

**Dr. Denis Mukwege:
Addressing the Nightmare of Sexual Violence against Congolese Women**

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April is Sexual Assault Awareness Month and, as Dr. Denis Mukwege once said, “The world must draw a line on anything that is unacceptable and one of those is the way women are abused during conflict.”¹ For many years women in the Democratic Republic of Congo have been treated as second-class citizens, and their voices about the horrible and despicable acts of men in their country have gone unheard. Dr. Mukwege, who is a gynecologist as well as a human and women’s rights advocate and Nobel Prize winner, has been addressing the issue of sexual violence and the way it has changed Bukavu, a city that is located on the east side of the DRC, for approximately two decades. Horrendous human rights abuses are widespread in the Congo and are mostly committed by non-state armed groups. These cases, mostly directed against women, are typically underreported because of the fear of being outcast and stigmatized. The data is thus limited, but according to the estimate done by scholars in 2011, between 1.69 to 1.8 million women have been sexually assaulted in their lifetimes, and between 3.07 and 3.7 million Congolese women have been abused by their partners. Additionally, 50% of women have experienced domestic sexual violence in Bukavu.² Sexual violence is clearly a devastating human rights issue in the Congo. Dr. Denis Mukwege, however, provides a living example of advocacy and hope against sexual violence and serves as an example for the rest of the world.

This crisis began in 1996 when the Congo war started. During this time, many women and girls were raped and killed, and these heinous actions spread throughout Goma and Bukavu. The perpetrators of sexual violence were, and still are, members of all the armed forces and armed groups that are in the eastern Congo. These groups include the former Congolese Rally for Democracy in Goma, which is a Rwandan supported armed group that controlled the east Congo during the war, and the Forces Armées de la République Démocratique du Congo (FARDC),

¹ “‘The world must draw a red line on the impunity of abusing women in war,’ Nobel Peace Prize 2018 Laureate – Dr Denis Mukwege,” *New African Magazine*, December 19, 2018, <https://newafricanmagazine.com/17552/> (accessed April 14, 2020).

² Amber Peterman, Tia Palermo, and Caryn Bredenkamp, “Estimates and Determinants of Sexual Violence Against Women in the Democratic Republic of Congo,” *American Journal of Public Health*, vol 101, No. 6 (June 2011): 1060-1067, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3093289/pdf/1060.pdf> (accessed April 14, 2020). According to the United Nations report, 73% of victims are women and 25% are children.

Bukavu (Nord Kivu) is a city in the Democratic Republic of Congo. It is known for its wealth, and it has natural resources like cobalt, diamonds, gold, silver, petroleum and more. Although it is known for its natural resources, it is also known as one of the most dangerous places on earth for women and children to live in.

which is the government armed forces.³ These government armed forces do not only sexually abuse women, but they also steal whatever they have with them as well. In addition, they commit some of the most horrific things that could be done to any human, according to Human Rights Watch, which reported that women and girls have each been raped by 15 to 20 men, and these victims are not only raped but their genitals are destroyed. “Following rape, many women and girls require medical attention for prolapsed uteruses, severe vaginal tears, and obstetric fistulas.”⁴ The first patient of Panzi Hospital, Dr. Mukwege’s Hospital in Congo, was not a delivering mother, but a victim of sexual violence. She was raped, injured and shot in the genitals. This is one of the worst traumas that could ever happen to a woman or any human being.⁵ According to the BBC, 48 women are raped in an hour, and 20% of women report being raped, but unfortunately, nothing has been done.

Women are not the only victims. Men are also sexually assaulted, but most of the assaults are not reported because of the toxic masculinity and stigma in the society. Even with the stigma, 4% of men have reported being raped, but nothing has been done. Stephen Kigoma is a male victim who was raped and then fled to Uganda. His rapist told him that even if he reported the rape, no one would believe him. He went to a hospital where he was taken care of, but out of all the sexual violence victims, he was the only man there.⁶

Children are also harmed. Sometimes Congolese women are raped in front of their children, which is traumatizing for both. One patient of Panzi Hospital was an eighteen-month-old baby that was bleeding. “She had been raped, leaving her bladder, genitals, and rectum severely injured.”⁷ It did not matter for the perpetrators that it was a baby; all they wanted to do

³ Anna Maedl, “Rape as a Weapon of War in the Eastern DRC? The Victims’ Perspective,” *Human Rights Quarterly* 33, no. 1 (2011): 128-47.

