



**Victims, Perpetrators, or Moral Agents  
Children and Youth Survivors of the War  
in the Democratic Republic of Congo**

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*It's painful. She was in the eastern part of the Congo in the village called Kitanda. One day there was this war between Mayi Mayi and soldiers. One day the soldiers broke into their house. They found her with her mother. Four soldiers started raping the mother. She was no longer strong, and they killed her. And after killing the mother they started raping her again. So as they were raping her she also lost her consciousness and some people just came and picked her and took her to the*

*hospital in Kabongo. She says she was not even able to walk and could not even speak. And she did not have food. So just people of goodwill would go and see her and bring her some food and they really took care of her until one day a certain father felt pity on her. He said, I will take you with me to Kamina and go stay with me. So they came here. They were staying with that Papa. He also got a disease and he passed away. So she started staying all alone. By good luck she fell into the hands of UMCOR. So the UMCOR – ONG started taking care of her and she is even able to go to school and do things and when she remembers her story she cries.*

*-- testimony of a girl witness to violence against women in Kamina, Democratic Republic of Congo, September 30, 2009<sup>1</sup>*

*As a former Mayi Mayi militia I could see that those were crimes. As a criminologist I want to detect how crimes are perpetrated by different people, and I want to go and solve crimes and to help people to avoid crimes.*

*--a former Mayi Mayi follower, September 29, 2009*

Violence against women and children is a weapon of war in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and elsewhere.<sup>2</sup> Stories about the rape and torture of girls and women in the war in

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<sup>1</sup> This girl and thirteen others referenced in this paper are part of a program called The Ambassador Girl's Education Program, initiated by the United Methodist Committee on Relief with additional funding from USAID.

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the DRC were reported by The New York Times as early as 2003.<sup>3</sup> International concern about violence against women as a weapon of war in DRC has gathered momentum through media exposure on programs hosted by Oprah Winfrey<sup>4</sup> and Bill Moyers.<sup>5</sup> Most recently, Nick Kristof has published columns from the hot zone that still simmers in eastern DRC's Kivu provinces, highlighting the problem of rape in the New York Times.<sup>6</sup> Secretary of State Hillary Clinton visited the area on August 11, 2009, and declared responding to violence against women to be a priority for USAID and the diplomatic corps in Kinshasa. In these stories, the victims are women and girls; the perpetrators are men.

This crisis of the war on women in DRC victimizes children in multiple ways, and food scarcity feeds its flames. Culpability for perpetuating a system organized around rape and torture as a social strategy lies with power brokers who benefit from the war, for whom food is not

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<sup>3</sup>Reports of rape as a weapon of war in the DRC go back to 2003. The first *New York Times* articles highlighting rape include Marc Lacey, "War is Still a Way of Life for Congo's Rebels," November 21, 2002. The first news cycle begins with Somini Sengupta, "Congo's Warring Factions Leave a Trail of Rape," June 9, 2003; "U.N. Says Congo Rebels Carried Out Cannibalism and Rape," January 13, 2003; Marlise Simmons, "Court Likely to Take Up Congo First," July 17, 2003; "Helping Abused Women in the War," June 12, 2003; Somini Sengupta, "Innocence of Youth is Victim of Congo War," June 23, 2003; Felicity Barranger, "French Proposal for U.N. Force to Halt Congo Strife Gets Support," May 29, 2003; "Aid Workers Report Thousands of Rapes," November 6, 2003; "Women in Congo," June 30, 2003; Daniel Bergner, "The English Lesson," September 28, 2003; Marc Lacey, "A Former Child Soldier Fights Her Memories," August 30, 2003.

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AeEbnBMET2g>.

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VeMkMIXk3NM>.

<sup>6</sup> New York Times, *the Grotesque Vocabulary in Congo*, February 10, 2010 retrieved from <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/02/11/opinion/11kristof.htm>.

scarce.<sup>7</sup> A child's resistance that undercuts the power of violence against women begins first with the girl's continued will to eat and drink and second with her desire for education. Building on these primary acts of resistance, advocates seek to stand in solidarity with the girls and make a space for discussion and a change in social attitudes and behavior towards the girls.

