



**WITNESS
FOR JUSTICE**

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The Invisible Price of War

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Content warning: This piece contains mentions of rape and suicide. Please prioritize your well-being when deciding whether or not to read.

In the Democratic Republic of Congo and Sudan, women and girls pay the invisible price of war. Gender-based violence is being perpetrated against hundreds of thousands of civilians. While rape as a weapon of war is nothing new, it is unconscionable. Silence is complicity: we must not allow them to suffer in silence. We owe it to these women and children to elevate their voices and stories and bear witness to the atrocities being committed.

In April of this year, a child was raped every 30 minutes in eastern DRC.¹ The youngest survivors are toddlers. In the winter months of 2025, children made up an estimated 35% to 45% of victims of gender-based violence. Gang rapes perpetrated by members of warring factions and militias are common.² Many survivors end up pregnant in the midst of displacement and war, forced to mother a child “while still being a child themselves.”³ Since fighting began in 1996 in the DRC, hundreds of thousands have been sexually assaulted, cementing the country’s reputation as “the worst place” to be a woman or a child. The number of assaults is also likely much higher than available estimates due to underreporting.

In Sudan, gender-based violence is also being perpetrated by armed militias and fighters. Chillingly, some Sudanese women are choosing to die by suicide to escape a fate of rape. More than 130 women died in a mass suicide last



year.⁴ Imagine being so certain you will be raped that you choose to die rather than be violated. A Sudanese woman poignantly asks: “Where is the world? Why don’t you help us?”⁵

US funding cuts have only made the situations in these two African countries more dire. Without adequate funding, resources such as post-rape kits, HIV prevention, and mental health support are lacking. There just isn’t enough to go around.

Women and girls everywhere are taught from an early age to be hyper-vigilant. Almost every woman has a story about being sexually harassed and/or assaulted. In the United States, that number is 81% of women.⁶ It’s always a dangerous time to be a woman: We can never fully let our guard down, even for a second. As a woman living in the United States who already fears gender-based violence, I can’t imagine being subject to the sexual violence that Congolese and Sudanese women and children are enduring. Their trauma stems not only from the war, but from violence against their bodies and souls. For each woman, “sexual violence looms over her head like a sword waiting to drop. The bodies of women become battlegrounds.”⁷

As I prepared to write on this issue, I asked myself: why does sexual violence skyrocket during wartime? I learned that sexual violence is a calculated act of cruelty because perpetrators know it will cost the victims everything.⁸ Beyond harming a woman’s physical and mental health, surviving rape carries the weight of ostracization. In many communities, women who survive rape are blamed and disowned by their families and partners. Unmarried women face men unwilling to marry them due to the sexual violence they experienced. Without women, communities fall apart, regardless of whether or not the war ends. In this way, perpetrators ensure the people they are waging war against are shattered.

The United Church of Christ observes Thursdays in Black, a movement to raise awareness about gender-based violence.⁹ As you take the time to learn more about the gender-based violence

crisis, I offer these resources as a starting point.

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