

The story of a Congolese refugee worker in Tanzania

Feza Irene Penge

The author, from the Democratic Republic of the Congo, was trained to teach children with special needs. In this personal reflection, she describes how due to the violence in her home country, she became a refugee in Tanzania, twice. She describes the suffering she has faced, including the death of her own children, and her experiences of sexual violence. In the refugee camp of Nyarugusu in Tanzania, she became involved in psychosocial work and learnt the power of working within the community. She has recently resettled in the United Kingdom, and hopes that her experiences can now be of use in her new home country.

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I am Feza Irene Penge, a 38-year-old woman from the Republic of Congo. Nothing, in my experience of the first Congolese civil war in 1994, could have prepared me for the terrible destruction of all that we held dear, within days of the start of the second Congolese war in 1996.

I was born in Uvira, a town on the border of Lake Tanganyika in, what was then, Zaire. Uvira was a good place in those days; there was abundant food and a functioning railroad. My family are Bavira, a tribe from the region. Sadly, my parents were divorced soon after my birth, and so I was raised in my uncle's house. I was smart at school, and was often first in my class. After completing primary school, my parents did not have the money to pay for secondary school, but the wider family decided it would be a

pity if such a smart girl did not have the opportunity to continue her education. So I went to live with my elder sister for a few years, in the provincial capital of Bukavu, at Kivu Lake, to attend school. At 19 I graduated and returned to Uvira. I wanted to go to university, but this was simply not an option. I was married at the age of 20, in 1993.

One year later, the first Congolese civil war started. In the area around Uvira, there are many different ethnic groups, and major tensions existed between them. On 5 October 1996, violent clashes erupted between the Banyamulenge¹ and the MaiMai². Many houses were burned, and people's throats were cut. It was terrible. It was also dangerous for me, because my husbands' mother was a Banyamulenge. My husbands father had two wives, one of whom was Bembe³, the other was Banyamulenge. The sons of the Bembe wife were jealous because their father had bequeathed cows to their half brother, my husband. They took advantage of the chaos of the war.

On 24 October 1996, at 5 PM, the half brothers came with a group of MaiMai fighters to our home. My husband was able to escape, just in time. Fortunately, my mother-in-law was not in the house, because they would have killed her for sure. They did not kill me, but they beat me, stole our money and destroyed all of our possessions. We could not stay in Uvira. We fled to Tanzania, where we remained in a refugee camp for two years. When the half brothers

of my husband arrived in the refugee camp as well, we were afraid they would try to kill my husband. It seemed safer for us to return to the Congo. Meanwhile, in Uvira the situation had stabilised somewhat, because the Banyamulenge were now in control, and therefore there was nothing for my husband to fear. We returned, and I started working in schools for children with disabilities. I loved the work, learned sign language in order to teach deaf children, and how to help the blind. Soon I became the head teacher in a school for the deaf and blind. The school was run by a local nongovernmental organisation (NGO). However, being a head teacher does not mean you will be rich. I was promised a salary of 80 US dollars per month, but only received 20 dollars a month. While the director of the local NGO said that there was not enough money to pay me more, I strongly suspected he pocketed the money. So, I resigned. When I had the opportunity to work with a Catholic NGO, I jumped at the chance immediately, and once again was able to work with deaf and blind children. I took many additional courses and seminars on special education, and went for trainings to Bukavu, and to Bujumbura in Burundi. For me, life was not so bad at the time.

Then the second Congolese war began, and things turned very nasty, very quickly. On 5 October 2002, the MaiMai descended from the hills surrounding Uvira. It was hell. They burned the houses, killed people and raped who ever they could. This time, I was not spared. I remember every, single detail.

On 15 October, at 9 PM, they attacked our house with many fighters. My husband hid with the neighbours. This time, the rebels were not satisfied with stealing our money and burning our house. They killed my brother in law. They raped me, over and

over, many times. They raped me in front of my family, and continued raping me, until I lost consciousness. Neighbours brought me to the hospital, where I remained for three days. There was no question, we had to leave our country again.

I found my husband and we left by foot, with our six-month-old, twin daughters. This time we had no money or any valuables left, so we could not pay for the boat to take us across Lake Tanganyika, out of Congo. We lived in the hills for several weeks, and had almost nothing to eat. My two little babies became sick and died. Now I had no children left, because my first born had died earlier. I really thought I would also die, and almost hoped for it. In the end some fishermen took pity on us, and took us to the other side. Once again, we were refugees in Tanzania.

