
HEALING THE WOUNDS OF WAR: The Peacebuilding Work of Sylvie Maunga Mbanga of the Democratic Republic of the Congo

By Jennifer Freeman, Peace Writer

Edited by Emiko Noma



2008 Women PeaceMakers Program

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Joan B. Kroc Institute for Peace & Justice
Joan B. Kroc School of Peace Studies
University of San Diego
5950 Alcala Park
San Diego, CA 92110-2492
<http://peace.sandiego.edu>

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ABOUT THE WOMEN PEACEMAKERS PROGRAM

Made possible through a generous grant from the Fred J. Hansen Foundation, the Joan B. Kroc Institute for Peace & Justice's (IPJ) Women PeaceMakers Program annually hosts four women from around the world who have been involved in human rights and peacemaking efforts in their countries.

Women on the frontline of efforts to end violence and secure a just peace seldom record their experiences, activities and insights – as generally there is no time, or, perhaps, no formal education that would help them record their stories. The Women PeaceMakers Program is a selective program for leaders who want to document, share and build upon their unique peacemaking stories. Selected peacemakers join the IPJ for an eight-week residency.

Women PeaceMakers are paired with a Peace Writer to document in written form their story of living in conflict and building peace in their communities and nations. The peacemakers' stories are also documented on film by the IPJ's partner organization Sun & Moon Vision Productions. While in residence at the institute, Women PeaceMakers give presentations on their work and the situation in their home countries to the university and San Diego communities.

The IPJ believes that women's stories go beyond headlines to capture the nuance of complex situations and expose the realities of gender-based violence, thus providing an understanding of conflict and an avenue to its transformation. The narrative stories of Women PeaceMakers not only provide this understanding, but also show the myriad ways women construct peace in the midst of and after violence and war. For the realization of peace with justice, the voices of women – those severely affected by violent conflict and struggling courageously and creatively to build community from the devastation – must be recorded, disseminated and spotlighted.¹

In the following pages, you will find these narrative stories along with supplemental information to provide a deep understanding of the conflict and one person's journey within it. These supplements include a brief biography of the peacemaker, a historical summary of the conflict, a timeline integrating political developments in the country with personal history of the peacemaker, a question-and-answer transcript of select interviews, and a table of best practices in peacebuilding as demonstrated by the peacemaker.

**BIOGRAPHY OF A WOMAN PEACEMAKER –
SYLVIE MAUNGA MBANGA**



Sylvie Maunga Mbanga, a lawyer by training, works with local organizations in the fight against sexual violence against women in the eastern region of the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). Formerly coordinator of the program against sexual violence for the Interchurch Organization for Development Cooperation (ICCO) and Church in Action, as well as the program officer for the peacebuilding and conflict transformation program at the Life and Peace Institute, Mbanga consults for other agencies and groups, providing counseling and legal services to victims of rape and sexual violence. With ICCO, she developed strategic and holistic interventions to assist victims, including the provision of psychological counseling and medical care, legal services and access to the judicial system, and economic support in the form of income-generating activities and skills building. For the Life and Peace Institute, Mbanga was charged with implementing programs on good governance and coordinating research activities.

Mbanga also works to resolve ethnic conflicts within communities in the provinces of North and South Kivu. She has facilitated dialogue between the Banyamulenge community and other local groups such as the Babembe and Baviro. The dialogue sessions and subsequent cultural exchanges between the groups led to the founding of an ethnically mixed organization that raises awareness about the need for further communication and tolerance.



Mbanga has served as a radio correspondent for the French/Swahili service of Voice of America, covering local women's peacebuilding initiatives and issues of women's leadership, and is a member of Synergy for Women Victims of Sexual Violence and Action by Christians Against Torture.

CONFLICT HISTORY – DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF THE CONGO

The conflict in the eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) has been called by many the world's most neglected humanitarian disaster. Since 1996, successive conflicts have drawn in seven African nations and resulted in over 4 million direct and indirect casualties.² Despite various peace agreements, nearly half a dozen armed militias continue to operate in eastern Congo.³

Congo's wars have been inextricably linked to the sociopolitical climate of the surrounding region (in particular that of its eastern neighbors, Rwanda, Uganda and Burundi) and to the exploitation of Congo's rich natural resources, including diamonds, gold, timber and coltan. Injustice, retribution and power imbalances between tribes, created or fueled during colonial times, continue to reverberate across state borders, inciting new bloodshed.

Following independence and external meddling in Congo's first elected leadership in the mid-20th century, Congo fell under the 32-year dictatorship of Mobutu Sese Seko. In the name of Congolese nationalism, Mobutu shunned foreign investment, clothing and cultural practices in favor of an "authentic" Zairian identity.⁴ However, as his failed economic policies drove the country into economic ruin and his population into starvation, Mobutu reaped a personal fortune estimated at \$4 billion.

In the early 1990s, mounting civil unrest and rioting by unpaid soldiers forced Mobutu to concede to a conference of Congolese leaders seeking a multiparty polity. In the years that followed, a transitional coalition government was appointed, but Mobutu continued to retain substantial power as the head of state.



In 1994, events in Rwanda irrevocably changed the futures of the country and its neighbors. Genocide was carried out over 90 days by Rwanda's Hutu-dominated *Mouvement Révolutionnaire Nationale pour le Développement* (MRND) government, its armed forces (*Forces Armées Rwandaises*, FAR) and members of *Interahamwe* militias, killing between 800,000 and 1 million Tutsis and moderate Hutus. As the international community faltered in its response, the rebel, Tutsi-led Rwandese Patriotic Front (RPF) advanced from their northeastern front to capture the capital Kigali, driving the FAR into retreat over the Congolese border and effectively ending the government's genocidal campaign.

As the RPF advanced, an estimated 3 million Hutu refugees fled across Rwanda's border into eastern Congo. This influx of refugees created a humanitarian disaster of epic proportions in the Congolese provinces of North and South Kivu. The massive migration overwhelmed Congolese authorities and the international community's response, leading to inadequate food supply, a catastrophic cholera outbreak and further insecurity as armed Rwandese militias took clandestine control of the refugee camps. This confluence of genocide, the displacement of millions and subsequent humanitarian disaster laid the seeds for the destabilization and ongoing conflicts that have since plagued eastern Congo.

Following the genocide, the leader of the RPF, Gen. Paul Kagame, assumed Rwanda's presidency, while the remaining members of the former Rwandese government set up a government-in-exile in the refugee camps in Congo and began recruiting FAR and Interahamwe soldiers into a new army, the *Force Démocratique de Libération du Rwanda* (FDLR).

In 1996, an association of Congolese armed groups supported by Rwanda, Uganda and Burundi invaded eastern Congo. Coming from the east, the *Alliance des Forces Démocratiques pour la Libération du Congo* (AFDL), along with Rwandese troops, slaughtered hundreds of Hutu refugees, in their search for former *génocidaires* and members of the FDLR. The AFDL then advanced on Kinshasa, overthrowing Mobutu's dictatorship and installing Laurent Desire Kabila as president. However, in the weeks following his assumption of power, Kabila grew wary of his Rwandese supporters and made a public announcement that all Rwandese should return to Rwanda. His statement sparked xenophobic riots in Kinshasa, resulting in dozens of Rwandese deaths. In retaliation, troops backed by Rwanda and Uganda attempted to overthrow Kabila. Kabila requested support from Angola, Zimbabwe and Namibia to repel the coup, leading to six African nations becoming embroiled in a war over the Congolese presidency.

In eastern Congo, Rwandese and Kinyarwanda-speaking Congolese supporters of the AFDL reorganized themselves into the *Rassemblement Congolaise pour la Démocratie* (RCD). The RCD's primary objective was to eradicate the FDLR, seen to be responsible for the 1994 genocide and an ongoing threat to both Rwanda and Tutsi ethnic groups in Congo. During the same period of national unrest, a new group, the *Movement pour la Libération du Congo* (MLC), was created in the north and backed by Uganda. Fighting soon broke out in the Kivus⁵ between the RCD and the FDLR, and in the north between the MLC and the Congolese Armed Forces, the *Force de Armes de Démocratique Congolaise* (FARDC). As the MLC advanced into North Kivu, fighting also began between the rival rebel groups MLC and RCD.

On July 10, 1999, a ceasefire was signed in the Zambian capital, Lusaka, between the six African nations⁶ involved in what became known as the Second Congo War. The following month, the MLC and RCD also signed the accord. As part of the agreement, the United Nations authorized a peacekeeping force to forcibly implement the ceasefire accord. The Mission of the United Nations in the Democratic Republic of Congo (MONUC) had initial authorization to deploy 5,537 peacekeepers, including 500 observers.⁷

In January 2001, President Laurent Kabila was fatally wounded by one of his bodyguards during an attempted coup led by one of Kabila's cousins, Col. Eddy Kapend. The coup was crushed and resulted in Joseph Kabila succeeding his father as president.



Despite the Lusaka Peace Accord, fighting continued in eastern Congo. In addition to political and ethnic rivalries, armed groups from both inside and outside of Congo have sought control of DRC's mines, sources of multiple billions of dollars in metals and precious stones. While the leaders of armed groups benefited personally, the majority of the profits from such exploitation has been funneled into the region's rampant arms trade. In addition to local militias, the International Court of Justice has ruled that both the Rwandan and Ugandan governments owe the Congolese state tens of billions of dollars in natural resources plundered between 1998 and 2003.

However, the involvement of international mining companies, foreign armed groups and proxy actors in extracting Congo's wealth and fuelling the conflict continues.

In April 2002 a second round of peace talks was convened in South Africa between Kabila's government and the MLC. As part of the deal, the MLC leader, Jean Pierre Bemba, was given the post of premier. The RCD however, rejected the deal. Three months later, bilateral talks were convened between Kabila and Rwanda's president, Paul Kagame. Kagame agreed to withdraw his troops from eastern Congo, under the understanding that DRC would proactively disarm and arrest members of the FDLR.

Further peace talks were held between the government and the major rebel groups in December 2002. These talks paved the way for the establishment of an interim government, pending elections which were to be scheduled for 2006. As part of the peace accord, the four main rebel groups were granted seats in the interim government, with their leaders becoming vice-presidents. An ambitious plan to integrate rebel fighters into the Congolese Army (FARDC) was also embarked upon, with limited success.

As the top-heavy interim government struggled in its effectiveness, a general in the newly integrated FARDC, Laurent Nkunda (a former member of the RCD), led two battalions to mutiny and formed a new rebel group, now known as the *Congrès National pour la Défense du Peuple* (CNDP). Asserting that he did not have faith in Kabila's army to protect the rights of Tutsi minorities in eastern Congo, he vowed to fight both the FARDC and former Rwandese Hutu militants still operating in eastern Congo.

Despite ongoing fighting in the east of the country, Congo's first parliamentary elections in over 40 years were held in July 2006. While not without incident, the elections were given general approval by international monitors. After the first presidential vote, no clear winner could be distinguished between the incumbent Kabila and the leading opposition candidate Bemba, leading to a secondary run-off vote. As the second election date of October 29 approached, supporters of both candidates clashed in a number of locations throughout the country. In November, Kabila was declared the winner of the second vote. Bemba took refuge in the South African embassy, before being flown to asylum in Portugal in April 2007.

Despite relative stability in Kinshasa, fighting continues to plague the east of the country. In recent years, high casualty rates, human rights abuses and massive internal displacement have been blamed on clashes between the Congolese army and Gen. Nkunda's militia. In spite of a number of attempts at ceasefire negotiations, a durable peace has yet to be achieved. Members of Hutu militia groups and the FDLR continue to rape and kill civilian populations in the rural regions, and Rwanda continues to assert that the group still poses a legitimate threat to Rwanda's security. Following the RCD's official integration into the Congolese armed forces, internal fighting caused a split that has resulted in two groups – RCD-Goma and RCD-Kisangani Liberation Movement (RCDKLM) – with competing ideological standpoints on the involvement of Rwandese in the eastern Congolese conflicts. Furthermore, Congo's natural resources continue to be an inciting factor in the region's conflicts.

Years of conflict and extensive human rights abuses have resulted in a culture of impunity that permeates the violence in the region. In particular, the rights of women and girls have been

severely abused extensively during the conflict. Wide-scale and extreme sexual violence has become synonymous with the conflict in the Kivus and is perpetrated indiscriminately by all the armed groups. As Congo looks ahead toward increased efforts to establish peace in the region, it will have to address not only the military ambitions of armed groups, but also the deep and pervasive injustice that has been perpetrated upon the civilian population over decades of conflict.



INTEGRATED TIMELINE

Political Developments in the Democratic Republic of the Congo and *Personal History of Sylvie Maunga Mbanga*

- 1884 – 1885** Following two centuries of British, Portuguese, French and Dutch involvement in the slave trade out of Kongo, European powers recognize King Leopold of Belgium’s claim to the Congo basin at the Conference of Berlin. The Congo Free State is inaugurated, with Leopold as ruler.
- 1908** The state of Belgium annexes Congo. Mass atrocities, slave labor and arbitrary killings carried out by Leopold’s proxies spur mass protests in Leopoldville (now Kinshasa).
- 1960** June – Following anti-colonial riots in the capital, Leopoldville, Congo is granted independence. Patrice Lumumba is elected as prime minister and Joseph Kasavubu president.
September – Kasavubu dismisses Lumumba as prime minister. Lumumba is arrested a few months later.
- 1961** February – Former Prime Minister Lumumba is murdered. The United States and Belgium are suspected to be involved.
- 1965** Kasavubu is overthrown in a coup led by Joseph Mobutu.
- 1971** Joseph Mobutu renames the country Zaire and himself Mobutu Sese Seko.
- 1971 – 1996** Zaire’s economy deteriorates following the nationalization of many foreign-owned industries, the ousting of many foreign investors and Zaire’s inability to make loan payments to Belgium, ending the former colonial power’s development aid to the country. Amidst rampant poverty and crumbling social services, Mobutu amasses a personal fortune estimated at \$4 billion.
- 1974** *April – Sylvie Maunga is born Maunga Mbanga⁸ in Bukavu, South Kivu province, Zaire.*
- 1991** Unpaid soldiers riot in Kinshasa. Mobutu agrees to a coalition government with opposition leaders, but retains substantial control of the state apparatus.
- 1992** *April – Sylvie’s eldest sister, Edwige, dies.*
- 1993** *January – Sylvie’s second eldest sister, Leonce, dies of meningitis.*
- 1994** April to June – Genocide occurs in neighboring Rwanda.

July – As the primarily Tutsi Rwandese Patriotic Front (RPF) invades Rwanda, effectively ending the genocide, 3 million Rwandese refugees flee into eastern Zaire. Along with millions of innocent Hutu civilians, members of the former Rwandese government and Interahamwe militias responsible for the genocide regroup in eastern Zaire.

- 1996** The *Alliance des Forces Démocratique pour la Libération du Congo* (AFDL), supported by Rwanda, Uganda and Burundi, invade eastern Zaire.
- 1997** May – AFDL forces, with members of the Rwandese army, capture the capital, Kinshasa. Zaire is renamed the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). Laurent Desire Kabila becomes president. After helping him claim power, the Rwandese are instructed by Kabila to return to Rwanda. The move incites anti-Rwandese riots and killings in Kinshasa.
- 1998** August – Rebels backed by Rwanda and Uganda retaliate against Kabila in Kinshasa, and Zimbabwe, Namibia and Angola send troops to repel them. The *Rassemblement Congolaise pour la Démocratie* (RCD), comprised primarily of Tutsi rebels with Rwandan support, control the eastern provinces of DRC with the goal of abolishing the Hutu armed group, *Force Démocratique de Libération du Rwanda* (FDLR), thought to be responsible for the 1994 genocide in Rwanda.
- 1999** In North and South Kivu, fighting begins between the *Movement pour la Libération du Congo* (MLC) rebels supported by Uganda and RCD rebels backed by Rwanda.
- Sylvie graduates with a B.A. in Law from the Free University of the Great Lakes, Goma, DRC.***
- July – The six African countries involved in the war sign a ceasefire accord in Lusaka, Zambia. The rebel group MLC signs on August 1, with RCD signing three weeks later.
- 2000** The U.N. Security Council authorizes an initial U.N. peacekeeping force (MONUC) of 5,500 personnel to implement the ceasefire. However, fighting continues between rebels and government forces, including Rwandese and Ugandan forces still in the region.
- 2001** January – President Laurent Kabila is shot dead by a bodyguard. Joseph Kabange Kabila succeeds his father.
- 2002** January – Mount Nyiragongo erupts, devastating the city of Goma in North Kivu.
- April – Peace negotiations are held in South Africa. Kabila signs a power-sharing deal with the MLC rebel group. The MLC's leader, Jean Pierre Bemba, is inaugurated as premier. RCD rebels reject the deal.

Sylvie travels to South Africa to attend two days of the DRC peace negotiations.

July – President Kabila of the DRC and President Paul Kagame of Rwanda sign a peace deal under which Rwanda will withdraw troops from the east, under the condition that DRC will actively disarm and arrest Rwandese Hutu militant groups blamed for Rwanda’s 1994 genocide.

November – Sylvie becomes program coordinator at the Life and Peace Institute, coordinating projects on good governance and gender policy.

December – The Amani peace deal is signed in South Africa between Kabila’s government and the main rebel groups. Under the deal, rebel leaders and opposition members are to be part of an interim government, prior to elections scheduled for 2006. Rebel forces are also to be integrated into the Congolese Armed Forces.

2003 August – Congo’s power-sharing interim parliament inaugurated.

2004 December – Renegade soldiers loyal to Gen. Laurent Nkunda form a pro-Rwanda rebel group to support the rights of Congolese of Tutsi origin (known as Banyamulenge). Nkunda’s army clashes with the Congolese army in the east. Rwanda denies supporting the breakaway faction.

2005 May – A new constitution, with text agreed to by former warring factions, is adopted by parliament.

2006 ***Sylvie purchases a building which she donates as a school in her father’s ancestral home of Lubero.***

May – War continues in the east as U.N. peacekeepers and the Congolese army attempt to disarm and integrate irregular forces ahead of the elections.

July – Congo’s first elections in four decades are held. While some clashes do occur, the poll has the general approval of international monitors. No clear winner is decided in the presidential vote. Incumbent leader Kabila and opposition candidate Bemba are set to contest a run-off poll. Supporters of the two candidates clash in various locations around the country.

Sylvie serves as an election monitor for the parliamentary elections in Walungu province.

October – A run-off presidential election is held. Kabila is declared the winner.

December – In the east of the country, fighting continues between rebel leader Nkunda and the Congolese army. Over 50,000 civilians are displaced.

Sylvie flees Nkunda's invasion of Bukavu, travelling through Rwanda to reach her family in Goma.

2007 April – Bemba flies to Portugal after spending three weeks in the South African embassy in Kinshasa.

November – The Congolese and Rwandese governments sign a second agreement in Nairobi, Kenya to disarm and repatriate Hutu militias, notably the FDLR.

2008 January – Rebel militias, including Nkunda's, negotiate a peace agreement with the government of Congo.

Sylvie begins work as the program coordinator for anti-sexual violence projects of the Interchurch Organization for Development Cooperation (ICCO).

February – Nkunda breaks the peace agreement, citing lack of confidence in the Congolese Army.

April – Fighting continues in the east between Rwandese Hutu militias and the Congolese army, leaving thousands of people displaced.

September – Sylvie travels to the United States to take part in the Women PeaceMakers Program at the Joan B. Kroc Institute of Peace & Justice.

October – Nkunda begins a new offensive, displacing hundreds of thousands from villages and internally displaced peoples' camps in North Kivu, before invading Goma town.

NARRATIVE STORIES OF THE LIFE AND WORK OF SYLVIE MAUNGA MBANGA

God's Plan

In eastern Congo, wars came like the rains, gathering in the forested hills or amassing over the eastern horizon in Rwanda. Sometimes you could hear their rumble in the distance. Sometimes, there was a sudden quiet in the air, a stillness that told you they were near. Sometimes, there was no warning at all. But when the rumble of war echoed amongst Congo's hills, even the rainclouds hid.

The war came to Bukavu in the late afternoon on a quiet day at the end of May 2005. The heat was finally receding as the sun slipped down its evening arc. Sylvie Maunga had been in her office at the Life and Peace Institute all day catching up on work. One of her colleagues had been feeling ill that morning and had checked in at the hospital. It was 4 p.m. when a co-worker's cell phone rang. It was their colleague calling from the hospital, shouting, "You have to move to the office! The war is coming here!" Fear welling, they assured him they were already in the office. He advised them to stay there, a safe distance from the current fighting.

But they all knew this reassurance would be short-lived. If you were still in the city when the war came, it was too late. Once the militias' guns started singing and the soldiers began moving door to door, there were only pockets of safety, and they were only temporary. In eastern Congo's wars, civilians are targets: for what little money they have left, for their ethnicity or for their sex. Women face additional violence. When armed men find them, they may be raped by one man or by them all; they may be raped traditionally or with broken bottles or the butts of guns; and afterward, they may be left with their physical and psychological wounds, or killed.

From inside her office, Sylvie's cell phone rang. It was her close girlfriend, Anne-Marie, sounding hysterical. "Sylvie, please come here, the war is beginning here!"

"Where are you?"

"I am near your apartment and I can't move." The war had already claimed the roads around her. Anne-Marie was desperate to get inside Sylvie's building for shelter from both bullets and rape. Sylvie was unsure what to do. Moving on foot toward the fighting would put her in considerable danger, as she had no way of knowing where it had reached.

She tried to reason with Anne-Marie, "But the war is also close here, the guns are really singing."

But Anne-Marie pleaded, "Please, Sylvie, you must come!"

