

Letter from Zainab

Since Women for Women International started its work in the Democratic Republic of Congo in 2004, we have often heard about the atrocities that women faced during the decade long conflict. Even after spending the last 13 years working with some of the world's most socially excluded women survivors of war, the stories of rape, torture and sexual violence that my colleagues and I encountered as we prepared for our work there haunt me to this day.

Women for Women International has served more than 8,000 Congolese women since 2004 and, taken together, their stories reveal a chilling pattern of sexual- and gender-based violence, torture and murder. Some women were kept as sexual slaves for weeks, months, and sometimes as long as a year in the bush. During that time, they were forced to cook and clean for their assigned captors. Sometimes the rapist stayed at the woman's home for days as he continued to rape her. After they raped and attacked women in other villages, they would come back a week later to repeat their violence.

After a while, we could not ignore another pattern that was emerging from the stories—how the women's husbands were dealing with the acts of rape and violence committed against their wives, daughters, and mothers. Because of the social stigma still attached to rape in Congolese society, victims were being thrown out of their homes and shunned by their families and communities.

Initially, we were angry at the men who abandoned these women who had already been through so much. We couldn't understand how a man could literally throw his wife into the street—without regard for her safety or vulnerability to disease, or for the hungry, terrified children that she was still expected to care for.

But the more we worked with the women, the more we realized we need to talk with the men to understand their reality. It occurred to us that, within the context of war, just as the world automatically casts women in the role of victim, men are automatically cast as violent aggressors. Just as we ask the world not to stereotype women, we must recognize when we are guilty of making similar assumptions.

As I thought about these stories and the anguish that the women who survived would live with for the rest of their lives, I attempted to reconcile what I had seen and heard with what I knew to be true—that stronger women build stronger nations. I thought about Bora, a young woman who told me that, "Peace means I can be protected when I am inside my house." I knew then that any services that Women for Women International provided to Congolese women would be incomplete if we did not also enlist men as agents of change, training traditional and community leaders to use their social capital to advocate on behalf of women's rights and raise public awareness about the value of women's contribution to their country's reconstruction. Building upon a model that we piloted in Nigeria and continued in Iraq, Women for Women International launched a Men's Leadership Program (MLP) in January 2005 in eastern DRC's South Kivu

Province to do just this. This report details the program's development, implementation and impact.

As Congo moves toward its first democratic elections since gaining independence from Belgium in 1960, Women for Women International believes that a unique window of opportunity exists for Congolese women. Ideals have the chance to be realized, where the rights of all citizens—women and men—are respected, where gender-based violence is unacceptable and where both women and men are active participants in creating new systems, institutions and ways of seeing the world. If women cannot fully participate, it is unlikely that a society can make substantial gains in building a foundation of gender equality for the future.

In a country where a conflict characterized by its systematic attacks on women has shattered the social bonds of whole communities, peace and reconciliation will not be possible without women's active role and partnerships with supportive men.

Cheers,

Zainab Salbi
Founder and CEO of Women for Women International