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Psychosocial and theological approaches to the mental health of student war victims in the Eastern Democratic Republic of Congo



AUTEURS



This article is the result of collaboration among various experts from complementary fields. The authors of this article, Sarah Obotela, Prince Asani, David Gaston, Abigael Lihamba, and Fidèle Manatshitu Kabwe, each bring their respective expertise to the understanding of the issues related to the mental health of students who are war victims in the Eastern Democratic Republic of Congo. Sarah Obotela, a trained sociologist and the initiator of this project, brings an essential sociocultural perspective to the understanding of war trauma among students. Prince Assani and David Gaston, both communicators, contribute to the dissemination of knowledge and raising awareness about the mental health of war victims. Abigael Lihamba, a building engineer, provides technical, practical, and logistical expertise in research on the mental health of war-affected students. Finally, the expertise of Fidèle Manatshitu Kabwe, an agricultural engineer, allows for the exploration of the complex links between the mental health of students and environmental factors. By combining their knowledge, they hope to contribute to the creation of innovative and effective solutions to support the mental health of this vulnerable population.

ABSTRACT

This article examines psychosocial and theological approaches aimed at supporting the mental health of students war victims in the Eastern Democratic Republic of Congo. The research was conducted in two distinct phases. The first phase consisted of a conference-debate aimed at identifying students traumatized by conflicts and how these traumas manifest, while the second phase focused on addressing the needs of these students by collecting lengthy testimonies from each victim present at the conference. This article explores the results of these two phases and offers recommendations for supporting the mental health of war-affected students in this specific region.





The wars in the East of the Democratic Republic of Congo have caused devastating consequences for the population, particularly for students who have been exposed to psychological trauma. According to alarming statistics from the United Nations, this region has been the scene of prolonged armed conflicts, with violent clashes, massive population displacements, and widespread human rights violations. Students, as a vulnerable group, have suffered the devastating effects of these wars, jeopardizing their mental health.

A study conducted by the United Nations on 'Conflicts in the Democratic Republic of the Congo: Causes, impact, and implications for the Great Lakes region' revealed that, in addition to macroeconomic and sectoral effects, conflicts have also had devastating effects from a social and human perspective. Beyond the high number of deaths and displaced persons, wars have caused enormous social and psychological trauma to women, young girls, and young men who have endured physical and psychological atrocities, including rape, torture, humiliation, and alienation from their communities. Young girls have disproportionately been victims of rape, while children have faced more deprivation than the rest of the population. These upheavals have become commonplace among students from this region of the Republic, threatening their ability to continue their studies and build a better future. Many of them having become orphans too soon or having witnessed atrocities in their respective environments, seek a new haven in areas deemed calm. Thus, the city of Kisangani, more than 700 kilometers from Beni, the epicenter of the massacres, appears to be a perfect destination for them.

To address this critical situation, it is essential to adopt a holistic approach that integrates both psychosocial and theological perspectives. Psychosocial approaches emphasize understanding the social, psychological, and cultural factors that influence individuals' mental health, while theological approaches recognize the role of spirituality and faith in the healing and resilience of these victims. In this study, we focus on psychosocial and theological approaches to support students war victims in the Eastern Democratic Republic of Congo. By combining knowledge derived from social psychology, theology, and local realities, we seek to better understand the specific challenges these students face and propose appropriate interventions for their support.

