



# **The impact of conflict in the Democratic Republic of Congo on women and their response to peace-building**

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## **Abstract**

The unprecedented brutality, and the widespread sexual assault perpetrated against women during the conflict in the Democratic Republic of Congo (hereafter the DRC) have caught the attention of the world, to the extent that many observers are raising the question as to why Congolese women are so cruelly treated. To answer this question this paper discusses the complexity of causes behind the conflict and the various reasons leading to the atrocities prevailing in the country. Notwithstanding the painful situation of women in the DRC, there is a strong endeavour among women to transform the society and build a lasting peace.

## **Key words**

*Conflicts; church; peace-building; sexual abuse; women*

## **1. Introduction**

This article is based on a study I undertook in the Kivu as a contribution to the current debate on the role of women in a community in crisis. I have a double commitment to this cause as a Congolese woman, a member of the affected community, and also as an engaged and concerned African woman theologian.

This article is therefore a contribution to understanding the nature and effects of the current conflicts in the DRC and their consequences for the life of the population. It pays particular attention to the situation of women as they face extreme acts of sexual violence and rape. Conflicts and massive violation of human rights continue in spite of multiple peace talks

intended to stop the killing in the DRC that have been held by national and international leaders since 2002.<sup>1</sup> The failure to stop the conflict exacerbates the plight of the people at grassroots level. In fact, women and children remain the most affected by the aftermath of this deadly war.<sup>2</sup> This article also discusses the involvement of Christian women in the process of peace-building that is taking place in the DRC as many of them or their daughters and relatives are survivors of rape and other types of sexual assaults.

In this paper I would like to advocate that Christian women constitute an important asset and resource in building peace across the various ethnic and tribal groups that are divided by hatred and pursuit of revenge. For this purpose I will describe the research methodology used to collect and analyse data. Then I will discuss the background of the conflict, its causes and impact on women. Finally, I will draw the attention to the efforts of Congolese women to bring lasting peace in the country.

## 2. Methodology

The article is based on my previous research at PhD level. This was an empirical work in the Kivu. Marshall and Rossman (2011:210) consider data analysis as “an interpretive act, a process of bringing meaning to raw and inexpressive data”. They acknowledge that “raw data have no inherent meaning; the interpretive act brings meaning to those data and displays that meaning to the reader through written report.”

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- 1 On 19 April 2002 a peace agreement, which was thought to put an end to the war in DRC, was signed at Sun City, South Africa in the presence of many African Heads of State and officials from overseas. Since then several meetings have been organized in this regard but the conflict continues to ravage the country. The failure of this agreement was already predicted by the International Crisis Group in their Africa Report no 44 of 14 May 2002 entitled, “Storm Clouds over Sun City: The Urgent Need to Recast the Congolese Peace Process.” [www.crisisgroup.org/en/africa/central-africa/dr-congo/044\\_storm](http://www.crisisgroup.org/en/africa/central-africa/dr-congo/044_storm). Accessed 10 August 2012.
  - 2 According to René Lemarchand, approximately 5.5 million people have died in the Great Lakes region since 1994 and 38,000 die every month of war-related causes making it the deadliest conflict in the world after the World War II. *The Dynamics of Violence in Central Africa* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009)

### 3. Research framework

In this study I have located my research within two major theoretical frameworks. The first one is the feminist ecclesiology and the second is the theology of peace. I will explain why these two theories are suitable to this work.

#### Feminist ecclesiology

The focus of this study is on the action of Christian women in the process of building sustainable peace in the eastern Congo. In the DRC most people consider themselves as Christians and various minutes of the *Eglise du Christ au Congo* (equivalent of the National Council of Churches) and statistics confirm that the majority of church members throughout the country are women. Since the Church is still playing a significant role in the society, I suggest that one should count on Christian women in the DRC to contribute to peace-building in the country. I therefore draw insights from the feminist ecclesiology as perceived by African women's theologies. Watson (2002:10) defines feminist ecclesiology as "one way among others for women to speak about their being church and their embodying the divine in the world". She argues that women have to rethink what it means to be church in an institution which marginalises, oppresses and excludes them. In the context of this study women have to face marginalisation both in the Church and in the community at large. Yet marginalisation does not deter women from being key players in the Church and the society. African women theologians such as Mercy Oduyoye, Isabel Phiri and Nadar Sarojini to name a few, unlike their Western colleagues, advocate remaining in the Church to work from within for the transformation of the society and creation of spaces where men and women experience justice. This is what Oduyoye (2005:1) calls *koinonia*, meaning participation and inclusiveness. In the DRC the ecumenical league of women known as *la Fédération des Femmes Protestantes*, is appreciated nationally as being a reliable partner in all Christian activities organised by the national church. Women should therefore be included in any activity that aims at bringing peace in the region.

