

With international women's month in March fast approaching, some of Africa's most influential women, and authors of inspirational books which NAW has featured in past editions, speak out to highlight the plight of women in eastern DR Congo.

# Women speak

“WE OWE IT TO THE WOMEN OF THE CONGO”

By **Belinda Otas**



“What is happening to the women of eastern Congo is atrocious, but far worse is the fact that the rest of the world is failing them. The way we respond defines our humanity and anyone who has any opportunity to speak out on their behalf or do something to rectify their situation should ask themselves this question: If you and your children were being raped, would you rather that others remain silent and distance themselves from you?”

**SEFI ATTA** is a US-based Nigerian writer. Her books include *News from Home* and *Swallow*.

*“All people of conscience, men and women, must bear witness to this violence and support local Congolese organisations that provide long-term moral and material assistance to these women”*



“Rape as an orchestrated weapon of war is a cold-hearted and a most despicable crime by men who are (born of women). It is designed to stigmatise and humiliate women in the worst possible way. We owe it to our sisters to use our visibility and our voices to show our support of them, our solidarity with them, our empathy (and sympathy) of their trauma and, just as importantly, denounce the crime and call the world's attention to it so that it is stemmed.”

**CHIKA UNIGWE** is an Afro-Belgian writer of Nigerian origin and author of *On Black Sisters' Street*.



“It's easy to detach ourselves from the plight of others or feel like it does not affect us because it is not happening next door. But just imagine for a minute that a man could take possession of your body against your wishes and instead of being taken to the ER, having a rape kit processed on you, getting whatever medical care you need including Aids prophylaxis, STD treatment, surveillance for pregnancy, psychological help, you get nothing. And it could happen to you again next week because nobody is really looking out for you. And then you still have to go on living, if you survive the ordeal. You may not physically be able to go to the DR Congo and help. You may not be able to take time off work and volunteer. But there is one thing you can do. You can pull up a browser on your laptop,

Google ‘women of the Democratic Republic of Congo’ and go to one of the sites that come up to donate money. Mention them in a blog post or article. Talk to your friends about them. Help to raise awareness and encourage others to help in whatever little way they can. Every little counts. They are our sisters. Just imagine, it could have been you. You are no better.”

**FOLAKE TAYLOR** is the author of *The Only Way is Up: The Journey of an Immigrant*.



“The enjoinder ‘Women and children first’ has come to take on the opposite meaning in too many modern conflicts. In Sierra Leone where my family live I saw this firsthand. Every woman in our village was raped the day the rebels overran the area. They included my aunts, my cousins, and the woman who took care of me when I was a child. Too often these events are reported in the western media as random acts of violence. They are anything but random. The mass rape of women, the torture and beating of civilians: these events are planned, co-ordinated and executed with the precision of any military operation. Their purpose is to cow a civilian population into compliance. It's important we understand that before anything else, because it helps us understand what to do. The International Criminal Court in The Hague have arrested some of the commanders of armies responsible and charged them with war crimes. There are still more of them out there and the ICC intends to issue more warrants. People the world over need to send a clear message to these men that there is no such thing as impunity. If you do one thing to help the women of the DR Congo, please write to ICC prosecutor Luis Moreno-Ocampo at the ICC in The Hague and pledge your support.”

**AMINATTA FORNA** is author of three books, including *The Memory of Love*.



“The war that has plagued the DR Congo has made victims of all of its women who have endured loss and grief, violence and rape, hunger and disease. This violence must stop. And it must stop now, for the sake of future generations of Congolese people. All people of conscience, men and women, must bear witness to this violence and support local Congolese organisations that provide long-term moral and material assistance to these women.”

**LAILA LALAMI** is a US-based Moroccan writer and author of *The Secret Son*.



“No question in my mind about what needs to be done. The international community can start by holding the leaders of the country including the president accountable for what his army is doing. Women also need to fight this particular battle themselves in their own way, commensurate with their local culture. What do I mean? In some of these conflicts, the victims sometimes know the perpetrators. They should keep records, even oral documentation of these criminals and be active locally to someday bring them to justice. The world should empower the women to stand up, along with their own men, to this evil – one person at a time. Where do we come in? By petitions, and yes sometimes targeted aid to put pressure on these ‘see no evil, do nothing’ governments. The UN needs the ‘teeth’ to mean what they say.”

