



*“A time comes when silence is a betrayal.”
Martin Luther King*

***Journey to Eastern Democratic Republic of Congo
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A Trip Report by Zainab Salbi

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I can't get Nabito out of my mind. I can't stop my tears every time I think of her. I can't forget how her broken arm looked and how her fractured elbow felt. Nabito is a widow and mother of 12 from a small village near Walungu in eastern Congo. When she heard about the Interahamwe's frequent attacks on nearby villages, she started spending the nights in the bush with her children. One of these nights she decided to go back to her home.¹ Little did she know that her life would change forever.

That night the Interahamwe came. When they arrived at her home, they started beating her with the butts of their machine guns.

“They cut my legs and hands and even my belly with knives, machetes and guns. And they started raping me in front of my boys soon after the beating. They asked my sons to hold my legs and hands apart as they were trying to tie my body parts. They asked one of my boys to rape me. But he begged them not to ... ‘I can't rape my mother’ he explained. But they would pull my pubic hair in a brutal way to force the screams out of my mouth as I was naked, with my hands and legs tied apart, with my sons tied next to me. They started raping me ... all eight of them. When my son refused to rape me, they broke his leg.” Nabito told this story as her right arm, which has been broken in the middle, was moving without her control.

Nabito continued to explain how the Interahamwe soldiers were raping her daughter outside of her home as she herself was being raped: “There were so many men around my daughter neither of us know how many men raped her,” Nabito explained. Nabito had to be taken to the hospital soon after the Interahamwe left. “I was half dead when they finished raping me. My belly was bloated ... it was inflated ... I lost consciousness so my son-in-law and my neighbors took me to the hospital. I am alive today but I don't have anything. The Interahamwe stole my five goats and one cow. They even stole my pots and plates. I have nothing now. I don't even own the dress I am wearing,” Nabito explained as she lifted part of her dress to show me the rags that she was wearing under it. This torn and dirty fabric wrapped around her waist was the only thing that she still owned.

It has been three years since Nabito's life was changed. She has been living away from her village, afraid to return to her home lest the Interahamwe attack her and her family again. She and ten of her

¹ The Interahamwe (“those who fight together”) is one of the several fighting parties in the DRC's conflict. This civilian death squad is mostly from Rwanda. They were among those responsible for the 1994 genocide against Tutsis.

children are living with some extended family members who just recently started asking for rent. Her daughter's husband abandoned her after she was raped and she is now HIV-positive. The Interahamwe took her second daughter as a sexual slave for two weeks in the bush until she managed to escape and reunite with her infant child left at home. Nabito tries to feed her children by begging. "My job is to beg. I go to the market to beg to see if anybody can help me so I can eat," she explains as she remembers her life in the village, where she earned enough to feed her children with her goats, her cow, and her farming.

The Interahamwe stole her past and future. They left her without the feeling of being a full person. When I asked her about her hopes for the future, Nabito answered by saying: "I want to get my life again. I want to become a person again ... I don't feel that I am a person anymore ... I am just a street person. I have no house, no life, I don't eat, and I don't even have clothes ... Last night I was fed and so I slept well but that does not happen that often." Tears were starting to drop from her eyes when she finally said in a more forceful way: "Look at me. Look at me ... my life has been full of suffering since that night ... I want to be a woman again ... I don't even see myself as a woman anymore ... I don't even have a decent arm anymore ... even my slippers I had to pick up from the garbage. Look at me."

It has been three years since Nabito encountered the Interahamwe but no one has looked at her. The International Rescue Committee's mortality study indicates that at least 3.3 million more civilians died between August 1998 and November 2002 than would have been normally expected during this time; most due to vaccine-preventable disease and malnutrition.² More than 2 million people have been internally displaced.³ But the world did not look at Nabito and the millions like her.

This report will attempt to share my journeys to the Democratic Republic of Congo in November of 2003 and July of 2004. We may be late. But we are never too late to look at the reality there and the need for development assistance to help the people capture this moment of peace.

