

## **“Sexual Violence as a Weapon of War - Mental Public Health Impact and the Influence on Peace Building in Rwanda”**

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**Introduction:** Changes in the nature of warfare in recent decades have increased the effects on the civilian part of society, particularly vulnerable groups such as women and girls. In many armed conflicts, sexual violence is used as a strategic weapon of war impacting on the psychosocial wellbeing of individual victims and society.

**Objectives:** To analyze the long-term mental health impact of sexual violence as weapon of war after the genocide in Rwanda and identify the interdependency of psychological trauma related to sexual violence and the process of reconciliation and peace building.

**Methods:** The thesis is based on a review of relevant literature regarding the topics of sexual violence as a weapon of war, sexual violence related mental trauma and the impact of trauma on the process of peace building.

**Results:** Sexual violence was used as a weapon of war on a massive scale during the Rwandan genocide. Today, more than 15 years after the atrocities took place, victims, following generations, and the society as a whole still suffer from the long-term psychological consequences of experienced traumatic events.

Research in Rwanda and similar contexts have revealed that prevalence of psychological trauma can diminish people's willingness to participate in the process of peace building (Pham et al., 2004), be less open to reconciliation (Bayer et al., 2007), and favor violent over non-violent conflict resolutions (Vinck et al., 2007).

**Conclusion:** Sexual violence used as a weapon of war impacts on the psychological wellbeing of individuals and their ability to participate in the process of reconciliation. Sexual violence in conflict and related mental trauma has to be considered as an important factor influencing post-conflict settings as it can contribute to the cycle of violence and endanger the process of sustainable peace building.

Therefore national and international efforts have to be strengthened to fulfill the obligations of the United Nations Conventions regarding the rights and protection of women and further aim for comprehensive trauma healing by including mental health components into their interventions and consider this as it relates to the process of peace building.

**Key words:** sexual violence, conflict, weapon of war, Rwanda, trauma, peace building.

