efforts emerged to include men into projects so that they might become allies in the fight against sexual violence committed against women or to change masculine identities.¹²² Building on heteronormative and colonial imaginaries of men as heads of the nuclear family, these newer approaches often reproduced existing gender norms and marginalized experiences of sexual violence of male or non-heterosexual victims.¹²³

It is important to note, however, that such norms-oriented projects remained marginal. Rather than embracing new programmatic orientations, larger interventions predominantly continued applying the same approaches as before. Well-rehearsed statebuilding activities and the provision of medical aid in the east remained the core intervention tools.¹²⁴ Donor representatives and employees of international organizations interviewed during field research in DRC in 2016 and 2017 highlighted structural gender inequality as a main reason for sexual violence, yet defended established intervention practices by referring to shrinking budgets, restricted time frames, limited influence on local dynamics, or a lack of political will on the side of the Congolese government. One interviewee elaborated that focussing on sensitization and behavioural change in the whole country would be desirable, as sexual violence was clearly not only occurring in the context of wartime violence in the east. What discouraged strategic realignment, she stated, was the worry that services offered to victims in the east would end if her country stopped providing assistance.¹²⁵

Now turning to Sierra Leone in the early to mid-2010s, some topical shifts were clearly taking place: especially towards ‘teenage pregnancy’¹²⁶ and ‘early marriage’,¹²⁷ both of which matched emergent global policy trends around Global South girls.¹²⁸ However, these topical shifts did not break with the ‘continuum’ narrative but rather revived it into a direction that appealed to both donors and domestic authorities. At the time, a focus on protecting girls from early sex and marriage promised to be less controversial – both within Sierra Leone society¹²⁹ and between donors and the Sierra Leone government – than the topical alternatives pushed by some Sierra Leonean and transnational activists, such as an explicit focus on abortion or female genital mutilation.¹³⁰

¹²¹Hillhorst and Douma, “Beyond the Hype?” 90.

¹²²Mertens and Myrntinen, “A Real Woman Waits,” 10.

¹²³Ibid.; LGBT activist Goma, LT personal communication, 2016.

¹²⁴Veit and Tschörner, “Creative Appropriation,” 12–15.

¹²⁵Diplomat donor country, LT personal communication, 2017.

¹²⁶Government of Sierra Leone, *Let Girls be Girls*.

¹²⁷Government of Sierra Leone, *National Strategy*.

¹²⁸Moeller, *The Gender Effect*.

¹²⁹See Fofana Ibrahim and others, “Making Sense of Girls Empowerment,” 364–5.

¹³⁰See also Menzel, “Without Education,” 448.

Donors approached these issues with an emphasis on sensitization even though this hardly matched the defined problems. A good example is a UNICEF-commissioned study that became influential in debates around teenage pregnancy.¹³¹ After long descriptions of how protracted poverty in Sierra Leone drove girls into situations leading to abuse and pregnancy, the study states that future efforts needed to focus on five areas, all of which required sensitization. It lists, ‘the promotion of abstinence (especially for the younger teenagers); children’s delayed involvement in sexual activities; correct and consistent use of condoms and other contraceptives; decrease in the number of sexual partners; and increased resistance to sexual pressure’.¹³²

Donors’ preference for sensitization was likely exacerbated by a growing unwillingness on their part to subsidise government funding for service delivery in Sierra Leone. As described in the previous subchapter, FSUs had already come near to collapse after they no longer received donor funding. In 2016, Rainbo Centres – one of the few providers of free medical services to survivors of sexual violence – lost their funding partner, the international NGO International Rescue Committee. Rainbo Centres only survived because of the dedication of their staff, a one-time donation from IrishAid,¹³³ and, eventually, success in the acquisition of donors who clearly share the wider preference for funding sensitization rather than service-delivery. It is telling that Rainbo Initiative now names ‘awareness raising’ as one of its key goals.¹³⁴

In sum, what we see in donor-funded responses to sexual violence in both DRC and Sierra Leone are notable topical and very significant technical continuities since the early 2000s.

4. Concluding Remarks

This article emerged from a comparative observation, namely from the startling non-homogeneity of donor-funded responses to sexual violence in DRC and Sierra Leone, two widely studied cases of conflict and intervention in Sub-Saharan Africa. We, the two authors, had initially expected to find much similarity in our case studies, mostly based on the assumption that dominant international policy narratives and donor priorities would have led to similar responses in both contexts. In the process of exploring our apparently erroneous assumption, we developed a framework for studying the ‘shapes’ (key topics and approaches) of policy responses, which we present and illustrate in this article. Zooming in on processes of politicization, depoliticization, and technicalization allowed us to draw attention to

¹³¹Menzel, “Without Education,” 446.

¹³²Coinco, *A Glimpse*, ix.

¹³³Sierra Leonean physician/activist, interview AM, 2016.

¹³⁴Rainbo Initiative, *Strategic Plan 2020-2024*, 7–10.

the key role of ‘first responders’ in both contexts who drew on different policy narratives around sexual violence that were available in international policy circles in the early 2000s. Topics and especially technical approaches chosen and developed in early donor-funded responses then proved ‘sticky’ – even if and where domestic activists or governments tried to change course. They created path dependencies that have remained relevant until today.

We focused on describing the emergence and persistence of topics and approaches without tackling the exact mechanisms that rendered initial (de)politicizations and technicalizations ‘sticky’. Describing such mechanisms would require detailed ethnographic studies within donor organizations and their respective country offices, which was not the focus of any of our eclectic fieldworks. However, some tendencies that could plausibly contribute to stickiness have already been described in the literature on intervention practices: namely, a tendency on the side of donors to stay in country contexts once they have developed access and made initial investments;¹³⁵ and knowledge hierarchies among donor-employed/commissioned professionals that usually privilege technical over context-specific knowledge.¹³⁶ We suspect that there is a third tendency, which likely contributes to the stickiness of topics and approaches but still requires further research. Donor-employed/commissioned professionals are probably ready to somewhat adjust to country contexts, if only in the sense of adjusting to the specific technical knowledge on selected topics and approaches deemed professionally relevant for the contexts they come to work in. This would mean that, in terms of content, knowledge hierarchies privileging technical knowledge are not necessarily the same everywhere; yet they would only be ‘context-specific’ in the sense of having been shaped by different initial (de)politicizations and technicalizations. Without this third tendency, and given the intense rotation of intervention personnel, we would expect to see much more convergence in donor-funded responses than we have been able to detect, at least in our comparison between responses in DRC and Sierra Leone.

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¹³⁵Krause, *The Good Project*, 28–30; Menzel, “Without Education,” 446–8.

¹³⁶Autesserre, *Peaceland*, 68–96.

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