Overview of Current Reality

"I want the outside to learn that the Congolese suffered a catastrophe. There was pillaging, raping, killing and people who have been in prison without trial. We live in poverty, we need food, we can't pay for the school fees for our children and we can't afford the security fees."

– Furaha, 45 years old

There are no estimates for the number of women raped since the fighting started in eastern DRC in 1998.⁴ The closest estimate was provided by AFECEF, a local women's organization, that stated

² International Rescue Committee, "Mortality in the Democratic Republic of Congo: Results from a Nationwide Survey," April 2003, at <http://www.theirc.org/mortality/>. 4 March 2004.

³ Human Rights Watch, "The War Within the War: Sexual Violence Against Women and Girls in Eastern Congo," June 2002, 5 at <http://www.hrw.org/reports/2002/drc/>. 4 December 2004.

⁴ Although the official start of Congo's war is cited as 1998, armed conflict flared, particularly in the eastern part of the country, since at least 1996. In 1996, rebel groups fought to overthrow Congo's ruler, Mobutu Sese Seko. They were successful in 1997, led by Laurent Kabila, who assumed leadership of the country. Fighting continued in the early part of his rule, as various militia groups clashed with his supporters and attempted to overthrow the government. This unstable environment led to the entry of several international actors, eager to lay claims to the DRC's substantial mineral resources.

about 35,000 women have been identified as rape victims/survivors⁵ and many are from South Kivu (eastern DRC).⁶ The age group of the rape victims/survivors ranges from 12 years old to 80 years old, with the primary age of the victims/survivors being 17 to 40 years old. In general, none of the estimates are representative of the volume of atrocities that took place in eastern DRC. Because of the lack of resources available to collect the records, and the social stigma still attached to rape, it is difficult for local NGOs to collect accurate records.

During a two-week visit to eastern DRC in November 2003, I was able to conduct interviews with focus groups totaling 200 individuals, primarily women, with limited participation by men. Most interviews were conducted in the villages surrounding Bukavu and Goma, while others took place at the center of these towns in offices of local NGOs. The results of the interviews showed a consistent pattern of killing, raping and pillaging by the warring factions. None of the interviews conducted showed a separation of the atrocities, particularly between the killing and the raping. These two crimes were almost always committed hand-in-hand. In the case of Nabito, for example, five people were killed in her village the night she was attacked. Sometimes the pillaging did take place without killing and raping, but that appeared to be the case in villages that were attacked multiple times. Warring factions often combined all three crimes during the initial attack on a village.

Many of the interviewees did not view the fighting parties distinctly, and those who are still living in isolated villages don't know that there was a signed peace agreement.⁷ Many view the war as a foreign war, a war that has to do with Rwanda and Uganda much more than DRC.⁸ "The arms that are killing us are coming from outside the country. I ask for the international community to stop the flow of these arms in order to stop this war," Mirimba, an older man explained at one of the village meetings. Still some, especially the younger population, are starting to look back to Mobuto's time, wishing that it were back in some ways.⁹ "At least during Mobuto's time, there was only pillaging.

⁵ There is an ongoing discussion on whether to describe women who have endured rape as victims or survivors. Needless to say, the term 'survivor' gives more active agency to the woman as opposed to 'victim', which is a more passive word. In the case of the DRC, I chose to use both terminologies as I think it is more reflective of the women's reality in terms of their own strength and resilience and the struggle they are going through after the violence they have endured.

⁶ Much of the fighting in this conflict has occurred in North and South Kivu, along the DRC's eastern border.

⁷ President Laurent Kabila was assassinated in 2001, and his son Joseph assumed office and attempted to further various peace agreements that were begun by his father. In December 2002, Kabila signed a power-sharing agreement with rebel groups as part of the Inter-Congolese dialogue held in Sun City, South Africa. A national power-sharing government was inaugurated on June 30, 2003, ostensibly bringing an end to the conflict, with the goal of holding nationwide elections within two years. However, despite the efforts of MONUC, a UN peacekeeping force of several thousand members, sporadic attacks against civilians persist in eastern DRC.

