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Life after rape in Congo

A local women's organization is teaching rape survivors shunned by their villages new life and work skills.

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BUNIA, Congo

The posters in Marie Pacuriema's otherwise-bare office are cheerful, with smiling cartoon characters standing upright and proud. Women in the Democratic Republic of Congo have rights, they declare. Together we can make a difference! Violence against women will stop!

Ms. Pacuriema sighs as she looks over her paperwork, the noise of motorbike taxis and street vendors flowing through the open door. She gestures to the mud porch, where young women – some carrying babies – are bent over an old sewing machine. They are all rape survivors, Pacuriema says, and many have been shunned by their families. The sewing work, which Pacuriema arranged, is their only income.

"I try to help these women understand that they have rights, and these rights must be respected," Pacuriema says. "But it is difficult."

For seven years now, Pacuriema has been on this mission – trying to convince her fellow Congolese of the sentiments expressed in her posters, struggling all the while against the realities brought on by war.

Eastern Congo has experienced atrocious levels of sexual violence over the past nine years – first during a five-year war that ended in 2003 and killed 4 million people from violence and hunger, then during continued instability and ethnic fighting. Human Rights Watch, the United Nations, and many other organizations have decried the mass rapes here; most estimates put the number of Congolese rape victims in the tens of thousands.

During the war, most women were raped by militia members, who wielded sexual violence as yet another weapon. Today, women and girls are more likely to be assaulted by the low-paid Congolese soldiers, who regularly extort and terrorize local villagers.

Scores of aid organizations continue in their efforts to aid rape survivors.

But more and more, there are also people like Pacuriema – local women simply trying to help. They have formed organizations throughout eastern Congo, working with scant resources to arrange housing for survivors, persuade husbands to stay with their raped wives, and to find work for women supporting babies they never wanted.

"The Congolese themselves are really trying to do something," says Madnodje Mounoubai, spokesman for the UN peacekeeping force in Bunia. "But most of the time, they only have their goodwill."

Pacuriema, who once held a job as an outreach worker with a local radio station, formed her first women's club in 2000. Traveling to rural villages for her radio job, she had been shocked to meet women who had never been to school and who looked at her with awe for speaking in public. She wanted to teach them to read and write, and wanted them to realize that under Congolese law they were equal to their husbands.

But as the violence increased, her focus shifted. Her hometown, Bunia, is the capital of Ituri Province, a mineral-rich but infrastructure-poor region that is still considered the least stable area of Congo. Toward the beginning of the war, fighting ravaged the Ituri countryside, and hundreds of women fled to this city. They slept under trees and bridges. Some wept constantly, Pacuriema recalls. Others did not talk at all.

Pacuriema and some friends decided they needed to do something to help these refugees. So they created a new organization that would give some assistance itself – funded in part by modest local donations, in part by NGOs – but would also try to coordinate the various women's associations that are sprinkled across this region. They called their group "Forum des Mamans de Ituri" or Ituri Women's Forum.

"So many women were killed; so many were raped; so many were displaced," Pacuriema says. "When the militias came, the husbands fled – the women often stayed alone. They had to support all the weight of the family on their heads. We realized that we needed to help each other."

By 2003, the war had come to Bunia, too. Different ethnic groups fought for control, and periodically one militia group would triumph, killing and raping its way through town. A few weeks later, another ethnic group would take revenge. One humanitarian agency, Cooperazione Italiano, estimated that in Bunia – population 250,000 – approximately 10 women were raped every day during 2004.

Pacuriema said her group tried to unify women during this violent period – bringing women from different ethnic groups together for meetings and workshops. They would sew together and pack food parcels.

"Women were divided because they belonged to different ethnic groups," she says. "We helped women to meet and to look for peaceful cohabitation."

They also tried to find help for rape victims. They talked about the attacks and told women that they should not flee their villages in shame. If a woman's family refused to take her back, Pacuriema's group would try to arrange other housing. Sometimes Pacuriema would invite women to stay with her own family.

The forum also organized work programs and microfinance loans, coordinating with some of the donor groups pouring into eastern Congo. They opened a makeshift sewing center.

"We wanted to help them be busy," says Jacqueline Borive, who works with Pacuriema. "We wanted to give them a way to keep their mind off what happened."

This is why Judith, a 17-year-old girl with downcast eyes, came to the organization. (The women in Pacuriema's program asked not be identified fully because of the stigma of having been raped.) Although she did not want to talk about her experiences in the war, Pacuriema and others say she was raped multiple times.

"I came here because I had nothing to do at home," Judith says. "It's just living."

The other women clustered around the sewing machine have equally violent stories. Most do not want to talk about rape.

A 17-year-old girl with big eyes holds her squirming 2-year-old son, Moses.

"I didn't want to be a mom, but they took me by force," she explains, looking downward.

She says she came to Pacuriema's group when she was still pregnant, hoping to learn some skill that might support her and her baby. Today, she says, she makes some money from the clothes she sells.

M., who asked that only her first initial be used, was raped on two separate occasions. During the war, a militia group raided her village and killed her parents as the family ran away. Then they raped her. After the war, she and her siblings lived together in a house on the outskirts of Bunia. There, drunken Congolese army soldiers raped her again.

After that attack she came to Pacuriema's organization. She had heard about it on the radio and spent three days looking for the actual office. She says Pacuriema made her feel welcome immediately.

"I came here in order to know how to make clothes, so I might have something to make with my life." Today, she says, she helps other women with their sewing. She has friends here – women who understand what she has been through without needing to ask.

"We Congolese women, we are doing what we can to help each other," Pacuriema says. "Women here have

long felt neglected – but we hope this feeling will one day be over.

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