

# Until the Violence Stops: Faith, Sexual Violence, and Peace in the Congo

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## Abstract

Although many of the world's religions are thought to debase women, progressive faith traditions and practices empower females as a means of attaining justice and thereby, peace. The brutal violence experienced by the women of the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) has summoned many religious people to come together in the pursuit of peace and justice. The Religious Institute's Congo Sabbath Initiative is one such instance of faith traditions allying to advocate for an end to the sexual violence in the DRC. The success of the Congo Sabbath Initiative can be replicated as people of faith continue to forge the path to peace.

## I. Until the Violence Stops

“Eastern Congo right now is the most dangerous place in the world to be a woman or a girl. Used as a weapon of war, sexual violence and rape exist on a scale seen nowhere else in the world” (Enslar, Glamour). Upon learning of these violent injustices towards women in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), the Religious Institute felt compelled to mobilize its national network of faith communities to awareness and advocacy. The result was the Congo Sabbath Initiative, which not only provided assistance to organizations working in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), but also raised awareness about the negative effects many wars and institutions can have on women worldwide.

## II. Religion & Women

Religion is often regarded as a root cause of the second-class status of women around the globe (Kristof, 2010). There are indeed many religious texts, laws and interpretations that prevent females in the modern world from reaching their full potential. In the New Testament, St. Paul states that women "must be silent" (Timothy, 1:2). In one Orthodox Jewish prayer, males thank God for not making them a woman (*Birkot HaShachar*). The Koran says that the inheritance of female children should be half that of their brothers (4.11, 4.176).

Many of these texts were originally written to give women increased power in a patriarchal system, not take it away from them. For example, the Koranic law which states that male children are entitled to double the inheritance of female children was actually in place to assure that women received money from their deceased parents. Muslim scholar Dr. Kecia Ali explains that laws relating to inheritance and dowry were actually used to restrain the male power that was pervasive in the culture at the time (Ali, 2003).

Unfortunately, the literal interpretations of religious codes often reverse their original intent (Scovill, 2008). Many women today hold leadership roles in politics, yet are often unable

to become leaders in their own faiths (Carter, 2009). In Ireland, where most citizens are Roman Catholic, Mary McAleese has been president since 1997 (Ireland Country Profile, BBC). Yet Catholic women are unable to be ordained as priests (*Lumen Gentium* 25:2). It is dubious that any of the prophets envisioned a world where women's progress is prevented.

Nelson Mandela's chosen group of global leaders, The Elders, is currently working on seven projects consisting of five regionally and two thematically based initiatives. One of the two thematic projects is to end the religious and traditional basis for the discrimination against women ("Our Work: Latest Initiatives", The Elders). This choice in subject indicates the gravity of the marginalization of women, mirroring the importance that the United Nations placed on this topic with the creation of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women in 1979 (UN-CEDAW, 2007). Hopefully, The Elders and those with whom they engage will be able to begin the many changes necessary for this injustice to be rectified. Former President Jimmy Carter, himself a member of the select group, addressed the marginalization of women at the Parliament of the World's Religions' December 2009 conference. In addition to outlining the wrongs religions have done and continue to do to women, he reminded attendees, "every generic religious text encourages believers to respect essential human dignity" (Carter, 2009).

### **III. Religion & Peace**

It is this deep sense of common humanity, expressed by former President Carter, that motivates people of faith to advocate for the rights of women and end discrimination and injustices everywhere. Religious leaders are often at the forefront of social justice projects; through these initiatives they work for peace. This notion of justice as a step towards peace was articulated by Pope Paul VI, who stated, "If you want peace, work for justice." Rev. Theodore M. Hesburgh develops this concept further, stating, "There will be no peace where there is no justice and no justice where human persons do not have basic human rights." He points out that religious leaders such as Mahatma Gandhi, the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., and Nelson Mandela, "who have worked successfully for peace have worked first of all for justice" (Hesburgh, 1956).

In order to attain peace, justice must be found. Peace is not a white dove that lackadaisically floats into a community. It requires work to attain and maintain, and is not sustainable in systems where injustice occurs. Therefore, peace advocates such as Dr. King identified and isolated issues such as racism and poverty, which were preventing his society from being peaceful. Dr. King then worked tirelessly to change the culture and legal systems maintaining this injustice. Religiously motivated peace advocates across the globe work towards their goals by advocating for justice (Hesburgh, 1956). The DRC is one nation that has been the object of global activists' attention in recent years, where many individuals and organizations have been devoted to creating peace.

### **IV. Brutality and Sexual Violence Against Women in the DRC**

The DRC was blessed and cursed with natural resources that have long been the object of other nations' desires. As a Belgian colony from 1880-1960, the DRC's natural mineral and

human resources were exploited through slave labor under autocratic rule (Center for American Progress, 2009).

Upon independence in 1960, the entire army rebelled against the newly formed government, which secessionist movements also threatened. Five years later, Mobutu Sesse Seko became ruler through a successful coup. He ruled with brutality and corruption for thirty-two years. It is estimated that from 1965 to 1997, Mobutu stole five billion dollars from his country. In 1994, the Rwandan genocide occurred. Mobutu not only provided shelter and protection to the nation's two million refugees in Eastern DRC, but also a safe haven for the armed forces who had conducted the genocide. This bold move caused Rwanda and Uganda to invade the DRC in 1996 to gain control of their rebel forces (Center for American Progress, 2009).

