



Gender Justice: A Key to Fighting HIV in Congo

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I recently had the opportunity to spend time in Lubutu, a small village in the Maniema Province of the eastern Democratic Republic of Congo. Among my companions were Julienne Tchakupewa and Richard Malengule, leaders in the Heal Africa/American Bar Association Gender and Justice program.



After flying from Goma to Kisangani, we faced a 240-mile drive in a tiny Toyota pickup to Lubutu. Julienne insisted on riding in the back of the pickup and sat comfortably in an overstuffed chair surrounded by food and supplies we were taking to Lubutu. When the rains came a tarp was rigged up and over her creating a kind of Congo Conestoga wagon for the remainder of the trip.

The next day Julienne travelled about 100km on the back of a moto (a small motorcycle) for five hours in the rain over slippery, ankle deep muddy roads to Punia. While there, three or four men who had just begun serving long prison sentences for rape were released after only a few months, a common occurrence in Congo where jail doors open at the sight of money.

Outraged, Julienne organized the women of Punia and led a protest march through the village. This was a brave and encouraging action, for it is only within the past year that women in larger towns, like Goma and Bukavu, began to dare to speak out against rape and the subjugation of women.

Such a demonstration by the women of a small village signified that women are sensing their inherent power to break free from the fetters of traditions and customs. It also means that they no longer need to suffer in silence.

The empowerment of women is key to combating the pandemic of rape and the transmission of HIV that follows in eastern DRC. Among the selfless and dedicated Congolese men and women on the front lines of the struggle to educate, empower and liberate women from traditional subjugation and the emotional and physical trauma of sexual abuse are Julienne and Richard.

They spend weeks at a time in North Kivu and the remote Maniema Province conducting training sessions to sensitize men and women to the need to end the oppression and emotional and physical assaults upon women. They also aim to promote gender equality and opportunity for women.

Richard is a young, dynamic and courageous Congolese attorney who is risking his life in the struggle to bring equality and respect to women, and to overcome customary law that deprives women not only of property, inheritance and education, but also of equality, dignity and opportunity.



Not only does Richard work to bring a new understanding and appreciation for women to the people of remote villages like Lubutu and Punia, he also brings criminals, usually rapists, to justice. He described journeys with three on a moto -- the driver, the offender, and himself -- driving through the forest on roads that are not much more than trails. En route to one of the few courts in the province, the men often cross rivers in a pirogue, a small boat, which is particularly dangerous because an offender who prefers drowning instead of prison can easily capsize the pirogue, dumping motos, luggage and people into the swiftly moving waters.

Richard's wife and two small children live in Goma, and he is away from them weeks at a time. His wife is supportive, but she rightly worries and misses him. Richard is dedicated to his work, a work of risk and sacrifice, but also of rewards: he is helping to change the Congo, to bring women into their rightful place, and to end the sex discrimination and the sexual violence which contribute to the transmission of HIV.

It is brave individuals like Richard and Julienne who will help the Congo stop the exploitation, sexual assault and spread of disease to the Congo's most precious resource, its women.

You'll learn more about Richard and Julienne in the future, as we continue to support their work.