The first years in the camp were very hard. There was very little I could do, and I was not used to being inactive. I tried to find employment in the camp, but was rejected. I think I was rejected because I was not a Bembe. Most of the refugees, including those in positions of power in the NGOs, were Bembe. Being idle is really difficult for me; I felt abandoned and useless. For my husband, to do nothing was even worse. As a man, he was used to providing the family income. He had been a businessman, trading in petrol in Uvira, and now he had nothing to do. After two years, I finally got a job as a teacher in a primary school in the camp. As a refugee, you do not get paid a salary, but receive an allowance. It is not much, around 15 US dollars per month. People in Tanzania can only do salaried work if they have a work permit, which the refugees in the camps will not get; they say we already receive food and housing for free. So, I worked as a teacher and later became the assistant director of the school. In all honesty, this was very difficult for my

husband because he was left behind with my daughter (who had been born in the camp), and did not really know what to do with her. Our relationship struggled. Fortunately, he also eventually got a job with an NGO, which made him feel valuable again.

Then, in the camp something bad happened to me, again. A male refugee worker raped me. People from outside the camps think that such things do not happen, as this is supposed to be a safe place, but these things do happen. After he raped me, he fled the camp and I went to the police. I felt terrible. People began to speak negatively about me, and even blamed me, the victim. My husband also felt very bad, and considered divorcing me. Eventually, with lots of talking, we overcame the problem, and stayed together. Our relationship is good now.

In my work as a teacher, I tried to work as much as I could with disabled children. I like to work with them, and I am good at it. The management of World Vision, the NGO that was responsible for education in the camp, noticed this and I was appointed the *'Inspector for Special Education'*. After that, I could assist others to learn how to better care for children with disabilities. This is so essential, children with disabilities tend to be marginalised and are often treated very badly. Other children beat them, and throw stones, and the adults do nothing. Sometimes parents may even abandon their own children because they are disabled. Another terrible problem is the sexual abuse of children with disabilities. These kids are often very vulnerable, because they cannot express themselves, so many are raped and no one seems to care. I could not stand this, and tried to intervene, and talked to families, neighbours, and teachers.

World Vision had two programmes aimed specifically at empowering children and youth. They were called *'Child Voice Out'*

and *'Learn from Me'*. The goal was to give children and youth the opportunity to have their voices heard, and to take collective action to change things in their lives. It is amazing how much children often already understand about their lives and the situations surrounding them. I advocated for the inclusion of children with disabilities in these programmes. It is so important that children can express themselves. These programmes gave them the opportunity to do so through means of theatre, games and even radio programmes, all based on the problems they faced in their lives.

In 2010, I had additional training in psychosocial work. UN High Commissioner for Refugees and psychosocial trainers from HealthNet TPO Burundi organised a series of courses on community based psychosocial work. I liked this a lot, because it helped me to do the things that I already did, but in a more systematic way. I like to use different methods, such as organising support groups, individual counselling, and community mobilisation. In the camp, we started to work closely with other organisations involved in mental health and psychosocial support, such as those involved in HIV/AIDS work, or in projects against sexual and gender based violence. We also worked cooperatively with the psychiatric nurses who treat people with severe mental health problems and epilepsy. In this way, my own work became much more interesting, and more effective. In fact, I rediscovered hope. I learnt that the skills of psychosocial help can also work in your own life, and how to talk to people, or deal with conflicts in the family. It is, of course, not always easy because once people trust you as a helper, they tend to come and visit you often and everywhere. Sometimes people ask me how I can continue, but I do not feel that it is a burden. I am just like that.

I like to share what I have learned, and to help people. My faith also gives me strength. When it all becomes too difficult to cope with, I pray and feel relieved. Sometimes, the stories of girls and women who have been brutally raped are very hard to hear, but I tell them they need not be ashamed. That it happened to me as well, and that we can overcome the bad things that have happened to us.

In 2012, my family had the opportunity to resettle in Europe. After 10 years of living as a refugee, this was a great opportunity for our family. Given the continuous threats of my husband's half brothers, it was unlikely we could ever go back to Uvira. In July 2012, my husband, I, our daughter (who was born in the camp), and a child we had adopted, moved to the United Kingdom, with a group of five other Congolese refugee families. Initially, I was afraid to go out, on the streets. The people were dressed so differently; and some of the girls were almost naked, to my eyes. Also, on the streets no one seems to greet each other. This was a shock to me. Now, I am confident I will survive here and settle. My hope is that I will be able to continue to offer psychosocial

support to others. I have seen that this is important, also here in the UK, because many of African refugees feel very lonely, and the social connections are eroding. This is dangerous for wellbeing, and I hope that I can use my skills in community based psychosocial work, here, in my new home country as well.

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¹ Banyamulenge is a name for the ethnic Tuti's in South Kivu.

² Local armed groups of various ethnic origins, known for severe atrocities.

³ The Bembe are another ethnic group, living on the shores of Lake Tangayika.

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