In 1997, DRC rebel leader Laurent-Desire Kabila ousted Mobutu and eradicated the strong Rwandan influences in the government. This caused Rwanda and Uganda to invade again, this time to support the Rwandan rebels they had originally fought against. Upon their second invasion, the foreign forces became very interested in the natural mineral resources of the East Congo and wanted to control and exploit the area. In order to protect his land, Kabila recruited forces from Zimbabwe, Angola, and Namibia. These forces stopped the invasion, and a ceasefire stating that everyone would exit the DRC was signed in 1999, but was violated by every party (Center for American Progress, 2009).

In 2001, Kabila was assassinated, and his son Joseph Kabila came into power. Under his rule, the government appeared to improve, but the war had simply adopted alternate forms to become less noticeable. Crimes against civilians were used as a tactic to create fear, gain control, and achieve ethnic cleansing. Sexual violence against women was among these civilian-target methods and became increasingly common (Center for American Progress, 2009). Disabling or killing the female population would remove power from their families and societies. Most forces involved in the conflict used sexual violence as a war tactic, some as a systematic procedure. Women who traveled for work were susceptible to being raped outside, and those who were forced out of their homes and into forest safe houses became easy targets. Yet many women were raped in their homes, some with entire families in the same room. Girls as young as three months and women as old as eighty were victims, some taken to army bases and forced to be sex slaves and perform domestic labor. Some were raped and then killed, others left to die shortly after or live a life of disease, injury, disability, and shame (Human Rights Watch, 2002).

Although Kabila is now the leader of a democratic nation, the DRC continues to have a weak government. The conflicting armed forces remain, continuing their hidden war through brutality against women (Center for American Progress, 2009). Police officers, other authority figure, and common criminals are also predators in this climate of sexual violence, enabling the cycle to continue. In many cases, such acts were actually rewarded by leadership and patronage (Human Rights Watch, 2002).

There seem to be few systems that are supporting and advocating for women, and those that are have not been effective enough to fulfill this great need. Many women feel as though they cannot admit to having been victims of rape due to social stigmas (Human Rights Watch,

2002). Laws do little to assist these women, and medical assistance is hard to attain. Since the beginning of these conflicts in 1994, it is estimated that over 200,000 women and girls have been raped (Center for American Progress, 2009).

### **V. Religious Communities' Call to Action**

These statistics and stories should be unacceptable to those of every faith tradition and should call those with deeply rooted religious values to create peace and advocate for justice. However, the situation is overwhelming, and the average individual has little power over the way of the world. As Episcopalian Timothy Palmer wrote in his sermon on the DRC, "Certainly crimes against humanity *should* be addressed from the pulpit. But once I tell you what I know about horrific crimes taking place in a remote country, what then? The more I learn about the Congo the more powerless I feel." He compares himself with the Christian messenger Elisha, who suddenly finds himself in the midst of war and immediately asks another, "What shall we do" (Palmer, 2009)? When people of faith are overwhelmed by the grandiosity of a terrifying situation, they feel small. Then they look to join their voices with others and find that together they can advocate for justice.

Several religious organizations developed service projects focused on women of the DRC, for example: Catholic Relief Services, Episcopal Relief and Development, Lutheran World Relief, Presbyterian Church (USA) Worldwide Missions, United Methodist Committee on Relief (UMCOR), World Jewish Relief and World Relief (Evangelical) (Religious Institute). It is clear from the projects and their language that it is these organizations' religious convictions that drive them to do this work. Their beliefs that we are all related and are children of God who deserve love and care spur them to begin these projects and give them the strength to see them through. Although some may seem to proselytize or look down upon those who need assistance, most simply feel called to assist others because of our common humanity (Episcopal Relief & Development Lutheran World Relief, and World Relief cite human rights and dignity regardless of belief as motivation in their mission statements).

UMCOR eloquently explains this sentiment in the "Values" section of their website. It reads, "All people have God-given dignity and worth. The most essential partner in UMCOR's work is the beneficiary, the ultimate end-user of our service. There are no 'victims' in our vocabulary. There are only survivors whose courage, along with a humanitarian helping hand, can transform communities" (UMCOR). This belief that individuals are sacred inspires them to empower others. They travel to the Congo and aid women, not because their damaged bodies and souls will be easy targets of conversion, but because they feel connected to the pain of others and must work to restore justice for all in order for peace to prevail.

### **VI. The Religious Institute's Multifaith Response to the Crisis in the DRC**

The Religious Institute, like many organizations, recognized the need for public awareness of the atrocities against women in the DRC. Believing that faith leaders can be powerful moral advocates in their communities, the Religious Institute called upon them to take action against the sexual violence occurring in the DRC.