Sylvie could not abandon her friend to the militias. She left her office and began navigating the pandemonium toward her apartment at the center of the fighting. At every turn she studied the flow of people fleeing the violence to gauge where she may find safe passage. If she chose wrongly, she would become a victim. Along the way she passed a family fleeing, and recognized them as friends of her parents. "Please," she called to the husband, "you must help me get back to my apartment to reach my friend. She is stranded there."

The husband was anxious to reach his wife at home, but Sylvie begged him. He ran with her for a few blocks then insisted he had to be with his family. Sylvie let him go. On her own, she finally reached her apartment and Anne-Marie.

Across the road from Sylvie's building, the renegade army of Gen. Laurent Nkunda⁹ was laying siege to one of Bukavu's most strategic battlegrounds, Alfajiri College. Situated on the main road running east to west through Bukavu town, the college lay just before the road branched into the capillary avenues of Bukavu. Sylvie and Anne-Marie witnessed the slaughter of the Congolese army from her second-story bedroom window. Sylvie stood in the shadows gripping her camera, but she could not raise it to eye level; the glint of the setting sun on the lens could have easily turned the soldiers' guns on her. She watched as the militia loaded large, sophisticated weaponry into the college, a stark contrast to the older rudimentary weapons used by the Congolese army.¹⁰

Around 5 p.m., the explosions and gunfire reduced to sporadic bursts. For a few precious minutes Sylvie and Anne-Marie thought the war might be ending. But explosions soon began to shake their building; the shells felt as if they were falling meters away. The women ran from the bedroom into the hallway and dove to the floor. They lay awake until dawn with their bellies on the cold cement, listening to the war rage around them.

In the morning, they searched for something to eat, but realized they had only a container of milk. Outside, the soldiers had begun crossing the road to loot the shops on the ground floor of Sylvie's building. In addition to food, the men raided the contents of a women's clothing store. Sylvie and Anne-Marie watched as the militiamen dressed themselves in brightly colored skirts, blouses and headscarves before approaching a Congolese army checkpoint. From their window, there was no way to warn the soldiers of the disguises. They watched helplessly, as from under flowing skirts, Nkunda's soldiers opened fire.

At 5 p.m. that evening, the women heard the soldiers moving back across the road toward their building to look for food again. As their voices got nearer, Sylvie heard them discuss searching the remaining apartments in the building. Shaking, Sylvie ran to her phone. She dialed a friend who worked for MONUC in Kisangani town, over 800 miles from Bukavu, and tried to remain calm as she begged him to send some of his men in Bukavu to come to their aid. Outside, she could hear the soldiers opening the door of the apartment on the far end of her hallway. The women tried to stay silent, huddled in her bedroom, furtively searching the horizon for MONUC's white-and-black insignia and listening to the soldiers make their way through the apartments toward Sylvie's.

Soon, their boots came to settle outside Sylvie's door. She could hear one of them tell his colleagues, "I know there is a girl in here." Sylvie redialed MONUC's number. As tears fell from her eyes, she told her friend, "Yes, we will be killed here."

But as the men began to pry the door, a four-wheel-drive engine was heard approaching. The men abandoned the door and fled by the rear stairwell as the U.N. vehicle pulled up on the road.

Praising God, Sylvie called her friend to ask why his men remained outside. Could they take her and Anne-Marie to a safe location? He apologized. MONUC's mandate only covered deterring

the militia from entering private houses. They could not transport civilians to safety. Sylvie pleaded, but the response was firm: “You are not U.N. staff. U.N. policy states that we cannot move with you in our vehicle.” After a cursory review outside the building, the MONUC vehicle departed.

It only took a few hours for the militia to return. Again, Sylvie called her friend desperate for him to send peacekeepers to deter the gunmen. Again, he obliged. Hundreds of Congolese citizens called MONUC for protection during outbreaks of violence, but the U.N. force was unable to send soldiers to them. Sylvie knew that the only reason they were coming to her aid was because of her friend’s seniority and goodwill.

Over the following days MONUC came to their rescue twice more, but was never able to help them leave Sylvie’s increasingly dangerous apartment. Their milk was soon finished, and the women knew they had exhausted the U.N.’s ability to protect them; they must leave on their own. On the fourth day they noticed that the militia was moving out of the college to patrol the city. They waited until evening and watched out of the bedroom window for vehicles passing on the Avenue President Lumumba. After some time, they saw an international organization’s car approaching. Leaning out of Sylvie’s window, the women called and motioned for them to stop. The car pulled over while Sylvie and Anne-Marie quickly locked the apartment and ran down to them. After hearing their situation, the staff agreed to bring them to Anne-Marie’s family’s house on the other side of town.

Anne-Marie’s family home stood on a lush embankment in a quiet residential area of Bukavu. The compound contained two buildings, the smaller guest quarters where Anne-Marie had been staying and a large manor house where her family had lived before her parents relocated to Goma. Two-story whitewashed walls with large arched windows held up faded, burnt umber tiles. Bougainvillea roamed the compound walls in bright sunset hues, over which Bukavu’s tin and tile roofs could be seen, punctuating hillsides and clustered along the valley. To the north, Lake Kivu shone the evening sun’s reflection.

The women decided to spend the night in Anne-Marie’s bungalow in the hope that if the militia entered the compound, they may only take interest in the main house and leave without searching the guest quarters. But the next morning their phone conversations with friends in other parts of the city revealed a new picture of the army’s strategy. They were not only interested in looting; they were thorough and would approach from the perimeter, checking each building as they advanced. The guesthouse did not have an interior hallway in which to hide, and Anne-Marie and Sylvie realized they would be spotted through the windows of any room. At 10 a.m. they moved to the big house.

It was 4 in the evening when they first heard the footfalls of the militia outside the compound. Sylvie strained to hear the Kinyarwanda being spoken by the soldiers, as fear gripped her stomach again.¹¹ Anne-Marie and Sylvie ran to the center of the house, avoiding the treacherous windows where they could be seen or shot, but losing their ability to hear or see the location of the soldiers. Then they heard their neighbors’ screams.

As the women next door were rounded up, Anne-Marie’s neighbor desperately grabbed a stick of margarine, smearing it on her belly. When the militias ordered the women to undress, she showed them the shiny thick residue and explained that it was due to her infection with HIV. In the

hopes of being spared violent, degrading sexual abuse, the woman dared her attackers, “If you want, you can take my disease.”

The senior officer simply smirked his disgust, “OK, then we must assist you.” Sylvie and Anne-Marie listened in stunned silence to the crack of the bullet and the screams of the woman’s child, “My *maman*, they killed my *maman*!”

Moments later, they heard the men approaching Anne-Marie’s house. After peering first into the guesthouse, one of them commented, “You see this house? A white man must live here. We should try this house, it has to have big money inside.”

From their position in a room on the far wing, the women could hear the soldiers approaching the house. The men smashed the large multi-pane window to the ground floor and entered the living room. In the middle of the room were just three chairs, left from when Anne-Marie’s parents moved out. A soldier looked it over dismissively, “You know these white men. He doesn’t leave his money, they move with their money. Can’t you see there are only table and chairs?”

Sylvie and Anne-Marie held their breath as they listened to the men open the doors of the adjacent rooms. Then the officer announced, “We are wasting our time here. Come, let us move.”

As quickly as they had come, the men were gone. Sylvie and Anne-Marie breathed a sigh of relief, but they knew their security continued to hang by a thread.

They slept lightly that night, alert to the echoes of the embattled city surrounding them. Their bodies were tired from the adrenaline, fear and grief at the devastation around them. But after a few hours of quiet, they heard once again the familiar warning of the militia’s approach.

The men entered through the gate and surveyed the buildings and garden before approaching. This time the sparse evidence of habitation did not deter them. They entered and began searching the rooms, moving deeper and deeper into the house. Terrified, Sylvie and Anne-Marie searched frantically for a room in which to hide. They ran down a remote hallway, dead-bolting the connecting steel door. They entered a small bedroom used to hold supplies for washing clothes. They huddled together, crying softly as the men made their way methodically through Anne-Marie’s family home. The friends took each other’s hands and prayed, “God, can you assist us? We have no more patience left.”

The militiamen had reached the steel door protecting their small hallway. They slammed against it, testing the strength of the hinges. Suddenly there was a deafening crack, and the metallic pang of a bullet lodging in their door rang throughout the house. The door held, but the gunmen were already looking for alternative entry routes to the hallway. Some of their comrades were already approaching the wing from the outside. Glass shattered as a soldier smashed his way through one of the end room’s windows. In moments they were in the hallway, Sylvie’s heart in her throat. There was no possibility of escape. Anne-Marie looked into her eyes and saw the empty void of resignation replace Sylvie’s panic. The soldiers were many; in the privacy of the house they would have no limits on what they would do to them when they were found. Would their torture last for days or be mercifully brief, even if that meant ending in death? Anne-Marie gripped Sylvie’s hands with all her

strength and whispered, “No, Sylvie, it is not our day to die! It is not today. The Lord isn’t telling me that today is the day we die. We will see each other again and then we will understand.”

As she clutched Anne-Marie’s hands, Sylvie began to sob, but bit hard on her lip to muffle her cries. The men were moving closer to them now, but slowing down. As they approached the last three rooms, a soldier called, “Is there anything inside there?”

“No,” said another, “if there were people in there they would be screaming. There are no people there.”

And with that, the soldiers turned to leave. One remaining soldier had been dispatched outside to check the rooms from the exterior. A few feet away from Anne-Marie and Sylvie’s window, his commanding officer called him, “Come on, let us go.”

Sylvie and Anne-Marie remained in the room until the early morning. Stepping out of the room, they surveyed the destruction left by the gunmen. They had been thorough in their brutality, and it was easy to imagine how they would have employed the same brutality on Sylvie and Anne-Marie if they had found them. The women took the remaining sugar and water from the house and at dawn entered the dim streets littered with war’s detritus. Past corpses scattered in the market and swollen bodies lining the road, the women walked the main roads through Bukavu town. MONUC was now patrolling the main Avenue President Lumumba, keeping the militia’s violence at bay. Sylvie and Anne-Marie walked for three hours through their wounded city until they reached the North Head Bridge and crossed into Rwanda. Two days later, they reached the north end of Lake Kivu and were able to reunite with their families.

In Goma, Sylvie suffered from the psychological aftershocks of the trauma she experienced. For her, as well as so many of eastern Congo’s citizens, Congo’s wars came too frequently to be processed or healed from. Violence had become a frequent and tragic reality, creating a war-weary generation that had never known peace.



Two-and-a-half years after Nkunda’s siege of Bukavu, Sylvie applied for a job to work with the Netherlands-based Interchurch Organization for Development Cooperation (ICCO). The nongovernmental organization (NGO) was opening a new office in Bukavu and Sylvie was selected for the position of program coordinator for ICCO’s anti-sexual-violence program.

She was away in Kinshasa when the new director selected office space. When Sylvie returned, the director called to show her the building he had located. Sylvie stared in disbelief as they approached the two-story, whitewashed house with tile roof and bougainvillea the shades of a sunset. Her mind filled with disbelief: Why? Why did he choose this house? Unbeknownst to her, Anne-Marie’s family had sold their house following the war; the large house was now home to a number of organizations sharing the various floors and reconstructed rooms. Sylvie never imagined she would step inside that building again.

Inside, the scars left by the war had been repaired: new windows installed, pockmarked walls painted over, furniture replaced. It was then that the director turned toward the last wing of the

mansion. In front of a freshly varnished wooden door, he exclaimed, “And here, Sylvie, is your office!”

Overwhelmed with emotion, Sylvie blurted, “No, I don’t want to stay here.”

“But why?”

She could not bring herself to explain that she had once believed that room would be her coffin. The director could not understand her reaction to being given the only private office. He tried to reason with her, to explain that he had chosen it especially for her. He insisted that it was the best office they had, and that he thought she would grow to like it. Understanding his well-intentioned gesture, Sylvie finally agreed to accept the office. It took her two days to be able to explain her reaction and the events that had occurred.

At first Sylvie did not know whether she would be able to cope with the emotional strain of working amidst her memories from that day. But Anne-Marie’s words came back to her. God did not let them die that day. They did not know it then, but later, they would understand why.

Three years have passed. Sylvie now works daily with survivors of sexual assault who were not as lucky as she. Whether they suffered at the hands of one of the many militia groups terrorizing eastern Congo, or in their homes at the mercy of their husband, relative or neighbor, Sylvie works tirelessly to heal the psychological and physical trauma they have experienced. Every day she looks at the posters of sexual violence that adorn her office walls and understands the plan God chose for her that night.

Fighting the War within the War

*Furaha: A Friend's Story*¹²

First they forced their way inside her house. Then they forced their way inside her body, inside her family and inside her memories – tearing apart everything they entered.

It was a war within a war, carried out by militiamen – many with wives and families of their own – who had killed and seen others killed in the wars of Rwanda and eastern Congo. But somewhere a line had been crossed, from combatants fighting a military enemy, to agents of terror shredding the last threads of fabric that held intact the dignity and humanity of eastern Congo's communities.

Furaha heard them enter her compound. It was 2004. Gen. Nkunda's militia had invaded Bukavu and was now moving door-to-door, plundering the riches and bodies of its citizens. Quickly, Furaha and her husband ordered their daughters into the bedroom. Their safety depended on their silence. She and her husband stood in the living room with their adolescent son in the hopes the militia would believe they had only one child. Furaha knew that if she hid too, the absence of women in the household would be conspicuous. She chose to expose herself to protect her daughters.

They could hear the men at their front door, demanding to be let in. Her husband opened the door; if they resorted to entering by force the whole family could be killed. They began ordering the family around, but did not seem to suspect there were more people in the house. Their demands were for money, jewelry and cell phones. Furaha's family had collected their valuables and gave them what they had, but the gunmen were not satisfied. The commander was growing more agitated; Furaha sensed the rising tension.

The commander ordered his men to train their guns on the couple and their son, then he ordered Furaha's son to lay face-down on the floor. The commander approached Furaha. She began to wail as his hands gripped her. Taking hold of her clothes, he roughly pulled them off her body. Naked and shaking with fear, she was instructed to lay face-up on her son's slim, bony back. The commander in charge began to unbuckle his belt as he ordered her husband to watch. As he descended onto her, she let out a pained, desperate howl. Her son's body compressed under the weight of the two adults atop of him, choking his sobs.

There was nothing sexual about the rape. Her flesh shook like that of a dead fish as he thrust himself violently, angrily into her. From the bedroom, their terrified daughters could hear their mother's cries.

When he finally finished, the commander ordered her husband to remove his pants; he told him it was his turn. Furaha's husband froze as his mind tried to block out his wife's limp, bleeding body and his son's terrified eyes below. He knew if he resisted neither he nor his family would likely live. Robotically, he forced himself to perform the actions ordered of him, as his mind tried to bury his son's whimpers and his wife's tears. The militiamen watched, barking instructions and laughing. The gunmen left Furaha's family alive, but some of their wounds were too deep to heal.

In neighborhoods where houses nearly touch, the sounds of that night carried easily through the mud brick walls. Over the following month, Furaha's family endured comments and knowing glances from neighbors, publicizing their trauma. Sylvie had heard the rumors of what had happened to her friend that night. She allowed two weeks to pass and then tried to approach Furaha to see how she was. Sylvie greeted her at her home, but her friend was distant and avoided mentioning the ordeal she and her family had endured. Careful to allow her the time she needed, Sylvie left without raising the reason for her visit.

A week later, Sylvie returned to visit Furaha again, only to find her home abandoned. Unable to take the humiliation, Furaha's husband had insisted they leave Bukavu. In a matter of days, the family had packed everything they owned to join the growing exodus out of Congo's conflict-scarred east.

On a trip months later, Sylvie found herself in Furaha's new town. She called her friend to let her know she was there. When Furaha met Sylvie she immediately apologized for not saying goodbye before leaving Bukavu. Those weeks had been unbearable for her and her family as they dealt with their own pain, as well as the incommunicable fissures the attack had created within their neighborhood.

Furaha had made an attempt to address her physical injuries the day following the rape, going to the hospital for the doctor to examine the damage it had caused and to receive the cocktail of medications that would try to prevent many sexually transmitted diseases. However, there was no medication that could heal the psychological wounds.

Furaha worried about her children more than herself. Even after their move, they remained quiet and withdrawn. Their personalities were nearly unrecognizable from what they had been prior to the attack. Joy and laughter were strangers in their household now. Furaha encouraged her children to pursue activities through school or their church in the hopes that they would make friends, but for years after their move her children remained withdrawn and despondent. Furaha's husband had returned to live and work in Bukavu, adding physical distance to the couple's emotional isolation.

So when Sylvie proposed creating a national network with Furaha to provide assistance to survivors of sexual violence, she jumped at the idea. Furaha quickly began travelling to provinces to talk to women's groups about their network and started forming alliances in her area and in the east. Together the women talk with local women's groups about small project ideas in remote conflict-affected areas. Recently, their organization received a project proposal for over \$1,000 to assist survivors of sexual violence in a province where women were being caught between warring militias. Much more money is needed as word spreads and victims come forth seeking assistance.

But Furaha finally has an outlet for the pain she suffered – a vocation to help other women speak about suffering that has long been unmentionable in Congolese society, and a venue for them to access both support and solidarity in their healing. Together, Sylvie and Furaha continue to raise money and build partnerships with local organizations to help women come out of the isolation Furaha knows so well.

Zawadi: A Mother's Story

In her darkness, she could not see the cracks of light filtering through the doorframe. She sat on the rickety wooden bench, hands clasped firmly together in the faded fabric wrap over her skirt. Her mouth opened, but instead of speech, her throat released awkward bursts of laughter, her mind stumbling on the terrifying terrain where she hid the nightmare of those days.

Sylvie sat with her counterpart from a local partner organization of ICCO as they tried to counsel the woman. She recognized the woman's trauma symptoms and patiently waited for her to tell her story when she was able. Trying again to give voice to the long buried pain of her abuse, Zawadi started to speak, then suddenly ran out of the room, flinging the door open, into the bright nothingness of outside. Sylvie jumped with surprise, but knew not to follow her. Finally, Zawadi returned. To Sylvie's surprise the woman asked if she could speak only to the man from her village, Sylvie's colleague. Sylvie agreed and left the room. After she left, Sylvie's partner asked Zawadi why she did not want her in the room. Looking down at the cement floor, she said she was too ashamed; it was difficult for women to talk to each other about these things. Sylvie was a lawyer from a big city, how could she understand?

The man reassured Zawadi that Sylvie had a lot of experience with these issues. She was there to help them. Sylvie would be the best person to whom she should talk about her problem. After a moment of consideration, Zawadi agreed to let Sylvie return and apologized for her initial embarrassment, "I'm sorry. I could not easily talk about this with you." The old woman's face was deeply lined. She bore the marks of her age, as well as the deeper scars of a story Sylvie could only imagine.

Sylvie's local partners had briefed her on what general details they knew when they requested her assistance for this case, but the woman's protracted trauma had roots in both her past and her present. Sylvie asked her gently if she was willing to now share what she had experienced. Slowly and haltingly, the woman receded into the dark caverns to recall her abuse:

I was coming from the fields that day. I was carrying cassava. Then, along the long dirt road I saw five men standing. As I came closer they greeted me. 'Good evening. Where are you coming from?'

I said, 'Digging.'

'Oh,' one said, 'where are you going?'

'Home.'

'Oh, you grew some nice cassava,' he said.

'Yes, I'm going home to cook it now.'

When I first saw them I thought they were only villagers passing on the road. Then I started to move past them and saw their guns. Then I knew they were Interahamwe.¹³ I was scared; I knew I was going to have problems with them. They asked me if I would give them some of my cassava. Of course I gave it to them, then quickly I took the rest of my bundle and tried to leave. But they stopped me. 'Where do you want to go?' they asked. 'We're still talking with you. We're friends.'

'No.' I said, 'We're not friends.'

They said, 'Ah, but today we've decided we're going to be friends. Let's go for a walk together in the bushes, then we'll see.'

They had their guns. I had no choice, I could not refuse. They took my cassava and led me into the forest. We walked for a very long time through the bush. Finally, we got to a place, I could see they had had a fire and it seemed they were sleeping there. It was their camp. One man turned to me and said, 'Are you happy with all of us?'

I said, 'Why?'

'Would you like to have all of us as your boyfriends?'

'No! For me, my husband has died. I'm a widow.'

They said, 'Oh, but that is good news also. Now we are going to stay with you here. We won't brutalize you, but you will be like the wife to all of us.'

Then I knew I was in a lot of danger. I quickly tried to run away, but they caught me and beat me seriously. I was screaming. They hit me with their fists, sticks and guns, then kicked me on the ground. They kept beating me until I couldn't move. Then the first one came. He said, 'Since you refused to be our girlfriend nicely, there will be brutality, like you wanted.'

Then he raped me. When he was finished, the others all took their turn. The next morning I could not move. I was bleeding a lot. I told them, 'I am very sick now.'

'Oh, are you asking us to kill you now? Because if you say you are not well, we can kill you. We do not need someone who is sick here.'

I was so scared. I just kept quiet. If I talked about this I would die.

Every night they raped me, each one after the other. For seven nights this continued. I thought I would die that way.

Then after one week I woke and saw them packing to leave. They told me they would continue to move. I could not walk anymore and felt surely they would kill me now. But they said they were going to leave me. I praised God for this chance.

They took all my things, then they left. Maybe they thought I would die just there. After a day I started to walk home. After three days I finally reached my village. I couldn't talk to anyone. Many people asked me what had happened, where had I been? But I didn't answer.

