



# SOOTHING AN UNSPOKEN PAIN

**Victims of sexual abuse, often abandoned by their husbands, find help at an unusual hospital in Goma, North Kivu province.**

Chantal was raped and maimed by armed men before her daughter's eyes. Her injuries were extensive, and the after-effects even worse. But the most unbearable part was being abandoned. Her husband did not want a wife who had been raped. He went to see his in-laws to get back the eight goats he had given them when he married their daughter. "Give me back the dowry! Your daughter is worthless now!"

Chantal is feeling better now, and she can tell her story without crying. She is articulate, and she even smiles occasionally. She is recovering in a Goma hospital known as DOCS (Doctors on Call for Service), which was refurbished by UNICEF. Like a hundred other patients here, she underwent surgery for an obstetrical fistula. Her attackers had damaged the wall that separates the vagina from the bladder, causing a slow but unstoppable urine flow.\*

At first, in an effort to control her incontinence, Chantal tried drinking less water, but that only exacerbated the odor. "Everyone stayed away from me," she says, "but the flies followed me everywhere." A year and a half and three operations later, she is feeling better.

Why has rape, particularly gang rape, become so common? According to the counsellors who work with the victims, not only do rapists want to show off their strength in front of their peers, they also want to belittle their victim in the eyes of her family. It is an attack on the entire tribe. The problem is especially rampant in

Masisi District, west of Goma, where armed groups, often founded along tribal lines, are still active.

For Chantal, the rapes are easy to explain. "It's because of the war," she sighs. She does not hold a grudge against anyone. "God has healed me, so I've forgiven everyone." Except her husband perhaps. "I never want to give myself to a man again," she says. "I want to give myself to God."

DOCS has trained counsellors who travel throughout Goma and the surrounding countryside in a bid to persuade sexual assault victims to get examined. Not all of them suffer from obstetrical fistula, but they all may have been exposed to sexually transmitted infections. And virtually all have been traumatised. After their attack, often by machete-wielding rapists, some are crippled by an inability to speak, which is very difficult to overcome.

These counsellors, "barefoot psychologists," meet with women in a transit home near the hospital. The women are invited into a listening room where soft, orange armchairs help create an atmosphere of trust. It is



filled with a seemingly endless stream of women of all ages.

DOCS counsellors have identified thousands of victims, whose ages range from three to 80. In the city of Goma, as elsewhere, child rape is often committed by a family member or friend – in secret. But outside Goma, rapists are usually strangers who do not even attempt to hide themselves. On the contrary, it is not unheard of for all the women in a village to be rounded up and raped. DOCS once took in a grandmother, a mother and a daughter all from the same family.

If they know their assailant, victims rarely press charges. They fear retaliation and worry that their attacker will never be punished due to the lack of due process. Rapists have been sentenced in the past, but criminals rarely spend much time in prison. "You can buy your freedom for US\$50," says Julienne Chakupewa, an educator who works with DOCS counsellors.

Sometimes the victim's family turns to tradition in search of a solution, but traditional chiefs often refuse to hear rape causes. As justices of the peace, they do not have the authority to deal with criminal cases. Chiefs who are not afraid of retaliation sometimes bring the victim and her attacker together, so that he may apologize and give the victim's family one or two goats as compensation. Other families, eager to resolve the problem, opt for a shotgun wedding: By marrying his victim, the attacker "expunges" her family's shame.

Julienne Chakupewa knows a woman whose daughters were raped by soldiers. This fearless mother flew into a rage and went to complain to the rapists' superior. "You should consider

yourself lucky," she was told. "Your children were only raped, not killed. Others are raped and killed."

When they leave the DOCS hospital, after a stay that may last for up to two years, most patients from the fistula ward are physically healed. But they are often alone in the world. To shelter themselves, they ask the hospital for blue plastic sheeting.

*\* Fistula can also damage the tissue between the vagina and the rectum.*

