

## **The Cry of a Congolese Woman**

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Unofficial translation from French by M-C Faray and the PeaceWomen team

August 28, 2007 " *If silence is a crime, knowing and saying nothing is a more serious one*"

The continuous silence which surrounds today's tragedy in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) is a serious crime. For a decade now, Congolese people in general, and women in particular, are enduring incredible suffering. The DRC, with its sixty million inhabitants, has been reported to have women constituting up to 51% of the population. Unfortunately, this majority is without a voice!

The Congolese woman is used as an instrument of propaganda and mobilization for political gain. Due to her current ignorance and patriarchal retrograde mentalities, her education and development are neglected; she is absent from decision making tables where her own future, as well as that of her family is discussed; and she is the first victim of the wars and armed conflicts.

The permanent insecurity, violence and displacement of populations in the east of our country, regardless of the agreements signed at Sun City in 2002 and the recent elections in 2006, is a forgotten tragedy, ignored without precedent in Africa. Women are used to provide sexual and cooking services to the armed militants, rebels and other groups. Their bodies are used as battle grounds. The violation is a means of intimidation, humiliation and the destabilization as well as destruction of local communities, by foreign and national arms forces, the police and secret intelligence services.

This humanitarian catastrophe has driven the Congolese woman to the forefront.

She rose like a mother to say: "No to death, No to all forms of violence, No to sexual abuses particularly rape, No to the malicious destruction of the ecosystem, and NO to the war!

She rose like patriot to denounce the aggression and the occupation of our country by Rwanda and Uganda armed forces or their support to rebels groups, regardless of the general confusion maintained until this day by the international community through the UN.

She rose like an activist engaged for change and the birth of a state governed by the rule of law, which will enable her to create a space for viable participation likely to support as well as favor the emergence of her leadership.

In the face of this permanent political instability since independence of our country, widespread unemployment and economic recession, Congolese woman have risen like providers and guarantors of food security. Her role is visible in the fight against poverty and by her strong presence in the informal economy.

Without the Congolese woman, there would have collapsed. She has been present and has always intervened in all the vital sectors of public life: health, economy, environment, civic education, human rights.

Today and more than ever, the Congolese woman is conscious of her responsibility as well as the role she must fulfill in the reconstruction of our country. From Gaborone to Addis Ababa, from Nairobi to Sun City, from Pretoria to Kinshasa, She has shown unity for only one CAUSE.

**What is that only Cause?** As was rightly put by Mrs Noeleen Heyzer, director of UNIFEM: *"What we want for the 21st century is a rekindling of hope, the capacity for women around the world to bring their dreams of equality of access, opportunity and rights, freedom from discrimination, related intolerance and peace to reality, a better world for all"*.

This is also the dream of all Congolese women, this is our common cause! Beyond our ethnic, cultural and religious diversities, as well as our individual opinions, sensibilities, and political groups... we only have one cause!

Alas how to make our dream a reality in a state that is not for its citizens! This is our cry!

Here are some observations:

1) The DRC has signed and ratified human rights treaties and in particular CEDAW which was signed in 1986.

2) The DRC Constitution of the Third Republic stipulates in its article 14 that the state has the obligation to implement and enforce the law and to promote women's rights and their participation in the development of the nation, particularly by guaranteeing their rights to a significant representation in local and national institutions.

The reality is very different in the life of a Congolese women; as proof, after recent elections of 2006, the overall representation of women is only 7.2% in senior positions in government and parliamentary institutions.

3) In spite of the agreements signed to put an end to the war and the promulgation of the new law in June 2006, which recognise rape and other forms of sexual abuses, as crimes, their continuous practice continues to devastate the lives of women. This is particularly so in the east of the country, where these atrocities are used as means of humiliation, terror and weapons of war. These acts often remain unpunished; thus destabilizing the future and safety of women.

4) The DRC Family Code promulgated in 1999, contains several clauses that are discriminatory and incompatible with CEDAW. Moreover although the Family Code gives the widow rights of inheritance, the reality is very different! Faced with the institutionalization of corruption, what can a widow in the DRC who is dispossessed do?

Such are the few examples of life for a woman in DRC.

Faced with these great challenges, we must rise; mobilize, in the spirit of solidarity to:

- Bring the DRC government to entrench the rule of law in the whole country
  
- Support morally and financially grassroots women's organizations for better results: health, human rights, literacy and general education for woman and young girls, fight against poverty by economic empowerment, fight against ignorance by information, instruction, and civic empowerment.

As we ask the following question: ***"How could a woman (demand) her rights if she is not even aware of them?"*** For this reason, we invite women throughout the world to support the fight of Congolese women as a sign of solidarity, because it is a noble cause!

Written on the 28<sup>th</sup> August 2007, London (U.K))  
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