## Theology of peace

Theology of peace in this study refers to God's perspective and discourse about peace. In an insightful statement Dear (1994:15) has captured well the significance of defining a theology of peace in a context of violence. He states:

From the perspective of the world's violence, theology refers to and reflects upon God's relationship and transformation of the violence and our participation in God's transforming nonviolence. Our theology seeks to pinpoint God's way out of violence and enter into that struggle.

Following the definition of Dear, the theology of peace in this study is a call to Christian women to become agents in transforming the current situation of war into a nonviolent society. As expressed in the above framework, women as the Church should be involved in fulfilling God's mission of bringing peace in their community. However, it is not always easy for many women in the DRC to play their role as the church because of cultural barriers and ignorance of their role as church.

In his study on the concept of *shalom* in the Hebrew Bible, Westermann (1992:16-48) has defined *shalom* as "wholeness or wellness in a comprehensive sense – that is, the well-being or welfare of the person in community, including all areas of human existence, a healthy human existence in all its possibility". Political and economic unrest have deprived the eastern Congo of peace for many years. In his book, *A Time for Peace* (1996), Hendricks reflects on the various shades of the term peace (*shalom and eirene*), and notices that: "If people live in *shalom*, they enjoy health, wholeness, soundness and integrity. Living harmoniously with one's family adds to *shalom*. The wider the covenant of peace extends, the more inclusive is *shalom*" (Hendricks, 1996:4). This is in my opinion what is lacking in the Kivu region where people experience hatred, mass killing, rape of women and girls, and every kind of violation of human rights. The Church, men and women together, have the mandate from the Lord to be a healing community that brings restoration to broken lives. I now discuss the situation of conflict in the DRC.

#### **4. Background to the situation in the DRC**

Since the end of colonisation in 1960, the DRC has never experienced lasting peace. The country is often the theatre of inter-ethnic conflicts and invasions from foreign armies (Rwanda, Uganda, Burundi, Angola, Eritrea, Somalia...). In his analysis of historical causes of conflicts in the DRC, Nest argues that “the pattern of resources dependence established under Belgian colonial rule, combined with the absence of a democratically accountable regime during the independent era, caused the weakening and fragmentation of the Zairian state” (Nest, 2006:17). In this section I will discuss the three major causes of the current disastrous conflict and its massive toll of rape and sexual assaults on women and children. These are the spill over of the genocide in Rwanda, control of mineral resources and ethnic rivalry.

##### **Spill over of the Rwandan Genocide**

The location of the eastern part of the DRC in the Great Lakes Region exposes the Kivu province to being affected by any trouble which occurs in neighbouring countries such as Rwanda, Burundi and Uganda. It also allows easy penetration of foreign soldiers from neighbouring countries (Rutikanga, 2003). The current political crisis in the Great Lakes region started with the Rwandan and Burundian genocide in 1994, which led thousands of Rwandan and Burundian refugees to find asylum in neighbouring eastern Congo. On 6 April 1994, the presidents of Rwanda (Juvénal Habyarimana) and Burundi (Cyprien Ntaryamira) were both killed when their plane was shot down near Kigali airport. This resulted in acts of genocide in both countries, which were in the media headlines for many years. An estimated 500,000 Tutsis and moderate Hutus were killed in the 13 weeks following April 6, 1994 (Human Rights Watch, March 1999).