Then one day this man [indicating Sylvie's partner] came to see me. He asked me if we could talk about what had happened. I was afraid to talk about it because then all of the people in the village would know what had happened to me. I didn't want that. He said you know those Interahamwe are coming with diseases, but if you go to get a test you can get some medication. So I thought I could just go there to get that medication.

A local group who was working for *Médecins Sans Frontières* was giving testing, so I went. They told me I was positive for the disease and that I would have this HIV for the rest of my life. Then they also told me that I was pregnant. Me! I am an old woman with grown children. How is it that I can be having a young baby now with my age?

As she spoke, her eyes began to tear. She blotted them with her shirt. Her shoulders shook like thin branches as she hid her face in her hands. The compound trauma of the abduction, multiple rapes, HIV infection and pregnancy lay like boulders on her thin frame.

Zawadi's baby was born a few months later. Without any of the necessary education or prophylactic medication to prevent mother-to-child transmission, her baby also tested positive for HIV.

Sylvie soon learned that the local group had not provided even the most basic support services to Zawadi. She had not been given pre-test counseling to prepare her for the psychological and physical ramifications of testing positive or negative, nor had she received post-test counseling or medical support once she learned she was positive and pregnant. Furthermore, no one had told her how to protect her unborn child from the disease. Her blood had been taken and in return, she had been handed a death sentence.

Sylvie began counseling Zawadi on her options for her and her child to live with HIV. Long-term counseling by Sylvie's partners was needed to work through the trauma of her rape, but with knowledge and the support of medication and healthy living choices, tiny slivers of light began piercing the darkness of Zawadi's caverns.

After learning her options, Zawadi asked Sylvie if she had any anti-retroviral (ARV) medication for her. Unfortunately, Sylvie did not. But she vowed to find another organization that did. When she returned to ICCO's office, Sylvie also began to lobby her organization to provide the medication when other providers were not available. "If we are promoting a holistic approach, we must also offer ARV medication to these women." Sylvie argued. "If we meet someone and talk

with her, but we don't address her needs, how can she trust us?" Zawadi's abuse had come at the hands of the Interahamwe, but her abandonment by those from whom she had sought assistance had been equally traumatizing. Sylvie was determined not to leave Zawadi without a path toward psychological healing and medical support.

However, as Sylvie reflected on all Zawadi had survived, she thought not of her vulnerability but of her strength. Sylvie asked Zawadi her baby's name. "I named him *Bénédiction*," she said. Despite the circumstances of his conception and that they had both been infected with HIV, Zawadi had named her son "Blessing." When Sylvie asked why, Zawadi answered, "I am 48 years old. I did not ask to have this baby, so it must be a blessing."

Kashindi: A Child's Story

Kashindi was only five years old. Bonane, 55 years old, was a friend of her father's; Kashindi played with his children in their village.

It was May 2008 when her father fell sick. Bonane came to visit him at their home, chatting and drinking tea with Kashindi's parents. As the men discussed Kashindi's father's sore knees, Bonane said, "I have some medication I can give you. It will help with the pain."

"Kashindi, can you go with your uncle to get me my medication?" her father asked.¹⁴

"Yes, Papa."

She walked with him along the snaking dirt paths from her family's house to his. When they arrived, she saw her friends playing, but their father ordered them out of the house as he and Kashindi entered. He took her inside and gave her the medication for her father. Then he said he had some gifts for her. Excited, she ate the treats – local cassava chips and *bons-bons*. He told her that she could become his friend and when she came to see him, he would give her more candy. Then he told her he wanted to play a game. In a back room he removed her clothes and laid her down to play the game. Then he removed his pants. As Bonane began to penetrate her, she resisted and began to cry. "It hurts!"

"Don't worry," he said, "it will feel better soon."

When he finished, Kashindi could barely walk. She finally reached her home and found her mother. "I brought the medication for Papa."

As she said the words, tears flowed down her cheeks. "What happened?" her mother asked.

"When I went there to my friend's house, their daddy told them all to leave, and then ..."

She did not know how to explain what he did to her. Shaking, her mother lifted her skirt and found blood running down her small thin legs. Taking her daughter in to her husband she yelled, "You see what has happened!"

Kashindi's parents went to her father's friend's house immediately. He came out and saw their faces as they demanded to know what he had done to their daughter. Hanging his head he admitted his transgression. "Please forgive me!" he pleaded, "It is true, it was me who did that. But I am going to pay you a cow and some money and clothes for the girl," he reassured them. He wrote and signed a letter to the family, accepting the responsibility for Kashindi's care and schooling, as if she was his wife.

When they returned home, Kashindi's mother and father discussed the old man's proposal. This was the customary response to defilement in their village.¹⁵ But after a long deliberation Kashindi's parents decided they could not accept a payment in response to what had been done to their daughter. They decided to report the rape.

At the police station Kashindi's parents learned there was a local organization in the larger town of Uvira that could help them, *Réseau l'Association de Défense de Droits des Hommes a Fizi* (RADHF – The Network Association for the Defense of Human Rights in Fizi). They went to the RADHF office and told them what had happened to Kashindi. The staff advised them that the first course of action was to go to the hospital to have her treated and the rape documented.

Kashindi's parents waited over one week before taking her to the hospital, thinking they would have to pay for the services with money they did not have. In the meantime, Kashindi's mother treated her wounds with hot water and local herbs. By the time Kashindi saw a doctor, she had developed a serious infection. The doctor started treatment for the infection and wrote a report concluding that Kashindi had been raped. Due to her young age, he emphasized that the rape had been especially damaging to her small body. Due to her injuries and infection, he suggested that Kashindi be transferred to Panzi Hospital, the only hospital in South Kivu specializing in the extensive damage wrought by sexual assaults. Unfortunately, her parents could not afford to take her there and took her to a local hospital instead.

As Kashindi received treatment, her parents went with RADHF staff to the local court to pursue her case. After waiting to speak to the judge reviewing her case, the family was finally told that the case was not to be heard due to lack of evidence. Shocked, they reminded the judge of the medical report from the doctor detailing Kashindi's extensive injuries and his firm conclusion that she had been raped. But the judge remained impassive, "Your report was not from a state health facility certified to diagnose rape. You must go to a state-certified doctor."

When Kashindi was able to leave the clinic, her parents took her to the state-certified doctor in Uvira. As she lay on the examination table, he gave a cursory glance at Kashindi's crimson, swollen wounds then said, "I see nothing." Kashindi's parents were outraged. In Uvira, justice was still sold to the highest bidder.

Sylvie was working with ICCO as their program coordinator for sexual violence when she received RADHF's report. As RADHF's funder and trainer, Sylvie occasionally provided assistance when they encountered particularly challenging cases. For this case, RADHF hoped that Sylvie might be able to use her legal background to convince the judge to hear the case.

Sylvie travelled from Bukavu to Uvira, where she met with ICCO's local partners and Kashindi's father in RADHF's office. Together, they drove 12 miles to the village of Bibokoboko to

Kashindi's home. Sylvie sat down in the family's small hut with Kashindi and her parents and listened to Kashindi's mother re-tell the events since they had brought the case to court. The perpetrator was now denying that he had written the letter detailing what he would pay the family for what he had done to Kashindi. Kashindi's parents had talked to his neighbors who had heard Kashindi's cries in his house. They said it was not the first rape he had committed, but he had paid the other families to keep quiet. They were afraid to go to the police in case he came after them.

Scared and flighty, Kashindi did not seem to be listening, but intermittently she would suddenly try to leave the room. When Kashindi's mother asked if she could tell Sylvie what had happened to her, Kashindi turned and started to hit her. Her mother said that since the rape she had been acting irrational; angry outbursts and running away had become common. When asked simple questions, she would give blank stares and refuse to respond. Gently, Sylvie asked her if she knew a man named Bonane.

"Yes" she replied.

"What did you do with him?" Sylvie asked.

In broken Swahili, Kashindi said quietly, "One time my father asked me to go get his medicine and he tried to ... he told me that we can do friends' things." With Sylvie's encouragement, the rest of the story slowly came out: "He gave me chips and candies. Then he started to hurt me. He said we were playing a game, but it started to hurt. It hurt a lot."

As Sylvie became involved with the case she realized that the family was already under pressure from people in their village to drop the case, accusing them of trying to divide the community. They thought that further strife between the families could be avoided if Kashindi's family sought an agreement locally. "What advice can you give me? Should we continue?" Kashindi's mother asked.

Sylvie simply replied that if it was up to her, she would want to see the man prosecuted. She understood the pressure Kashindi's family was under, but she appealed to their empathy for other parents in their village. "Even if he gives you money or pays you with clothes, he can continue because he knows it is easy for him, he simply has to pay enough. But if you punish him, all of the village will be saved in the future."

Kashindi's family decided to pursue the case, but they remained worried about their security. Bonane had powerful friends and they were worried he could cause them harm. Sylvie arranged for RADHF to meet with the police and local authorities to inform them of the risk to the family's security.

Meanwhile, Sylvie returned to Uvira to build momentum among lawyers and civil society actors to approach the doctor to protest his report on the rape. However, despite their lobbying he remained impassive: "I have the freedom to stay consistent with my original report. I saw no evidence of rape. It looked like maybe she was raped before."

The civil society members were furious. "She is five years old! How can she have been raped before?"

Finally, Sylvie was able to find another state-certified doctor and drive Kashindi and her parents to see him. Without the influence of the perpetrator's bribes, the second doctor quickly confirmed that Kashindi had been the victim of a recent and extensively damaging rape. Nevertheless, the judge kept stalling. Despite the letter, the most recent doctor's report and the witnesses, he insisted there was not enough evidence. Finally, when he agreed to hear the case, it was put off on multiple hearings as the defense team failed to show up.

Sylvie made the trip between Uvira and Bukavu weekly, trying to keep the pressure on the court to hear the case and decide on a verdict. As the case dragged on, Congo's government passed anti-sexual-violence legislation requiring sexual violence cases to be decided within one month, and Sylvie began lobbying at the provincial level in Bukavu. At international meetings she would raise the case, asking for solidarity among the international partners present to pressure the court to expedite Kashindi's hearing. Eventually, Sylvie was able to arrange for a commission to travel to Uvira with ICCO's coordinator, along with representatives of the United Nations Population Fund. Together with staff from Uvira's local U.N. Office for Humanitarian Affairs and civil society members, a team of 20 advocates went to talk to the judges and lawyers arguing the case. Within three weeks, a verdict was read. Bonane was found guilty. However, out of a possible maximum sentence of 10 years for defilement, he was given four months.

For Sylvie and her colleagues, the sentence was akin to judicial forgiveness for the grievous crime Bonane had committed. If raping a five-year-old child did not garner the maximum sentence under Congo's sexual assault legislation, what would? After the struggle needed to get a perpetrator convicted, such light sentences left Sylvie and many human rights advocates believing there was little to dissuade future violators from committing such crimes.

Kashindi's family, however, was pleased with the verdict. Bonane's defense had brought witnesses that had corroborated his version of events in which Kashindi had simply come to his house for the medication and left. With suspicions of corruption swirling around the courtroom, Kashindi's parents doubted that Bonane would be convicted at all. However, a conviction was the only satisfaction they were allowed. Bonane insisted he could not pay damages to the family as he had no money and was unemployed. Kashindi's parents were convinced he was either lying or the money he had originally agreed to pay them had been distributed to the doctor and judge as bribes.

Ironically, two months after Bonane was put in prison, he died suddenly from an illness he contracted while there. Sylvie regrets his death as yet another shortcoming of the Congolese judicial and penal systems. As a defender of human rights, she asserts that anyone convicted of a crime, even sexual abuse, should be subject to the sentence given. Basic human rights should be upheld in prison, including the provision of basic medical treatment.

Despite all of Sylvie and RADHF's efforts, Bonane's conviction and subsequent death led to RADHF and Kashindi's family receiving threats from Bonane's family. Eventually both RADHF and Kashindi's family were forced to leave Bibokoboko. Now the blame for the chain of events lies again on the victim and those that supported her.

But Sylvie takes comfort in the victories, hard-won against a system that has been stacked against survivors of sexual violence for decades. She is working with her local partners across the region to document sexual assault verdicts and lobby the courts to enact stronger sentencing for

perpetrators. However, reform of the judicial system must accompany reform of Congo's policing, penal system, local traditions and survivor-support and referral networks. Sylvie knows the work ahead of her is staggering, but she continues to forge alliances to unite Congolese communities to tackle the issues together. Only then will Congo be able to turn the tide against the injustice perpetrated against Kashindi and the hundreds of thousands of Congolese women, men, boys and girls, who have suffered similar abuse.

Asina: A Wife's Story

Stumbling down the road, blood caked between her aching thighs, Asina's head clamored with flashbacks of the nightmare she and two other women had just endured: the blows against her body; the deeper, splitting pain; the militia soldier's hot breath against her face; the other women's screams, indistinguishable from her own. But as her mind frantically sought escape from the images of the violence she feared she would not survive, other fears – of how she would tell her husband, of her health, children and future – soon tortured her.

As she approached her village and the house she shared with Kamaliro, her husband of more than a decade, she tried to come up with the words to tell him what had happened. She entered their home, skin bruised and clothes torn – a physical testament to the brutality of her ordeal. To his questions, her words came in choking sobs: She had been with two women digging in the fields when the militia had come; they had tried to run but were caught; they were each violently raped and told the violence would end with their executions. Their torture continued for hours. But instead of being killed, the women were ordered to return to their homes, where the militia's destruction of their bodies and psyches would serve to perpetuate their terror and domination of the local community. Once they broke a community's wives and mothers, its families crumbled, and the fear of the militia's power reigned. They had won.

The violence had its intended consequence on Asina's family. The trauma of Asina's rape encircled Kamaliro like barbed wire, gouging his mind with images of his wife being violated by the militiamen, and inflicted upon him the pain of his own humiliation, anger, helplessness and loss. He had been unable to protect her. The invasion of other men into her body had destroyed the private, sacred union which they shared, and he could no longer live with her in the same house. His tone conveyed a melancholy finality that did not leave room for discussion. She was ordered to pack her things and return to her parents' home.

Asina's parents went through similar shock when they received their daughter later that day. However, they had heard of an organization, Sarcaf, that assisted victims of sexual violence in their town and the next week approached the group with news of their daughter's separation and a plea for assistance. Asina was exhibiting signs of post-traumatic stress disorder, suffering both from the compound trauma of the rape and depression over her husband's rejection. Sarcaf staff approached Kamaliro to see if he would be willing to talk to his wife, but he refused. They decided to write to ICCO, the organization that trained and funded their counseling activities, to ask Sylvie, the program's coordinator, for assistance.

It was a dusty morning when Sylvie travelled to Sarcaf's office in Bunyakiri. She greeted her colleagues and reviewed the organization's monthly report, focusing especially on Asina's case.

Sylvie had dealt with similar cases in the past and knew that the entwinement of myriad psychological, social and cultural issues often made a positive outcome elusive. But all battles in Congo's complex war of armies, militias and civilians were hard-fought, and Sylvie was not willing to surrender to the militias' violent campaign.

As Sarcaf's truck rumbled to a stop in front of Asina's family's compound, Sylvie was welcomed at the gate by her parents and the curious faces of Asina's four children, eager to see the shiny truck arriving from the city. Asina stood near the compound wall in a patterned skirt and worn T-shirt, her expression neither one of excitement nor apprehension. Her face looked as worn as her shirt.

Sylvie greeted each family member in turn as she was invited to sit with them inside the compound's thick mud walls. The parents described what had happened and the effect on Asina, as she sat quietly beside them.

Sylvie listened and then turned to Asina. "Before you were raped, what was your relationship like with your husband?"

Asina's face brightened slightly at the memory. "We were very happy. We have these four children and we did many things together. Before, we were in a good relationship. But when I was raped my husband asked me to go to my parent's place."

Sylvie nodded, "Would you like to return in your house with your husband?"

"Yes, my only wish is to return to my home."

"How can we help you with this?" Sylvie asked, trying to gauge what sort of intervention Asina would be comfortable with. "I think we can go try to talk to him for you." For the first time during the visit, Asina began to smile.

The next day, Sylvie drove with her local counterpart to the row of mud houses and dusty banana plantations where Kamaliro lived. Stopping at a few homes before their destination, they walked door-to-door to greet his neighbors. Children clamored in the doorways as Sylvie and her partner introduced themselves as development workers and asked the families a few questions about the needs of their village. After an hour visiting other houses, they came to Kamaliro's home.

"Hello there!" Sylvie called.

An older man answered the door. Sylvie allowed a series of customary Swahili greetings to roll off her tongue in rhythmic sequence: "Good afternoon! How are you please? How is your family? And how are things? How is work? How is here?"

Asina's husband punctuated each of Sylvie's questions with a polite, "Fine," before she began her introduction.

"My name is Sylvie Maunga Mbanga from ICCO in Bukavu. Are you not the man who works with the church here?"

“Yes,” the man replied, still surprised by the arrival of unfamiliar visitors transported in the luxury of a private vehicle.

“We decided to come visit you on our tour of your village. We do development work. We often come here, so this time it is our turn to visit your place.” The man relaxed. Sylvie continued, “How are you here? Are you good?”

“Yes,” he replied.

Looking past him into the empty house, Sylvie remarked, “Oh, you stay alone?”

“Yes.” His eyebrows rose quizzically.

“Oh, but you have a nice house. You really stay alone?”

“Yes, my wife got a problem so now she is at her parents. I stay alone.”

“Oh, what kind of problem?” Sylvie tried to sound nonchalant.

“Just a problem.”

“Was it a very hard problem? Did you try to resolve it?”

Kamaliro’s eyes focused over Sylvie’s shoulder; he seemed to be losing interest in their conversation. She changed the subject and began asking him about general things in the village. His interest returned and he offered Sylvie and her partner chairs in his house, relaxing into their conversation about the village and the development needs of the area. After some time, Sylvie asked what work he did with the church. After he told her, she asked if his wife also worked with the church. “No.”

“Oh, is she digging now?”

“I don’t know,” he replied. “She isn’t coming to our field anymore. Maybe she is digging on her parent’s plot because she is staying with them.”

Sylvie took the opening, “Oh? Why is she at her parents? She’s old to be staying with her parents.”

“I told you it was a problem!” He let out a long breath. His eyebrows furrowed, but his bloodshot eyes were filled with sadness rather than anger.

Cautiously, Sylvie leaned forward, her voice quiet and calm, “Sometimes when we have problems we don’t know if they can be helped. I also have many problems in my life. I lost my two sisters and I miss them very much. But I continue to have the hope that my life will be good. You should also have a promising future.” Kamaliro sat silently, eyes lowered. When he did not respond, Sylvie wondered if he might express his feelings more openly with her in private.

She asked him if he had any bananas for sale. She had seen some in his yard and told him she was looking for some to buy. Together, they walked outside to his garden. Once they were alone, Sylvie tried again slowly, “Is it possible for you to tell me what happened with your wife?”

With a heavy sigh Kamaliro said, almost in a whisper, “She was raped.”

“Mmm.” Sylvie nodded reassuringly, silently encouraging him to go on.

Looking at her he tried to explain, “You know, in our culture you cannot stay with a woman who was raped.”

Sylvie acted surprised, “Oh, was she also in a relationship with the man who raped her?”

“No, it was the Interahamwe.”

“For this you expel her?”

“Of course, I can’t stay with her!”

“Well, it is up to you but you should ask yourself if she ...” Sylvie’s voice trailed off. She tried to explain to him other types of what was locally referred to as “rape,” giving the example of men who witnessed their wives having intercourse with other men, in consensual relationships. Sylvie agreed that for that kind of “rape,” she sided with the men. “But for you, do you believe that your wife was a part of this in any way?”

His voice was now melancholy. “No, I don’t think so. But it is hard for me.”

Sylvie made up a story of a couple she knew that had the same problem as he and his wife. She explained how this couple was able to restore their relationship and is now living happily together. Then she offered, “If you want I can help you with this.”

He shot back a skeptical, “You? You are going to help me! How?”

Hearing the defensive edge to his voice, Sylvie tried another approach. “How long has it been since you last saw your wife?”

“It’s been so long, maybe four months. I never see her. But I know that she is at her parent’s place.”

“And is she good?”

He said, “Yes, I think so because I never hear that she is sick or unwell.”

“When you hear about her, how do you feel?”

He considered this, then said, “I’m glad when I know she’s safe. I don’t wish anything bad on her.”

Sylvie knew she needed to reveal the true purpose of her visit. “You know my coming here was not an accident. I know your wife. She is a very nice woman. She still thinks about you and loves you very much. I came to greet you for her.”

He looked at her with astonishment. After a pause, he finally mumbled, “OK.”

But Sylvie knew her initial pretext had injured their trust. She tried one last time: “I know it is very hard to talk about these things, but I am available to assist you if you want.”

With his head low, Kamaliro replied, “But for me, I am not ready to talk about this. Every time when I remember what happened, I feel very bad.”

Sylvie felt there was hope. His ongoing pain showed he had not been able to move on. In the openness of their wounds lay the opportunity for the couple to heal the deep personal and shared scars left by the rape, together.

Sylvie bought bananas from him as promised, then asked if she could come visit him again some time. He said, “You are welcome.”

“Thank you,” she replied, turning to leave. Then, as if it was an afterthought, she said, “If I see your wife, can I tell her you greet her?”

“No problem, you can tell her.” He added, “I don’t have a problem with her, we just aren’t a couple.”

Sylvie smiled and waved goodbye as she and her colleague drove back to Sarcaf’s office. Once there, Sylvie debriefed the local team to let them know that her visit with Asina’s husband had gone well, but many more visits would be needed to build the trust that would facilitate further counseling.

