



*In a culture of
rape and violence,
is God still Healer
and Redeemer?*

"Naama" by James VanFossan. Used with permission.

PATRIARCHY, RAPE, AND HEROISM

Lessons from the Congo by Steven R. Tracy

In 1899 Joseph Conrad wrote the classic novel *Heart of Darkness*, using the context of the Democratic Republic of the Congo to expose the malevolent darkness of the human heart. Now, over a century later, the Democratic Republic of Congo epitomizes the reality and potency of human depravity. In the past decade Congo has experienced a series of foreign invasions and civil wars that have led to the deaths of over five million people. One byproduct of these years of conflict, coupled with entrenched patriarchy, is epidemic levels of violence against women.

According to a recent United Nations report, Congo has earned the dubious distinction of being the rape epicenter of the world. Last year in eastern Congo 50,000 women were reported raped in a single province, often by rebel soldiers. Many of these women were publicly gang-raped and mutilated. Tragically, raped women are blamed for bringing shame on their husbands and families and are subsequently abandoned and thrown out of their homes and churches. Incredibly, experts agree that sexual violence against Congolese women is continuing to increase.

Our first trip

A group of colleagues and I first traveled to the Congo in 2007 to conduct conferences on abuse. We were shocked at the extent of patriarchy and resultant mistreatment of women. In the first conference a pastor led a devotional from Psalm 45:10–11 and taught that a husband is a woman's lord and that she must literally bow down before him. Many of the pastor's wives reported being raped and/or beaten by their husbands. At one conference several pastors adamantly insisted that Christian wives must forgive and sleep with unrepentant husbands who had abandoned them and had subsequently gotten AIDS from prostitutes. These pastors boldly declared that this was a Christian wife's duty, so if in carrying out her duty she contracted AIDS herself and died, "she would die a good death."

Yet at the end of our first conference we delightfully witnessed something none of us had ever seen. After much discussion and prayer, over fifty of the pastors stood in front of the congregation and publicly repented not only for abusing and failing to serve their wives, but also for dishonoring the women in their churches. They acknowledged their failure to minister to the abused and vowed to change. Most incredibly, they committed to printing a copy of their declaration for their wives to post in their homes and asked their wives to hold them accountable for each commitment.

A catatonic face

One of the most painful and inspiring Congo experiences in 2007 came while visiting a Christian mental health clinic in a nearby town. For several years this area had experienced intense violence, including the public execution of over five hundred young men less than eighteen months earlier. This orgy of violence had caused many women and men to go insane. In the midst of this satanic cloud a brave Congolese woman named Abia stepped up to face the devastating evil. She recruited a small mental health staff and started a humble NGO (non-governmental organization) to treat the broken, in the name of Jesus. Abia's husband, a pastor, rejected the patriarchal cultural norms that give women little place in this society other than caring for the physical needs of their husbands and children. He encouraged and assisted her in the work. They received no western funding, treating the most severe mental illnesses with their meager resources. Rebels threatened them and came to the clinic repeatedly to steal the few drugs they had for treating patients. Yet they braved the risks and continued to minister to victims of sexual violence.

During our visit, the staff took us into each tiny, dank room packed with shattered men and women, telling us each person's story. We prayed with every patient after hearing the evil they had endured. Our hearts broke for each survivor, but one young woman stood out from the rest. Her face has haunted us for the past year. She had been raped and impregnated by a rebel soldier. Her family brought her to the clinic with her hands bound to keep her from harming herself and others. When she saw a man she would scream "all men are dogs!" She eventually quit speaking. The day we visited we took a picture of her catatonic face. I will never forget her hands reaching for the cross necklace my wife Celestia was wearing while Celestia held and prayed for her. Over this past year it has been excruciatingly painful to look at her picture; her traumatized and dead expression embodied the effects of violence against these women.

Returning

In July of 2008 twelve of us were privileged to go back into eastern Congo to conduct our second series of abuse seminars. We went representing a nonprofit abuse healing organization, Mending the Soul Ministries, in partnership with Congo Initiative, a holistic Congolese Christian NGO.

This year we were eager to invite Director Abia and her staff to our conferences. They came, along with 75 pastors, 100+ abuse caregivers representing 30 NGOs, 50 army officers (including former rebel leaders), 80 prostituted women, 80 rape survivors, and 50 civic leaders. We again heard repeated stories of rape and other effects of extreme patriarchy. Yet happily, we also heard many pastors and churches testify to following through with last year's commitments. Several pastors were now serving as chaplains to these NGOs. This year we met even more incredible Christian heroes bringing healing into the devastation.