**NGOZI ACHEBE** is author of *Onadobe's Daughter*.

*“We owe it to our sisters to use our visibility and our voices to show our support... and denounce the crime and call the world's attention to it so that it is stemmed”*



“Those who are committing violence against the women of the Congo do so because they do not think the rest of us can or will do anything to stop it. They believe that we will hear the news and – overwhelmed by the sheer numbers of tragedies in the world, concerned with only what is happening in our own communities – ignore this degradation of women who are very much like our own mothers, sisters and daughters. Geographical distance doesn't lessen our obligation to stand for what is just and right in this world. We have the ability to make the type of change that can accumulate and build momentum until slowly or suddenly, but surely, this stops. Take the first step, listen to their stories, read what is happening, reach out and ask what you can do.”

**MAAZA MENGSITE** was born in Ethiopia and is the author of *Beneath the Lion's Gaze*.



“Women are the glue that holds society together during chaos and conflict, and we are reminded of their resilience and capacity for hope. In DR Congo over 5m lives have been lost and hundreds of thousands of women raped in a strategic campaign to destroy women, their families and communities. Yet, in the midst of this, Congolese women still tell us their visions of building bridges of peace in their own country as well as for their sisters in Africa and around the world. The time has come for us to help echo the voices of the women of Congo as they break their silence; these issues do not only impact women in Africa. Women are the key to sustainable peace in Congo and globally.”

**ZAINAB SALBI** is CEO and Founder of Women for Women International.



“It will take men to stop rape in DR Congo. The fact that rape victims are breaking the silence around the horrific sexual violence endemic in the country is crucial for building peace and stability in the country. Women have started to speak out on their devastating experiences. Men, by and large, have remained mute while playing a strong part in stigmatising and excluding rape survivors. But without involving Congolese men, it will be difficult to address this problem successfully.”

**CHRISTINE KARUMBA** is the Country Director of Women for Women International in the Democratic Republic of the Congo.



“Sometime in the summer, I saw *Ruined*, the Pulitzer Award-winning play by Lynn Nottage, which told of women in a village in Congo who accept to work in a bar/brothel, after being brutalised by soldiers in the war. This may have been fiction, but the emotions the actors raised in me broke my heart that some real women did go through these things and it continues to happen. One thing that helped me withstand the play was the resilient spirit that shone through, the humanity these women retained through it all and their hope for a better future, and making ways to adapt and come through it stronger. What we can do to help stop these war crimes targeted at women is to continue to support such works that bring them to the public stage, in plays, art, movies, books and documentaries. We can support by taking action as part of charities and lobby groups.”

**MYNE WHITMAN** is a US-based Nigerian writer and author of *A Heart To Mend*.



“The real perpetrators of rape in the Congo are the corporations and international mining cartels that drive the carnage, in order to protect their access to mineral resources. Increasingly, the data shows that the international attention generated by ‘rape reporting’ has done more harm than good to Congolese women. Congolese militia now know that they can generate headlines by planning mass rapes, and they use the threat of mass rape as a negotiating chip. So our job is not to ‘raise awareness’. It is to name and shame, call out, and hold accountable the international corporations, mining cartels, and political interests who are extracting resources from the region and arming and funding the militias. And to demand fair trade in Congolese minerals, which are in all our cellphones, laptops and other techno toys. That is the only way to halt the suffering of women in the Congo.”

**SHAILJA PATEL** is a US-based Kenyan activist, writer and poet. She’s the author of *Migritude*.



“It is devastating to hear about the terrible ordeals women in the eastern DR Congo have to endure. It’s time the world names and shames those involved including those illegally removing the mineral resources of the area which is the foundation for the conflict. The leaders of the DRC, Rwanda and Uganda must be held accountable for their inability to end the conflict and to stop the LRA and the other militias operating almost with impunity within their borders. 5.4m people have died already in this conflict. If this was happening anywhere in the western world the response to the atrocities would not be so apathetic. Sadly in this conflict it is, yet again, the women who are carrying the heaviest burden.”

**LAURI KUBUITSILE** is a Botswana-based writer who has written over 10 books, including *Anything for Money*.



“Systematic rape and pillage have been used as weapons of war since time immemorial. In 2008 I met women victims of rape in Bosnia. What struck me was that despite the horrendous psychological and physical damage inflicted on them during the Balkans war, many women chose to talk about their ordeal. Talking takes tremendous courage. It turns a victim into a survivor – a woman with agency and power to transform lives. What I do as a filmmaker and writer is listen attentively to what these brave women say. I listen, record their testimonies, and then broadcast their experiences to as many people as possible, so that we learn from their incredible resolve to live. We learn and, hopefully, we never forget.”