OBJECTIVES

The objective of this study is to support students living with the traumas of war in the Eastern Democratic Republic of Congo. More specifically, we explore psychosocial and theological approaches that can contribute to improving their mental well-being and fostering their resilience. First, we examine the psychosocial factors that influence the mental health of student war victims. Physical violence, forced displacement, loss of loved ones, and precarious living conditions have a profound impact on their mental health. We demonstrate how these factors influence the prevalence of mental disorders such as post-traumatic stress disorder, anxiety, and depression among students. Second, we present the perceptible role of faith in Jesus Christ in the healing and resilience of students who are victims of war. We believe that this faith can provide emotional support, a source of meaning and comfort in times of distress, as it is written in the Gospel according to John 14:1 (New Living Translation): 'Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God; trust also in me.' Next, we identify the psychosocial and theological interventions that have proven effective in other post-conflict contexts and could be adapted to meet the specific needs of students in the Eastern DRC. This may include approaches such as individual and group therapy, art therapy, relaxation techniques, as well as faith-based interventions centered on Jesus Christ. Finally, we assess the effectiveness of these interventions by collecting qualitative and quantitative data from participating students. We seek to measure changes in their mental well-being, resilience, and ability to continue their studies despite the trauma they have experienced. The results of this study will help identify best practices, guide policies and support programs for students who are war victims in the Eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo. In summary, the objective of this study is to explore psychosocial and theological approaches to support students who are victims of wars in the Eastern DRC, by identifying the specific challenges they face and proposing tailored interventions to help them recover and rebuild their lives.



METHODOLOGY



The achievement of the objectives of this study was made possible through a mixed research approach, both qualitative and quantitative. This approach allows us to gain an in-depth understanding of the experiences of student war victims in the Eastern Democratic Republic of Congo, while also collecting measurable data to assess the effectiveness of the proposed interventions.

PHASE 1 - CONFERENCE WITH SPECIALISTS

In this first phase, we held a conference with experts in psychology, sociology, and theology who extensively commented on the traumas of war and the psychological, social, and spiritual consequences of armed conflicts. The conference was interactive between the experts and the student victims, some of whom took the opportunity to express their problems in order to find a solution.

PHASE 2 - CONFERENCE WITH TESTIMONIES FROM THE VICTIMS

In the second phase of our research, we organized a second conference, this time focused on the testimonies of victims. The speakers first presented specific psychosocial and theological approaches that could help student victims overcome the traumas of war. Then, the victims themselves were invited to share their testimonies publicly.



This approach allowed victims to share their personal experiences, emotions, challenges, and resilience strategies. The testimonies have been a powerful means of raising awareness about the realities faced by student war victims. The speakers also facilitated interactive discussions, allowing participants to ask questions, exchange ideas, and reflect together on the implications of these testimonies. By using the conference method, we were able to create a safe and open space for student war victims and specialized speakers.

This has promoted the sharing of information, awareness, empathy, and mutual understanding. The conferences were recorded and documented to ensure the accuracy of the information and to facilitate further analysis of the collected data.



Indeed, war generates numerous diseases for those who survive it. It is a highly traumatic experience that one cannot go through without suffering psychological trauma.

IMPLEMENTATION OF THE FIRST AND SECOND PHASES

CHAPTER 1 : UNDERSTANDING WAR TRAUMA



The first phase of the research was conducted through a conference-debate gathering students affected by the wars in the Eastern DRC. The main objective of this phase was to identify the students traumatized by the conflicts and how these traumas manifest themselves.



SYMPTOMS





According to clinical psychologist Mr. Norbert NONG, the psychological symptoms of war trauma manifest as forgetfulness, difficulty concentrating, lack of logic in thinking, presence of negative thoughts, immediate reactions, lack of tolerance, difficulty relaxing, appearance of nightmares or bad dreams, suicidal thoughts, lack of concentration, fear, anger, shame, stress, guilt, pressure, and anxiety.



War is a terrifying event and tends to have a negative impact on the psychosomatic and social life of Congolese soldiers who have experienced it; Congolese soldiers who have lived through war tend to display symptoms including the reliving of certain horrific scenes, irritability, mood disorders, and distrust. As a result, they find themselves in a state of post-traumatic stress.



The sociologist, Professor Gaspard BOLEMA LOSAILA, believes that everyone is traumatized, though to varying degrees. This can manifest as impatience, intolerance, authoritarianism, lack of consideration for others, lack of self-consideration, loneliness, the weakening of main morals and ethics, a feeling of being discriminated against, feeling despised, or neglected by society at all times, the feeling of revenge, the effort to harm those who attack us, a loss of affection and protection.