⁴ Erika Carlsen, “Rape and War in the Democratic Republic of the Congo,” *Peace Review: A Journal of Social Justice*, vol. 21, no. 4 (2009) 474-483 at 476, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/10402650903323546> (accessed April 14, 2020).

Goma is a city that is located in the eastern Congo. The Congo war is known as Africa’s first world war; there was a mass killing of Congolese people and the war was between the civilians and the military; President Marshal Mobutu was abroad for his medical treatments; the Rwandan army in support of Anti-Mobutu rebels wanted to overthrow the government.

⁵ Denis Mukwege, “Denis Mukwege – Nobel Lecture,” December 10, 2018, *The Nobel Prize*, <https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/peace/2018/mukwege/55721-denis-mukwege-nobel-lecture-2/> (accessed April 14, 2020).

⁶ “‘We need to talk about male rape’: DR Congo survivor speaks out,” *BBC News*, August 3, 2017, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-40801782> (accessed April 14, 2020).

⁷ “Panzi Hospital,” *Panzi Hospital and Foundation*, <https://www.panzifoundation.org/panzi-hospital> (accessed April 14, 2020).

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was destroy her. When the baby arrived at the hospital, the nurses could not believe their eyes. They thought it was a nightmare, because it was one of the most inhumane things they had seen. This kind of horror is what Congolese women endure. In addition to feeling weak, having their voices not being heard, and living in fear, they also fear for their children. Women in Bukavu cannot even go to fetch water without the fear of being raped.

Dr. Denis Mukwege is the hope within this nightmare. He is a Congolese gynecologist who is known as the global campaigner against the use of rape as a weapon of war and a world-leading expert on how to treat the wounds of sexual violence. He was born and raised in Bukavu. He studied medicine in Bujumbura, at the University of Burundi and received his medical degree in 1983. What he wanted the most was to help women injured during childbirth. He continued his education in gynecology in France at the University of Angers.⁸ Dr. Mukwege founded Panzi Hospital in Bukavu in 1999. He and his team have treated over 50,000 victims of sexual violence. He performs over 10 operations a day, and the hospital has 370 nurses and staff support. He has been a hero to many women in the world. He does not only treat women in the Congo; he treats women around the world. He ensures that patients receive the help they need. His staff delivers over 35,000 babies a year with a 99.1% survival rate. Panzi Hospital also has psychologists and therapists who help victims to overcome the nightmares they have endured. It provides as much help as possible, with doctors working in obstetrics, gynecology, dermatology, cardiology, physiotherapy, neonatal surgery, and more. Dr. Mukwege is not new to the environment; he knows the country very well, because when he was young, his father was a pastor who traveled throughout the community to comfort the sick and dying. Many of the people were laboring mothers who did not have anywhere safe to deliver their babies; this had a huge impact on Dr. Mukwege's life, and that is why he became a doctor.⁹

It was a great sacrifice for Dr. Mukwege to become a doctor – he has been threatened multiple times by politicians and armed groups. In October 2012, he was attacked, his family was almost assassinated, and one of his good friends, Joseph Bizimana, was murdered. These attacks started several days after he chastised the government for failing to protect the people in the country and for the injustice that was widespread. He fled to Belgium with his family for his safety, but unfortunately he could only stay temporarily because he was needed at the hospital. In January of 2013 when he returned to the hospital, many people were happy to see him, and they celebrated.

Panzi hospital does not only help women and children; it also helps men who are victims of sexual violence. In 2018, Dr. Mukwege was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for his heroic work and effort to end the use of sexual assault as the weapon of war in the Democratic Republic of Congo. Because this sexual violence has been going on for more than two decades, it also has

⁸ “Denis Mukwege Facts: The Nobel Peace Prize 2018,” *The Nobel Prize*, <https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/peace/2018/mukwege/facts/> (accessed April 14, 2020).