First, caveats: rape as a means of humiliating the conquered is not unique to the war in DRC. Rape occurs in the violence in other countries within Africa; rape occurs in war on other continents than Africa.<sup>8</sup> However, the forms of torture associated with rape in the war in DRC add horror to the tragedy. When I contextualize the problem of rape and torture in the DRC, I take two risks: first, I disadvantage the DRC by inadvertently reinforcing stereotypes of the DRC as a uniformly savage country, "the most dangerous country in the world,"<sup>9</sup> obscuring the many wonderful, peaceful, ordinary people who live there, and second, I potentially deemphasize the important task of addressing similar instances of rape in other countries. Understanding the particular history and dynamics of rape and torture in the DRC, however, enables local and global advocates to better respond to communities and individuals as they struggle to resist, respond, and reduce violence against women and children in that country.

The data for this discussion comes from interviews I conducted in Kamina, DRC in January 2008 and October 2009 as part of a research project with the working title "Where's

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<sup>7</sup> UN Secretary General, UN Expert Panel Reports, 12 April 2001, retrieved from <http://www.un.org/News/dh/latest/drcongo.htm>.

<sup>8</sup>"Ban calls for independent inquiry into rape as weapon in African wars," UN News Centre, 7 August, 2009, <http://www.un.org/apps/news/story.asp?NewsID=31710&Cr=rape&Cr1=ki-moon>, retrieved March 24, 2010.

<sup>9</sup> Tim Butcher, *Blood River: a Journey to Africa's Most Broken Heart*, London: Grove Press, 2007.7

the Peace to Keep?’ Peacemaking Practices of the Luba Methodist Congolese in Kamina, DRC.”

This ethnographic project seeks to illumine the stories of indigenous Congolese persons who have worked before, during and through the war to build the peace of their country. I have identified seven peacemaking strategies during these interviews that the Luba Congolese themselves have engaged: calling on Biblical and Luba traditions of peacemaking, such as the Beatitudes and the story of the “white lime of peace”; organizing support for “widow and orphans,” the outcasts of society; rebuilding the infrastructure, including building stable, fired brick houses, schools, churches, and hospitals, signifying hope for a stable society; organizing care for internally displaced people by distributing indigenous and international aid; engaging in conflict transformation with the Mayi Mayi militias in peaceful areas that were not part of the war zone; creating missions of support and reconciliation for war torn families and congregations in the war zone; and finally, encouraging the presence of persons from the United States and Europe as a way of signifying that peace has come. During this research Congolese women identified a need for peace for women by using the resources of the project to address gender-based violence, in the war and in the society in general. These stories are the positive stories of self-determination that never enter the newspaper. Supporting Congolese women who are addressing the problem contributes to building peace for women, children and men in the DRC.

### *Silence and Shame of Rape*

In the DRC, as elsewhere in the world, the tragedy of violence against women reverberates in intrapsychic, familial, social, cultural, economic relationships. Girls and families

are ashamed and silenced when rape occurs, both because the girl and her family experience an intrapsychic sense of violation and contamination and because a girl's economic worth in marriage has now declined. While she may marry, the groom's family is no longer obligated to pay the bride price that once could be obtained. So deep is the sense of dishonor to the family that many girls are shunned or ostracized by their families and community members. While church leaders easily talk about the need to change the behavior of male perpetrators, and actively seek to do so from the pulpit, they may find it difficult to empathize with women who have experienced rape. They may not quickly resonate with the language that the perpetrator's vicious acts dishonor him, not the girl and her family. The idea that the church should provide compassion for the suffering of a girl or woman is relatively new and contrary to assumptions embedded even in ecclesial culture. For example, even though the Methodist response usually emphasizes changing the violent behavior of men little attention to empathetic care for women, an non-Methodist ecclesial leader who otherwise has an extraordinary record as a peacemaker quickly assumed that by addressing violence against women, our project sought to teach girls how to reduce their sexual attractiveness to men. The "culture of silence" around rape makes the complexities of violence against women in the DRC difficult to systematically explore. From my hundred hours of interviewing Congolese about their peacemaking practices, the following picture emerges.

### *Rape and Combatants in War*

The link between rape and food scarcity is strong and interactive. In the DRC soldiers historically go unpaid. When their money runs out, they must coerce villagers into feeding them. When the village food supply runs low, violence, including rape, becomes the soldiers' means to eat.