Regarding theological symptoms, Professor Reverend Pastor Albert Aimé Kabwe believes that victims exhibit symptoms such as: disgust for meditating on the



RESULTS

The results of this phase revealed that many students, if not all, show symptoms of post-traumatic stress, anxiety, hatred, and depression.



The testimonies highlighted the extent of the traumas experienced, and the forced displacements. Experiences such as sexual violence, abductions, and the loss of loved ones have had significant repercussions on the mental health of students, compromising their well-being, academic focus, and future.

CHAPTER 2 : IDENTIFICATION OF THE TRAUMATIZED

The second phase of the research focused on identifying traumatized students. After the experts' presentations, we collected detailed testimonies about the trauma experienced by the victims. These testimonies were edited in a way that respects the anonymity of the participants and preserves their dignity.



ETERNAL TEARS

You and I had just crossed an important milestone in our academic journey. Our success in G1, after two years of separation, solidified our bond. The complicity was intense; who did not know that? In the third row, we were always smiling, often dressed in pink and white, our favorite colors. The main ambition was to become doctors in medicine. That day, the department secretary announced our success. Our embrace, the intonation of your joyful screams, the scent of your perfume, told me nothing of what awaited me. Yet, for us the future was not veiled. At the end of each interview, we felt like we had illuminated everything, broken down some barriers, and made progress one step forward. Thus our determination was born, which made us different from the other girls in the audience. I loved you. I still love you. Enduring a grim spectacle of which you were the subject was unthinkable. The righteous live by faith; it is through faith that they triumph.

TEMOIN

1

But why does death not require faith from us long before it enters our lives? Since uncertainty is inherent to man, our lives might be limitless. Unfortunately for us humans, death is our most certain destiny. Each birthday is one year less, one step closer to death. We met again at 2 PM that day. We were discussing how to realize our idea: a banquet. Eating, not plantains this time, not fufu, not beans. Instead, going to a supermarket - we who typically frequented makeshift restaurants twice a day. You wanted it so much. Being generous, you already had the guest list. And as it could have honored us, you suggested the dress code: attire and color. In the meantime, nostalgia overflowed from your heart. You kept me updated on your trip to Oicha to greet your parents. Your dad was asking for you; you were his only leaving, you left me your share; we went to the tailors with our fabrics. I was busy organizing I had never imagined, not even for a single moment, that it would be painful. I smiled when on the phone that you would return in a few days. More or less 60 kilometers from Butem death would brutally tear you away from the living. Heartless men, coming from the forest, Your death was of unbearable savagery. My eyes still shed a few drops of tears every time it. It is a friend who, during his wanderings, discovered your head hanging on a tree branch. away lay your body... not really your body but your toes, your fingers, and your intimacy. The other parts have never been found until now. This is what your mother explained to me a few months after the burial...

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TEMOIN

2

perpetrated by ADF-NALU* terrorists coming from Bukavu in South Kivu. The transfer was a source of satisfaction for us, as it allowed the family to join him without much effort. Indeed, Butembo and OICHA being close regions, it took us two hours of travel to reunite with our dad. Oh! What a real pleasure it was to see our whole family gathered again around a dinner. This family communication was the moment we had been missing the most.



The whole family regained the affection of dad. Our mom became young again, smiling and full of hope; an attitude produced by the constant presence of our dad. When we were children, dad's presence had brought unmatched motivation that propelled our school results. Not having yet benefited sufficiently from our dad's presence, he then informed us of a new service assignment awaiting him. Every time the service needed him, it was a worry for the whole family; OICHA is part of the triangle of death where the activity of the ADF is horrifyingly frightening. During such an assignment, anything is possible, as armed attackers are constantly reported. This was our motivation for interceding for dad.