⁸ The main fighting factions have included the Interahamwe militia, mostly from Rwanda and responsible for genocide against Tutsis there; former Hutu members of the Rwanda military, also responsible for genocide; the Mai-Mai, a cluster of local militias divided into about seven factions, created in response to Rwanda's occupation of eastern Congo; Rwanda-supported Congolese Rally for Democracy; and Uganda-supported Movement for Liberation of Congo, in addition to troops provided by Angola, Zimbabwe, and Namibia sent to support the Kabila government. The struggle for control of resources (including diamonds, gold, copper, and cobalt) and land, fueled by ethnic alignments, has been a major element of this complex conflict between multiple actors. All have been accused of committing crimes, as all of them wear similar uniforms and are difficult to identify. Most of the time, the only way to identify the groups of soldiers is through their accent or language.

⁹ Mobuto Sese Seko ruled Congo from 1965, when he seized power in a coup, until 1997 when he was overthrown. Mobuto's rule was overall characterized by immense greed and corruption, as he enriched himself at the expense of the majority of the population whose standard of living deteriorated sharply during his time in office. Also during his rule,

Now we are being killed and our women are being raped as they destroy our villages,” one young man explained. Yet for those who are working on building peace, there is a reserved optimism about the future. As Jacqueline Rusilibya, the President of Pro-Femmes/Twese Hamwe explains, “I am neither optimistic, nor pessimistic at this point. Things are not yet clear.”

There is a strong history of local NGOs and civil society in eastern DRC. They have been particularly active during and after the war. Most local NGOs that are focused on women are directing their services towards counseling and shelter provision, while international NGOs have been focusing their efforts on emergency aid distribution. All agree that now is the time to start development work that provides job opportunities for people so they can begin to feel a sense of peace and security in their lives. All NGOs are appealing to donors to provide resources and fund development work to capture this moment.

NGOs are advocating what the people are saying in the field. Furaha, a woman from a small village bordering Bukavu, explained: “We want peace and when we know peace, we can build our society. Without peace, we can’t even fix our houses.” Her friend Rosa, a mother of seven children, asked “How can I feel peace when my house is destroyed?” Bora, another young woman added, “Peace means I can be protected when I am inside my house.”

This is a critical moment to capture the “reserved optimism” in eastern DRC and transfer it into real and full optimism. To do so, we need to provide the necessary support for development work so people can realize peace in their lives -- to be able to live in their homes, to send their kids to school, and to earn their own living. It doesn’t take much to help women like Magdalena who said, “We are living under the life of poverty, we are miserable. Our children can’t go to school. We need help to stop this miserable poverty.”

Raping, Killing and Pillaging

“The world should not reject women who have been raped. One should accept them into the society, not stigmatize them and reject them.”
– A rape survivor

Goma, DRC is a city covered with black volcano lava. One can still feel the fear brought about by the volcano’s eruption three years ago, for its marks are everywhere. But the magnitude of the volcano is minimized next to the magnitude of the women’s pain. My journey to Goma started with the director of a local association known as MOADE, an organization that helps rape victims/survivors by providing them and their families with shelter. She took me through black, muddy side streets until we entered a small dark room. The room had seven women and was full of children who were playing and making loud noises. A teenage girl was sitting on the side and chopping some vegetables. The women welcomed the director with a warm smile. She hugged them, kissed them, and asked for their permission to sit and talk with them about what they have been through. They agreed and asked their children to leave the room and play outside. The teenage girl remained silent on the side as she continued chopping her vegetables.

armed and security forces, originally designated to maintain domestic order, became engines of repression and intimidation against ordinary citizens.