**YABA BADOE** is a filmmaker and author of *True Murder*.



“It’s important that the women of eastern DR Congo see themselves as people who have the power to change their circumstances rather than helpless victims. Power comes from knowledge and women by nature are custodians of both knowledge and power. The mothers, sisters and aunts of the Congo should resist local traditions that justify the violence, and must teach their young (right from the cradle!) that women should be treated and expect to be treated with respect, as well as the fact that violence does not resolve conflict. Women from the world over who write, speak or have the ability to influence an audience should support local charities that rehabilitate abused women, and encourage constructive conversations about this issue both on and off the internet. Violence against the women of DR Congo is violence to women everywhere.”

**OGO OGBATA** is the author of *Egg-Larva-Pupa Woman*.



“Rape is being used as a ‘weapon of war’ to cower women in eastern Congo into submission. A society that does not value its women is an impoverished society. For those of us who are active agents for change in the international community, we must support them by writing/publishing/singing/painting their stories as a way of raising awareness about their plight in the international community. Today, Congolese women are engaged in peace-building, both in the DRC and abroad, in an attempt at moving them from victims to active and valued citizens with choices. Their voices – inspired by different experiences and perspectives – deserve our greater recognition!”

**NANA AYEPIA** Clarke is a Ghanaian-born publisher specialising in African and Caribbean writing.



“*Congo: We, The Women, Speak. The Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples’ Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa* was adopted by the Assembly of the African Union in 2003. It is now 2011, and when I listen to the reports coming from the DRC, where rape is systemically used as a weapon of war, I resolve not to turn away, but to write about it and keep on writing about it, until it stops.”

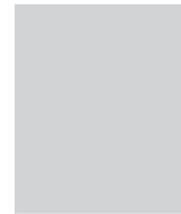
**ABIDEMI SANUSI** is a Nigerian writer based in London and author of *Eyo*.

**“Geographical distance doesn’t lessen our obligation to stand for what is just and right in this world... Take the first step, listen to their stories, read what is happening, reach out and ask what you can do”**



“We need to work with the government. Appoint and elect a representative that will be supported by all the women that will ask the government to legislate capital punishments for violence against women. They have to create the awareness to the world so that the government has no choice but to implement the legislation to avoid foreign intervention.”

**STELLA DAMASUS** is a Nigerian actress and champion of women’s rights.



“Sexual violence is a form of social control used to buttress the unregulated extraction of vital mineral resources to the international market. Any response to end sexual violence must always include recommendations to G-8 governments for political and economic policy approaches that will stabilise Congolese society, provide diverse livelihood options, reverse the trend of hyper-militarisation, and challenge the history of foreign intervention into Congolese political and economic affairs. Influential women must use their position to present policy reforms and not humanitarian approaches as solutions to ending the gross injustice against Congolese women and children. Influential women must link with the Congolese Diaspora, Congo advocates and Congolese civil society to inform their messages to global leaders and multinationals. Influential women must reject media and popular jargon that the Congolese context is too complex. It is not. What is missing is the political will at the national and global levels. Sexual violence will stop when foreign governments who fund renegade armed groups in the Congo have their military aid cut by their bilateral partners. Sexual violence will stop when the perpetrators of rape are actually held accountable for their actions. Influential women must mobilise in large numbers in major policy spaces to insist on action and not empty proclamations which sit on dusty shelves in Geneva,

New York, Washington DC, London, Brussels, Addis Ababa, etc. The Congo did not know systemic sexual violence prior to 1997 – we must ask ourselves why it is so prevalent now.”

**MUADI MUKENGE** is the Programme Director of Global Fund for Women in Sub-Saharan Africa and lead author of the report, *Funding a Movement Against Sexual Violence in the Democratic Republic of Congo: 2004-2009*.



“What is happening to the women of Congo is so horrific that any collection of words on a page cannot come close to describing it. If I told you that I met a four-year-old girl, lying next to her mother in the rape ward of a Goma hospital, both mother and daughter torn to shreds by rape – would that compel you to act? If I told you that I met a 17-year-old girl who had been kidnapped and given as a ‘wife’ to an entire rebel army unit, who escaped, then was recaptured, then escaped again, only to find herself alone and pregnant – would that move your conscience? The information about Congo’s devastating war is out there – we have all heard the statistics, cried at the stories. Words are not enough. Somehow, we need to close the gap between information and action. And there is action we can take. The crisis in Congo is complex, but a key economic driver is a brutal war over Congo’s rich mineral resources – minerals that wind up in our daily electronics products like cellphones and laptops – you can email the 21 largest electronics companies directly. Each of us, as an individual and as a consumer, can let the electronics companies know that we would purchase verifiably conflict-free products when they become available. And we can pledge that we will stick with Congo for the long haul – do the hard work of restoring Congo’s security system and state infrastructure so that its women and children can live and thrive – in peace.”

**NAAMA HAVIV** is Assistant Director at Jewish World Watch, the NGO behind the film, *Congo Women Rising*. ■