Usually our dad comes home at 8 am after his shift. However, on that day, it was not the case. Meanwhile, amidst deep concern, we were learning about clashes involving deaths and injuries between the army and the rebels. We were thus forced to search in the morgues and hospitals of the area to find our dad. After several searches, we finally found him in critical condition, shot in the leg, dad could no longer walk without the use of crutches. That's how I became the son of a disabled soldier unable to fulfil his responsibilities as a family father...

*Allied Democratic Front – National Army for the Liberation of Uganda

THE PATH OF VENGEANCE

Prince, a student at the Faculty of Social Sciences at the University of Kisangani, comes from Mangina, the village of his grandmother, where he is used to spending his holidays. After obtaining his high school diploma, he goes there as usual and finds his grandmother, his uncle, his uncle's wife, and his cousins in the field located about a hundred meters from the house. Three days after his arrival, while Prince and his entire family are in the field, his paternal uncle asks him to go fishing a few meters away from his grandmother's field.

TEMOIN
3



Prince was so happy to reunite with his extended family, but alas! It would not last. Prince's nightmare begins when he goes fishing with his uncle. From a distance, they hear gunshots coming from the direction where his grandmother and the rest of the family are. It was the first incursion of terrorists into his village. Worried, they decide to stop fishing to join their family and make sure that everything is okay.

As they approach the house, cries of distress reach their ears, fear fills the stomach, feet seem to lose touch with the ground. Prince and his uncle understand that their family is being beheaded. Powerless to support their family, the survival instinct forces them to hide under a tree located a few meters from the scene of the tragedies. After total silence, Prince and his uncle decide to come out of hiding. The damage was so enormous that only tears could express approximately what had just happened. Lifeless bodies drenched in blood and houses reduced to ashes. The ADF has no mercy during its operations. Deeply affected by the unexpected and tragic death of his grandmother and the rest of his family, Prince harbors thoughts of revenge every day. His behavior becomes more and more strange and his intention to join the army takes shape, which is how in 2023 he joined my reserve.



TEMOIN

FROM MOURNING TO HOPE

In 2018, I embarked on a six-month trip to Wicha to visit my older brother. This holiday was supposed to be filled with joy and unforgettable moments, but fate had decided otherwise. One dark night, the rebels broke into my brother's house, saying in a grim voice, "We don't need anyone but you, but you." Despite the pleas and multiple attempts by my brother's family to dissuade them, the rebels remained adamant. That night, they kidnapped my brother, leaving him behind, bathed in a pool of blood. In the morning, the population made a heartbreaking discovery: the lifeless body of my dear brother, abandoned a few kilometers from his home. The news of his death hit us hard, plunging our hearts into deep sorrow.

Exhausted from our strength and even lacking the strength to cry out, we were all there, the conference host, the speakers, and the participants, listening to each victim with tears in their eyes crying out the atrocities they experienced. Analyzing the testimonies allowed us to highlight the specific needs of student victims of war in the East of the Democratic Republic of Congo. Psychosocial approaches were favored to provide comprehensive support to students, including interventions such as individual and group therapy, art therapy, relaxation techniques, and resilience-building activities.

Theological approaches were integrated to meet the spiritual needs of the students, taking into account the importance of faith and spirituality in this region. Spiritual counsellors were involved to provide emotional and spiritual support to students, paying particular attention to healing inner wounds.

“ The mental health of students war victims in the Eastern Democratic Republic of Congo is a major concern that requires multidimensional approaches. ”



CONCLUSION:

The results of this study underscore the importance of psychosocial and theological approaches to support these students in their healing and rebuilding process. Psychosocial approaches, such as individual and group therapy, art therapy, relaxation techniques, and resilience-building activities provide effective tools to help students overcome trauma and develop adaptive mechanisms in the face of stress. These approaches also promote the creation of a supportive and solidarity-filled environment among students, thereby strengthening their collective resilience. At the same time, theological approaches recognize the importance of the spiritual dimension in the healing process. By integrating spiritual counselors and addressing questions of faith and spirituality, these approaches offer a space for emotional support and students' search for meaning, contribute to restoring hope, promoting reconciliation, and



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