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Republic of the Congo, Factor 15: Human Rights

Congo: Women's Rights

When I was growing up, my parents always said, "You can be whatever you want to be when you grow up, as long as you put your mind to it." While I soon discovered that my plans to be a cowgirl in the Wild West were futile, my eyes began to open to the vast number of opportunities available to a young woman in America. For all I know, I could be the future President of the United States, the next big hit artist, the prospective CEO of a Fortune 500 Company. Unfortunately, the only life that many young women in underdeveloped countries are limited to is filled with the worries of today instead of the hopes of tomorrow.

1. Economic Situation

The First and Second Congo Wars have contributed to the deaths of nearly four million people by way of conflict, disease, and famine. They have dramatically increased the national external debt (currently at \$6.874 billion), and shaken the basic infrastructure of the country as a whole. According to the United Nations World Food Program, approximately 6.3 million of the 77,433,744 Congolese people are food insecure, and nearly two-thirds of the population is malnourished ("Democratic Republic of the Congo"). The Congolese are very family-oriented, and an average family has five children. Gaston Asitaki Lisiki, president of the Congolese Association for the Family, explained in an interview with Mercator Net that a major reason for such a large family is to ensure care by the children as the parents reach their older years. This is geared by the fact that there are only five nurses, one doctor, and eight hospital beds available for every 10,000 of the population ("Health Situation Analysis"). The doctors and nurses themselves are paid minimal amounts, and usually are not even paid at all.

Approximately 55% of Congolese live below the poverty line and survive on less than a dollar per day ("DR Congo."). A typical meal for poor rural farm families of seven would consist of a bowl of bidia, made from cooked corn meal and cassava. They cannot afford meat, and so they eat bugs as a source of protein; locusts, termites, and caterpillars are some of the more common insects. Only 28.9% of the rural population has access to an improved water source ("Congo, Democratic Republic of the"). It is the job of the females to collect the water, and therefore many women contract diseases from the lack of sanitary water sources. According to Barbara Frost of Water Aid, this affects the girls' education, inhibiting them from attending school after they hit puberty. This helps to explain why only 54% of the female population is literate ("Donate To/Sponsor DR"). In addition, only 2.5% of the country's GDP is spent on education, and the literacy rate for males and the total population is 76.9% and 66.8%, respectively ("Congo, Democratic Republic of the").

2. Farming

Native farmers in the Democratic Republic of the Congo commonly use a method called shifting cultivation. This entails clearing an area of approximately two to three acres either in the grasslands or jungle, using it for the cultivation of crops until the soil is depleted, and then leaving to start over again somewhere new. Fungicides, fertilizers, and insecticides are not readily accessible, and even if they were most farmers could not afford them (Bliss). Although the government of the DRC disbursed 98% of its Agricultural & Rural Sector Rehab 3K Grant in 2013, it has only distributed 1.3% of its Rural Infrastructure Support Project in the past year (Democratic Republic of the Congo, *African Development Bank & African Development Fund*).

The average salary for a farmer varies across the country. This depends on many factors, such as their proximity to a city, quality of growing season, and region. In the rural Ubangi region, the average was nine dollars per season during the year 2010. In the city of Kinshasa, it was \$2,000 dollars per year for a vegetable farmer during the year 2011 ("DRC: Urban Farming Takes Root.", "Effort"). Some of the main agricultural goods of the Congo include coffee, tea, rubber, cocoa, bananas, and cassava ("Congo, Democratic Republic of the"). According to the Food and Agriculture Organization, women contribute to 80% of household food production. To quote Annie Matundu Mbambi and Marie-Claire Faray-Kele of peacewomen.org, "their visibility and contribution to food security for the survival and running of the Congolese society is undeniable and internationally recognised." The women do a large portion of the sowing, threshing, harvesting, weeding, transportation, and marketing while the men do most of the plowing, clearing, and preparation of the fields ("II. Women's Contributions"). Furthermore, as the population continues to grow, water becomes more and more scarce for the poor, pollution increases, and the climate continues to change, women will be left flailing to keep themselves and their families socially and economically afloat.

3. Abuse

The oppression of women of the Democratic Republic of the Congo is still very prevalent in today's society. Women are viewed as inferior to men, and are frequently abused verbally, emotionally, and physically. Between 2006 and 2007, over 400,000 women between the ages of fifteen and forty-nine were raped in the DRC ("If Numbers Could Scream"). The DRC Ministry of Planning itself reported in 2007 that 64% of women have been physically abused since the age of fifteen, 59% of women have been physically abused while pregnant, and 10% of women between the ages of eighteen and forty-nine were forced into losing their virginity. It also stated that 71% of women were abused in their own homes, 57% being physically abused, 35% being sexually abused, 43% being only emotionally abused, and 64% being both physically and sexually abused.

Rape is being used as an instrument of fear in war and conflict. It frightens the local populations into leaving their lands, and therefore their way of life. It sends the message that women are a commodity, to be used and thrown away at the caprice of men. It takes away strong mothers from children who are already struggling to find a way in this world. An entire community can be undermined in one night raid; when these rapes occur, the women are often left in shock. It takes away their confidence, and will to work and take care of their families. Furthermore, when women are raped in some populations they are cast out of society in disgrace and forced to live on their own. This further damages the economy of the area and the overall well-being of their civilization. According to Friends of the Congo, 28% of partners or husbands habitually refused to help out around the house, 20% actually stole the agricultural works and money of their spouses or partners, and 23% would not let their women work for any money at all. This is counterproductive not only to the men, but to the economy as a whole.