Elige and her husband are two of these heroes. After attending our conferences in 2007 she approached her church about starting an abuse ministry. She received strong support and began traveling up to 150 kilometers a week on foot going into small villages to minister to raped women. Every time she goes into the bush she risks being raped or killed. Several times armed rebels accosted her, but each time when they saw the cross necklace she wore they let her go. After I heard her testimony I thanked her for her ministry and asked if her husband encouraged her work, since she faces grave risks that could affect her entire family. Elige beamed at my question and said "my husband is a very good man and loves me greatly. After he saw how well I

cared for his children when we married [his previous wife had died], he said I was smart and talented. He helped me get an education. I couldn't do the work I do without his support. He is too old to go with me, but he prays for me every time I travel." Our team was in tears; we were awestruck at these heroes willing to risk everything to share light and hope with wounded and abused women.

More than we imagined

Of the six conferences we conducted, the most unusual was the conference for prostituted women. Our hosts told us this had never been done, ever, yet they were willing to give it a try. In a country where the average annual income is less than a dollar a day and over 30% of the children are severely malnourished, economic desperation reigns, particularly for women who have been raped, abandoned by their husbands, or otherwise rejected by society. Many end up being prostituted to survive. We planned this conference with great care, and asked God for a miracle. He graciously gave us many!

Eighty prostituted women came. Their faces were filled with shame and pain. Some bore fresh facial wounds from being beaten by their pimps. One young woman, also named Abia, was particularly angry. She had "accidentally" climbed into the van thinking it was going south toward Goma where she intended to visit a witch doctor to have a curse removed. Celestia sat with her during the first day, putting her arm around her shoulders. Abia admitted her anger and frustration at being at this Christian conference. Celestia assured her that God had brought her here so that he could lift the curse by the power of his love. At the end of

the day Abia squeezed Celestia's hand and said "don't leave me." She was desperate to know more of Christ's love and forgiveness. By the end of the conference Abia and fifty other prostituted women had placed their faith in Christ.

Abia told us later that when she had gone back to her camp a man offered her \$10 to sleep with her. She refused, saying she was a new creation in Christ and no longer a prostitute. He then said he knew she needed money for her sick daughter, so he offered her an additional \$10. She again refused and said she trusted God to provide. We were able to help Abia and the other women get job training and micro loans so they could have a new

means of livelihood. It cost only \$18 to buy a prostituted woman her freedom. We heard recently that roughly 45 of these formerly prostituted women are still attending literacy, job training, and discipleship classes. God did even more than we imagined!

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Steve and Celestia (back center) in 2008 with three Congolese heroes including Abia (front left), the director of the mental health clinic, and Naama (front center) who, after her own recovery (see the portrait of Naama in 2007 on pg. 4) now helps other young women who have children born out of rape.

What God has redeemed

The ultimate highlight of this year's trip was seeing Director Abia and her staff from the mental health clinic. We were anxious to tell them we had been praying for them and to show them the *Mending the Soul Healing Art Workbook* we had prepared for the conference. We showed them the chapter on post-traumatic stress disorder that contains a picture of the face of the traumatized woman we had met in their clinic the previous year. We asked if they remembered the woman. In unison they cried "she is Naama!" which means "grace" in Swahili. They told of her miraculous healing. A few months after we visited the clinic Naama began to regain her senses as the staff continued to love and care for her. They began teaching her about the love of Christ and she responded, embracing Christ as her savior. They continued to care for her physical, spiritual, and psychological needs and eventually helped her reunite with her family.

Abia surprised us a few days later by bringing Naama to meet us. We did not recognize her. The face that had embodied traumatic hopelessness now glowed with a youthful and bashful smile. She said she did not remember our visit a year earlier but when she began to regain her senses the staff told her about us. They assured her that we were praying for her from America.

Naama beamed as she recounted how God had answered our prayers. Celestia "just happened" to be wearing the cross necklace she had worn the previous year when we met Naama. Celestia was able to give it to her as a symbol of the power of the cross. Naama is raising her daughter by herself, trusting that God will give her a husband who, she says, "will be worthy of loving me." Today Naama ministers to other women in her village, helping them accept and love their babies that have been born as a result of their rape. Naama is another hero bringing light and hope into the gloom.

Joseph Conrad correctly understood the sinfulness of the human heart. Patriarchy, misogyny, and rape are unspeakably evil. Unfortunately, Conrad did not understand the larger story of redemption. Our time in the Congo reminded us of Paul's words in Romans 5:20, "where sin increased, grace abounded all the more." In the midst of devastation the grace of God shines, heals, and produces remarkable heroes.



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