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 Banyamulenge and the MaiMai. 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 husband’s father had two wives, one of whom was Bembe, 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
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 non-governmental 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 sup-
posed 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 over-
came 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 bet-
ter 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,
nighbours, 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 situ-
ations surrounding them. I advocated for
the inclusion of children with disabilities in
these programmes. It is so important that
children can express themselves. These pro-
grammes gave them the opportunity to do
so through means of theatre, games and even
radio programmes, all based on the pro-
blems they faced in their lives.

In 2010, I had additional training in psycho-
social 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 sup-
port groups, individual counselling, and
community mobilisation. In the camp, we
started to work closely with other organi-
ations involved in mental health and psycho-
social 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 interest-
ing, and more effective. In fact, I redis-
covered 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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