Women in my interviews report that as girls, they feared rape during the lootings that regularly occurred in the DRC under the Mobutu regime. Mobutu Sese Seku, the thirty-seven year dictator who was deposed in 1997, used the Congolese military as his personal "Force Publique." (The colonial ruler King Leopold of Belgium created the Force Publique, a regiment of local Congolese police who used violence and torture to impose Leopold's labor requirements on the Congolese population.) The Congolese military, "Mobutu soldiers," looted the population during times of political instability. Early on looting by the military helped Mobutu control the population by robbing them of food, homes and material goods, though in the early 1990s military lootings were organized to destabilize the Mobutu regime. Looting benefited individual military officers and men—Congolese officers enriched themselves by pocketing funds intended for food and supplies for soldiers; the soldiers reaped the rewards of the pillage, including food and goods, that they collected. In the melee of looting, girls feared being raped by the marauding soldiers. Families in Kamina, the place of my research, were particularly subject to looting because they lived twenty kilometers from the largest military base in the DRC.

Culturally, the power to loot became associated with the military uniform. Now this power is assumed by almost all Congolese combatant forces. (The exceptions include

Zimbabwean, Namibian and Angolan forces, observed to be well-disciplined.) When Laurent Kabila gained governmental control in 1997, Congolese soldiers did not benefit from his rise to power as they expected, either because the Congolese officers pocketed national funds designated for support for the soldiers or because insufficient funds were designated by the national government. The population continued to fear the Congolese military, “Kabila soldiers,” as they were now known. In addition, new forces appeared that terrified the population.

In 1998 Rwanda invaded Congo, with the aid of Uganda and Burundi. Girl witnesses from the eastern Congo report watching “rebels” break into their homes. Though each girl’s story is different in detail, they contain common elements: children were forced to watch as soldiers beat and raped their mothers and oldest sisters, butchered babies with machetes, killed their fathers unless the men were able to escape, and often forced the adult family members to eat the cooked body parts of other family members. The rebel forces usually included Rwandans and their allies, with Congolese soldiers integrated into the force, as soldiers easily changed sides depending upon the way food and money was controlled by a given force in a given area.

Finally, since 2000 the Congolese population has lived in fear of Mayi Mayi warlords and the warriors under their control. Laurent Kabila, during his coup against Mobutu, encouraged the renewal of Mayi Mayi militias. In the 1970s local Mayi Mayi had defended the population against Mobutu’s soldiers’ acts of coercion of villagers. With the same intent the Mayi Mayi arose again and were armed by Kabila during his successful 1996-1997 coup. As the Rwandese invasion made its way across DRC in 1998 these militias grew in numbers but also became a threat to the population. The militia leaders rose in their power and influence, and their behavior



was governed by traditional rituals, immature decision making, the numbing effect of drugs and alcohol, and a rigid defiance of the authority of government or the system of traditional chiefdoms. Feared by the local villagers, Mayi Mayi are now well known for adopting the military practices of looting, rape, mutilation, and cannibalism.

### *Rape in Front of the Family*

Congolese identify the Rwandan invasion as bring a new aspect of rape to war to Congo—rape in front of the family. As an act of war, soldiers and militias who rape intend to terrorize the entire family and community, not just individual women. Rape is a public act that is often combined with other kinds of brutality. Burying the mother in an earthen hole, insisting that the mother dismember and cook her baby as she would a chicken, forcing members of the family to eat the mother's breasts or intestines are all variations of rape with torture that were witnessed by the girls who testified. Men and boys often fear being required by soldiers to rape their mothers and sisters as the family as soldiers look on. Men have reported fleeing in terror as they anticipated this indignity.

The psychosocial consequences of rape and torture in front of the family are enormous. If an estimated six million people have now died from conflict, malnutrition and disease as a result of the war in the DRC, at least this many (counting conservatively one surviving child for each person who has died) now suffer the psychological and physical effects of witnessing violence done to family members and friends during the war. Child survival requires the child's overcoming both physical and emotional traumas induced during the war.

### *Violence as an Act by Children and Youth*

Almost all of the forces described above depend heavily on child soldiers. Child soldiers are often recruited through offers of food. Drugs and alcohol desensitize children to the violence they are committing. Once they become part of an armed group, child soldiers are controlled by the power of the group.

The former Mayi Mayi follower quoted above recounted how he was drawn into the militia and how difficult it became for him to leave. The physical boundaries between the Mayi Mayi battalion camp and the village were permeable. Though Mayi Mayi officers and those being trained resided at the camp, followers came and went, living with their village families. Initially, the youth believed he was increasing his family's safety by joining the Mayi Mayi. By the time he discovered that the Mayi Mayi's stated purpose of defending the population was contradicted in practice, he had been initiated and knew some of the Mayi Mayi's rituals. He would have endangered his family by defecting from the Mayi Mayi. He finally took the opportunity to leave the Mayi Mayi in the confusion that resulted after government forces developed a strong offensive against his Mayi Mayi group.

