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A new dawn for Congo: the central role of women in moving DRC forward

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Although traditional Congolese society was matriarchal – meaning that women had a clear role to play in society – with colonisation came the destruction of Congolese social, political, economic and cultural structures, and the marginalisation of women. Although the 1970s brought a period of stability and relative respite for Congolese women, in the 1980s and 1990s the country descended into a hell of economic instability and corruption. The invasions of 1996 and 1998 by armed groups from Rwanda/Uganda brought the beginning of the mass rape of women and of the close correlation between rape and conflict minerals. Women called this their ‘Al Nakba’ (Arabic for catastrophe), as they considered it a planned and calculated genocide; a deliberate attack to destroy them, their reproductive system and organs, their communities and culture, and ultimately their nation. Thus, during 1999–2000 many women in the South Kivu towns of Mwenga, Kasika and Makobolo were tortured, mutilated and buried alive because they resisted the occupation of their lands. Meanwhile, since 2011, over 1000 people in the town and area around Shabundu have fallen victim to the genocide by the Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Rwanda (FDLR) rebels. The rape of 3000 women and the burning of 500 homes was used as a key mechanism of terror to force the displacement of 10,000 people from the eastern Congo region.¹

Clearly the situation in eastern Congo has been appalling, but it is a mistake to suggest, as too many have, that rape is simply part of the traditional culture in the DRC. This is a demeaning and debilitating approach that disregards the historical roots, and dehumanising consequences, of a prolonged war and ignores both the strategic use of rape as a weapon of that war, and the indirect sponsorship of the invasion by multinational corporations seeking economic gain. There is a more than significant correlation between the beginning of the war – the invasion by rebel groups like the M23 (who the UN now acknowledged were indeed backed and armed by Rwanda and Uganda) – and the increase in the incidence of sexual violence with extreme force on women, men and children. Rape has been used as a weapon of intimidation, humiliation, destabilisation, displacement, partition and balkanisation. In the wake of such displacement, there has been an increase in mineral extraction and trade from those regions, which in turn is linked to the increased arms trade in the region. Rape, then, is not a remnant of traditional culture, nor is it merely

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¹Source: <http://www.ingeta.com/massacre-a-shabunda-avant-les-elections-apres-les-elections/>. Report by Fondation Congolaise pour la Promotion des Droits Humains et la Paix Coordination Sud-Kivu.

the unfortunate by-product of the conflict. The mass rape of Congolese women is in fact a central mechanism in the war strategy and the war economy of eastern Congo. Yet, while women are undoubtedly the victims of rape, it is wrong and unproductive to see them *only* as victims.

Women make up 53% of Congo's 70 million people, half of which are under the age of 18. Thus, the future of the area cannot be decided without Congolese women. Moving forward in the Democratic Republic of Congo must involve including more competent women in positions that involve safeguarding the nation's interests and implementing policies that benefit people collectively rather than individually. To achieve this, article 14 of the recently approved (2005) Congolese Constitution, which requires the elimination of all forms of discrimination against women, must be applied and implemented in the area of electoral law. This would in effect render illegal any political party's candidate list that does not include women. In 2006 at least three women were shortlisted as potential candidates for Presidency. In 2011, despite there being about 500 hundred seats in Parliament – women hold 44 seats and represent less than 10% – none of the presidential candidates was a woman. Women's rights groups need to work more efficiently with Congolese civil society to empower and build bases for women so that they will be able to hold positions of power in the coming elections. From an activist point of view, however, I note the lack of a sustained vision in many organisations' approach to truly 'change the game' in Congo. Rather, too often, they are in a perpetual state of fighting against an enemy – be it armed factions, poverty, rape or economic collapse – rather than engaging in constructive action, something that has been very detrimental to a future prosperous Congo.

From my experience of documenting the work of Congolese women they have the capacity to organise themselves and effectively tackle key issues. Congolese grassroots groups have been voicing their concerns since 1997 and have documented the strong proportional correlation between rape and minerals. Congolese women have long asked bluntly: 'Why don't you solve the conflict to obtain conflict-free minerals?' While they welcome the concept of the Conflict-Free Minerals initiatives (the American Dodd Frank Act and subsequent U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission ruling, and the new European Law modelled on that) they question whether the traceability process will stop the conflicts; they question the destabilisation attempts by Rwanda and Uganda; and they ask why there is no provision or penalty whatsoever for a company that does not respect the traceability process? Congolese women in the diaspora work tirelessly to ensure the voices of the women on the ground are heard in various international institutions. They are also determined to ensure that those who are participating in genocide are brought to justice. Their struggle has been at the heart of my film '2016 = Congo's New Dawn',² which follows various Congolese women from the diaspora and from Congo in their efforts to make their voices heard. Congolese women can, and have, risen to prominent positions in the European political scene – for example Mie-Jeanne Lumbala (Deputy of the Belgian parliament) and Gisele Mandaila (Secretary of State for Belgium). Why should a woman not preside over Congo in 2016, after the next presidential election? Moving forward requires building strong, stable and legitimate institutions. Only from such stable foundations can development, growth and prosperity grow and Congolese

²'2016 = Congo's New Dawn', a film by Shana Mongwanga, <http://www.africalives.org/Pages/CONGONEWDawn.aspx>.

women can and must play their part in this process – not only as citizens and voters, but also as leaders.

Notes on contributor

Shana Mongwanga is an Activist, and Film-Theatre Director. She was born in Bukavu, East DR-Congo and is currently based in London. She has a Master in Political Science/International Relations and is a Bachelor in Law from the Catholic University of Louvain (Belgium). She worked for the Jesuit Refugee Service-UK Office in advocating and lobbying and on behalf of refugees and asylum seekers on a national and European level. A particular emphasis of her work included to accompany, serve and advocate for asylum seekers in detention centres across Europe. In response to a growing frustration and the lack of tackling the root causes of refugee issues, she founded AFRICA LIVES! (www.africalives.org) to challenge stereotypes about developing countries particularly Africa, often portrayed as an un-resourceful, dying continent and the perpetual victimisation of African women. AFRICA LIVES! is dedicated to projects encouraging positive social change using films, theatre and art. In 2012 the organisation launched AFRICA LIVES! NETWORKS in response to the growing need to provide efficient network structure for policy and advocacy to various communities and organisations. The organisation has been instrumental in providing advocacy structure, lobbying and legal referrals and works with international and national NGOs, faith groups, lawyers and human rights campaigners across Europe, the USA and Africa. Her short film 'Congo – a Common Cause from London to Bukavu' echoes the voice of British-Congolese Women who travelled to East Congo for the World March of Women in 2010, bringing strong messages from those on the ground who refuse the perpetual victimhood and exploitation of their plight for self-serving purposes by organisations which bring very little change on the ground. Her latest short film '2016 – Congo's New Dawn' follows Congolese women advocating for change from New York to London, and at the heart of EU institutions. It follows their struggle as they demand the implementation of the parity law and equal rights – written in the Congolese Constitution – into the political arena. In the backdrop of the mass Congolese protests against the re-election of Joseph Kabila, Congolese women give an answer to the question 'Can a woman become president of Congo in 2016?' Her films have been screened at the Cannes Film Festival – Short Film corner, New York – Congo Harlem Film Festival, African and African-Caribbean Design Diaspora Exhibition and the British House of Commons. She is a trustee of West London Opera and Director of the Shakespeare Readers Society.