The children left and the room was quiet and very dark. There was no light because there is no electricity. Some women sat around me and others sat to the side. They were all sober and quiet. Monique, a woman in her forties who sat next to me, started by saying “We suffer here, we suffer a lot. Our children don’t eat or sleep. I have five children. None of them are in school. They hang out in the market. They try to help people carry their bags to make some money. I am not working. I don’t have funds to do anything.” I noticed Monique’s skirt was full of holes and as she caught my eye, she explained how the neighborhood treats them as if they are no longer women: “Everyone knows that our kids’ fathers left. Because we cannot afford school fees, our kids are street children,” she continued. When I asked about their fathers and why they abandoned their children, Monique started making eye contact with the other women -- as if asking for their approval to tell me more about their reality.

Monique took a deep breath and said, “We were on the road to buy mangoes and other stuff for our trade. On the way back, we encountered an Interahamwe attack against five mini-buses that were on the road ahead of us. By the time we arrived to that point, they had already killed many of the passengers in these buses. When they came to our bus and saw that most of us were women, they told us that they were not going to kill us, but that they would take us with them to the bush. Some women refused. So they killed them on the spot with their machetes. I had my 14 year-old daughter with me, and I didn’t want us killed, so we went with them. But it wasn’t easy in the bush. The first time they tried to rape me, I refused and resisted. So they brought out their knives and started trying to cut different parts of my body... my arms, my legs and they cut my stomach.” At this point, Monique stopped to show me her cuts. The cut in her stomach was so deep that it melted every fiber in my body. Monique continued and said, “When my stomach started bleeding, I lost consciousness and they started raping me. They had assigned me to six men who raped me on a daily basis. Every time I refused, they would get the knives out and threaten to cut my stomach again.” Monique, who is currently HIV-positive, later told me that the 14 year-old girl who was sitting on the side was her daughter. She was also made a sexual slave for three months until the Interahamwe abandoned them as another group was preparing to attack their camp. This is how Monique and her daughter gained their freedom.

Monique’s story was just the tip of the iceberg. Once Monique finished, the other women started talking. Rosa, a young woman who was sitting next to Monique started saying: “I was 14 years old when they raped me. I became pregnant. Thank God my child does not have AIDS.” Rosa’s child may not be HIV-positive, but Olivia, a mother of seven who has also been gang-raped is, and so is Mary, a mother of three. All the women in the room – and their daughters – had been raped. Most of them are HIV-positive as a result, and their husbands abandoned them. This phenomenon is so widespread that local NGOs have started campaigns to educate men about violence against women during wartime and to encourage them not to abandon their wives after they’ve been raped.

After these interviews I traveled to five more villages, interviewing women who shared their stories, which also illustrated the consistent pattern of rape. Women, like Monique, were raped in the road and some were raped in their own homes. Many 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 capturers. Sometimes the rapist stayed at the woman’s home for days as he continued to rape her. Marie, from Nyengo village in Nyatemde, for example, talked about how her rapist

stayed at her home for three days. After they raped and attacked women in other villages, they came back a week later to repeat their violence.

It Gets Worse When It Comes to Batwa Women

There are traditional beliefs that if a man sleeps with a Batwa¹⁰ woman he will be protected from death by bullets, his spinal cord will never be broken, and if he is HIV-positive, he will be cured. Sometimes these beliefs extend to cannibalism – if a man eats a Batwa woman or child, he will be strengthened. As a result, Batwa women were special targets of violence during the conflict. Women were not only raped, but also abducted as sexual slaves and kept for months. There are also rumors that the women were victims of cannibalism.

I had the chance to meet a group of Batwa women near Goma. They only emerged about two years ago from their nomadic lives in the forest, where they ate game meat and lived in the bush, to stay with some relatives who had settled in a small village near Goma. The Interahamwe chased them out of the forest after killing about 100 of their people and raping many women. Nearly every woman in the group I spoke with was raped, including the chief's wife.