Three weeks later, Sylvie returned to Bunyakiri to check on the progress of the case. She learned that the counseling sessions with Asina were continuing, but that no further progress had been made with Kamaliro.

Sylvie mulled over her approach as they drove along the dry dirt roads to Kamaliro’s house. It was no longer necessary to go under the pretense of development work, but Sylvie still greeted the children and parents of the village.

As she sat down again with Kamaliro, she asked, “How are you here now?”

He said, “Yes, things are good.”

Sylvie looked at him with a twinkle in her eye, and asked, “Do you have your laugh now?”

He rolled his eyes. “Why do you always ask about this?”

“It’s good to know. I want to see people happy. I admire men and women who love one another. When I see situations like yours it affects me, so I hope I can be of assistance to bring you back together.”

Kamaliro smiled, so Sylvie continued. “Do we have an agreement? Would you be willing to give me an appointment if I want to work with you about this situation?”

“What kind of appointment?”

“I would like, maybe in one month, to come visit you for a couple of hours. Just to talk with you.”

He shrugged his shoulders, “No problem.”

Over the coming months, Sylvie and Kamaliro became friends. Occasionally, Sylvie would bring small gifts from the city that one could not get in the village, as a sign of goodwill. It helped that Sylvie’s arrival in her company’s pick-up truck caused the neighbors to envy Kamaliro his important visitor.

Sylvie began her counseling sessions in an informal manner, discussing Kamaliro’s day-to-day life and feelings before broaching the deeper issues surrounding his separation from his wife. At the beginning, the psychological and cultural hurdles he needed to overcome to reunite with his wife seemed insurmountable. He insisted that to be in a sexual relationship with a woman who has been raped was intolerable in their culture. Sylvie explored this presumption further, asking if he knew a couple who had experienced that in his village. He admitted, “No, it’s only talked about.”

She then asked him, “What vision would you like to have for the future?”

“I don’t know what kind of hope or vision, but when people know that I’m back with my wife, they are going to talk about it. Every time I am with her I’m going to remember the Interahamwe.”

“But the Interahamwe are far away in the bushes.”

He said “Yes, but the people say the Interahamwe come with HIV and disease.”

“Yes, I agree with you, it is a problem if they come with the disease. But we can see whether this problem affects your wife by making a test.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes, we can go get a test to see if she is infected or not.”

He looked again at Sylvie skeptically, “OK, I’m going to ask the advice of the elders in my village to see what they think.”

Sylvie went directly to Asina's home to inform her of her latest meeting with her husband. The news that Kamaliro was going to talk to the elders about their relationship lit her sunken eyes with hope.

Then Sylvie mentioned the possibility of going for an HIV test. Asina listened attentively to Sylvie. Even if they discovered that she had contracted HIV, Sylvie reassured her that she knew many women who were HIV positive, but who were still able to maintain good relationships with their husbands with anti-retroviral medication and condom use. Asina's hands shook slightly as they discussed the details of where to go for the test, but as they finished Asina agreed to the test and said her deep faith in God reassured her that everything would be OK.

The next day, the women went to the clinic and stood together in the painted cement waiting room breathing the characteristic odors of iodine and illness. Other patients came and went. Finally, Asina was called for pre-test counseling. Thirty minutes later, she returned to meet Sylvie and the women walked together to the laboratory.

After her blood was taken Asina seemed calm, but Sylvie felt a fervent energy lying just under the surface. They stood outside under a leafy tree for shade, waiting for the results and talking infrequently before each returned to their own silent prayer. Finally, a nurse called Asina. Sylvie had to remain outside, watching her walk away, hands clasped and head bowed as her lips moved steadily without sound.

After a long wait, Asina's figure loomed in the shaded clinic doorway. As she stepped into the bright sun toward Sylvie, her face shone with a smile lifting her cheekbones to her eyebrows. After a relieved and joyful embrace, Sylvie asked Asina what she would like to do. Asina thought for a minute, then asked Sylvie meekly, "Can you go to tell my husband that I am safe?"

After lunch, Sylvie dropped Asina at her parents' before driving to Kamaliro's house. Exchanging greetings, Sylvie quickly exclaimed, "I have good news for you!"

Kamaliro looked at her expectantly, "What kind of news? Did you catch the Interahamwe who raped my wife?"

Sylvie sighed with exasperation at his preoccupation with his own concerns, rather than thinking of his wife. She ignored his question and replied, "Your wife went for testing and she is very OK."

"Good," he said, considering the news for a moment. He stood up and began pacing the room. "But it is still wrong for a woman to have two men in her life."

Sylvie knew that getting Kamaliro to consider renewing a sexual relationship with his wife after she had been used sexually by another man would be difficult, and even if possible, would still take a long time. So she moved on, "What happened about your advice?"

He said "I went to get the advice from those men and they said there are some rituals that the *mwami* [elder] can do to make sure that I won't die if I return in the relationship."

“So would you consider this?”

“OK, I would consider it.”

In an effort to gain communal support for the couple’s union, Sylvie and staff from Sarcaf decided to contact friends of Kamaliro. When Sylvie and her partner found the men, they said that Kamaliro had been telling them about Sylvie’s involvement in his problem. Fortunately, it seemed the friends also believed that as long as Asina was not infected with HIV, her husband should take her back. They offered to help Sylvie and her local partners to convince Kamaliro that if his wife was still safe, then the couple should be reunited.

As the months passed, Sylvie continued her regular visits to Kamaliro. During one visit, Sylvie looked at the state of the husband’s house before picking up a broom to start some much-needed sweeping. As she worked, she reminded him, “You know, if you were with your wife she would be the one doing the cooking and cleaning.”

“Yes, of course.” He looked at Sylvie, realizing an offer was veiled in her comment, before saying, “Well, then she can come only to cook and clean.”

Sylvie tried to conceal her smile. She mentioned that she had talked to his friends and that they supported him taking his wife back. He considered this, but raised yet another obstacle, “But it is my family who can’t accept for my wife to come back here.”

This time Sylvie felt it would be better if she did not approach the family herself. His friends agreed to go to the family and discuss their recommendation that their son should reunite with his wife despite the rape. At that point it would be up to the parents to decide whether they supported their son reuniting with Asina.

The next day, Sylvie went to meet with the friends again, eager to hear the outcome of their meeting. They reported that after a long discussion, the parents said they did not have a problem with the couple’s reunion, provided that the mwami gave his blessing.

Sylvie then went to tell Kamaliro his parent’s feelings. Upon hearing the collective support from both his peers and his family, he replied simply, “OK.”

It had taken nearly nine months, but the cultural and societal barriers to the couple’s union – both real and perceived – had finally been overcome. What remained was Kamaliro’s ability to defeat the personal demons of pain and humiliation from the night Asina last stood in their kitchen.

After a week, Sylvie’s colleague visited Kamaliro to ask how he was doing. The men talked for some time before they came to the topic of his wife. With the shift in subject, Kamaliro became still. With his head bowed and eyes downcast, he admitted he would like to have his wife back, but he didn’t have the courage to look for her.

Sylvie’s colleague could barely believe the revelation. Carefully, as if Kamaliro’s resolve would crumble under the wrong words, he ventured, “But if she comes to you, will you accept her?”

He considered this, then responded, “Yes, if she was coming here, I would allow her to come.”

As soon as the man returned to the office, he called Sylvie. The excitement in his voice was tangible, “The husband accepted! He only said that we should go get his wife.”

Sylvie hurried through her other responsibilities at ICCO’s office so she could make the journey back to Bunyakiri as soon as possible. Arriving in town, she instructed her driver to pick up a crate of beer to offer the couple in celebration of their reunion.

Asina had been informed about her husband’s willingness by Sylvie’s local partners in the weeks prior, and had been preparing for the reunion ever since. She and her children, who had barely seen their father in the couple’s nine months of separation, mulled around her parents’ compound in anxious anticipation of their short but momentous journey home. When Sylvie arrived with the vehicle, Asina was waiting outside, nervous and excited. As she climbed into the back of the pick-up, Sylvie saw in her eyes the fear that her dream of reuniting with her husband – now supposedly moments away – might be too good to be true. But Sylvie smiled back at Asina with an encouraging nod, “It will be all right.”

As the truck pulled up to the house, Kamaliro opened the door to watch their arrival. The couple did not embrace, but brief smiles containing a kaleidoscope of pain, joy and hope conveyed the complex emotions and history of their recent past and uncertain future.

Once the vehicle had been unloaded, Kamaliro invited them all in. Once they had all been seated, he turned to his wife, “I would like to thank Sylvie because she helped us. She is the one who was coming to tell me about your news. We should be grateful to her and recognize her good work; she did it for us.” Asina nodded vigorously.

Sylvie blushed and replied, “Me, too. I’m very grateful to see you reunited as a couple.”

Though reestablishing their home and the intimacy they once shared was a challenge, Asina and Kamaliro continue to live together, a testimony to their personal courage and the support of their community. In the warm smile that now greets Sylvie when she visits Bunyakiri, she sees Asina’s ability to defeat the militia that violated her. Indeed, Sylvie believes it is the courage and strength of entire families and communities like Asina’s that will ultimately defeat all of Congo’s militias.

Ni ya mudamu yenu ile kazi
This Work It Is from Your Blood

Papa

In eastern Congo, where war, natural disaster and poverty vie to snatch the gifts God bestows on its population, families provide some of the last bastions of strength in weary, torn communities.

The seventh child to Maunga Batema Augustin and Masika Sabuni Suzane, Sylvie grew up in the relative privilege of an upper middle-class Congolese family. Knowing the value of education, Sylvie's parents sacrificed luxuries normally awarded to professionals of their stature to pay for each of their 10 children to attend primary school through university. As she grew, Sylvie witnessed her parents struggle in order to shelter their family from the hardship and poverty that permeated their community and country.

In order to meet the financial responsibilities of raising 10 children, Sylvie's parents balanced the burden of caring for their children by each maintaining full-time careers. Her mother worked as an administrator in the Department of Social and Family Services. But it was Sylvie's father's profession as a state administrative chief that dictated much of his family's life. His career required him to relocate every two years to oversee a different local administration. Biennially, the decision was made between Augustin and Suzane to move as a family, or to leave some of their children with relatives or friends so they could continue their schooling in the better institutions offered in larger towns. Some years their careers also required the couple to separate, further splintering their family.

As a young man, Augustin quickly gained notoriety in the communities in which he had worked as a just and honest adjudicator. In his position as a state administrator he refused the customary practice of taking bribes when adjudicating cases. For many families, their case had laid unresolved for up to a decade as they fought for justice in a system where the verdict went to the party that could pay. As Sylvie passed through towns and villages throughout North and South Kivu, grateful citizens quickly remembered her father and the gift of a fair and transparent hearing they had received from him.

In his family, Augustin brought the same principles of respect, transparency and fairness to his relationship with his children and his wife. He rejected Congo's firm patriarchal mold and took an active role in raising his children, even taking Sylvie and her sister, Gisèle, to live with him during a two-year post while his wife stayed with their other children.

As a girl, Sylvie's friends often witnessed her father making his own breakfast while his wife was granted a morning to sleep in. Knowing only the strictly patriarchal families in which they had been raised, Sylvie's friends taunted her with the accusation that her mother was lazy and disrespectful of her father. But Sylvie admired her father's treatment of his wife and his daughters. Her father taught all his children that women should be regarded as equal members of society, imbuing them with the same human rights and dignity as men.

Sylvie was six years old when her family first moved to Idjwi, an island territory in Lake Kivu. The island comprised a few rural villages, connected by dirt pathways and devoid of electricity,

running water or substantial infrastructure. As the school year approached, Sylvie was sent off the island to live with family friends in the main town of Bukavu to start primary school. For the next few years she only came to Idjwi for school holidays.

On a bright Sunday afternoon in the summer of 1982, Sylvie sat in the garden with her older sisters, Micheline and Gisèle, happy to be surrounded again by her family. As the girls talked about their time apart, distant sounds began to filter through the afternoon haze: a woman's cries approached from down the long dirt road from the church. Running to the fence and peering in the direction of the noise, the girls could make out four men carrying a crying woman by her limbs toward Sylvie's family compound.

During the two previous summers, Sylvie had seen the same strange behavior by the men in Idjwi: Groups of men would suddenly pounce on lone women at the market or after church. The women were obviously afraid and had struggled, some crying, but none of the villagers intervened or seemed upset by the men's actions. At the age of six and seven these occurrences scared Sylvie, but as none of the adults seemed disturbed, she had kept her questions about the men's behavior to herself.

But Sylvie was now eight years old. Her eyes met the frightened woman's as she screamed for Sylvie and her sisters to help her. Sylvie turned and ran to the house, calling to her father, "*Papa!* Come, quick! There is a problem outside!" Sylvie's father came to the door, asking what was wrong.

"A woman is crying! Four boys have caught her. We don't know where they are taking her!"

Augustin stepped out of the house and shouted at their security guards, "Go catch those boys outside!" The guards ran outside, ordering the gang to halt. The boys looked back in shock, then dropped their captive and ran.

Sylvie's father approached the girl, now hiding her tear-streaked face as she lay on the dirt road. "What happened?" he asked, inviting her into their compound. The young woman explained how she had been coming from church when the men had surrounded her. In a mob they had attacked her, grabbing her arms and legs and carrying her down the main road; where they were taking her she did not know. Sylvie's father pressed further: what could be the motivation for her kidnapping? With a solemn voice breaking in sobs, she described the ritual she had just escaped.

On the island of Idjwi, boys approach marriage like a trophy to be captured. When a young man settles on the woman whom he wishes to marry, he gathers his friends and informs them of his choice. Thus begins a period of stalking the woman, waiting for a time when she is alone and vulnerable. Together, the men plot the day on which the kidnapping will take place. When they find her alone, the men attack, restraining her forcibly if she does not submit. Raised in a highly patriarchal culture, villagers are accustomed to such women's screams; resigned to the woman's fate, they do not intervene.

Struggling for her freedom or limp in capitulation, the bride-to-be is carried to the man's house where the couple is left. For two days she is locked inside and raped by her captor. That she has been tarnished by her suitor ensures she will not be considered an acceptable bride for another man. The boy then approaches her family's house by nightfall to leave a gift of a cow. The token

signifies an initial bride price and informs the family of the reason for their daughter's disappearance. Her family thus realizes that by this time her captor has consummated the marriage, which leaves them little option to refuse the suitor. When the man returns the next day, the continuing presence of the cow confirms that the family has accepted their daughter's fate. The following day, his parents will approach the girl's family to identify their son as the woman's captor and announce that she has become their son's wife. The girl's family must then agree to the marriage. If they refuse, a conflict between the families is inevitable.

Sylvie's father listened to the woman attentively, then dispatched a messenger to the home of one of the area's cultural leaders to inform him he would be visiting. Two days later, Augustin was driven up to the man's circular mud hut and welcomed inside by the leader and his family. After the men completed the customary greetings and sat down, Sylvie's father raised the reason for his visit: "So what is happening here with marriage? Is it forced, or something the couple consents to?"

The cultural leader laughed and responded with a conspiratory glance, "Here, men like to show they are strong men! If you are hard, you must show that you are able to take the woman."

Sylvie's father did not reciprocate the leader's male bravado, returning his humor with a steady gaze. Surprised by his guest's lack of commiseration, the cultural leader tried to reason with him, "It is our culture to come and kidnap her and bring her into your home. It is not a bad thing! We would like to show that if you love someone you must prove it! If you go to ask the women, they will say, 'Yes, it is what happened to me, but I love my husband.'"

Sylvie's father looked at the leader directly. His tone was firm, "I don't think it's a good thing. If you give the women an opportunity to talk openly about this issue, I don't think they can accept to be treated like you do here." The cultural leader was stunned. "From now on," Augustin continued, "if I see a boy take a woman without her consent, the boy, his parents *and you* will all be arrested!" The cultural leader tried to stammer his protest, but Sylvie's father went on, "I am giving you the order. It is your responsibility to tell your people that I said it is not right for you to treat women that way. If you continue, I will take all of you to the prison."

The effects of Sylvie's father's ruling were swift. He met individually with the other cultural leaders in the area and then called a meeting to make his decree public. Over the following year the island saw a rapid decline in the kidnapping and rape of women for the purpose of marriage. As women slowly began to realize they were more secure in their communities, a noticeable shift began to occur on Idjwi. At church on Saturday and travelling to and from the Sunday market, Sylvie began to notice women venturing out on their own, smiling and relaxed as they enjoyed the weekend's activities.

In the year following her father's decision, women approached Sylvie's parents at church or visited their house. All of them were mothers with daughters of their own. Sometimes they would speak to Augustin directly, but most often they would approach Suzane quietly and tell her, "Your husband is a good man. He made a good decision here. In this area, our girls did not have the opportunity to choose their husbands. My daughter was constantly afraid to move anywhere. Now she has freedom."

For Sylvie, her father's decision was an important lesson. He stood up for what he believed was a basic human right and in doing so, protected not only the rights of the women of Idjwi, but the rights of his own daughters. Thus, Sylvie first recognized that allowing the oppression of any woman was oppressive to all women. In liberating the women of Idjwi from a chauvinistic tradition, Augustin liberated Sylvie as well. As she grew, these basic tenets drove Sylvie's decision to work for peace, justice and women's rights. It was her father's early lessons on justice that Sylvie credits as her first and most profound legal training.

However, Sylvie's parents were not supportive of her initial legal aspirations. She had grown up in a family with a strong political consciousness, and her parents hoped she would pursue a career as a politician. They enrolled her in Political Science at the State University of North Kivu in Goma. Sylvie made it clear she did not wish to study politics, but was eventually persuaded to go. She finished her first year with high grades, but when she came home for the holidays she informed her parents again that she wished to study law. "I am finished studying at this school. If you do not allow me to study law, I will finish my studies now. I will not return to pursue a degree in politics."

Both of her parents were shocked, but her mother was especially angry at Sylvie's stubbornness. "Augustin, order your daughter to go! We are her parents; it is not up to her to refuse our wishes!"

But Sylvie's father was pragmatic, "It is not that easy, Suzane. We cannot make her study."

The transition to law school was not an easy one for Sylvie. As she was entering as a second-year student, she was forced to take the prerequisite first-year legal courses concurrently with her second-year curriculum. As she worked from before sunrise to late in the night, her younger sister Anie became Sylvie's shadow. Knowing the pressure her sister was under, Anie silently assumed Sylvie's chores in addition to her own. She would rise before Sylvie to make sure that her sister had breakfast and clean clothes. At night, Sylvie would enter the house like a zombie, heading straight for her bed rather than stopping to eat an evening meal. As she lay in bed, barely conscious, she would feel a presence enter the room and sit on her bed. Between her lips would slide a forkful of chicken or a spoonful of rice, as Anie's voice would gently urge her, "Come on, Sylvie, you must eat. If you do not eat you will get ill or starve!"

As that grueling year came to a close and Sylvie passed her first exams, she knew that without Anie she never would have made it through her first year of law school.

In 1998, Sylvie completed her law degree at the *Université Liberté de Grandes Lacs* in high standing. Sylvie's family was incredibly proud of her achievement, and her parents and siblings rallied around her as she began her career.

She spent the first years following her graduation representing victims of sexual violence and building her legal and human rights skills through short-term contracts with a variety of organizations. She also worked independently and with a former colleague of her eldest sister, Edwige, to form an alliance of organizations working for victims of sexual violence in eastern Congo. However, working independently did not offer Sylvie financial or professional stability as eastern Congo plunged further into conflict.

After a few years Sylvie applied for a longer-term position at a major international NGO, the Life and Peace Institute, working for peace and good governance in the Kivus. As she made the transition to a large international NGO, her sister, Micheline, called Sylvie every week to see how she was doing. After many years at the United Nations Development Programme, Micheline was always ready with administrative and organizational advice for Sylvie, as well as providing much-needed encouragement when Sylvie became discouraged and overwhelmed working amidst the violence and challenges of the war.

From the support of her siblings and inspiration and lessons from her parents, and especially her father, Sylvie felt it was impossible to separate the achievements of her career from the guidance of her family. Their unwavering support also taught Sylvie what an exceptional childhood she had experienced compared to the hardship and lack of opportunity faced by millions of children in communities throughout eastern Congo.



In Congo, women do not buy property of their own, as it is expected they will live with their families until they get married, and then with their husbands in a house the husband purchases for his wife. However, soon after she started working, Sylvie began putting money aside. In 2006, after six years of saving, Sylvie had saved \$10,000, enough to purchase a plot of land in her father's ancestral village in Lubero. Initially she worried about sharing her unorthodox plans with her family, but when she told her father of her intention, he was overjoyed. "What an intelligent daughter I have!" Augustin exclaimed, praising Sylvie's practical and financial foresight to anyone who would listen.

Choosing the land to purchase presented some challenges. In Lubero there was not much good land available with a house. But Sylvie did not need a house to live in for a number of years, as she would be continuing her work in Bukavu. Her purchase was an investment for years down the road, and most importantly, a bond to her family's ancestral area.

The effects of the war were deepening the village's poverty. Parents were having difficulty paying their children's school fees and when the local school in Lubero was unable to pay its rent, the landlord was forced to put the property up for sale. The land was dry and the building dilapidated. It lacked doors or windows and the embankment was eroding. One hundred and fifty children were about to lose their education.

After careful deliberation, Sylvie bought the property.

