

Ten Reasons Why Eastern Congo Is the Most Dangerous Place on Earth for Women



Civilians in eastern Congo, particularly women and girls, are targets of conscience-shocking brutality and sexual violence. Every day, they face a harrowing array of threats from armed militias, the military, and even the police who are supposed to protect them. Understanding the reasons why life has become so dangerous for women in eastern Congo is an essential first step in helping to end the violence and create a more hopeful future.

1. Predatory security forces

“It is more dangerous to be a woman than to be a soldier right now.”

Major General Patrick Cammaert, former UN Deputy Force Commander, describing the situation in eastern Congo, May 2008

Any state's most basic responsibility is to provide security for its citizens. However, the Congolese military is notoriously corrupt and undisciplined. Soldiers themselves live in appalling conditions, are frequently unpaid, and often resort to looting or petty theft to “pay themselves.” The army is guilty of widespread abuses of the people they are supposed to protect, and soldiers often view attacking women as a “benefit” of carrying a gun for the state.

2. Lawless militias

“This violence was designed to exterminate the population.”

Louise Nzigire, social worker at Panzi Hospital in Bukavu, spring 2005

A complex and confusing assortment of illegal armed militias operate in eastern Congo. Some are purely criminal, some are loosely political in their goals, and many of them have links back to neighboring states. The Rwandan rebel group called the Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Rwanda, or FDLR, has ties to the 1994 Rwanda genocide and now commits atrocities against Congolese civilians, including appalling acts of sexual violence. The vast majority of civilians in eastern Congo fear militias more than anything else. Militia members often forcibly take local “wives,” coerce landowners to conduct menial labor, and steal harvests from local farmers. Militias have been all too eager to use rape and other forms of violence as tools to intimidate and suppress the local population.

3. A culture of impunity

“In Congo, if someone starts an armed group or kills people, they have a better chance of becoming a senior minister or a general than being put behind bars.”

Anneke Van Woudenberg, Human Rights Watch, January 2008

In Congo, law enforcement as we know it is nonexistent, and access to justice is extremely deficient. For most women in the Congo, going to the police with a complaint about a crime is almost unthinkable, and most women fear that if they go to a police station they will be subjected to rape, other forms of violence, or theft. For the few women and young girls who do get the opportunity to publicly identify their rapists, prosecutions are slow to nonexistent, and reprisal attacks against the victim and/or her family are common. Perpetrators thrown into jail are often able to simply pay guards for their release or, in some cases, break through the prison walls and walk away.

4. The resource curse

"We are cursed because of our gold. All we do is suffer. There is no benefit to us."

Congolese gold miner, June 2005

The scramble to exploit the Democratic Republic of the Congo's vast natural resources has been the principal driver of atrocities and conflict throughout Congo's tortured history. In eastern Congo today, resources are financing multiple armed groups that target the local population. Many of these armed groups use rape as a deliberate tactic to drive the local population away from mines and other areas that they wish to control. The twisted logic: terrorize the women first and everyone else will stay away.

5. Poverty

"My job is to beg."

Congolese woman, November 2003

Instability and grinding poverty in the Congo have created a stagnant economy, and few companies are willing to invest in this central African nation. The international companies who *have* invested in the Congo are primarily interested in the resource-extraction sector, which at best does little to help local people and at worst fuels competition and conflict between armed groups. Years of economic decline and conflict have acutely affected women, many of whom have become widows and have been forced to find ways—including begging and prostitution—to support their families. As women are the primary caretakers of the family, they must often venture outside of safe zones to collect water or firewood, which puts them at greater risk of attack. With many men killed or driven away from their families, women not only lose an important source of income and protection for their families—they have to care for children and try to earn money with no social safety net. The ability to rely on extended families for support and comfort has also often been shattered by dislocation, violence, and chaos.

6. A collapsed health care system

"I was not trained as a gynecologist, but I am being trained on the job, because the need at the hospital is so large. The Congolese government does not provide our hospital with any resources."

Dr. Roger Luhiriri, Panzi Hospital, Buvaku, South Kivu, September 2008

Another consequence of the prolonged conflict is an outright collapse of the Congolese health care system. Tens of thousands of women have survived rape and sexual violence, but the Congolese government is unable to provide adequate medical services, rehabilitation programs, or psychological counseling. This means that women have a very difficult time surviving the physical scars of sexual violence, much less addressing the psychological ones. Furthermore, lack of adequate medical care to prevent and treat diseases such as cholera and malaria further add to the insurmountable daily struggles and dangers faced by Congolese women and their children.

7. Internal displacement

"It would be much too dangerous [to return home]. Battles continue to rage there. But we're really not proud of having to stay here."

Josephine, a Congolese woman who has been driven from her home and now lives in a camp for displaced people, June 2008

More than 1.3 million Congolese have been driven from their homes, or "displaced," in eastern Congo. Throughout the conflict, rape has been used as a weapon to force communities to flee their homes. Now, huge populations live in poorly protected camps, where they are vulnerable to attacks by militias and Congolese security forces. Although humanitarian organizations provide life-saving supplies and care to the camps, it is often almost impossible for families to earn a living or properly care for their children in such settings.

8. A failing education system

“Out of more than 4.4 million children who are not in school in the Congo, 2.5 million of these children are girls... The violence, the poverty, the culture—there are many reasons why children are not going to school.”

UNICEF, 2008

The school system in Congo is extremely weak: School enrollment rates, from primary school through university, have dropped significantly since the onset of the conflict. It is difficult for uneducated women in eastern Congo to know and defend their rights. It also been proven again and again that investments in basic education for girls have some of the very best returns of all development programs. Girls that have at least a basic education are more economically productive, have smaller and better cared for families, and are more likely to be active in their communities.

9. Gender inequality and cultural barriers

“Women had very few rights. They are not perceived as equal citizens. I think what [...] these atrocities have done is to have, bizarrely, normalized rape. So now it's not just the Congolese army and the factions that are raping the women; now it's becoming normalized. Domestic rape and domestic battery has wildly increased in families.”

Eve Ensler, founder of V-Day, September 2007

Ongoing political and economic insecurity in the Democratic Republic of the Congo have further eroded the status of women in society. Women in the Congo are often treated as little more than private property, and they are often denied access to health care, property, education, and information.

10. Inaction

“It’s shameful that soldiers anywhere are allowed to [commit atrocities such as rape against civilians]. That’s why I want to be president. I want to change this. I want to make security one of my first priorities so that these and other acts come to an end once and for all.”

President Joseph Kabila, before he won the national elections and became Congo’s first democratically elected president since independence, June 2006

The Congolese Government and the international community have failed to act to end the suffering of Congolese women. In spite of the promises President Kabila made over two years ago and the presence of the world’s largest United Nations peacekeeping force, armed groups continue to target civilians in eastern Congo. If the next president of the United States makes ending violence against women and girls in eastern Congo a priority at the beginning of the new administration, the Congo could have a real chance at peace. The United States should seize this opportunity to play a leading role in ending this violence and ensuring that Congolese women can once again feel safe in their own communities.