Fara, one of the women in the group, talked about what she had endured: “The Interahamwe kidnapped me and kept me in the tent and did all kinds of things to me. They kept me and two other women for one week. We ended up escaping when the Interahamwe had to move.” Another woman added: “The Interahamwe did not want us to work when they kidnapped us. They kept us as sex slaves. We were locked in a house. Each Interahamwe had a woman that he considered his. We were considered their sexual slaves.” In this case, the Batwa husbands did not abandon their wives. Collette, one of the rape victims/survivors commented: “Our husbands accepted us back because they realize that it is not our fault. We didn't want to go to the Interahamwe. We were forced.”

Yet the husband's acceptance has not reduced the economic suffering the Batwa are enduring. They are still landless and discriminated against by the surrounding population. Their kids don't go to school because of their poverty, and they have no access to health care because they lack ID cards.

Life After Endured Violence

When rape is conducted hand-in-hand with pillaging and killing, rape victims/survivors have to deal with a multitude of psychological, social and economic consequences. According to Mparda Kabanga, a professor of psychology at the University of Goma who also counsels rape victims/survivors, the cases I encountered are just the tip of the iceberg: “Rape victims are still having a hard time talking about what happened to them. It is difficult for a victim to say that she was raped. Most are still worried about their husbands' acceptance, particularly because there are so many husbands who have abandoned their wives after they were raped, leaving them alone with

¹⁰ Batwa is the tribal name for the local indigenous population. The Batwa make up about 3% of the total population. Locally, they are referred to as the “pygmy” population. The Batwa community in South Kivu and North Kivu were made landless in the 1960s, as Mobutu's government repossessed land for a national park. This had a significant economic impact on them, as they could only be laborers for landowners. In addition to living in the bush and being landless, the Batwa community suffered a great deal during the recent war. The Batwa were a target for killing by all sides because they do not possess ID cards. This made them vulnerable to attack even by the Congolese army, as the rebel groups also do not carry ID cards.

social and economic burdens as they care for their children. Others are having a hard time with self-acceptance, which leads them not to say anything, and most of the time they don't have any help in their homes. They try to do what they can, but they don't have a chance to really mourn or address their past. They have to work and they have to keep their homes going. They have nothing.”

Dr. Mparda counsels about 42 women victims/survivors of rape a month. The cases he handles come from different parts of the region. Trauma is not only limited to the act of rape, but to the entire experience that surrounded the crime. According to Dr. Mparda, in addition to their rape, women still have to struggle with their escape from their village or their capturers; seeing their daughters raped in front of them; surviving physical mutilation; and being raped in front of their children. This trauma, according to Dr. Mparda, increases as they are challenged with a lack of food and faced with health consequences, mostly HIV/AIDS. Thus, women tend to keep their secret until someone draws them out.

Displacement is yet another major issue which rape victims/survivors have to face. Displacement is primarily the result of husbands' abandonment; destruction of homes; fear of returning to the village due to the possibility of repeated attacks; or fear of social consequences, especially if the victim/survivor was impregnated as a result of rape. The women also face a lack of income as a result of the displacement, which is compounded by the destruction of their property by the militia.

Dianne was among seven women I interviewed in Nyengo village in Nyatemde. She talked about how her rapists stole whatever savings she had along with her sources of livelihood. She explained how the “rebels circled all of the homes -- we were inside the house and they found me. My husband was away. I was at home with my children and other people. They held their flashlights. They found me, and I was raped by two men. They beat up my kids as well. Everyone who was in the home was beaten. I was beaten and then raped. They stole my goats and my radio. They came two times. The first time they raped me. The second time they just stole stuff.”