### *Rape as a Force Creating Displacement and Food Scarcity*

The fear of rape and torture at the hands of any of the forces mentioned above created the crisis of the massive numbers of internally displaced in the DRC. Fear of violence, rape and torture drove villagers from their homes as they discovered that armed forces were overtaking

their town. The armed forces used this fear as a way to occupy territory—they knew that by sending word in advance, many villagers would flee, making it easier to take control of a town or village. Most of the people I have met in Kamina have experienced some form of displacement at some time in their lives. Displacement creates food scarcity when villagers cannot harvest or cultivate.

While the numbers of displaced people in refugee camps are counted and announced in the international media, the number of people finding refuge in the bush, wandering from village to village, or residing with relatives, friends, and strangers are difficult to tally. Most internally displaced people fled to the bush with nothing, expecting that their displacement would be temporary, as it had been during previous lootings, after which they would return to their homes. When they discovered they could not go home, they did not quickly find their way to internationally sponsored feeding programs; rather, they gathered unfamiliar food that was difficult to digest, drank dirty rain water from puddles and holes, and bartered with villagers to work or sell their clothes for food. Many of the 30,000 people registered in Kamina for feeding programs spent weeks, months, or more than a year fleeing the war in these circumstances.

For the child soldier, food scarcity leads to the child's participation in violence, rape and torture; for the child residing in the village, the child or the parents' fear of rape and torture leads to food scarcity.

### *Rape and Internally Displaced Orphans*

Many of the children who witnessed their mother's rape and death have also lost their fathers through death or flight. The children seem to have been allowed to flee, perhaps in order to spread the horrific tales of the potential plight of villagers who try to remain in their homes. These children frequently found adult relatives or strangers who led them in flight. When the children arrived in Kamina many of them continued to be housed with the family or strangers with whom they fled.

Some children report being treated well in the families with whom they are living, but others report ostracism and discrimination, especially from the children in their families. In some cases, they have been allowed to remain as household servants and are responsible for much of the housework. The children have little food and are physically underdeveloped. Some are beaten if they resist. They continue in their homes as they have no where else to go.

### *Violence Against Women and Military Wives*

The DRC's demilitarization program gives combatants who have been part of rebel groups or the Mayi Mayi an opportunity to return to civilian life with a small stipend for retraining or to enter the Congolese army. Kamina Military Base, the largest military base in DRC, houses this controversial program, in part under the auspices of the United Nations Peacekeeping force (MONUC). Many wives come from the eastern Congo, some reside at the base while their husbands are stationed elsewhere, others are widows. Women at Kamina Base were eager to bear witness to their experiences and the challenges they continually face.

Hunger continues to drive the sexual behavior of women and the ability to challenge violence against women on the base. Some of the women on the base, especially those without husbands, are so poor and hungry that they are driven to prostitution to get some money to buy food. Some of the women, who have husbands deployed elsewhere, do not receive support from their salaries and are poor and hungry also. When violence against women does occur, it is hard to bring the perpetrator to justice because payments are offered to women, their families, or the courts to keep silent. When women are very poor, they take the payments to buy food. None of these situations is unique to Congo, but it is a tragedy for the women and their children.

### *The Moral Agency of Children*

The dichotomy of Congolese as victims and perpetrators breaks down when we think about the moral agency of the Congolese, including children, who have survived violence against women and children in the context of the war and its aftermath. Hunger drives violent behavior for some in the DRC, though some violence against women, such as the public humiliation characteristic of the Rwandan invasion, serves other purposes, most usually greed. Individual children and youth who have been subject to the psychological and physical abuse that accompanies violence against women resist the power that is intended to subdue them every time they take a bite of food. The fact that they stay alive—often while they are chronically malnourished—demonstrates their will to resist. Although they have little clothing or few school supplies, when they find a sponsor who will provide school fees, hope for a better future pierces their trauma. Boys, and sometime girls, are compromised when they are drawn into the role of

child soldier; their emotional and spiritual development is derailed. When they renounce their former behavior and turn toward a new future, they too enact resistance.