The Congo Sabbath Initiative was launched by the Religious Institute, in partnership with V-Day, UNICEF, and UN Action Against Sexual Violence in Conflict in January 2009. The mission of the project was to educate faith communities about the horror of sexual violence against women and girls in the DRC and turn them into advocates for change. The Religious Institute received endorsements for the initiative from fifty-three national religious leaders of many different faith traditions and organizations (Congo Sabbath: National Endorsers). With these endorsements, the Religious Institute called upon congregations in the United States to respond to the women's crisis in the DRC by acting within their faith communities.

By committing to host a Congo Sabbath, congregations agreed to participate in an advocacy activity around V-Day and Sexual Assault Awareness Month. This activity varied by congregation but often included holding a worship service, hosting an adult education class, or raising funds for the City of Joy at Panzi Hospital in Bukavu, Congo—a center where women survivors receive medical treatment, education, leadership training, and a chance to earn income. The Religious Institute recruited more than 140 communities nationwide to host a Congo Sabbath and developed an online advocacy toolkit to assist them in developing their event. This web-based guide included worship resources—a responsive reading, a bulletin insert, a sample newsletter article, and sample sermons—as well as links to other information and resources on the DRC.

In addition to maintaining a strong partnership with V-Day throughout the project, the Religious Institute reached out to other national partners to raise awareness. National religious denominations, such as the Union for Reform Judaism, the United Methodist Church, the National Council of Churches, the United Church of Christ, and the Disciples of Christ, featured the Congo Sabbath Initiative on their websites. Enough!, a project of the Center for American Progress, also posted the project on their resources page.

The Congo Sabbath Initiative provided an opportunity for the Religious Institute to reach out to religious organizations that typically do not work on sexual violence issues. *Sojourners* magazine, which focuses mainly on issues of poverty and the environment, featured a full-length article on the Congo Sabbath in its April 2009 issue. Faith in Public Life reached out to their extensive list of progressive clergy and people of faith to ask them to join the Congo Sabbath Initiative. More than eighty faith communities responded, and this joint effort helped the Religious Institute reach its goal of recruiting more than one hundred congregations to participate.

The Congo Sabbath Initiative was uniquely positioned to help and empower women because it was a faith-based, grassroots effort. Too often denominations offer policy statements that result in neither the education of congregants nor the mobilization of communities for justice. Bypassing institutional statements allowed individual congregations to participate without cumbersome bureaucracy. Additionally, the grassroots nature of the initiative allowed congregations to address current events, rather than waiting months or years for an institutional response.

In light of the immense challenge to justice and peace that the sexual violence in the DRC poses, the goals of the Congo Sabbath Initiative seem lofty. Holding 140 Congo Sabbaths across the United States cannot stop the violence in the DRC, regardless of fundraising. But, as Rabbi

Shelley Kovar Becker notes, "You do not stand idly by while your neighbor bleeds...We need to do something, even if the only thing we can do is to rail against this" (Hill, 2009). The Congo Sabbath Initiative was a way for congregations to reach out to a marginalized community and become conversant and aware of the crisis. Becoming aware is the first step toward action. As King said, "Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere" (King, 1963). The knowledge that these atrocities occur will help prevent them from reoccurring. Congregants become advocates against the prejudices within their own communities that enable these hate crimes. It also allows combating crimes against women in the DRC to become a common cause, making it easier for the region to receive donations, grants and aid.

### **VII. Using the Congo Sabbath Initiative as a Model**

The Congo Sabbath Initiative provides a powerful model for multi-faith outreach. In the Congo Sabbath Initiative, the Religious Institute highlighted a problem facing the world, found national religious leaders to recognize the importance of action, and provided resources needed by leaders from different faiths to advocate within their congregations. With the average size of faith communities in the United States being 186 congregants (U.S. Congregations Resources), every faith leader that participates in the initiative creates a ripple effect that magnifies the impact.

Building on the success of the Congo Sabbath Initiative, the Religious Institute has launched the Rachel Sabbath Initiative, named for the matriarch Rachel who died in childbirth. The Rachel Sabbath Initiative supports the United Nations' Millennium Development Goal 5 (End Poverty 2015: Millennium Development Goals), which focuses on improving maternal health. The Religious Institute is calling on congregations and denominations across a range of faith traditions to raise awareness and support for the UN's target of reducing maternal mortality worldwide and achieving universal access to reproductive health by 2015. In the year 2010, the Religious Institute hopes that increasing numbers of faith leaders will reach out to their congregations in support of saving women's lives worldwide, and the Rachel Sabbath Initiative will be the first step towards achieving this goal.

### **VIII. Religions Coming Together for Women's Peace in the DRC**

While religion today often has a reputation of subjugating women, progressive faith traditions have worked to empower them. Numerous faith traditions affirm women's rights as human rights. This dedication to women's rights is reinforced by the idea that one must advocate for justice to create peace. The sexual war crimes against women occurring in the DRC have called upon the world's religions to raise their voices to stop the violence. The Religious Institute's Congo Sabbath Initiative is one example of many different faith traditions coming together to educate their communities and promote peace. This model of the Congo Sabbath Initiative can be used for future campaigns to promote peace and justice in the world. Until all of the violence stops.

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