Dianne and the other women in her village have few options for income generation. Many rural women end up carrying stones on their backs for builders for five dollars a month; this does not provide even one full meal a day for a family of seven. Women in the towns, such as Nabito, are often forced to beg. Pregnant women have to leave their babies a few days after delivery so that they can go to work. Because of this, most babies end up eating grilled banana instead of their mother's milk. Despite these efforts, women are still having a hard time making ends meet. Bahatee, a woman who works with her daughter to carry stones, said: “I don't have enough to eat. I wouldn't be carrying stones if I could have something to eat. I eat once a day. We are only able to eat one meal at night. Nothing the whole day.”

Developing a source of income is not the only financial burden that women face. Villagers now have to pay the soldiers who guard their villages for their protection. In Nyengo village, for example, villagers have to pay 500 francs a month per family to the soldiers as a price for keeping the village safe from attack. This can amount to one week's earnings for a fortunate family. I didn't see any soldiers in Nyengo, but that was not the case in another village near Bukavu. I was in a meeting with forty women and five men when I asked them about the current security situation. There was no answer, but all eyes were directed at a soldier who was sitting by a tree about a mile

from where we were meeting. The soldier was lying down under the tree on the only road to the village. He charges villagers an exit and entry fee when they leave the village to trade goods.

Overall peace is not yet fully realized in eastern DRC. “The attacks are continuing up to now especially at night. Last month, for example, a soldier came at night to my house to steal. When people saw him, he escaped to another house, but he was alone. The people attacked him and killed him,” a man told me in one of my interviews outside of Bukavu.

July 2004: Return to the Democratic Republic of Congo

I had the good fortune to return to the DRC less than one year later in July 2004, several months after Women for Women International opened our office in the heart of the conflict-affected area in Bukavu. Everyone in our office knew how Nabito had affected me months earlier, so when I arrived in Bukavu I was happily surprised by the news that my office had arranged a meeting between us. It took me few days to be able to see her. She was waiting for me at the psychologist’s office. When we saw each other, we embraced and kissed like a mother and a daughter uniting after a long separation ... our laughter and tears mixed sweetness and sorrow. It was a surreal moment. We don’t know each other that well, yet we seemed to have a strong connection.

Up until that point, I knew the great impact she had had on me but I had not known how I had affected her. “Thank you God for bringing you into my life ... thank you God,” she kept on repeating. I didn’t understand. I had done nothing but interview her and give her a small amount of financial support. How could that have such a great impact?

I soon discovered that since we last met, she had used the money I gave her to start a small business where she was selling rice. With this business, she was able to rent a small room for herself and her daughter next to a room where her son lives with his wife and children. She was able to improve her life enough to have hope: “You came back to me ... there is a God. There is a God out there,” she repeated over and over. She continued: “I have a daughter who was born in 1995. I want you to raise her as your daughter. Help her get a better life than the one I have or the one I can afford to give her,” she said. I smiled and told her that I prefer helping her so she can give her daughter a better life. I would never dare take a daughter from her mother, remembering the pain I felt being separated from my own mother when she passed away in 1999.

I wanted to visit Nabito in her home to see how she was doing. We drove for about 15 minutes and walked for another 15 minutes through tiny alleys filled with garbage and open sewage. Shoeless children running around greeted me, “Bonjour ... bonjour.” Nabito, however, clutched Women for Women International’s newsletter with her picture in it and kept showing it to her friends as she passed them: “Look at my picture. If only I had a better arm though ... how embarrassing,” she commented as she showed it to her friends. She seemed proud to have her picture in print but really sad to see her injured arm. At that moment, I remembered what she said to me eight months ago: “I want to feel like a human being again ... I want to feel like a woman again.”

But today she seems to be doing better. She has her own room, and her foreign friend is visiting her at her home. When we finally arrived at her room, she carefully opened the rusted lock on her blue painted metal door and entered the six by six foot space that holds a small bed, a wooden chair, a

bowl, and couple of sarongs that had been given to her. Her daughter jumped into the room with a smile as her mother introduced us. Nabito pulled the chair up for me and sat with her daughter on the bed and said: “You know, Zainab, I never told my story to anyone but you and the psychologist who has helped me. I don’t know what is it about you, but I knew that I needed to tell you my story.”