The headmaster learned the building had sold and was preparing to dismiss his teachers and pupils when Sylvie explained that she would not be moving into the house. The headmaster showed visible relief at her offer to allow them to keep using the building, but he soon had to mention the school's difficulty with paying rent. Sylvie listened to the challenges the school had faced in raising school fees from the children's parents as the war deepened and the trading routes on which their livelihoods depended became impassable. Sylvie carefully considered her options before offering the headmaster the only sustainable solution for the children to continue their education: Sylvie would donate her house to be used as a primary school for the foreseeable future, rent-free.

Now, two sets of primary classes are held per day, one in the morning and one in the afternoon. All six classrooms are full and as Sylvie has been able to save more money, she has made improvements to the building, such as doors to insulate the classrooms from street noise.

Sylvie is not able to visit Lubero often, but when she pays a visit the headmaster immediately empties the classrooms into the small field beside the building for the children to thank their benefactress. The teachers call to their students, “Come and see, children! Our donor is here!” The children run outside and eagerly perform dances and songs of appreciation and welcome, thanking Sylvie for their education.

In 2007, Sylvie’s father travelled to Lubero. Throughout the village, people spoke of Maunga’s daughter and her school. As Augustine approached the small, one-story, cement building bursting with students, he swelled with pride at his daughter’s unique gift to his ancestral home.

Edwige

As the first-born child of Suzane and Augustin, Sylvie’s eldest sister Edwige had taken on a primary care-giving role for her five sisters and four brothers by the time she hit puberty. For Sylvie, the sun rose and set on tall, beautiful, Edwige. Edwige too, had a special fondness for Sylvie. While Sylvie was still young, Edwige left home to continue her schooling, but on her visits home from boarding school, she would often bring presents to her younger siblings. Even when she couldn’t bring much, she would try to bring something special for Sylvie.

Eleven years Sylvie’s senior, Edwige finished her bachelor’s degree while Sylvie was still in primary school. She began a career in civil society and community-based organizations at the age of 19, working for women’s development. She was a very hard worker and was soon promoted to the position of program coordinator for UWAKI (*Umoja wa Mama wa Kivu* – The Association of the Women of Kivu), a large regional network that oversaw an association of women’s groups throughout the provinces of North and South Kivu and Maniema.

When Sylvie was eight, Edwige invited Sylvie to accompany her on a three-week mission to visit UWAKI’s women’s projects in their family’s home district of Lubero. Sylvie was overjoyed by the prospect of a journey with her big sister, and she had not been to their family’s tribal area since she was a toddler. But their mother resisted. She sat down with Edwige and asked, “Are you sure you want to take your small sister on such a journey?”

But Edwige knew to appeal to her mother’s sense of family: “It is time to show Sylvie our grandfather’s home.”

After three days of driving, UWAKI’s truck climbed into the steep cloud-drenched hills of Lubero, approaching the first village Edwige was visiting. Hearing the rare sound of a combustion engine, the villagers came out of their huts to investigate. Once they recognized Edwige’s truck, the women started dancing and singing, calling other women to come: their *Maman* had arrived! “Welcome! Welcome!” they sang. Sylvie gazed in admiration at her sister’s brightly patterned head

scarf from the back seat. How was it that young Edwige had earned the esteem of all of these women? I want to become a strong woman like her, Sylvie thought.

As they moved through the village, Sylvie saw what she would later identify as gender policy in development at the heart of Edwige's work. Edwige passed to each group to view the women's projects in detail. Occasionally, Edwige would reproach the women, reminding them of earlier agreements about the development of their projects and ask why steps they had agreed on had not been done. However, when Edwige showed the women she was disappointed or expected more, she also added encouragement and went on to suggest strategies of how they could achieve their next objective.

By the time Edwige was promoted to the level of regional coordinator for UWAKI, her job was her life, often requiring long weeks without rest on Congo's dilapidated rural roads. Her absences from home and her family grew steadily longer. When she finally arrived home, sometimes after two months, she was exhausted and often sick with malaria. The villages where she slept, nestled in moist jungles where the evening air was thick with the mosquitos' high-pitched hum, lacked bed-nets.

During her brief moments of refuge at her parent's house, her mother would implore her to take a break. "You need rest!" she would beg her daughter. But Edwige simply sighed, "If I go to rest, who is going to supervise the projects?"

In February of 1992, Edwige fell ill again. She took the malaria medication a small rural clinic provided, but this time it did not calm her raging fever, bone-breaking pain or the chills that rocked her body. Drug resistance was prevalent throughout much of Congo, as few could afford a full dose of anti-malarial medication, creating drug-resistant strains of the disease. The decaying health infrastructure was unreliable in its ability to treat Congo's vast array of tropical and hygiene-related diseases.

After taking the medication, a large abscess grew on the right side of Edwige's neck. Not knowing its cause, the doctor in the rural clinic in Idjwi said it was too dangerous for them to operate. Sylvie came home for her school holidays to find her sister in the clinic with a gourd-shaped growth protruding from her hairline to the base of her neck. The doctor decided to use traditional medicine to put on the outside of the abscess, hoping to heal the infection without surgery. For three weeks Edwige lay in the crowded, sweltering clinic as the infection spread through her body and her fever climbed. In desperation, her family underwent the dangerous journey, transporting a very ill Edwige in a small boat across Lake Kivu to the main regional hospital in Goma.

Edwige stayed in the hospital in Goma for four weeks. There the doctors found that the infection had spread to her brain; they could not operate. For the first time in a decade, Edwige was forced to rest. The infection was consuming her. She lay in bed as her mother held a cloth filled with ice cubes against her burning brow. Day after day her mother sat by her bed, watching her daughter's tears run like the melting ice down her cheeks. Finally, one morning Edwige asked her mother to call her siblings; she knew it was time to say goodbye. Her mother tried to protest, but Edwige couldn't fight any longer. "It would be better for me to die than to stay, maman. I am suffering so much."

As her family stood gathered at her bedside, Edwige said goodbye to each of them in turn. To Sylvie, Edwige bestowed her belt. “This is the last gift I can give you. You must remember all the advice I gave you, Sylvie. You have to be a strong woman.” The next morning, April 3, 1992, the strongest woman Sylvie knew died.

As the family tried to heal from the loss of their beloved Edwige, they suffered the sudden death of their next eldest daughter, Leonce, nine months later. Not realizing that her immune system had been compromised during a visit to see her husband in rural Beni, Leonce was given a meningitis vaccine while working as a nurse in Goma. Her body was not able to fight the meningitis parasites injected into her, infecting her with the disease. She became paralyzed from the neck down and died within days. The compound loss wracked Sylvie’s family, nearly destroying her mother. In her own state of grief, Sylvie vacillated between abandoning the work her father and sister had inspired her to do, or heeding Edwige’s final wish and becoming an advocate for women, justice and peace in her community.

As the wounds of her loss slowly began to heal, Sylvie found the strength that she needed to work in her sister’s memory. In addition to finishing her law degree and working for the Life and Peace Institute and ICCO, Sylvie co-founded the Women Synergy for Victims of Rape, Sexual and Gender-Based Violence with one of Edwige’s former colleagues. And with each passing day, she remembered her sister.

On a warm evening eight years later, Sylvie was walking through the potholed streets of Bukavu on her way home. Suddenly she heard a man’s voice, “Edwige!” Sylvie paused at the sound of her sister’s name. “Edwige!” he cried again. Sylvie looked around to see a man was striding toward her, arms outstretched. “Edwige, don’t you remember me?”

He was close now. “I’m not Edwige,” Sylvie replied, “I am her sister, Sylvie. Edwige died. Don’t you know?”

The man looked stunned. “She died?”

He hadn’t heard the news. It had been nearly 10 years since he had seen Edwige, during which he had been out of the country. As Sylvie explained to him what had happened, he kept staring at her, as many others had done. In spirit and career, Sylvie had tried to emulate her sister, but Edwige had been much taller than Sylvie and there were 11 years between them. Nevertheless, Sylvie heard familiar and comforting words when he said, “How you resemble her.”

Democracy's Trials

Sitting amidst the Western opulence of a Washington, D.C., hotel room, Sylvie read the news from home, a lump rising in her throat. Voter registration for the historic Congolese election had been scheduled for September 5.

It was late August 2005. Sylvie was attending an international visitors program that would end on September 10, five days after Sylvie's only opportunity to register for her country's first democratic elections the following year. Her flights had been arranged by the U.S. State Department, and she did not have the money to reschedule her flight and leave the program early.

The news hit her hard and deep in the stomach. After all her work, she would not be able to vote.

As September 5 neared, Sylvie watched with bated breath as arrangements were made for up to 30 million Congolese citizens to register to vote. Fears of violence and fraud swirled around the preparations. The dream of a free and fair democratic vote still seemed too good to be true, and while Sylvie was optimistic, a nagging voice of doubt wondered if her government ever truly planned on holding multiparty elections. In the eastern Kivu provinces war still raged. Could the country's first democratic process succeed against these odds?

Then, one week before the planned registration, Sylvie read that Congo's electoral commission announced that voter registration would be postponed. Sylvie could not believe her eyes. The final day for registration would be September 13. Sylvie's flight was scheduled for September 11, but her journey would take days; there was no guarantee she could reach Bukavu by the 13th.

Early on registration day, Sylvie's flight from D.C. touched down in Bukavu's nearest international airport, Kigali, Rwanda. She had been travelling for nearly 40 hours via two continents. It was Sunday and she still had to make it across half of Rwanda and over the border into Congo.

From Kigali's airport she made the five-hour drive to the border. The late afternoon sun was hanging heavy on the horizon as she arrived at her apartment in Bukavu. It was a few minutes before 5 p.m. Sylvie ran inside to shower before asking her neighbor where she could go to register. "Unfortunately, the registration at the local places is now over. But maybe you can go try at the university? They had many people there," her friend suggested.

Sylvie drove as quickly as she could to the university. The trip across town took 20 minutes. As she pulled up to the main building and ran inside, her heart leapt at the sight of two small groups of people waiting inside with a handful of registration personnel. In a line behind the registration desk, five people stood waiting their turn. The chief registration officer approached Sylvie, "Where were you? The registration should be closed now. Why did you come so late?" Sylvie apologized and tried to explain that she had come a long way for this opportunity.

Sylvie was likely the last person to register to vote in Bukavu town and possibly one of the last in all of Congo. She reveled in each simple task of the registration: writing her name on the list, showing her ID, getting her photo taken and signing her registration identification. She thanked the

registration staff for waiting for her, before walking out into the warm evening twilight falling on Bukavu.



The year 2006, however, would not be Congo's first electoral process. During Mobutu's 32-year reign, elections were held every five years, as scheduled. Sylvie's father worked as a local administrator during most of that time; his office was tasked with administering the elections in their town.

Sylvie was 10 years old when she first learned about elections in what was then Zaire. Her father returned home from work one evening and after dinner sat with Sylvie's mother on the dark wood and plush patterned sofa in the living room. Sylvie and her siblings followed them; her older brother and sister took the remaining chairs while Sylvie and the others sat cross-legged on the floor. Sylvie always enjoyed listening to her parent's discussions and was growing familiar with the political topics her parents and elder siblings so often discussed.

That night she learned her father had received at his office a shipment of boxes from Kinshasa containing yellow and green pieces of paper. This, Sylvie heard, meant it was time for the "election." His tone was reserved as he explained how this year, instead of asking members of the public to come in off the street to sign the green papers, they decided to call a meeting. As the room filled, they asked everyone in favor of voting for Mobutu to show their support by clapping. Everyone clapped their hands and shouted Mobutu slogans. As the people filed out of the room, Sylvie's father's staff began their job of signing the green papers, while Sylvie's father was tasked with writing a formal letter indicating that the population had voted for Mobutu by acclimation. The box of yellow ballots was for the opposition, and it was to remain closed. Sylvie asked her father why. He explained that regardless of his frustration, these were the orders. This was the system in which they lived; he could not disobey.

For Sylvie's generation, Mobutu's elections were part of an incontestable system and the only reality they had ever known. For children, singing and dancing to the daily presidential anthem was like any other nursery song. For Sylvie, her father's post meant that Zaire's elections brought a free gift of thousands of green and yellow papers on which to draw and write, as soon as Mobutu's continuing leadership had been affirmed.

During Mobutu's reign Congo's media was heavily censored; it was rare in the east even to see programs from the capital, Kinshasa. It was not until her teens that Sylvie began to catch the murmurs of dissent from the hidden political corners where they were flourishing. She began to meet people who asked, "Is it normal to sing and dance for your president every morning?" A story started circulating that in the north of Congo someone had requested a yellow ballot. "Why do you want to have this color?" the local administrator demanded.

"Because you say we have two colors, Mobutu or not. I want to have another one," the man said simply.

“What kind of man are you? What do you want the other one for?” The man was arrested, beaten and thrown in jail; but he had asked. Sylvie began considering that perhaps in other countries alternative forms of leadership may exist.

As news and other programs began drifting into Congolese media, showcasing countries with multiparty, democratic politics, the vestiges of Mobutu’s normalcy crumbled in Sylvie’s memory. In 2003, Sylvie traveled to Sweden and saw firsthand a society with a successful democratically elected government. She began dreaming of the promise of democratic leadership replacing the authoritarian rule she had always known. But Congo was still far from democracy.



The worn pick-up lurched over what passed for a road only in the notoriously dilapidated infrastructure of eastern Congo. To the untrained eye it looked like an impassable mud path with boulders as obstacles and trenches looming large enough to swallow two wheels at a time. Late afternoon light filtered through the forest canopy as the truck lumbered along the 42-kilometer road from Butembo to the training site. The journey would take them over four hours.

Sylvie Maunga bumped along in the back of the double cabin with the facilitators she had trained from their local partner organization, *Reseau Wima* – “Together We Are Strong” – as they discussed the appalling state of the road. “By the time the delegates get to the workshop they will be complaining about the bad choice of venue!” “Ay-yi! With these roads, they will arrive with sore backs and telling anyone who will listen how many times they hit their head on the roof during the journey!” A member of the Butembo Electoral Commission sat in the front seat and watched the road ahead, careful that the driver did not miss a particularly large crevice or a python lazing on the road.

Reseau Wima was a competent and involved local partner of Sylvie’s organization, the Life and Peace Institute, but due to the short preparation time given by the announcement of the upcoming elections in July 2006, they had asked for Sylvie’s support for this crucial campaign on democracy and decision-making. Sylvie was glad to be able to monitor their training exercise and determine whether the organization’s facilitators had adopted the wider development perspective she had been teaching them. She hoped they were now able to look at the development objectives of their whole province, not just their small municipality. This perspective shift would facilitate the inclusion of the needs and goals of all the tribes in the province, rather than only those of their economically and historically dominant Nande tribe.¹⁶

In order to ensure the necessary support for the workshop, Sylvie had approached the electoral commissioner and the mayor in Butembo after she had arrived from Bukavu. Both were eager to support initiatives that would help Congo prepare for its historic first multiparty elections. The mayor asked to send four staff members, in addition to traditional, church and youth leaders from Butembo, Beni, Maboya, Lubero and the neighboring village of Manguredjipa. The participants had been chosen strategically due to their influence and ability to sensitize and lead their communities. Like Sylvie and her team, the majority of participants would arrive in the village the night before the workshop’s start, to recover from the long and uncomfortable journey.

The three-day workshop was held in a rectangular single-story cement building where the local church usually held services. By the time the workshop was to start, the room was buzzing with the staggered arrival of over 60 local leaders. Eventually, the majority of the predominantly male delegates had congregated, and Reseau Wima called the workshop to order with an official opening by the mayor of Butembo. The facilitator introduced her colleagues and Sylvie, letting the assembled participants know that Sylvie was there as Reseau Wima's visitor and trainer, so they should not be surprised if she interjected during the training, as they were also still learning the skills necessary to prepare for Congo's passage through its first democratic process.

The workshop had been convened as part of a collaborative effort between the Congolese Electoral Commission and the Life and Peace Institute, in order to train local partners on how to sensitize communities on objective electoral decision making. For the Congolese electorate, systems of patronage and clientelism were often rooted in ethnic and tribal bonds that existed long before the young nation's externally prescribed borders. These centuries-old systems had adapted quickly to the arrival of Western democracy, as money or food for an impoverished population was offered in exchange for the votes the candidates needed to gain political power.

For communities in eastern Congo, which had been plagued by a decade of war often fought along ethnic and national lines, voting easily became ethnically polarized. Politicians keen to benefit from the support of their ethnicity or tribe were eager to play on suspicions, disenfranchisement and the ongoing wounds of the conflict to exacerbate ethnic divisions in their communities. Shouting xenophobic slogans and promising retribution for actual and perceived wrongdoing, political candidates readily whipped up hatred and built stereotypes through divided communities across the already splintered Kivus. For organizations working for peace, the election demonstrated the limits of their peacebuilding activities. Most communities were more concerned with their candidate's ethnicity than his or her electoral platform.

Sylvie and her team began the workshop with an exercise that taught participants how to identify goals and objectives for their communities and their province as a whole. In small groups they spread out on the steps of the building or in circles under the property's flowering trees and brainstormed ideas. Sylvie passed between the groups observing their work, looking for the strengths and weaknesses in their strategies to include not only their needs, but also the needs of others. When they returned to the larger group, she began to draw connections between setting common priorities for a region, benefiting all the communities in their province and then holding the politicians accountable who promised to meet those goals once they were elected.

After Sylvie's presentation, the floor was opened for questions. Many participants raised their hands to ask questions about the process of setting priorities for their whole province. A skeptical voice soon piped up, addressing Sylvie directly, "But you, you are making this sensitization with which other groups?"

Sylvie could hear the protectionist undertones and watched looks of suspicion developing among the participants. She was a member of their Nande tribe, but if they viewed her as supporting enemy groups, their trust in her and Reseau Wima would be lost, the workshop ending in failure then and there. Sylvie knew she had to choose her words carefully so the group understood that this training was for everyone in North Kivu and not a disguise to benefit a rival group. "I am not asking

you or other groups to follow this example. I am simply showing you how to have a larger vision, rather than just a small vision.”

Sylvie looked around the room; people were whispering now. Had she ignited their curiosity or hostility? She took a deep breath and continued, “You can’t bring development without expanding to work with other regions and even countries. The tools that you are going to use for this election are not our tools, they are from West Africa. If we did not have a connection with them, we would not have these tools.” Carefully, Sylvie ventured to the sensitive heart of the issue, invoking a tribe that many in the room were particularly hostile to: “We had one governor for North Kivu, who was a Rwandese,¹⁷ but he did good things for North Kivu.” A few faces seemed to remember the politician to whom Sylvie was referring. She continued, “It shows it is not only the original people who can make good things. We must first make sure that he has a good plan and he believes in doing things for this country.” Her audience listened. And while there were no guarantees they would embrace a candidate from another tribe, they had heard her.

After the workshop closed two days later, other similar workshops were carried out by other local partners in regions throughout North and South Kivu. In this way, Sylvie was doing her small part to instill democratic values into Congo’s first democratic elections. It would be difficult to measure their impact in this election, but the skills that local leaders were learning had the potential to effect a fundamental shift in the political climate of the region. With more time and effort, Sylvie hoped that it would be possible to develop an electorate able to look beyond ethnicity. Someday, Congolese society as a whole could be able to separate a person’s ethnicity from the actions of armed groups bearing that same ethnicity, and to judge leaders purely on their credentials, their ability to lead fairly and transparently, and remain accountable to the people.



The birds awoke before the sun. Sylvie heard them from her bed as she lay in the dark, anxiously waiting for morning. It was 4 a.m.: late enough. She showered, donned her best clothes, jewelry, and carefully styled her hair. Today, July 30, 2006, was the day for which Congolese citizens had waited – the day they would finally exercise their first democratic right to vote.

Sylvie left her building in the dark and crossed the road to Bukavu’s election headquarters at Alfajiri College. It was an hour before the sun would rise and the polls would open at 6. As she walked through the dim courtyard, she saw a group of men huddled, facing her. She felt her pulse quicken as she tried to distinguish whether they were bandits ready to prey on citizens careless enough to walk the streets after dark. But today was the day of the elections; she was not willing to turn around and run home. As she approached, she breathed a sigh of relief. They were the college’s night watchmen. “Ah, you come so early to vote! Are you very happy?” they asked, laughing.

“Yes!” she replied, “I want to be here now because at 6 I think there will be many, many people.”

“OK, please continue.”

As Sylvie turned the final corner into the dimly lit courtyard, she realized she was not the first to arrive. Twenty people stood in line, eager to be among the first to cast their ballots. Sylvie joined one of the five lines formed in front of the voting rooms.

As the hour passed, the lines grew rapidly. By 6, women carrying babies on their backs, men dressed in their Sunday best, elderly women supported by younger women, and old men guided by their sons or grandsons stood in lines that stretched with the rays of the rising sun across the concrete courtyard. The crowd was jubilant, dancing and singing as they cried, “Today is our good day!”

Shortly after 6, the election team appeared and asked the first 10 people from each line to come forward. Sylvie moved ahead with the first members of her line into the voting room. Once inside, the commissioners requested three volunteer witnesses. Sylvie quickly raised her hand, as did two others. They were led to the voting booths and shown that the ballot boxes were empty and the ballot sheets not yet written on. The witnesses acknowledged that this was true. The commissioners then went outside to the courtyard to demonstrate to the crowd of assembled voters these same two facts. Gone were the days of Mobutu’s elections. Today they would have free and fair elections, where their choices were the ones written on the ballots, and their ballots were what counted.

