The ongoing war in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) has been marked by almost unimaginable atrocities, including millions killed and displaced in a war that seven nations have participated in. Most horrifically, sexual assault has become a major part of the violence with rape being so systematic and brutal that doctors in the DRC are now classifying wounds inflicted by rapists as combat injuries. Up to one in three Congolese women living in conflict affected areas have been raped and in spite of the official ending of hostilities, reported sexual abuse and domestic violence has tripled in the last year in some provinces. Despite the dedicated work of many Congolese NGOs and various international groups, the issue of sexual assault and domestic violence remains a serious crisis in the DRC. Agencies such as the UN, which are theoretically committed to gender equality, should be devoting huge resources towards combating sexual violence. Yet there have been only rhetorical denunciations against impunity and calls for accountability with little effective effort. The all too common attitude in the DRC and the world at large is that rape and gender violence should be left for women to address while men address the important issues of “real” politics. Rape, of course, is not a women’s issue. Addressing sexual violence is intrinsically important for everyone; and ending it means confronting the negative gender relations which lead to rape and domestic abuse.
The Democratic Republic of the Congo, and the east of the country in particular, has been described as the “Rape Capital of the World,” and the prevalence and intensity of all forms of sexual violence has been described as the worst in the world. Human Rights Watch defines sexual violence as “an act of a sexual nature by force, or by threat of force or coercion,” and rape as “a form of sexual violence during which the body of a person is invaded, resulting in penetration, however slight, of any part.”

Military-macho violence is a militarized view of masculinity that associates manliness with the excessive use of aggression, force and violence. Weapons are used as status symbols and to acquire social and economic hierarchy by employing power over unarmed civilians. Soldiers who exude any qualities deemed to be feminine are seen as weak and often end up being attacked and ostracized. Sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) often does not stop when the war ends, and therefore continues to undermine long-term security and stability. Forced prostitution during and after the conflict has contributed to the development of human trafficking networks internally in Uganda and across the East African region. In a population-based survey of human rights abuses in eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo mining towns, women reported that the most common perpetrators of rape and
forced marriage were civilians, including mining bosses, neighbors, and family members.6 Armed actors were among the least-cited perpetrators of sexual violence in these areas.