I didn’t know what to say. I was embarrassed at that moment for telling Nabito’s story in our newsletter. I had wanted to raise public awareness about what was happening to women in the DRC. I even published her picture next to her story, but I never thought about my possible violation of the trust that she had given me when she told me her story. Guilty thoughts ran through my head until I remembered that she had allowed me to videotape her interview for possible use in the press. But I wanted make sure.

I bent down, sat on the floor, put my hands on her thighs and asked her: “Nabito, do you think it is important to tell one’s story about rape and violation so that people can be aware of the crimes that are happening and stop them?”

“Not in my community,” she replied. “I would not say anything to this neighborhood and the people I know. You are the only one who knows my secret.”

“Oh, God,” I think to myself. I have violated Nabito’s secret. I could not stop myself from crying in front of the woman I was here to help. I have interviewed hundreds of women who have been through all kinds of violence, but rarely have I broken down and sobbed in front of them. I wanted to show them respect, not pity. I would hold them, talk to them, but never cry in front them except for the few times when my control betrayed me. I usually hold my tears until I am alone, usually in my hotel room. Only in that moment do I allow myself to sob and release my own sorrow and anger at the world’s injustice.

But Nabito was helping me in her own way, and I couldn’t help but show my vulnerability to her. I looked at Nabito’s white hair, her eyes, her smile and said, “Nabito, you have been example of courage for me. You may think that I helped you, but the fact is that you helped me. You are my teacher. Through your story and your willingness to tell it to me, I learned the meaning of courage. But tell me, should I tell your story and the stories of what women have been through in the DRC so the world knows what is happening, or should I stay silent?”

I wiped my tears and my running nose on my sleeve. Nabito looked at me with a big smile and answered: “They asked my sons to spread my legs as they were raping me. They pulled the hair from my vagina as they were torturing me and cutting different parts of my body. They asked my son to rape me and when he refused they shot him. I could hear my daughter’s cries, as not so far from me many men surrounded her and raped her one by one. If I can, I will tell the whole world about it day and night so they know how women are suffering here — so they know what is happening to us — so maybe they can stop it. I just won’t tell my own neighbors, so I can live in peace here.”

I continued to cry as she talked. She looked at me and said: “I can’t do that (talk to the whole world) but you can. You go and tell the world ... just not my neighborhood. I am okay now, Zainab.

You are in my life and I am okay now.” I rest my head on Nabito’s thighs and cry in silence, hugging her like a little child. Does she know? Does she know how I am seeing her? Does she know her impact on me? Nabito and I hug for a long time. I ask her to go to the hospital to check on her arm to see if it is possible to fix it. And I promise her that I will stay in touch with her.

Before I left, she tried to give me the only thing of value that she had: a picture of her and the son who was shot. I didn’t want to take something so valuable, so I took a picture of her and promised that I would always cherish it.

Exchanging letters in the Women for Women International Sponsorship Program could be the only opportunity for women like Nabito to tell their own stories to the world ... maybe not to their neighbors, but to the world.

Moving Forward

We can’t be silent anymore. Doing so is a betrayal of our humanity. This is a critical time to provide needed assistance to the DRC. There is a need for aid, development programs aimed at job creation, assistance in children’s schooling, health care, psychological assistance, shelter, campaigns to raise awareness about the plight of women within their communities, and countless other services. Our simple actions can lead to major changes in the DRC. The women I met showed incredible resilience and a strength that kept me in awe. It is now up to us to show them the respect that they have earned for their courage and strength, and it is up to us to share with them our hope in the world. They broke their silence by sharing their stories with us. It is now up to us to break our silence.

Break the Silence!

Find out how you can support women in the Democratic Republic of Congo and read more about Women for Women International’s work there by visiting our website at www.womenforwomen.org.