

At a time when the dire situation endured by DR Congo's women has all but disappeared from the news headlines, Lisa Shannon, author of *A Thousand Sisters*, a book that documents her journeys to the country, aptly reminds the world approaching International Women's Month: "I don't know many Congolese women living for the next iPod or Rolex watch. I know a lot of Congolese women who are focused on taking care of their kids and communities... we have to ask questions about how much of our lives is dependent on cheap coltan from the Congo." Interview by **Belinda Otas**.

DR Congo

Lest we forget the women

New African Woman: Is the world in denial about the reality of women in Eastern DR Congo?

Lisa Shannon: The Congolese people have been dismissed largely by the international community. In many ways, it's almost sub-human to think that somehow, it feels different for a woman in the Congo to be gang-raped, to have your whole family burned alive. It's important that we talk about Congolese women as complete human beings who had a full life prior to this violence. There's nothing about this violence that is baseline for them. They are shocked, horrified and hurt about what is happening.

What compelled you to do what you do for the DR Congo women?

The first time I heard of their plight was through the Oprah Winfrey show on TV. I was shocked to learn Congo has the deadliest war since World War II

and that millions have died. When that many people die and no one is talking or doing anything about it, we are sending a very powerful message that we don't think these people are human. I felt that if I didn't do anything, even though I had no idea where to start, I would be joining that message.

In your book, *A Thousand Sisters*, you talk about the stare in the eyes of the women a few times. What instantly registers with you when you see that look in their eyes?

At first, you look at it and it's this sort of glazed-over numb look, but when you look closer, there is a lot of desperation behind it and a sort of clinging to whatever shred of dignity and humanity they have left and there's a sense of hanging by a thread.

Is the international community making excuses for the lack

of action on this matter?

The Congo is a textbook case of the world making excuses. Women for Women International just did a survey of women on the ground and found that more than half of the Congolese women believe there could be peace in their country within a year if international will existed. There is an undying hope, which is reliant on us showing up and taking full responsibility for the role that we play. Our consumer electronics basically makes our entire economy and lifestyle what it is, and that's dependent on the kind of suffering that is taking place in the Congo. You have to ask questions about how much of our lives is dependent on cheap coltan from the Congo? So, like it or not, we have been funding this. Yet, we are giving all kinds of excuses about how it has nothing to do with us and the problems are impossible to solve.

"I really feel I have gained a much deeper sense of joy from knowing Congolese women."

Over 300 women were recently raped in Luwungi village, despite a UN base being nearby. Is there a lack of political will to stop this atrocity?

With the UN, it's very tricky because there isn't a lot of interaction between the UN and the Congolese people. I said recently and I stand by it, there are questions as to whether or not the UN may have driven through those towns when the rapes were happening. But what Congolese woman is going to run up to an armed foreign man and tell him she was just raped, especially if they don't even get out of the car? So, I think the UN needs to play a more active role in protecting people.

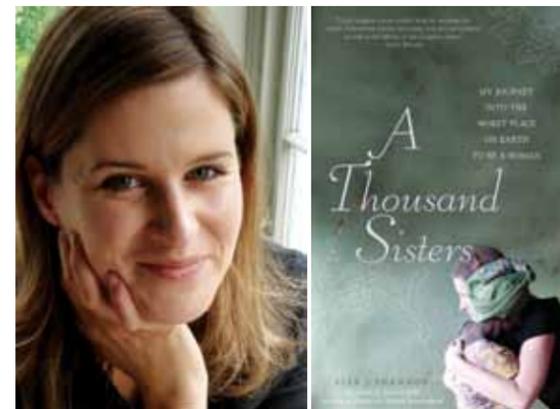
What action is urgently needed to end the war on women in the region?

Ending impunity. There has to be punishment for bad behaviour and that hasn't been the case. A justice system, there has to be repercussions when people rape. Education is important and Women for Women International has launched a men's education programme in the Congo. The security sector needs to be reformed, that's where some of the key solution for Congo lies and supporting the Congolese government in building their own systems, from provincial governments to central governments.

How has all of this changed your life?

When you are on a journey to do what you can, you are going to have moments that feel overwhelming and moments when it feels like you haven't made that much of a difference, and times when you question yourself if you will make mistakes. I really feel that I have gained a much deeper sense of joy from knowing Congolese women. They have dignified me because I may have had a, quote-unquote, 'good life' before this but it was empty. From Congolese women I have learnt what it means to be connected to other human beings and operate on a real value system, which is something that I think most of the women I know have had all along. ■

A Thousand Sisters is published by Seal Press, Perseus Books Group. www.athousand sisters.com



Lisa Shannon, above, encountered a profound sense of dignity among the women she met in DR Congo

Are people more aware of the atrocities in the Congo or are we still as ignorant as we were about the nature of the conflict?

People are more aware. When I started in 2005, the activist field was blank and no one knew about the Congo but now it's in the news a little bit more, not a ton but a little bit more. There's a movement and that's testament to the fact that when people hear, they care and want to get involved. So that makes me feel hopeful.

You write about being shocked after discovering a map which details areas occupied by militias. If the Congolese government and the international community made up their mind today, that it was time to get rid of the militias, is it doable?

It's absolutely doable and it's doable through diplomacy. I don't think military intervention is required. I think DDR –

Disarmament, Demobilisation and Reintegration – programmes could be very effective. Using diplomatic pressure and the structure of the international Criminal Court or the US, Europe and African nations' justice system, to go after criminals who live in these regions and choke off the leadership of the militias, would go a long way.

The blame game is endless but who are the parties that should be talking to each other about bringing an end to this war?

There is no shortage of blame to go around. If we are going to start solving this problem, we need to have intellectual integrity about the way we approach it, which means being honest that it is complex and many players have played key roles. That will be a place to start.