For their service, Sylvie and the other witnesses in each of the voting rooms were given the privilege of voting first. Sylvie had grappled with the choice of candidates presented for the presidential race, but she was determined to exercise the right to vote, of which she had so long dreamed. She also recognized that the opportunity to vote could be a vote for a candidate, or it could be a vote against the opposition. Her vision of a peaceful and democratic future for her country did not seem to be shared by any of the candidates on the ballot, but she was able to cast her vote against those candidates who had been the most violent and least receptive to the will of the Congolese people. As she folded her ballot and walked proudly to place it in the ballot box, she could barely contain her excitement. She was part of history – Congo’s emergence from centuries of authoritarian and colonial rule to its first tentative steps toward democracy. After voting, Sylvie took up her post as a witness. The enthusiastic but unsure citizens entered the room one by one and were asked to show their identification before they received their ballots and were escorted to the private voting booths.

A major obstacle to the implementation of Western voting practices in Congo was an assumption of literacy. While certain adaptations had been made, such as the addition of photos to identify candidates, many of the electorate had never seen the face of the candidate they had chosen and were therefore unable to pick him out by his photo. If requested, school-age children or other relatives were allowed to accompany voters into the voting booths in order to read the candidates’ names and write the voter’s selection. Witnesses were often called on to further ensure the rights of the illiterate were not being abused. A woman with a four-month-old baby sleeping on her back, one of many unaccompanied illiterate voters, requested the help of the election monitors. Behind the small privacy screen, she whispered the name of a candidate to the monitor. The election monitor wrote the voter’s choice, and Sylvie watched to ensure the election monitor selected the candidate the woman had chosen. As one monitor learned, the price for abusing this trust was jail.

The morning passed into the afternoon, and still the citizens kept coming. On her short break, Sylvie sat outside and ate fruit with the other election staff. Around them the crowd buzzed

with the excitement of the day. People were stumbling around, inebriated on the local brew and the power they were able to exercise. Perhaps for the only day in their lives, a poor farmer or an illiterate widow held the same power as a wealthy landowner, a university-educated lawyer, a gun-wielding general or even the president himself. Today, every citizen of Congo had an equal voice.

Late that evening the last few hundred voters straggled in before the polls closed at 11. Then, through the doorway entered a woman in a brightly patterned *katenge* and matching head-wrap. She was singing. The election staff asked her to respect the silence of the room, so her jubilant voice traveled down into her hips and moved her body in dance. To each station she shuffled, swinging her hips, rolling her shoulders to a silent beat, nodding her head to the song she sang to herself. As she danced up to the ballot box, she paused, looked to the heavens and cried softly, “Oh my God! Jesus, thank you!” Sylvie smiled and silently repeated the prayer.



Following the elections, the voting centers around the country posted their individual results on billboards at their various locations. Sylvie’s proximity to the college meant she was among the first to crowd against the tall black-and-white sign to view the results. Incumbent president Joseph Kabila had popular support throughout eastern Congo, though his main rival, Jean Pierre Bemba, held support in the west of the country. By the time the national results were released on August 20, it came as a shock to the Kivus to learn that Kabila had failed to gain the required 51 percent majority needed to avoid a run-off election. The run-off between the two candidates was scheduled for Oct. 29, 2006. As the next elections neared, violence erupted between rival supporters in Bemba’s strongholds and the capital, Kinshasa. However, the only fighting in the east was that of the ongoing regional conflict, only marginally related to Congo’s fragile attempt at democracy.

Following the results of the first presidential election, Sylvie increased her efforts to strengthen communities’ democratic skills and awareness in preparation for the parliamentary and run-off elections. Armed with a microphone, local partners arrived at markets throughout the rural villages of North and South Kivu to address the vendors and villagers. Standing on an overturned crate or walking around the market’s centre, Sylvie’s colleagues urged villagers to consider a candidate’s promises and how they would improve their community, rather than voting for the candidates who were inciting fear or retribution to advance ethnocentric platforms.

In the town centers, Sylvie organized women’s forums to mobilize support and strategize on how to get women candidates elected to parliament. Trying to combat the local stereotypes that a woman’s place was not in politics, Sylvie suggested that the women candidates should unite to nominate five women who they felt would be most effective in government. They could then ask their individual supporters to rally behind the chosen women to increase the likelihood that they would be elected. However, the women did not adopt Sylvie’s strategy and each conducted their campaign separate from the others. Only one wealthy woman candidate was able to achieve the support necessary to be elected to the parliament.

During the three months between the presidential and parliamentary elections, public debates were held in Bukavu and Goma in order to give the public the opportunity to ask questions directly to the candidates. There were over 100 candidates on the parliamentary election ballot. In groups of five, a total of 40 candidates attended the public meetings. As a meeting opened, Sylvie

would explain why they were there: to facilitate open communication between the candidates and the population. She explained that this would allow the population to hold the candidates accountable once they were elected into office. The audience was given the opportunity to hear a brief explanation of the candidate's platforms, or to choose to move directly to questions. The meetings were then aired on local radio stations, along with questions and commentary solicited from citizens on the street by journalists Sylvie had hired.

The second presidential vote and parliamentary election was held on schedule on Oct. 29, 2006. This time, Sylvie was asked by the Electoral Commission to monitor the voting in the small town of Walungu. When she arrived, she noticed the mood was different than that of the historic first presidential election. Due in part to the lower population density, voters arrived in staggered groups; sometimes the voting rooms were empty for 20 minutes before a lone voter would arrive. The overwhelming number of candidates on the parliamentary ballot meant many voters arrived without knowing for whom they wanted to vote. Even those who did have a chosen candidate often asked for the monitors' assistance to find their candidate in the thick ballot booklet. The crucial privacy of the vote was therefore compromised, as the election monitors came to know most of the voter's choices.

At the end of the parliamentary vote, Sylvie and the members of the Electoral Commission met to debrief on any urgent issues experienced over the two-day voting period.¹⁸ Fortunately, in Walungu the election had run smoothly. As they left the meeting the deep purple rainclouds overhead were no longer able to carry their heavy load. The election staff ran into a small restaurant to escape the torrential downpour and relax over dinner. As their plates of grilled goat, rice and plantain arrived, in walked a candidate for the elections. Seeing the commissioners, he sauntered over to their table, "Ah, nice to see you! So, which of you voted for me?"



The final result of the presidential elections, with Kabila declared the winner, pleased North and South Kivu, but in Kinshasa post-election violence resulted in hundreds of people losing their lives before Bemba, the opposition candidate, conceded defeat and fled into exile to escape charges of treason.

Sylvie does not know whether the elections in which she took part in 2006 will provide the opening for the democratic state she envisions for her country. The five years between 2006 and the subsequent elections in 2011 will provide a much greater opportunity to inform Congolese citizens of their new democratic rights. Through education and awareness, communities will be able to gain the tools necessary to observe their elected leaders' performance and hold them accountable in the next elections. Through the work of the Life and Peace Institute and other local civil society organizations, the new Congolese electorate is learning how to establish community goals and look for leaders who are ready to work toward them.

However, the legacy of centuries of misrule continues to plague Congo's leadership. Throughout the country, the population continues to equate and refer to politicians as "bad men." Politicians at the local and national level are believed to enter politics for personal gain, rather than to guide the development of their region or provide for their communities. This belief is supported by widespread corruption reaching throughout all levels of government. For those politicians who

do not expect to earn a second term in office, the incentive to reap whatever financial benefit they can during their time in office is even greater.

In order to preserve impartiality in its election work, the Life and Peace Institute initially cut off funding for any local partner that had a staff member running for office. Sylvie, however, campaigned successfully for them to reconsider their position.¹⁹ She believed it was crucial for community leaders who were known for their civic work to be elected. In this way, a new political group could emerge in Congo that would provide an alternative to the “bad men” of the past.

While Sylvie still hopes that DRC’s second elections will continue to build the foundation for Congo’s fragile democracy, developments in the national government and ongoing violence continue to threaten its leadership. Recently, Mobutu’s son was named prime minister, a move that could strengthen or divide historical opponents in Kinshasa. Though the elections of 2006 were generally a success, the real test of Congo’s fledgling democracy may be whether the government can maintain power without its enemies seeking violent regime change before 2011.

In the meantime, Sylvie continues her work to improve the rule of law in North and South Kivu. Her vision for her country is humble – to have peace and security under a democratically elected government, accountable to the Congolese people. Many consider these lofty goals. From time to time Sylvie considers the invitations she has received to join Congo’s political class. Many still consider politics to be the realm of men and vocally remind her that it is not the place for a woman. But Sylvie is not one to bow easily to patriarchal pressure. Perhaps, she considers, the way to change the political “bad men” of the past, is to lead the way with good men – and women – in the future.

Epilogue

The following is a reflection from peace writer Jennifer Freeman.

Perched above the snaking freeways, glinting glass and matte stucco neighborhoods of San Diego is the Garden of the Sea at the Joan B. Kroc Institute for Peace & Justice (IPJ). In that garden, under the low branches of a fire-red flowering tree, Sylvie leans forward, knee bent up to her chest as she explains the troubled history of her war-torn region. Unassuming in jeans and a grey sweatshirt, she speaks with passion and determination, her imperfect English still resonating with the intelligence and hard-won expertise earned over a decade of living and working in the world's most neglected humanitarian disaster.

Interviewing Sylvie is like reading a book in which you know the ending; how you get there becomes the adventure. The chapters do not come in order, but skip and jump with the untamed thoughts my questions spark. The protagonist herself is a mosaic of facets. One day I am speaking with an impeccably dressed, seasoned human rights lawyer arguing the necessity of judicial reform in order to protect the rights and dignity of victims of sexual violence. The next day a truant student emerges, expelled from her prestigious secondary school for encouraging her classmates to challenge their teacher's authoritarian rule. As she reveals another side of herself to me, I feel blessed, having earned another piece of her life's puzzle.

As Sylvie's story is pieced together, a dedicated peacemaker emerges from a kaleidoscope of mottled life experiences, each contributing to the choices that have made her an effective voice for peaceful change in Congo's war-torn Kivu provinces. It is a privilege to be part of this process, amplifying the voice of a strong, courageous woman speaking from experience on what is needed to bring peace to her troubled region. Even Sylvie was surprised by the significance of her work once its scope and impact could be seen on paper. She eagerly read the vignettes I pulled from our hours of interviews, editing and expanding the details of each experience. The hours we were not interviewing Sylvie spent pursuing invitations to explain the plight of her countrymen and women with faculty, students and the public. However, for Sylvie the unique opportunity to share her lessons and experience came at a high price.

Much of Sylvie's motivation to apply to the Women PeaceMakers Program was to bring attention to the humanitarian crisis in Congo and to describe her vocation to assist survivors of eastern Congo's rampant sexual violence. Unfortunately, the director of her organization's office in Bukavu – a European expatriate, not a native Congolese – was not supportive of her participation. Despite the strong backing of Sylvie's local partner organizations, her boss insisted that Sylvie take personal vacation time if she wished to be in the program.

After arriving in San Diego for which she took one month of vacation, Sylvie tried to lobby her supervisor to allow her to finish the two-month Women PeaceMakers Program. As the days passed I watched her become increasingly concerned with the unwavering ultimatum she was being given: return to DRC within the month or stay in the program and lose her job.

Sylvie felt that her loyalty lay with the Congolese people and in order to best serve them, she should use the opportunity to tell her stories and theirs to the U.S. public. And while she remained optimistic, in the end, pleas from Sylvie, her colleagues and the IPJ were ignored by her supervisor.

Sylvie received a letter the day after her allotted vacation time expired, informing her of the termination of her employment.

For years Sylvie has worked with international nongovernmental organizations (INGOs) drawn to the desperate humanitarian crises of eastern Congo. Despite primarily employing Congolese staff, most INGOs have explicit policies of hiring expatriate staff as heads of office. Sylvie's experiences under her various directors have often been challenging, as many new directors' cultural naïveté and lack of local knowledge limit their capacity for effective decision-making. Sylvie and other national staff working under a constant rotation of European or North American managers often feel there is a neocolonialist assumption of "we know best" inherent in programmatic and staffing decisions.

Sylvie explained, for example, the resistance she encountered when she questioned her boss' decision to make fluency in English a required skill for two new positions for which the organization was hiring. When Sylvie learned of the new requirement, she asked her boss why this should be made a requirement for the positions.²⁰ "But the only reason someone needs to know English is to submit certain reports," Sylvie explained. "We have someone to do that job, why should additional staff persons need English? I have found many candidates who would be very good for the positions, but you know most Congolese don't speak fluent English."

Her boss avoided giving a direct answer to her question. A week later, Sylvie saw her boss' shortlist, which included none of the candidates she had recommended. She soon found out that two of her boss' friends from Belgium had been selected for the positions. Sylvie convened a meeting of her colleagues to dispute the nepotism, arguing that there were many suitable and qualified Congolese candidates desperately in need of work. A spokesperson from the group delivered a letter to the boss outlining their feelings. Later that day their boss marched into Sylvie's office and shut the door. He didn't need any more strong women in the office, he announced. Intelligent ones like her just made trouble.

Sylvie was able to relate many similar examples. We discussed how she felt when foreign aid workers, often with less education and experience than she, arrived in Congo with the impression that they were needed to fix her country. After years dedicated to the complex issues fuelling and resulting from the ongoing war in the Kivus, Sylvie interpreted such condescension as misplaced, demeaning and in its worst manifestation, racist.

While ethnocentric attitudes seem to permeate much of Congo's INGO community, Sylvie has encountered a handful of expatriate supervisors who fostered equality and dignity within the organization. She spoke fondly of a former supervisor who treated the national staff members with professional respect. Before planning activities for a community, her boss made an effort to read the research that Sylvie and her local partners had already conducted. Respecting Sylvie and her coworkers' experience and input had a lasting impact on her relationship with her staff and the effectiveness of the organization's work during her tenure.

Sylvie thus feels that within a paternalistic INGO culture, it is certain individuals' personalities greatly contribute to the widespread misunderstanding and animosity that has developed between many Congolese staff and their international supervisors.

She sees the inequality between expatriate and local staff also to be symptomatic of a larger issue within the humanitarian aid industry in Congo. As millions of dollars of foreign aid flow into the country to fund INGOs and the U.N.'s largest and most expensive peacekeeping mission, MONUC, Sylvie and many Congolese analysts question the long-term benefits this money has for the Congolese people. How much of the foreign aid is staying in the country, directly benefiting the economy and livelihoods of a deeply impoverished population? International watchdog groups have joined Congolese critics in suggesting that the bulk of the money is remaining at a level that never reaches local citizens, instead funding staff, logistics and equipment that will leave the country once the conflict has ended or when expatriate staff rotate out.

In addition to the economics of humanitarian aid, Sylvie sees a second, more enduring effect of Congo's current saturation of humanitarian agencies. As the 12-year conflict continues to cripple many Congolese businesses and industries, educated Congolese are turning to more profitable work in the INGO community. Sylvie made that choice many years ago, and for the work she is able to do for communities in eastern Congo she insists she is grateful. However, as a lawyer she knows she will still have work when the conflict finally ends. But Sylvie believes that for many of her coworkers, degrees in international development or other services required by the international organizations will become obsolete if and when peace comes to eastern Congo. She has witnessed this trend depriving eastern Congo of teachers, doctors, store keepers, entrepreneurs and businessmen and women. She sees a generation of college- and secondary-school-educated Congolese youth choosing the only careers they know to be both profitable and secure, most of which exist solely to support the work of INGOs. "How will this benefit long-term peace and stability in my country?" she asks.

During the final week of the Women PeaceMakers Program, eastern Congo was once again hit by violence cascading through North Kivu's villages and IDP camps toward Goma. She is daunted by the prospect of returning to such violence – and facing unemployment – but hopes that this is God's way of leading her toward a new challenge – perhaps that of starting her own organization to provide an alternate example of humanitarian leadership.

I am confident that Sylvie will use every opportunity to fight for an honest and just peace for her fellow citizens. It is our hope that someday soon Congo will be permanently altered from a region of perennial conflict to a peaceful and stable nation. When it does, I know Sylvie will have played a significant part in its transformation.

A CONVERSATION WITH SYLVIE MAUNGA MBANGA

The following is an edited compilation of select interviews conducted by Jennifer Freeman between Sept. 10 and Oct. 31, 2008, and a transcript of a public event featuring Sylvie Maunga Mbanga on Oct. 14, 2008, in the Peace & Justice Theatre of the Joan B. Kroc Institute for Peace & Justice (IPJ). The public event was facilitated by IPJ Senior Program Officer Dustin Sharp.

Q: When you were young, did you ever imagine you would have a career working for peace?

A: There was no war when I was growing up in Congo. It was April 6, 1994, when I got a call from my mother in Goma. She asked me, “Have you heard what has happened in Rwanda?” I said, “No.” That was the day the Rwandan president’s plane had been shot down. She said they were saying there was war now in Rwanda. That was the beginning of the genocide.

The refugees began coming across the border into Goma. They were everywhere. I could look out of my family’s house to see them in the street and around our house. They had little food and water. Even if I explain to you, you cannot understand how bad this situation was when the Rwandese killed each other, and how they died without anything to eat, without medicine. When we went to the river we saw the Tutsi bodies in the water. By the refugee camps we saw big cattle trucks full of bodies – from the cholera. I thought, is this what war is like?

I couldn’t know that that was soon to come to Congo.

Q: Why and when did you decide to become a lawyer? Was there a particular person or experience in your childhood that influenced you to make this choice?

A: I chose to become a lawyer because I learned more about the situation in my country and specifically about my dad’s work, which was public administration. I saw many things about inequality and lack of justice in my country. Then I was looking to find a way to help the people in my country get equality, to get social justice. Then I chose to begin my legal studies to assist women and people who don’t have the possibility to have justice.

Q: Going to law school even in times of peace is quite difficult. But during your studies a number of momentous things happened in Congolese history. For one, in 1997 there was a coup d’etat and Laurent Kabila overthrew Mobutu Sese Seko after 32 years of rule. How did that huge political transition in the middle of your studies affect you and your family?

A: We lived through many, many wars in our country. We have maybe two months, maybe one month, then the war begins and we have to stop studies. For me, it took seven years to get my diploma. If we didn’t have war, I should have finished my studies in five years. Sometimes the quality of the professors was also lacking, because the good quality professors refused to come to the east of Congo because they didn’t think they would be safe. Sometimes I had to move to go look for studies in another side of my country. It was very difficult to finish.

It was the same for my family; I stay in Bukavu and my family is in Goma. In these two towns the situation was the same. Sometimes we had to leave our things when we moved. When war escalated,

my parents, siblings and I had to evacuate. We lost many things but we tried to survive through the wars.

Q: As soon as you finished your studies, you immediately started a career working for social justice. Do you think the fact that you were going to school during a time of war influenced your choice of career? Did you ever consider becoming a lawyer in private practice and making lots of money? Or did you know from the very beginning that you wanted to work for social justice?

A: [The reason I went into law was because of] the social situation in my country. When I saw the unequal treatment of the population, when I saw impunity, that is when I said it would be better to take this path. I agree that it is not a good decision if you want to make a lot of money. But for me [the purpose] is to put my efforts to change, if it would be possible, to work hard to change the inequality in Congolese society. If I get money in a bad society – where I can be in the minority with people who have money, while the majority does not have anything to eat – for me it is not a good situation. It is good to take the domestic and public administrative issues and lobby, like I am here.

Q: Very early on in your legal career you did pro bono legal work for victims of sexual violence in local courts, for victims of torture in local courts – very traditional legal services. But at the same time you began working with the Life and Peace Institute, working for structural changes, working for better governance in the Congo. Can you tell me more about your work with them?

A: The Life and Peace Institute is one international organization that works with the local organizations who want to assist the people to change their own situation. When I got this opportunity, it was another way to assist the Congolese in their local initiatives. I was the program officer in this organization for five years. The work I did was threefold: conflict transformation, good governance and developing gender policy. In conflict transformation it was about making agreements between many different ethnic groups. Analyzing the conflict in my country, the political actors use the ethnic approach to divide people, to show each ethnic group that the other people don't like you. For me it was an opportunity to train the population to know how to make a good analysis, to know what is true in what the political actors tell them.

At the grassroots level, the methodology that I use it is to look at their own situation, to see the small groups and ask, "What is your vision of your local society?" Then they say, "In our [agricultural] sector, we would like to protect our [farming] activities." Then I say, "How do you think we can protect it better?" They say, "Ah, we have to have the same price, we would like to have a good market and to discuss." Then I train them on how to discuss with the authorities how to protect the local activities and how they can negotiate the prices to have stability in their activities.

[It is the] same when they have to negotiate. Sometimes we have political actors who are saying to the Rwandese people, "Those other tribes don't like you." Then we have to meet all of the ethnic groups and try to show them what their interests are in this situation. What can they show to the other parties? What is their approach to the other parties? Then they discuss and make a plan of how they are going to change the situation. For me I still believe that those approaches are best – to put them in communication. I believe communication is the best tool to change ethnic conflicts.

There is still an ethnic conflict in the east of Congo because we don't have many opportunities to discuss the conflict. For me it is what is necessary.

About good governance: For Congo it was our first democratic presidential elections in 2006. Poverty is a big factor in my country, in voting. For many people, if you don't have anything to eat, when you find a candidate who says, "I'm going to give you food to eat," you don't have time to think what his platform is, or consider who else you could vote for. I try to train the population to think hard about their future, to know what their needs are in the local and national areas. Then we do exercises about who you can vote for, how to vote and when we can vote.

For me it was a good exercise, but I still think that it is not enough. For me the first step is to give the voice to the population to choose their candidates and to choose their president. I hope that it will become better in the future.

Q: I know there was a lot of pressure from the international community to have these elections, but much less attention was paid to the local governance structures on the ground and the victims of the war. Do you feel like the elections have made a difference for the victims of sexual violence who you work with on the ground and the victims of human rights abuses? Have you seen any improvements since the elections in 2006?