Later on the Tutsi regime which took control in Rwanda after the genocide, marched into the DRC in 1996 and put an end to the dictatorial regime of the late president Mobutu Sese Seko on 17 May 1997 (Nzongola-Ntalaja, 2002:15). At that time, in order to justify their incursion, a coalition of neighbouring armies with the backing of some Western powers pretended to be tracking down Hutu perpetrators of the genocide who were hiding in

the DRC. The report by Human Right Watch (1999) attests to the reason behind the war as established by many observers (*The Guardian*, 2010):

Rwanda's attack on Zaire in 1996 was initially aimed at clearing the vast UN refugee camps around Goma and Bukavu, which were being used as cover by Hutu armed forces to continue the war against the new Tutsi-led government in Kigali.

Moreover, Weiss (2000:2) acknowledges that “the genocide in Rwanda has profoundly destabilized the eastern Congo, plunging the area into endless cycles of violence”.

However, the Congolese people realised later that the real motivation for the war was bigger than and went beyond pursuing the perpetrators of the genocide in Rwanda. This became obvious when Rwanda and his allies launched another attack in 1998, only two years after establishing the late President Laurent Kabila as head of the state in place of the Mobutu regime.

It is noteworthy that in addition to the hunt for the perpetrators of the Rwandan genocide, there are also economic factors behind the ongoing conflict in the DRC.

### **Control of mineral resources**

The DRC is endowed with a wide variety of natural resources ranging from rich flora and fauna to water and minerals. The control of these resources has brought more harm than benefit to the country.

There is a popular saying in Africa that “crocodiles are always hungry”, which is true for those who profit from blood minerals. The “Congolese War” falls in that category of conflicts over the control of mineral resources. It may be that at the beginning of the war in 1996 the economic motivation was not a prominent factor but, once Rwanda and its allies took control of the country, it is argued that the control of the immense resources of the DRC became the top of their agenda. Nest (2006:31) argues: “Various individuals and organizations became cognisant of the profit-making opportunities available to them from their presence in the DRC and their links to foreign militaries deployed there.” This is confirmed by the mutiny which took place in Kisangani between soldiers from Rwanda and Uganda as reported by Reid (2006:75): “Uganda and Rwanda then fought

over control of the diamond trade in Kisangani, a city in northern DRC, in August 1999 and their mutual relations have been strained ever since.”

In spite of massive violations of human rights, as women and children are enslaved, raped and used by militias in the mining of blood minerals, the number of predators of mineral resources in the DRC is increasing. Besides Rwanda and Uganda, it is proven that many countries and international corporations are supporting conflicts in the DRC for the exploitation of minerals such as gold, diamond, cobalt and especially Colton, a mineral which is a key component in the manufacture of cell phones, computers and other electronic devices (Ware, 2001). Turner (2007:163) speaks of a United Nations Panel that in 2002

identified “elite networks” within the Congo, centring on the Rwandan and Ugandan occupation zones and on the Kinshasa government. Eighty-five foreign companies were cited as participating in the illegal exploitation of Congo’s resources.

It is evident on the world market that Rwanda, Burundi and Uganda are all competing equally for the exportation of mineral wealth from the DRC. In this regard Lemarchand (2009:254) argues: “Though both Rwanda and Uganda are bereft of diamond deposits, over the last few years Rwanda and Uganda have exported diamonds worth millions of dollars.” He adds: “It is from the extraction of Colton, however, that Kigali derives much of the financial wealth needed to prosecute its military operation in eastern Congo” (Lemarchand, 2009:254).

Apart from the greed for mineral resources, the war in the eastern DRC is also maintained by a profound and historical record of ethnic rivalry as I shall demonstrate in the next section.

### **Ethnic rivalry in the east of the DRC**

The population in the DRC is diverse, composed of an estimated 250 different tribes speaking more than 400 dialects (Heale & Jui Lin 2009:71). Although tensions among neighbouring clans or local communities have, from time to time, occurred in the country, nothing has ever matched the magnitude of the current violent rivalry, killing and rape of women in the eastern DRC. This situation in the DRC has been exacerbated by the presence of a great number of Hutus and Tutsis from Rwanda (Stearns

2011:37–38) in the Kivu region and to some extent the Hema from Uganda in Ituri, whose status has always been a disputed among people in the eastern DRC (Stearns, 2011:37-38; Vircoulon, 2010:210).