4. Policy

Women are given the right to vote in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, but they are highly discouraged from running for office. They are allowed to run by law, but the social pressures against them are extremely high. There are 47 women serving on both the provincial and bicameral parliaments of the DRC. This may sound like a high number, but these statistics are out of 690 and 608 seats, respectively. The Labor Code of the Democratic Republic of the Congo gives mothers two-thirds pay during a fourteen-week maternity leave, and all benefits are to be paid by their employer. It also supplies that an employer is not allowed to fire a woman because she is on maternity leave, but this Code is loosely enforced, if at all in many cases. In 2011, the Congo ranked 187th out of 187 countries in the Human Development Index with a score of 0.286 and 142nd out of 146 countries in the Gender Inequality Index with a score of 0.710 ("Gender Inequality").

Another code of law is known as the Family Code, and instead of protecting the already small rights of women it abolishes it legally. It declares that women must obey their husbands, who are the head of the home. Married women must obtain permission from their husbands before performing any legal act; this considerably cuts down their ability to make parental, marital, and workplace decisions. Even in the case of adultery, it is mandatory for a woman to serve at least a year in prison while a man must have caused “injurious harm” to his spouse for any prosecution to occur. This code also reaches into the inheritance of property and land of a deceased husband; the widow must share the household with one of the husband’s male relatives, and according to the Chronic Poverty Research Centre only 23.8% of widows received most of their husband’s belongings (“Gender Inequality”). Land concessions are, in fact, one of the only legal matters that the law itself is not biased against. However, the local traditions still strongly go against this, and therefore women have a hard time making it on their own or trying to raise a family on a farm with no husband. Also, because married women are not legally permitted to sign most contracts or acts without the approval of their husbands, they currently have little to no access to bank accounts and loans. This prevents women even more from independently succeeding in business and agriculture. This has a great impact on the work force, economy, and food production, disabling many bright women, young and old, from making a true impact on the world and bettering the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

5. Solutions

Many different organizations are working now to help the circumstances of women in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and all in different ways. For example, the IMA’s Ushindi Program helps victims of abuse and rape in the DRC. This program’s collective term for abuse is sexual and gender based violence, or SGBV. Some of its efforts include providing treatment and care to victims and their families, improving the rights and protection of women and children, and raising awareness of SGBV (“Ushindi”). Ushindi collaborates with several national and international organizations, including: the Ministry of Health of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Children’s Voice, HEAL Africa, Program for Promotion of PHC, the Panzi Hospital Foundation, Save the Children, CARE, and the American Bar Association Rule of Law Initiative. Ushindi is a USAID-funded program that uses legal, economic, and medical support to help those hurt by SGBV. It also works to help women legally prosecute men in SGBV crimes.

Another initiative is called Women for Women International; it is both an emotional and practical support outreach to oppressed women in the Congo. It has a one-year program in which women take classes on business, vocation, and health tools to prepare them for the work force and for the life that still lies ahead of them. Some of these courses consist of brick-making, soap-making, bread-making, ceramics production, agribusiness, livestock, beauty care, tailoring, culinary arts, and small business management. The ceramics production in particular teaches women to make household items to sell in markets in their surrounding areas, but also tiles for use in the Women’s Opportunity Center in Rwanda. The success of these programs is tremendous. Graduates from the Women for Women International Program nearly double their income after taking the class. Ninety-one percent learn to start saving a part of their income for use in the future; this is in comparison to the 14% that practiced this before the course. Only 4% of women coming into the program have knowledge of what it means to eat healthily, and 99% leave the class with this knowledge. The classes teach women’s rights, and increase the awareness throughout the program by 93%. Lastly, only 10% of women participate in safety nets (for example, governmental price subsidies for electricity, plumbing, and food) and social networks before starting the course, compared to 77% who do afterwards (“Donate”).

Goal number three of the United Nations “We Can End Poverty, Millennium Goals and Beyond 2015” is to promote gender equality and empower women. This ideal largely pertains to education; it also agrees with the goals of the Women for Women International Program, which is supported by the UN. Both organizations recognize the importance of education. Without proper instruction, how can anyone survive in the business world, let alone a single mother or the abused wife of a husband in the rural Democratic

Republic of the Congo? Even the keys to be truly successful in the field of agriculture are oftentimes hidden from women in the Congo, out of fear and prejudice. The United States Government, the government of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, United Nations, Children's Voice, HEAL Africa, Program for Promotion of PHC, the Panzi Hospital Foundation, Save the Children, CARE, the American Bar Association Rule of Law Initiative, Women for Women International, Interchurch Medical Assistance, and various other programs are trying to protect, educate, spread awareness, and provide justice for the abused and forgotten women of the Democratic Republic of the Congo. However, it is not a perfect system; in fact, time is running out for many of these projects and services. The Ushindi Program is currently only funded until 2015. More individuals and organizations need to continue funding the amazing initiatives started in the Congo, or begin new educational and socioeconomic enterprises. The government of the Congo is constantly being undermined in its efforts for the equality of women and sometimes, sadly, is corrupt in carrying out its various projects. The rights of women are not viewed as important as the economic and social crises that seem to pop up daily in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, but in reality women could be a critical part in the solution to so many of these problems.

Ignorance fuels so many of the conflicts and wars of this world, and if we would only listen to and try to learn from each other, so much could be accomplished. We may try to help as outside entities, but the solution must originate from within. We all must be willing to change, something that most people comfortable enough in their situation will not easily do. There are women in the Democratic Republic of the Congo who are more than willing to change, that crave true equality and justice. They seek knowledge, so that one day they may help themselves, and their daughters, and their granddaughters, and make a difference in the lives of other women and girls. For as the African proverb goes, "If you want to go quickly, go alone. If you want to go far, go together."

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