A: It is the first step. But I think we have many things to do in Congo. My analysis about the conflict in Congo is that it is not only national, but it is also regional and international. To have the elections is one step, so that the population can choose a president. But the gender policy is still a problem in my country. We had the elections and made a good law about gender, but we did not do many things that are needed concerning women's issues. You see in the parliament we have only two women. We lobbied the government to ask them if they have a plan to address the sexual violence. They told us yes. But at this time we don't have a good plan; we don't have one.

I think the women should have good positions in government, in public areas, to take care of their own situations. But right now I don't think it's enough for us, because after the elections the government doesn't want to make ending sexual violence a priority. Their priority is to keep themselves in political positions. How they can keep their own security, not the security for all Congolese? I was very happy with U.N. [Security Council] Resolutions 1325 and 1820, when we talk about how to involve the women in public areas. I think that we must still put a lot of pressure on the government to make sure that the government can go ahead and make policies that will help women to be secure.

Q: According to the Harvard Humanitarian Institute, up to 70 percent of women and girls have been either raped or sexually mutilated over the course of the conflict, and of course the fighting is continuing and ongoing in certain areas. While Congolese militias and the army are by no means the first soldiers to use rape and sexual violence as a weapon of war, the scale and nature of the sexual atrocities in Congo's wars has caused the conflict to be associated with this particularly devastating abuse of human rights. Can you explain both the causes and effects of this violence in Congo?

A: When the war was beginning in our country, we saw how soldiers were beginning to rape women. We had refugees who came from Rwanda and Burundi, and when they came they went directly into

the bushes. They didn't come with their wives or girlfriends. Then they are attacked by the Congolese government as well as their own governments, so they, especially the Rwandese Hutu, didn't think they had the support of Congolese people.

It was after that that we heard women from the bushes reporting that they were being raped. Hospitals also began making reports that women were coming needing medical assistance after being raped. This got our attention. We talked with local actors to find out what was happening locally. As the first war was beginning with AFDL [*Alliance des Forces Démocratiques pour la Libération du Congo*] (supported by the Rwandese army), the numbers increased sharply again. When they arrived the situation went out of control. The soldiers from Rwanda raped women; sometimes the Hutu, too, did the same things; sometimes the Congolese militias did, too. It became so, so bad. They had to move – all the girls and women began fleeing their homes. We saw that it had become horrible.

When we questioned the survivors of sexual violence, they told us what had happened. They told us that it was not like [the soldiers] came wanting to have sexual contact. They came to try to traumatize you. They told you they did it because your brother or your husband was not supporting them. When we asked the victims, they told us the ways the actors were coming to brutalize them. After the perpetrators [raped them], they brought hard things, like branches of trees, guns or broken bottles to violate them.

“...it was not like [the soldiers] came wanting to have sexual contact. They came to try to traumatize you. They told you they did it because your brother or your husband was not supporting them.”

When we researched this we realized it is not motivated by sexual pleasure, but it is a tactic to demoralize society in Congo. When you attack women in any society, you are trying to destroy all of society. Because women keep the family unified, they are a symbol of African values and the values of that society. When we see that all of the women [in a community] were raped, that population loses hope for the future; they lose hope that they can have a strong society. That was one of the main objectives of the soldiers and militia who raped the women. At the local level, frequently when people see this they think that there is a law of impunity.

Q: A main focus of your work has been assisting survivors and lobbying the local legal and social systems in North and South Kivu to better prevent and respond to these massive violations. Can you talk about the day-to-day work that you have done?

A: I should tell you that this work is not easy, to assist the survivors of sexual violence. In a structure in which you don't have democracy, you don't have the freedom to talk about what you want. When I visit the survivors of sexual violence every time you hear the stories. When the victim tells you her story, you feel that it is very horrible. And then we meet another survivor, and it's worse than the

last one told to you. And then I think, in which way can we address this? We address the consequence, but it is not enough only to address the consequence.

In the justice system, in the courts, we have many problems as well. We go to the judge and he asks us if we have the evidence that this victim was raped by this guy. And it is very difficult. Can you imagine, people ask you, “Can you give us a witness to this rape?” And the victim can’t remember because they brutalized them, sometimes they blindfolded them. It is very difficult for us in this kind of work. We have to look hard for the witness and the evidence to prove that it is these actors who did these bad things.

Q: How as a lawyer and social activist do you begin to address such a pervasive and destructive issue?

A: At first there was no assistance for survivors of sexual violence. So we tried to get assistance for them. But when they heard that there was assistance (medical, psychological, etc.), they were scared that people would find out that they had been raped. We had to sensitize them about the consequences of not [getting assistance].

For example, before, we heard there were many people infected by HIV. Many died quickly because they didn’t have any medical assistance. But we sensitized the community and they heard that it would be better if they did the test to know what is going on with their health and then they can live a longer life if they come for medical assistance. Finally, they came forward.

This work has been a way for me to change what was once taboo. Nowadays people can understand that it is normal for someone who didn’t choose to be raped to tell someone and they will assist you. Men, too, need to hear that they can assist women who were raped and that they should continue to live together with them. Minds are changing more now than ever before.

“This work has been a way for me to change what was once taboo.”

Unfortunately, one thing that has stayed like it was in the past is domestic and sexual violence in the home. It is not good. Today people still don’t think a woman can be raped by her husband or boyfriend. It is not up to women to choose the kind of sexual relationship they want. The law does not recognize it. Well, it recognizes it now (it is a very new law), but we conducted research in a few communities and they told us that they don’t understand this new law. The women say, “Even if my husband goes to prison, he’s going to be back and then what kind of relationship are we going to have?” They say it is up to the husband to decide the nature of their sexual relationship. We think it is still too early to see change regarding these beliefs.

But I think some things must be contextualized because even if we make a law, if the local community doesn’t think it’s going to work then we can’t monitor whether it is practiced in Congo. That is the situation with the taboo of sexual violence. But they think that the sexual terrorism that is going on should be punished very severely so that the antagonists will be discouraged in the

future. When the armies and militias make war, they must maintain the security of civilians, especially the women's security. It would be better if international humanitarian law would make a rule that the antagonists *must* respect, especially with regard to the specific protection of women.

Q: You mentioned HIV. Can you discuss the HIV/AIDS pandemic and the role it plays in your work?

A: Sexual violence is done to demoralize and degrade all of society. I have experience talking to women when they tell you, "The same day I was raped was the same day I got HIV, and it was the same day I got pregnant and now I have the baby from this. Now my baby and I both have HIV." It is a strategy to eliminate all of society. The strategy to assist those populations, like the women who were raped, is so difficult. Until now there is not a lot of assistance to prevent HIV. We have two to four days to administer the preventative medication to the survivors of sexual violence. Sometimes we give it, sometimes we have to wait a month [to get access to the preventative medication] and then it is too late to give it to them. All the time the HIV rate is increasing. In the east of Congo we have the highest rate of HIV, but I lobby donors to say we need more assistance to prevent HIV. It is horrible. It can eliminate all of society in the east of Congo.

Q: How can we as a society respond to atrocities that have been so numerous? For example, the statistic from earlier: 70 percent of the women in some areas of eastern Congo have been raped or sexually mutilated in the course of the conflict. That means there are thousands and thousands of armed men who have committed these human rights violations. If you were president of the Congo, how would you choose to respond to this?

A: This is not an easy question because the conflict in the Congo is very complex. It is not a conflict where you can say, "OK, this way is the best way." But I think the first thing which we must address in Congo is to train a good army. Before we had the elections, we had more than six militias in Congo, and each of the political actors now – even if they are in the government – still have their own militias. Then, for example, the Nkunda war in eastern Congo, it is a war which is supported by the RCD movement, but the RCD actors are in the government now. So, I think the first thing we have to do is to make sure we develop a professional Congolese army.

The second thing which is important to protect the women and other populations is to train a good police [force]. We don't have good police. It is the first time for us to have the experience of policing. Many times in my experience, when we see the police, it is like the enemy. When you see the police you have to run because he can arrest you [for no reason]. We must try to create confidence between the police and the population, that they are there to maintain the security of the population.

Next will be to include the population in making decisions. Even though we had elections with a democratic process, no one questioned the population; it was not the population who said, "This is the vision we would like to have for our country." For example, in Nkunda's war, he says he wants to liberate all of the Congolese people – but he didn't ask the population if that is what they want. I think we must create the public space in which the population can have the freedom to talk about their own vision of peace in our country. I think it would be the first way to change the Congolese situation.

And another way [to respond to the atrocities] would be at the international level, to foster a preventative approach. The way I see how the international community intervenes in the Congolese situation, I think it would be better if all of the resources that they bring into Congo would be used in a better way. They come only when things become so bad. The international community could use the preventive approach, because we know that all countries in Africa are so young in the democratic process, and they need a good supporter to change their own situation.

I believe that it will be very interesting to lobby the Rwandese government and the rebels that are in Congo to get an agreement and respect the agreement about peace and conflict transformation. I think in the future it will be better to address the structural causes. I still believe the international community has a big role to play in changing the situation in Congo. Congo has nine neighboring countries. The destabilization of Congo affects the stability of all the countries bordering Congo. You won't have peace in the center of Africa if Congo doesn't have peace. I think pressure from external countries would be a good way to change the situation in Congo.

“Congo has nine neighboring countries. The destabilization of Congo affects the stability of all the countries bordering Congo. You won't have peace in the center of Africa if Congo doesn't have peace.”

Q: What about the role of MONUC, which has the largest budget of any peacekeeping mission in the world: Is MONUC doing enough, not only to provide assistance to victims of human rights violations from the past, but also to stop violations that are happening today?

A: When I have some time to discuss MONUC's effort in my country, I think, yes, I have the answer to the question because I am a lawyer and I studied international issues and the law and I know the limits of international intervention. But if you make an analysis about MONUC intervention, you can ask yourself, why have they put a lot of money in Congo and nothing has changed? If you see the number of people who have been killed in the war, you can see that nothing has changed in Congo.

For me, MONUC should have a plan; they have been there for five to 10 years. The first mandate was to do observations only. Even if the antagonists make war, it is not for MONUC to interrupt this. They are only there to observe the war. And for the population, they think that it is not normal for an organization to come in to watch how we are killed but not do anything to stop it. It would be better if, for example, they say, “We take the agreement between the antagonists and you must respect this agreement.” But it is not the case.

We had an agreement between rebel groups and government, and a lot of money for the agreement came from the U.S. and Europe, but after two months war began again. MONUC then said that their mandate changed and they could intervene if the antagonists break the ceasefire. The

population came to say that MONUC is working with the enemy. We cannot believe that MONUC is staying there and yet the people are still being killed by armed groups. They don't do anything, still only observing.

“...for the population, they think that it is not normal for an organization to come in to watch how we are killed but not do anything to stop it. ...We cannot believe that MONUC is staying there and yet the people are still being killed by armed groups.”

I think it would be better for the international community and MONUC to have a plan to address the community issues, not only to take care of the political actors. Sometimes they hear that Kabila has moved to the east of Congo to combat the Nkunda army, and directly we have MONUC's staff who come to Bukavu or Goma asking, “Please, don't do anything.” But when they hear that the population has been displaced because [Nkunda's] army was killing them, they don't ask questions or address the needs of the population directly. They are more concerned with the political actors than the population's needs. It would be better if they change their priority to prevent and address the causes.

For me, I must repeat every time that when we assist the survivors of sexual violence with medical assistance, sometimes after two months they come back saying, “I was raped again.” We have a circle of violence and we need to address the causes of conflict.

Q: Of course, MONUC is not the only level that the international community is involved in the Congo. We also have the International Criminal Court (ICC). The ICC has opened official investigations for three warlords in Ituri district.²¹ Many people have said this is a fantastic achievement in international justice. Do you think this will make a difference for the women on the ground in the Congo who, as you have said, are still being raped and are still being left with the wounds?

A: Sometimes we have hope when we see that the people from Ituri were arrested by the ICC. But it is not enough, because it is not the civilian population who asked to arrest someone who raped or supported the rebellion group to rape the women. But I can say it is the first step. We say it is a sensitization to other actors, to say that even if you are not punished today, in the future you could be arrested too. And for the population, it would be better if we begin by addressing the criminals the population has asked them to arrest, directly when they ask. Two years ago we asked for Nkunda to be arrested. He has been wanted for over one year by the ICC, but he still travels to Europe and throughout Congo; before coming here I saw him.

For me it is not the real justice. It depends on the political will, political needs, political positions. When the politicians are interested, they will be arrested, but not when the population asks. They do not directly answer to the population. But it is still a good way to have some kind of arrests for

actors at the international level. It would be better if they accompany those activities with training of a local army to have a professional army and police – in order to have the hard peace, not the fragile peace. We still have the peacekeepers and after almost 10 years we still have the cycle of violence. I still believe that international intervention can do something, but I believe that the responsibility should be at the national level. People should know what they want. They should be involved in the public decisions in their country.

Q: One of the claims of the advocates of international justice is that when you arrest a warlord, for example, future warlords will be afraid to do the same actions because they will fear that they will be arrested. But of course that hasn't always been the case in the Congo, as you mentioned. Nkunda, the rebel general in the east, is still leading his campaign. Do you think any warlords or militia leaders in the Congo changed their behavior because of the arrests of the three warlords?

A: I don't think so, because they know that it depends on the period. Even if tomorrow [Thomas] Lubanga is in court, Nkunda is still continuing his war in the east of Congo. It is the same for the government side. Sometimes even if you have a different point of view from the government actors, they can arrest you. We don't have the freedom to talk about what we want. I don't think the behavior will change because they are still looking to use a military approach and not for good things to get the confidence of the population. But I am still looking to see what will happen in the future. We didn't used to believe that Lubanga could be arrested in the international court, but it is the case now. I think for the future it will be the same for other actors in Congo.

Q: As a lawyer, now that you have been practicing for 10 years, are you still optimistic about the possibility of the law to shape the Congo positively and have an impact?

A: Sometimes I'm still optimistic, sometimes I'm not – because things are changing every day in my country. We tried to see if things will improve after the elections. We tried to make a plan with the political actors. They even asked civil society what they should do. We try to do something, but things are changing.

But for me it is not so easy to have a good feeling about the future, but Congolese people should work hard to change the situation in Congo. I ask myself sometimes if we have a nation. It is the best thing we should have because at least all of us believe in Congolese nationality. It would be interesting for me if all of the Congolese people would work toward a unified nation, if all of the Congolese people would not accept to be used by the external actors to make war in their country, and to have some political culture to know how we can decide or tell the politicians that if they are not working in a good way to change the situation.

Q: Do the churches play an active role in the areas where you have been working in peacebuilding? Have you been coordinating any of your projects with churches there?

A: The Life and Peace Institute is an ecumenical organization. Our approach was a religious approach. We use the church leaders to sensitize their communities on issues, to conduct training on peacebuilding and conflict transformation. We have a lot of experience with churches. But sometimes churches are also used in the conflict. For example, some Catholics support the government, while other religions side with the rebel groups. So then they say that Catholics are not

good because they only listen to the government position. But I still believe that churches can play a positive role, because the majority of Congolese still believe in God, and I think we can use this to change their minds about conflict and work for peace.

Q: During your peacebuilding work, you have come up against many challenges and found many successful methods of peacebuilding. Can you give us an example of a strategy that worked well for you in this highly complex conflict?

A: Every time you succeed in one activity you are very happy. But I had one big challenge when I was working with the Life and Peace Institute. It was to link the north and the south of North Kivu province. There was an impasse between the North Kivu ethnic groups; the Nande (which is my tribe), the Hunde, the Nyanga and the Hutu are in the north of North Kivu. Then the Tutsi are in the south of North Kivu. At that time it was not possible for a Tutsi person to go to the north of North Kivu.

One of the reasons they recruited me in the Life and Peace Institute was because I was originally from North Kivu and they wanted me to try to make connections between the different ethnic groups. I asked myself, “How am I going to do this?” I was new and very young. In Africa people don’t listen to young people. Also, I’m a woman. All of this limited me. But I went to discuss this with my parents; I asked for their suggestion of how to approach the problem. My parents said, “Why do you want to bring Tutsi in our area? You know at this time people are not very kind. Some time you are going to bring them here and they’re going to see the position of the military and the airport, then they are going to make a plan to attack North Kivu!”

But I was given this challenge and I had to work for this. I was not trying to commit treason against my tribe, but to work for peace. I wanted to make sure the tribes could cohabit together.

“I was not trying to commit treason against my tribe, but to work for peace. I wanted to make sure the tribes could cohabit together.”

My boss agreed to give me all of the things which I needed to do this project. So I went to Kinshasa, the capital, to see the political leaders of my tribe. There were two or three ministers who were in the government from the Nande tribe. I explained to them what we wanted to do. They said, “We are not insensitive to your program, but what we are worried about is what will happen after your program. We don’t know if they [the Tutsi] can be trusted to do good things or if they are going to take another position.” But after I talked more to them they agreed and said, “Go ahead, we will support you.”

I went back to Butembo and Lubero and held meetings with the bosses of the local organizations and the president of the civil society in Butembo region. I remember the president of the civil society was a woman. She was very, very uncomfortable with the idea of including the Tutsi. She said, “What do you want to bring here?” I said, “It’s not a bad thing. We have many things here but

we need to consider the other actors in North Kivu.” I was not trying to cause tension for my tribe, but I wanted to explain that we have to change these negative perceptions. However, she refused to agree with me.

I began to meet individual actors in civil society to let them know my plan and that I wanted to work with them. I let them know that in the south they thought we were xenophobes. I told them we have to change these perceptions. Even if we are strong economically, if we don't communicate with others, there can come a time when these other tribes will make trouble for us. Some of the civil society actors said they would like to be involved. But they insisted they must be informed of everything that is happening and consulted at every stage of my program. I said, “Yes, but it is not me who is going to make this program. I would like only to give you the idea, but it is going to be you who are doing it.” Some were happy about this but others still refused. And then I spoke with a strong man with a lot of networks. Once I convinced him, many others also came on board.

We began by proposing three parts to the project: the north part of North Kivu would hold a workshop to identify their goals, what their resources are and then to make an agenda. The south of North Kivu would also hold the same workshop in their region. And then afterward we would bring them together so that both sides would learn what the other one wants.

We didn't specifically separate the workshops along ethnic lines. We requested the attendance of civil society actors from two regions, but we knew that in the south of North Kivu, the biggest influence came from the Tutsi and in the north the biggest influence was from the Nandes, though there were the other tribes I mentioned. We told them at that workshop they could discuss all of their problems. And we knew because they were civil society actors, they were going to discuss the tribal and ethnic strife.

After they finished the first workshop, we prepared the big workshop for all of them and invited the political leaders from Kinshasa. It was a big workshop. We were on the phone all the time. Sometimes the participants would call me saying they had heard from someone that I was not doing what I said I was doing with them. I had to keep building trust with them. It took us eight months to hold the final workshop. It was held in Butembo. That was my wish, because I wanted Tutsis to reach the north of North Kivu. Since the war began no Tutsi could set foot in the north.

But when the Tutsi delegates arrived there at the airport, the security people started sounding the alarm: Who are these guys? Even though we had written letters to the authorities informing them of who they were and what we were doing, when they arrived they were still scared. But to see the first time that a civilian Tutsi arrived in Butembo, it was such a big success for me. I was so happy. Then we began the workshop and it was wonderful. We invited the minister to open the workshop. The governor was also involved. More than 110 people attended: from the north of North Kivu we had 40 people; from the south of North Kivu we also had 40; then we had about 30 from the governor's office, the government ministers, reconciliation commissioners, observers, etc. The workshop lasted for one week. We hoped to get a good result and then implement it.

One of the main issues the participants at the conference were concerned about was who was going to make up the leadership in the province. The Nandes don't want the Tutsis to have control over the provincial government, but the Tutsis had the arms. Nandes had the money. Normally it would

be the Tutsi that would take the leadership positions, but they knew that in the future we would be having elections. So, before then, they decided what kind of government they all wanted to have. The workshop delegates from both regions made a profile outlining which kind of person they wanted. Then they went to present this profile to the government and lobbied them. They said this is our agreement: In the future, the governor must have this profile and the local government must have a representative from each of the ethnic groups. After four months they changed the government and a Nande became the governor. The vice governor came from another tribe. The chief of the army was Tutsi. They had representation of all the ethnicities. For me it was a huge success.

Another issue the delegates from the north wanted to talk about was around the issue of Rwandese migration. They said, “For us we are not xenophobes, but we see the Rwandese people coming – they are so numerous. We need to make sure that Rwandese are so many, and Congolese are so many in Congo.” As a result, the delegates made a policy about the border in Goma. The border patrol should check to see who are Rwandese, who are not Rwandese. They suggested various strategies, and in the end the government accepted what we call *Numakumbi*. It means if you have a visitor, when they arrive in Congo, you have to inform the chief of your avenue to show that this is my friend or relative from Rwanda. Then they know who is in the country, who is staying and who is leaving. Nowadays this is practiced. But it depends on the chief of the avenue. But sometimes the chief is Rwandese who works in collaboration with the armed groups, so it becomes hard to monitor them.

Q: That was five years ago. How is it now between the ethnic groups? Can Tutsis move there now?

A: Yes, Tutsis can move there now. One of my colleagues is a Banyamulenge [a Congolese Tutsi tribe]. When I went with him to Butembo recently he said, “I can’t believe this – I’m in Butembo, Sylvie!”

Q: What would they have done to him before?