During the regime of President Mobutu Sese Seko the issue of the nationality of Banyarwanda, which was not settled during colonisation or in the early days of independence, became a major concern because of contradictory laws signed by Mobutu in this regard. At the beginning President Mobutu was very amicable to the immigrants from Rwanda and Barthélémy Bisengimana Rwema, one of the Tutsi immigrants, became Mobutu's powerful adviser and chief of staff by 1970. He succeeded in making Mobutu sign an ordinance-law in 1971 followed by a law of 5 January 1972 granting Congolese nationality to all Burundians and Banyarwanda who were present in Congo when the country became independent in 1960 (Turner 2007:87-88). Later on the Tutsis who had lived in South Kivu for many years before independence decided to adopt the name Banyamulenge in line with the 1972 Law on Nationality but also as a way of distinguishing themselves from the Banyarwanda, Tutsi refugees of 1959–1962. The adoption of this name was contested by the Bafuliro of Uvira who consider the hill of “Mulenge” from which the name Banyamulenge is derived, as their heritage. The law of citizenship and their political influence at the time gave Tutsi immigrants from Rwanda the right to appropriate large tracts of land at the expense of indigenous communities in the Kivu (Lemarchand, 2009:229). The appropriation of land became another cause of tension between people of Rwandan origin and other Congolese tribes which led to the current conflict.

In 1981 President Mobutu Sese Seko signed another law that challenged the nationality given earlier to Rwandan immigrants. In this law citizenship was granted only to those who could prove that one of their ancestors was established in the Congo prior to 1908 (Lemarchand, 2009:228). Since none of the Rwandans, both in the North and South Kivu, were able to demonstrate that their ancestors had lived in the DRC that long, the Rwandans found themselves excluded from being Congolese.

The above contradictory laws on the status of Rwandan immigrants have opened the door to the xenophobic violence that has prevailed in the eastern part of the DRC to date. The frustration experienced by the Banyamulenge and other Banyarwanda in the region on the issue of nationality and land



ownership, can explain their prompt adherence to the liberation movement launched by the Tutsis of the Rwanda Patriotic Front which toppled the Hutu regime in Rwanda in 1994 and then invaded the DRC in 1996. This became the beginning of the current violence against women in the DRC.

## 5. The impact of the conflict on women in the eastern part of the DRC

The condition of women in the eastern DRC has deteriorated since the beginning of the war in 1996.<sup>3</sup> Besides the mass killing estimated at over five million (Ma, n.d.) the war in the DRC is characterised by unprecedented acts of violence and rape against women and girls. Alarming statistics of victims of mutilations and rape during the years of war in the eastern DRC appear in many UN reports and newsletters. In an article entitled provocatively “In Congo, a Dead Rat is Worth more than the Body of a Woman” Cookson (2010) reported that in 2009 more than 15,000 rapes were recorded in the DRC, and an average of 40 women were raped daily in the province of South Kivu alone. Figures were much higher in the previous years as more battles were taking place in various areas in the eastern Congo. Hundreds of thousands of women are estimated to have been raped in the years following the outbreak of the conflicts (Kirchner 2008). The situation is so devastating for women that the UN Representative for Sexual Violence in Conflict, Margot Wallström, described the DRC as “the rape capital of the world” (United Nations, 2010). Rape continues to date since uncontrolled militias and armed conflicts are still endangering the lives of women in remote areas. Though violence against women was used as a cheap weapon of war, the phenomenon seems to be described as a widespread practice even among civilians. In a recent report published by Oxfam International it is revealed that “while the majority of rapists were either soldiers or militiamen, the report also shows a shocking 17-fold increase in rapes carried out by civilians between 2004 and 2008” (Oxfam, 2010).

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3 The first wave of the war in DRC started in 1996, when Rwanda, Uganda and other allies decided to back the rebellion of Laurent Kabila to topple the regime of President Mobutu. Then, when the alliance between President Laurent Kabila and his allies broke in 1998, a second wave of war and conflicts took place and generated several pockets of rebellions that are causing havoc to date.