⁹ “Panzi Hospital.”

had a significant impact on the young people in the community. Sometimes children witness their mothers, sisters, friends, and cousins being raped, tortured, and killed. Dr. Mukwege said in one of his interviews, “Poverty, isolated communities, and exposure to conflicts are among various factors influencing gender inequality and sexual violence.”¹⁰ In addition to being a Nobel Prize winner, Dr. Mukwege is also on the advisory committee for the International Campaign to Stop Rape and Gender Violence in Conflict.¹¹ He has done remarkable work all around the world.¹² Despite the threats and the injustice, Dr. Mukwege has never stopped helping the Congolese people to overcome the atrocities that they experience every day.

The Democratic Republic of Congo is a wealthy country that is often called “poor.” The population suffers while being surrounded by natural resources. Although the country is very wealthy, it does not have a strong government, and it is being exploited by first world countries.¹³ Many companies have been accused of exploiting Congo for the cobalt. Some of the children working on the mines in Bukavu are orphans, their parents having been sexually abused and killed by the armed forces. This is one of the impacts of sexual violence; children stop going to school because they do not have anyone to pay for their school fees. The lack of education and guardians leads them to work in mines or become part of gangs or armed forces.¹⁴ This issue is exacerbated because Congolese society is very patriarchal and male dominated. Some victims report sexual violence, but unfortunately, nothing gets done because most of the perpetrators are members of the military, and they use their power to abuse women.

This issue has persisted for over two decades and must be addressed. First world countries have a responsibility to help the country instead of exploiting it, which only causes more people to suffer. Because the government is very weak, the UN should intervene in the

¹⁰ Denis Mukwege, “Congo: No Peace without Women,” *Journal of International Affairs* 67, no. 1 (2013): 205-09.

¹¹ United Nations, Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Sexual Violence in Conflict, “Democratic Republic of Congo,” March 29th, 2019, <https://www.un.org/sexualviolenceinconflict/countries/democratic-republic-of-the-congo/> (accessed April 14, 2020).

¹² “Dr. Denis Mukwege: The Man Who Mends Women,” *Panzi Hospital and Foundation*, <https://www.panzifoundation.org/dr-denis-mukwege> (accessed April 14, 2020).

¹³ United Nations, Security Council, “Security Council Condemns Illegal Exploitation of Democratic Republic of Congo’s Natural Resources,” *United Nations Meetings Coverage and Press Releases*, May 3, 2001, <https://www.un.org/press/en/2001/sc7057.doc.htm> (accessed April 14, 2020).

¹⁴ Matthew Laviertes, “Tesla, Apple among firms accused of aiding child labor in Congo,” *Reuters*, December 16, 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-mining-children-trfn/tesla-apple-among-firms-accused-of-aiding-child-labor-in-africa-idUSKBN1YK24F> (accessed April 14, 2020).

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Democratic Republic of Congo's domestic affairs to help those who need help. When we talk about human rights being violated, let us not forget the women in the Congo who live in fear and are suffering day and night. Congo is ranked as one of the most dangerous countries for a woman to live in. Women do not have many rights, and the few rights they have are being violated. Because of the violence, 4.3 million people have been displaced. In addition to the violence they face, these women do not have access to health care and economic resources, and the opposition they face because they stand accused of threatening cultural and regional traditions also make their lives miserable.¹⁵

Sex as a weapon of war has been destroying Congolese women, men, and children's lives; it has been destroying the Congolese society. Dr. Mukwege has dedicated his life to helping his people, advocating for their rights fearlessly, and standing for what he believes in. Although his life has been threatened multiple times, that has not stopped him from being a hero. Dr. Mukwege has empowered many people to come forward and advocate for the rights of Congolese women even though it means putting their lives in danger. The Democratic Republic of Congo needs more people who are strong enough to confront the corrupted government and talk about the injustice that is being done in the Congo.

¹⁵ Thompson Reuters Foundation, "The World's Most Dangerous Countries for Women 2018: 07: Democratic Republic of Congo," <https://poll2018.trust.org/country/?id=democratic-republic-of-the-congo>. (accessed April 14, 2020).

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