A: The army would have approached him. They think the Banyamulenge and the Tutsi must work with the RCD [*Rassemblement congolaise pour la Démocratie*] army and the Rwandese intelligence service. The Nande people think all Tutsi must be associated with the armed groups. And they don’t know these people very well. Communication is the only good way to end this armed conflict. Tutsis have good qualities, Nandes too. But because they don’t have the opportunity talk to one another they don’t know the good values that they can take from the other side.

But the big problem is the security in the war, especially on the road. You can’t move from Lubero to Goma because there are many Interahamwe on the road. Tutsi can’t go to the north of North Kivu on that road. If they take the plane they can move there. But we have only one plane; it fits 10 people and only goes three times per week. It is not a good connection. Those who have money can take the plane to the north of North Kivu. But the small people who don’t have money, they can’t. It is the same from the north to the south. When the northern people come on the road the Interahamwe catch them. They are catching everyone.

We were able to monitor if there was change after the workshop by asking target groups. Before we made the workshop we asked citizens in the north: “What do you think? How do you feel about these people?” Then after two years we went to go ask these people again to see if their perceptions have changed.

We also made relationship indicators to see how often people were moving to each region. We went to ask business people if they were moving to the south, or if they were Tutsi we ask them how long they have been there in the north. Then in Butembo we also asked the immigration service if they had Tutsi visiting them there. In this way we could see that people were now moving a lot. But with the lack of security it has again become difficult.

Q: Given the numerous obstacles, have you ever doubted the effectiveness of your peacebuilding work?

A: During the Nkunda war of 2006, I was living in Bukavu. I was at work when his army invaded and I was trying to run across town. I went through the main market. It had been a major center for the fighting but now the armies had moved on to another part of the city.

I was working with the Life and Peace Institute at the time. Part of my job was to work with local organizations. One of these organizations was the student organization which I supported by linking students to the university community. I would support the student organization to hold peacebuilding workshops and trainings for other students.

As I was running through the market there were dead bodies around me from the fighting. As I passed by the body of a young fighter, I looked at his face. I recognized him. He was the leader of this student organization.

From his uniform I knew he had fought with Nkunda’s army, with big guns on him and in combat with all the armed groups. I said, “Oh my God, it is true what the people had told me!” I had supported them; I had given them money and technical strategies for peacebuilding. I didn’t know what he could do with this money. I had given him money for the workshop and to put on a conference. Now I found his body on the road.

I didn’t know or suspect that he could have his own agenda. I thought he was working for peace, for the student group. I know he did the workshop and the conference, but I don’t know if he was taking some of the money off the top for arms. And he must have been high up in the militia because he was in a strategic place. Near the market there is a Muslim mosque. He stayed on the roof of that mosque where he was able to target all of the people who passed by the place. I was speechless. I just wanted to keep walking, but all the people around were calling to me, saying, “Sylvie, Sylvie, we saw your guy!”

In Congo when you say, “We work for peace, we work for conflict transformation,” some people do not believe you. When they see something that is contrary to what you say you do, they say, “Ah! Save us from your speeches about peace. We know what you do. We know you support the armed group.” So then it is not easy for us. When you don’t know who trusts you, then you also don’t know who you can trust. But you have to work with all of the actors – negative, positive, you have to try to have a good relationship with them. It is not easy. When one group hears that you were

with another group, they start saying, “Oh, sometimes she goes to tell our enemy about what we talk about.” Then the other group can also feel the same way.

I have said in a report that the primary group that is raping women is the Interahamwe. And yet I have to travel very often to the area the Interahamwe control. Sometimes I speak with them, I try to tell them I am not a politician. But sometimes, like when I went to Canada and talked on the radio, they hear what I said on the radio. Then I can be in danger when I return to Congo. But if you don’t speak about the situation, who is going to say what is really happening? No one. You have to take the risks. It is only the Lord who keeps our security.

Q: In 2005 you could have easily lost your life when the rebels invaded Bukavu. Where do you find the strength to remain in the east and keep doing the work that you are doing? Are you ever tempted to just move to Kinshasa where life is much safer and there is no war? Similarly, how has the conflict affected you on a more personal level, beyond your professional life?

A: Sometimes I realize I don’t look after my personal life when I am working hard for the conflict transformation. I am still single because if I get married I will not have as much time to work on peace issues. It is not easy because in a patriarchal system women are not listened to like men. When you talk about peace with the local leaders they ask, “Why does this small girl come to talk to us about peace? Who is she? What can she tell us about peace? Does she have any experience?” So every time I have challenges to demonstrate my experience and to keep objective.

Sometimes I say I would like to be secure, but sometimes I say when I move, who is going to keep working on conflict transformation? If all of the Congolese have to move, who is going to help the community to change their minds about other ethnic groups? I still believe that Congolese should take the risk to change their own security. I have family in Kinshasa, brothers and sisters; I have the opportunity to go there, but I think I should stay in the east of Congo because it is the area in which many conflicts are still. I think I have some role to play in this conflict to change the situation. I think to stay in the east of Congo is not a pleasure for me, but I still believe we should change the situation and put in effort to change it, because war is always beginning in the east. We need to train more of the population how to make a good analysis of how to protect their own communities, and you can’t have peace if you don’t take a risk. I am one of many who takes this risk to stay in the east of Congo.

Q: How will your experience in San Diego affect your work when you go back to Congo?

A: My experience here, I try to link it with my work. The first thing I learned here was that when I meet some people here, I don’t know them but every time they smile. I think it gives people peace. It is not the case in my country. I am going to tell people when I go there, “We should have a smiling face when we meet each other.” When we meet Hutu or Tutsi or Nande tribes, there is no smiling. We look at each other like we are the enemies. To have this communication with each other, it is a good and a hard thing that I learned during my stay here.

The second thing that I was very, very excited about was the election process here. I watch the TV and see how the population talks about the candidates, how they debate about the candidates. I think the population here is very free. You can talk about what you think, you can talk about the

candidate, you can criticize the candidate – but for us it is not the case. I remember it was the case in Congo when we voted for president Kabila or the opposition. If you talked badly about Kabila you could be arrested. You had to keep your mouth shut. I learned more about your freedom to talk about political issues and to show what your needs and vision are for the future of your country. For me, it is a good example to take back to the citizens of my country.

I also learned a lot from my Women PeaceMaker colleagues, about Zandile's story, Shinjita's story or Olenka's story.²² Sometimes it makes me think I don't do enough; I have to work harder. And when I saw at the conference what the Liberian women had done for democracy in their country,²³ I feel like I have a larger role to play in my country. That is what I learned about myself during this stay here.

BEST PRACTICES IN PEACEBUILDING

Activity	Mode	General Category of Peacemaking	Description of Implementation	Future challenges
Created guidelines for service providers to assist survivors of sexual violence	Alone and with ICCO	Gender and human rights training, specifically on sexual violence	Created guidelines with supervisors, psychological assistants and focal points on assisting survivors of sexual violence Trained local leaders on referral system and roles of each service provider	<i>Lack of logistical and financial support for service providers, including NGOs, CBOs, medical clinics and the police</i> <i>Ongoing corruption within the justice system</i> <i>Pervasive cultural and religious taboos against survivors of sexual assault</i>
Lobbying judges and courts to implement Congo's laws on sexual violence	With local partners, INGOs, U.N. agencies and ICCO	Gender and human rights lobbying; legal reform	Lobbied judges in the Bukavu and Uvira courts to prioritize sexual violence cases Lobbied for the courts to deliver weightier sentences to perpetrators and to include compensation to the victims in their sentencing	<i>Corruption within the justice system</i> <i>Lack of community knowledge or support of Congo's new anti-sexual violence legislation</i> <i>Lack of logistical support and infrastructure in the justice system</i>
Training workshops for local leaders in conflict analysis	Alone, and with Frederic Kamama, a consultant from Nairobi, and Peter Woodrow, a consultant from Boston	Interethnic reconciliation; conflict analysis; peacebuilding	Involving leaders of various warring tribes, social leaders, church leaders, women leaders and youth, Sylvie and her partners worked to train and practice methods of conflict analysis and resolution	<i>Convincing leaders to refrain from using ethnic tribalism for political gain</i>

Activity	Mode	General Category of Peacebuilding	Description of Implementation	Future Challenges
Training workshops for local and international organizations on strategic planning and facilitation skills	The Life and Peace Institute	Capacity building for local CBOs and NGOs	Held five-day trainings with various groups on facilitation, annual strategic planning and the role of local actors	<i>Maintaining the inclusion and participation of all stakeholders</i>
Workshops on the economic and infrastructure needs of the province, identifying common problems and collaborative solutions	With civil society, social and economic leaders, youth, women's organizations, the Life and Peace Institute	Reconstruction and reconciliation	Invited religious leaders and their communities to workshops and dialogue forums to learn each others' grievances and propose solutions	<i>Establishing transparent accountability between political actors and civil leaders</i>
Training students in empirical research methodologies	With colleagues at the Life and Peace Institute	Capacity building for civil society; building social scholarship and peace research in community analysis	Trained social science students on research methodologies. After the classroom instruction, students were linked with a local community group to undertake a research study. LPI published the results and provided the data to their local partners.	
Training local leaders, youth and women social scientists about issues affecting survivors of sexual violence	With psychology expert Tharcissice Niyonitigiye from the organization Healthnet TPO	Capacity building for target groups on addressing sexual violence	Trainings on how to lobby on behalf of survivors; basic counseling skills; couples' counseling and mediation; how to refer a victim to other services; and how to re-integrate a survivor into society	<i>Combating gender stereotypes to address the structural causes of violence against women and putting women in control of their own security</i>

Activity	Mode	General Category of Peacemaking	Description of Implementation	Future Challenges
Training women running for public office on how to run an electoral campaign	International Alert and women political candidates from South and North Kivu	Gender-sensitive democratic training; women's leadership training	Training women running for public office on the election process; how to make an electoral platform; how to campaign; how to make alliances between women	<i>Overcoming women politicians' reluctance to form alliances for political campaigns</i> <i>Combating ongoing gender stereotypes that identify politics as an exclusively male domain</i>
Training local community groups and the public in the democratic election process	The National Electoral Commission	Democracy training; CBO and NGO capacity building	Training coordinators of local organizations, social leaders, students, businessmen and women on why to vote and guidelines on how to select your candidate Training partner organizations on how to monitor whether there was a free and democratic voting process	<i>Creating a political climate which allows safe and open debates of political issues</i> <i>Establishing a democratic political culture in DRC</i>

**FURTHER READING –
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BIOGRAPHY OF A PEACE WRITER – JENNIFER FREEMAN

Jennifer Freeman has a B.A. in Political Science, German and European Studies from the University of Victoria in Canada and an M.A. in Peace and Conflict Studies from the University of Ulster in Northern Ireland, where she studied on a Rotary International Ambassadorial Scholarship. Freeman has worked with various nongovernmental organizations in Ghana, the United Kingdom, Canada and Ugandan refugee settlements on issues of women’s rights and peacebuilding through sexual and gender-based violence prevention and response, supporting women with HIV/AIDS and conducting psychosocial programs for war-affected youth. For her master’s thesis, Freeman conducted research on gendered security in Kyaka II refugee settlement in Uganda where she interviewed Congolese, Rwandan and Burundian refugees on their perspectives of human and traditional security threats in their countries of origin and since arriving in the “safety” of asylum.



Photo credit: Patricia Rogers



JOAN B. KROC INSTITUTE FOR PEACE & JUSTICE

The mission of the Joan B. Kroc Institute for Peace & Justice (IPJ) is to foster peace, cultivate justice and create a safer world. Through education, research and peacemaking activities, the IPJ offers programs that advance scholarship and practice in conflict resolution and human rights. The institute, a unit of the University of San Diego's Joan B. Kroc School of Peace Studies, draws on Catholic social teaching that sees peace as inseparable from justice and acts to prevent and resolve conflicts that threaten local, national and international peace.

The IPJ was established in 2000 through a generous gift from the late Joan B. Kroc to the University of San Diego to create an institute for the study and practice of peace and justice. Programming began in early 2001 and the building was dedicated in December 2001 with a conference, "Peacemaking with Justice: Policy for the 21st Century."

The institute strives, in Joan B. Kroc's words, to "not only talk about peace, but make peace." The IPJ offers its services to parties in conflict to provide mediation and facilitation, assessments, training and consultations. It advances peace with justice through work with members of civil society in zones of conflict and has a focus on mainstreaming women in peace processes.

In addition to the Women PeaceMakers Program, the institute has several ongoing programs. The Joan B. Kroc Distinguished Lecture Series is a forum for high-level national and international leaders and policymakers to share their knowledge and perspective on issues related to peace and justice.

WorldLink, a year-round educational program for middle school and high school students from San Diego and Baja California, connects youth to global affairs.

Country programs, such as the Nepal Project, offer wide-ranging conflict assessments, mediation and conflict resolution training workshops.

Community outreach includes speakers, films, art and opportunities for discussion between community members, academics and practitioners on issues of peace and social justice, as well as dialogue with national and international leaders in government, nongovernmental organizations and the military.

In addition to the Joan B. Kroc Institute for Peace & Justice, the Joan B. Kroc School of Peace Studies includes the Trans-Border Institute, which promotes border-related scholarship and an active role for the university in the cross-border community, and a master's program in Peace and Justice Studies to train future leaders in the field.

UNIVERSITY OF SAN DIEGO

Chartered in 1949, the University of San Diego (USD) is a Roman Catholic institution of higher learning located on 180 acres overlooking San Diego's Mission Bay. The University of San Diego is committed to promoting academic excellence, expanding liberal and professional knowledge, creating a diverse community and preparing leaders dedicated to ethical and compassionate service.

The university is steadfast in its dedication to the examination of the Catholic tradition as the basis of a continuing search for meaning in contemporary life. Global peace and development and the application of ethics and values are examined through campus centers and institutes such as the Joan B. Kroc Institute for Peace & Justice, the Values Institute, the Trans-Border Institute, the Center for Public Interest Law, the Institute for Law and Philosophy and the International Center for Character Education. Furthermore, through special campus events such as the Social Issues Conference, the James Bond Stockdale Leadership and Ethics Symposium and the Joan B. Kroc Distinguished Lecture Series, we invite the community to join us in further exploration of these values.

The USD campus, considered one of the most architecturally unique in the nation, is known as Alcalá Park. Like the city of San Diego, the campus takes its name from San Diego de Alcalá, a Franciscan brother who served as the infirmarian at Alcalá de Henares, a monastery near Madrid, Spain. The Spanish Renaissance architecture that characterizes the five-century-old University of Alcalá serves as the inspiration for the buildings on the USD campus. The architecture was intended by the founders, Bishop Charles Francis Buddy and Mother Rosalie Hill, to enhance the search for truth through beauty and harmony. Recent additions, such as the state-of-the-art Donald P. Shiley Center for Science and Technology and the new School of Leadership and Education Sciences building carry on that tradition.

A member of the prestigious Phi Beta Kappa, USD is ranked among the nation's top 100 universities. The university offers its 7,500 undergraduate, graduate and law students rigorous academic programs in more than 60 fields of study through six academic divisions, including the College of Arts and Sciences and the schools of Business Administration, Leadership and Education Sciences, Law, and Nursing and Health Science. The Joan B. Kroc School of Peace Studies opened in Fall 2007.

LIST OF ACRONYMS

AFDL	<i>Alliance des Forces Démocratiques pour la Libération du Congo</i> Alliance of Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Congo
ARV	Anti-Retroviral
CBO	Community-Based Organization
CNDP	<i>Congrès National pour la Défense du Peuple</i> National Congress for the Defence of the People
DRC	Democratic Republic of the Congo
FAR	<i>Forces Armées Rwandaises</i> Rwandese Armed Forces
FARDC	<i>Force de Armes de Démocratique Congolaise</i> Armed Forces of the Democratic Republic of the Congo
FDLR	<i>Force Démocratique de Libération du Rwanda</i> Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Rwanda
ICC	International Criminal Court
ICCO	Interchurch Organization for Development Cooperation
IDP	Internally Displaced Person
INGO	International Nongovernmental Organization
IPJ	Joan B. Kroc Institute for Peace & Justice
MLC	<i>Movement pour la Libération du Congo</i> Movement for the Liberation of the Congo
MONUC	<i>Mission des Nations Unies en République Démocratique du Congo</i> Mission of the United Nations in the Democratic Republic of the Congo
MRND	<i>Mouvement Révolutionnaire Nationale pour le Développement</i> National Republican Movement for Democracy and Development
NGO	Nongovernmental Organization
RADHF	<i>Réseau l'Association de Défense de Droits des Hommes a Fizi</i> Network Association for the Defense of Human Rights in Fizi

RCD	<i>Rassemblement Congolaise pour la Démocratie</i> Congolese Rally for Democracy
RCDKLM	<i>Rassemblement Congolaise pour la Démocratie</i> – Kisangani Liberation Movement
RPF	Rwandese Patriotic Front
USD	University of San Diego
UWAKI	<i>Umoja wa Mama wa Kivu</i> The Association of the Women of Kivu

ENDNOTES

¹ A version of this paragraph first appeared in the article “‘Women Cannot Cry Anymore’: Global Voices Transforming Violent Conflict,” by Emiko Noma in *Critical Half* Vol. 5, No. 2 (2007). Copyright 2007 Women for Women International.

² Direct and indirect casualties include those deaths caused directly by the fighting, as well as preventable diseases and injuries which have become fatal due to the conflict’s toll on local infrastructure and basic health services.

³ In this work, the Democratic Republic of the Congo is referred to as both DRC and Congo. It’s neighbor to the west is the Republic of Congo and is not mentioned in the work.

⁴ As part of this revival of native authenticity, Mobutu changed the country’s name to Zaire, the Congo River to the River Zaire, Katanga province to Shaba province, and his own name from Joseph Mobutu to Mobutu Sese Seko.

⁵ Congo’s eastern provinces of North and South Kivu are often referred to collectively as the Kivus.

⁶ DRC, Rwanda, Uganda, Angola, Zambia and Zimbabwe are signatories. Some sources believe Burundi also supported the AFDL movement, though they were not included in the Lusaka agreement.

⁷ After its initial deployment in 2000, the U.N. Security Council revised MONUC’s mandate to reduce its enforcement responsibilities, but to add reporting of violations and active engagement in the disarmament, demobilization, repatriation, resettlement and reintegration process ahead of elections in 2006. As a result of MONUC’s evolving mandate and the continuing insecurity in DRC, additions to its staff and budget were made. As of May 31, 2008, MONUC had a deployment of 18,428 uniformed personnel, including 16,666 troops, 699 military observers, 1,063 police, 939 international civilian personnel, 2,110 local civilian staff and 590 United Nations Volunteers. Over its eight years of operation, MONUC has become the largest and most expensive peacekeeping mission ever undertaken by the United Nations.

⁸ Christening children with French or European names was forbidden under Mobutu.

⁹ See the Conflict History section for more information on Nkunda. In this work, Nkunda’s force will be referred to as a militia, while the term “army” will refer to the armed forces of states.

¹⁰ Much speculation has been made in Congo and abroad as to the financiers of eastern Congo’s various armed groups. The International Criminal Court has accused external governments, notably Rwanda and Uganda, of using armed groups to plunder Congo’s natural resources and perpetuate the conflicts, in particular through a lucrative arms trade.

¹¹ Kinyarwanda is the national language of Rwanda. It is also spoken by the Banyamulenge, a Congolese Tutsi tribe, as well as a Tutsi tribe in North Kivu. Due to the proximity and history of the region, many Congolese from eastern Congo, Burundians and tribes from the southwest of Uganda understand and speak some of the language.

¹² Names in this section, “Fighting the War within the War,” have been changed to protect confidentiality. Furaha means “happiness” in Kiswahili.

¹³ The Interahamwe are explained in detail in the conflict history section.

¹⁴ Familial terms such as “Uncle” are used to refer to close family friends and tribe mates in addition to blood relations.

¹⁵ “Defilement” is used in this text as the legal term for rape of a minor.

¹⁶ Local tribes in the north of North Kivu include the Banande, Banyanga, Banhunde, Batwa, Batutsi, Bahutu and the native pigmy tribe.

¹⁷ In North and South Kivu, Tutsi tribes who speak Kinyarwanda are often referred to as “Rwandese,” even if they immigrated decades ago and hold Congolese citizenship, or belong to one of Congo’s ethnic Tutsi tribes, such as the Banyamulenge. Contrarily, Rwandese ethnic Hutus who fled following the 1994 genocide are often referred to as simply “the Hutu.”

¹⁸ Voting in smaller villages was carried out over two days to allow for those who had to travel longer distances to reach the polls.

¹⁹ At Sylvie’s request, the Life and Peace Institute established a contract with local partners whose members wished to run for election, which required the candidate to take a leave of absence from the organization while they were running for office. This allowed the organization to still receive funding during its member’s campaign.

²⁰ French is DRC’s language of business and commerce. Swahili is spoken as a common language throughout much of eastern Congo, which also has dozens of local languages. Many educated Congolese in the Kivus will speak fluent French, Swahili and at least one or more local languages.

²¹ The Ituri district in northeastern Congo was the scene of heavy fighting throughout the late 1990s and early 2000s. Three warlords from Ituri – Thomas Lubanga, Germaine Katanga and Mathieu Nguojolo Chui – have been arrested and transferred to the ICC in The Hague.

²² Sylvie was a Woman PeaceMaker in 2008, the same year as Zandile Nhlengetwa of South Africa, Shinjita Alam of Bangladesh and Olenka Ochoa of Peru.

²³ Sylvie participated in the 2008 Women PeaceMakers Conference, “Crafting Human Security in an Insecure World,” at the Joan B. Kroc Institute for Peace & Justice. The film “Pray the Devil Back to Hell,” on the role of women in the peacemaking process in Liberia, was screened during the conference.