The nature of sexual violence perpetrated by rebels is monstrous. Perpetrators use anything at hand, guns, knives and sticks, to penetrate a women's body (Kirchner 2008). The worst is that there is only one hospital, Panzi, in Bukavu to perform surgery on those who have developed fistula or with severe damage to their genitals. The spread of HIV is also rampant among survivors because of the stigma attached to the plight. Few survivors of rape are willing to come into the open with their case or to seek treatment quickly because they are afraid of being divorced by their husbands or rejected by the community.

## **6. Why are women targeted as victims?**

There is no single answer to this question since the causes of rape and sexual violence in the region are complex. The phenomenon tends to become a fashion of the day that even in areas that are not at war like in Kinshasa and other provinces in the West cases of rape are daily reported. Generally, the primary reason behind rape is gender inequality. Sorial and Poltera argue that "The prevalence of rape or sexual assault stems from a lack of recognition and respect for women as equal moral agents" (Sorial & Patera, 2010:15). Rape in the DRC is often practiced to assert male superiority over women. Isabel Phiri has rightly noted the reason why men rape, because "ultimately rape is about power, it is used as weapon of domination" Phiri, 2006:113). However, rape as weapon of war remains an unprecedented phenomenon because of its intensity and by different armed groups present in the eastern Congo.

However, the responses received from participants in various meetings during my fieldwork for my PhD research can be summarised in five major points:

Since many soldiers who invaded the DRC in 1996 and 1998 came from neighbouring countries of which rebel troops (Interhamwe, Lord's Resistance Army-LRA and others) were hiding in the DRC, these foreign armies used rape to punish and totally humiliate local Congolese communities as noted by Farr:

Among the most ruthless of the emergent combatant groups has been the National Congress for the Defence of the Congolese People (CNDP), led by Tutsi rebel Laurent Nkunda. In the north, cross-border incursions by the very violent Ugandan rebel group, the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA), have included abuses against DRC civilians (Farr, 2010). (Kenge 2015:46)

Foreign armies were not only interested in humiliating the Congolese people but also used female genital mutilation as a means of destroying women and reducing the population. Many survivors of gun rape are today unable to bear children. Along with genocide, destroying women's bodies is carried out with the intent of wiping out the rival group (Kenge 2015:46).

It is reported also that the Congolese national army and militia perpetrated sexual violence and rape against entire communities and families accused of supporting their enemies. Those acting in this way claim that their act of retaliation against the enemies is justifiable. Acts of reprisal using women's bodies have caused women to become victims of sexual violence regardless of what side of the society they belong to (Kenge 2015:46).

The use of fetishism has often been cited as encouraging rape for the rejuvenation and strength of some of the perpetrators of sexual violence against women. Many rebel groups use fetishism and witchcraft to enhance their military aptitude, and they are told by witch doctors to rape women. In an interview with Bahati Valérie, a child soldier of Mai-Mai confirmed that "witch doctors told them to rape many women: old, young and children, so as to get extra power for killing more enemies" (Mugisho, n. d.) (Kenge 2015:47)

Finally, rape is also used to force local communities to leave their lands for the exploitation of mineral resources and cutting of timber for the benefit of international corporations and national warlords. Therefore, rape becomes another strategy used by warlords to acquire minerals (Kenge 2015:47).

What is true in the Congo is that rape is widely practised during conflicts and accurate statistics on this phenomenon will never be known. I concur

with McNamee as she observes, “The shame and social stigma traditionally associated with rape keep many of its victims silent, and thus results in a statistical misrepresentation of the true extent of the phenomenon” (MacNamee, 2001:38). If the practice is not dealt with adequately, rape will become another scourge on the African continent as many countries, including South Africa, are struggling to control sexual assaults and crimes against women.

## 7. Peace-building efforts by Congolese women

While political talks on peace have not borne fruit, women on the other hand are striving to bring peace. They have initiated a number of activities in relation to restoring peace and mutual respect.

The office of the National Federation of Protestant Women in the DRC had organised in Kinshasa, on 20–25 July 2004, the National Congress of Protestant Women from all the provinces of the country. The theme of the congress was *souffle pour redonner la vie* meaning, “breathe to restore life” from Ezekiel 37:9. This was a call to Protestant women to speak out and speak prophetically in a country which has become as a valley of dry bones.