The resources available to these young people are quite different. Young men who leave the military or militias are generally able to draw upon government and non-governmental rehabilitation programs that provide a very small sum (\$100) for education, and they can often trade their guns for bicycles. The resources available to girls, in contrast, generally come through non-governmental organizations that try to respond to the ongoing discrimination against girls. In 2006 the Congolese government has enacted a new law prohibiting violence against women; when the government backs this law with programs providing support and restitution, a new day will have arrived. At the most basic level, however, food security programs that promote nutrition for not only women and girls but also boys and men will undercut the prevailing system.

### *The Moral Agency of Congolese Adults*

Ordinary Congolese adults play an important role keeping surviving children alive. At the most obscure level, adults are housing and feeding orphans, biological relatives or not, in their own homes. While children are often further burdened with stigmatization and physical labor in their surrogate families, conditions that would be considered neglectful or even abusive in less desperate contexts, the childrens' chances for survival are greater than they would be without such homes.

Congolese advocates for such children play a significant role in supporting their hopes and dreams. The majority of the girls whose interviews are reflected in this essay participate in the Ambassador Girls' Program under the auspices of the United Methodist Committee on Relief. An advocate provides mentoring, school fees, supplies and uniforms for the girls, giving them a hope for a future. The girls associated with this program, in my interviews, while often being sad as they remembered the violence they witnessed, also showed significantly more hope and happiness than the girls who were unconnected to such a program.

Since hunger is so fundamental to undercutting the power that keeps violence against women and children in place, agricultural programs led by Congolese, that rebuild the infrastructure addressing systems of food supply, such as those at Kamisamba Farm, challenge the status quo at its most basic level. Kamisamba Farm, a former Belgian estate, was bought by the North Katanga Annual Conference to rehabilitate as an agricultural training program. It provides training in crop and livestock production. Its programs have become a model for training at Kamina Military Base.

### *The Moral Agency of International Friends*

The international community exhibits moral agency at the most basic level when it supports the rebuilding of infrastructure in the DRC. Even though the international community, in Africa and beyond, has directly participated in the war, no one has created a Marshall Plan for the DRC. Women and children of poor nations, just like women and children of the domestic USA, receive different amounts of help when they are designated "deserving" or

“undeserving”—Haiti, hit by a national disaster in which many of the 250,000 assumed dead were internationals, is the newest “deserving” poor nation, while the DRC, in which most of the six million dead are Congolese, continues to be “undeserving.” The fact that Congolese continue to die at the war rate long after peace has prevailed in all but the northern Great Lakes region—can be directly attributed to the disruption of the country’s fragile infrastructure: food, water supply, electricity, medicine, education. Children living with the aftereffects of violence against women are dispersed through the DRC and therefore benefit from the rebuilding of infrastructure and suffer from its absence.

The international community also exerts its moral agency when it stands besides and empowers Congolese women and men who are trying to “break the culture of silence” and directly respond to the problem of violence against women. The group “Friends of the Congo” notes that Congolese women’s voices have been excluded as western think tanks have developed solutions to ending the war. On March 1-12 at the United Nations 54<sup>th</sup> Commission on the Status of Women, they specifically noted that the violence against women in Congo is a symptom of the economic, military and political struggle of countries in the northern Great Lakes region, specifically Rwanda, Uganda and the DRC, and that a solution for this crisis must be found for violence against women to abate.<sup>10</sup> Meanwhile, the international community can provide Congolese women with funding and support as they address the sexual tragedy.

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<sup>10</sup> “Congolese Women Have The Answer for Ending Sexual Violence in the Congo,” Bibiane Aningina Tshetu, Women’s Coordinator and Adviser, Friends of the Congo and Kambale Musavuli, Student Coordinator and Spokesperson, Friends of the Congo, in e-newsletter of Friends of the Congo, April 15, 2010. [info@friendsofthecongo.org](mailto:info@friendsofthecongo.org).



The issue of rebuilding the basic infrastructure of the country cannot be traded against the issue of addressing the problem of violence against women head-on. One of the unintended, unhappy consequences of Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's attention to violence against women in the eastern DRC is that projects targeted for rebuilding the country's health infrastructure that might have benefited the whole country have been put aside in order to prioritize projects specifically responding to violence against women in the eastern Congo. USAID has tabled projects that would have rebuilt the health infrastructure throughout the country in order to respond to directives prioritizing direct respond to violence against women in the Kivus. While the attention to ongoing violence against women in the Kivus should be applauded, the longterm effect will be undermined if an end to the war over resources is not negotiated and the infrastructure throughout the country, beginning with its food system, is not rebuilt.