Another important seminar on “Vulgarization of the Law on Violence against Women” was organised by the National Federation of Protestant Women on 30 April–3 May 2009. The seminar was an attempt to bring awareness of the various sections of the Law that give the right to women to fight against violence. Participants were also informed about different forms of violence against women that are practised in the country. They were introduced to “Tamar Campaign” during the seminar as a biblical approach to speaking out about violence against women.

For a country as big as the DRC and under the current economic situation, it is commendable that women were able to organise national gatherings bringing delegates from all the corners of the country to spend time to reflect on the situation in the country.

Another important event that made an impact was the World March of Women held in Kinshasa on 17 October 2010, calling for peace, demobilisation and the end of violence against women. Women from the *Fédération des Femmes Protestantes* (National Federation of Protestant

Women in the DRC) hosted the event which brought women from various denominations, races and organisations together in solidarity with thousands of women who have been sexually abused in the DRC (Mennonite Central Committee, n. d.).

An interesting development in the region is that Congolese women have started writing their own story. Apart from a number of articles, Fatuma (2009) has written a valuable book entitled *Femme et Paix Dans la Ville de Bukavu de 1996 à 2006: Réflexion Théologique* [Woman and Peace in the City of Bukavu from 1996 to 2006: Theological Reflection]. This book covers a period of 10 years during which war and violence against women had ravaged the eastern Congo. Although the region is still experiencing political unrest and violation of human rights, this book is revelatory, written by a woman who has witnessed and lived the situation at the climax of the crisis. The book describes the causes of the war, its effects on the community and upon women and more importantly various attempts made by women to be involved in peace-building. To this work one should add a numbers of theses and dissertations, including my own PhD research (Kenge, 2015).

There is a tremendous effort among women in their communities and churches to provide care to their colleagues, survivors of sexual violence. Using the limited resources available in the community, women in remote areas are capable of meeting basic needs of those who are suffering. They come together as associations of women in every congregation, and even those who are not members of churches, to organise fellowships for helping one another with food, clothes and even shelter. These meetings constitute a mechanism for coping with traumatic experiences of rape and providing relief to those who could starve when left alone.

Some women are even taking initiatives to meet with other women from rival ethnic groups and tribes to advance the peace process among themselves. They try to transcend the hatred and retaliation that have divided the population in the region. In fact women can be considered as peacemakers by nature because most conflicts in the country are initiated by male politicians and mining entrepreneurs.

## **8. Conclusion**

In this article I have introduced the reader to my motivation and interest in this study, and also to the research methodology I have adopted to collect and analyse the data. This is an empirical qualitative study based on personal interviews, observation on the field and compilation of written materials. I have also described the socio-political background of conflicts in the eastern region of the DRC and its implication on the rape of women. I have underlined three major causes of current conflicts that affect the country and its population. These include the spill over of the genocide of Rwanda and Burundi, the greed for illegal exploitation of mineral resources and ethnic rivalry, especially between the population of Rwandan origin and other local Congolese groups.

I have particularly drawn the attention of the readers to sexual atrocities and violation of human rights that women are facing from all armed groups operating in the DRC, including some civilians. Acts of assault range from gang rape to genital mutilation. The country has a record of war rape such that it is known as the world capital of rape. Reasons behind targeting women are complex. Besides gender inequality that is manifested in the way women are considered as second-rate citizens, sexual violence in the DRC is mainly fuelled by the hatred between rival groups using rape as cheap weapon of war. Armed groups rape women to humiliate their enemies and even to destroy female reproductive organs in order to exterminate their opponents.

This article is designed to demonstrate the courage of women in the DRC who are working hard to bring peace despite the failure of political actors and armed groups to stop the conflicts. Women from religious communities or other social groupings are meeting together to provide relief and spiritual support to their colleagues survivors of rape. To bring awareness of the plight of women in the DRC to the world community, women have organised peace marches, written books and journal articles and even academic theses and dissertations. They have held seminars and workshops to educate women about sexual violence and their rights.

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