

## #HELMSHURTS Story: Congo

### Niala, 12: Return to Childhood

The staff at Panzi Hospital in Congo, which specializes in treating women with traumatic fistula from rape, is used to women arriving shell-shocked from trauma. But 12-year-old “Niala” was in such rough shape emotionally, staff was deeply concerned she might not make it. Niala was only 12 when she was raped, and she was pregnant.

Instead of love and support, her family rejected her. In their view, she had lost her virginity, reputation, and everyone could see it on her tiny 12-year-old frame.

She showed up at Panzi only with a very thin will to live, overwhelmed by the prospects of what life held for her with no family, no money, no home, no education, and a baby soon to arrive only reminded her of the extreme trauma of her rape.

When she gave birth, she delivered a still-born. While under normal circumstances this would be a devastating loss, for Niala, it was a reprieve. No, she still couldn’t return home. But with support from Panzi Hospital, she was able to dream about her future again. Panzi Executive Director Naama Haviv described Niala in their meeting as “all smiles and teenage self-assurance.”

“She told us she was starting school again this month. She told us she is going to work hard and that she wants to be a minister someday. She wants to help people.”

### Rebecca, 13: May It Be So

In her native language, “Rebecca’s” real name means listen, but don’t speak. Indeed, she was a very quiet girl when she showed up at Panzi Hospital. She was

raped when she was only 13, and became pregnant. Like so many girls raped in Congo, her family rejected her because of the perceived damage. She didn't want the baby she carried, but there was no choice. She delivered via C-Section. As Naama Haviv, Executive Director of Panzi Foundation USA put it, "her teenage body just wasn't ready to give birth."

Rebecca rejected the baby for weeks, refusing to name him or breastfeed him. Only with what Haviv terms, "serious psycho-social intervention could she accept the baby."

With the support of her best friend, Niala, she has now taken on mothering the baby boy, naming him, 'May it be so.' Her life is back on track with support services from Panzi Hospital, including school, vocational training, and full time day care— unheard of in Congo outside of Panzi.

### **Marta, Ange & Bisette, 12: Raped. Pregnant. Prostituted at 12.**

Marta was only 12 when she started 6th grade in primary school. She was happy in school. But three boys raped her, and she became pregnant. Her family rejected her. She had no other choice.

Ange was 12. She'd been expelled from home by her parents also. We've learned by now not to ask the painful "why" questions. Their downcast eyes and shrinking demeanor tell enough. Now she is 13 and five months pregnant. She doesn't know how she will take care of her child. "I can't even take care of myself," she says.

Bisette's father died, he was very ill. Something happened with her mother. She cannot live with her mother, and she has the same look as the other girls – telling us to stop asking. "I am independent," she says. "Sometimes I visit my uncle." Drop it, say her eyes, just leave it. "There was no one that could help us. I had to fight for survival. Especially now that I have a child, I have to fight to survive. This isn't what I would choose."

These girls, these children, "work"; in a brothel.

The men pay 1,000 Congolese Francs around \$1.00 for “quick sex.” They like the younger girls, so the brothels heavily recruit for them. They put the youngest girls out front to lure in the customers.

Sylvie gets about two customers a night. Sometimes the men pay, sometimes they don't. OK, many times they don't. But at least she's been tested for HIV. At least she sometimes uses condoms.

We learn that's maybe why she sometimes doesn't get paid. The men refuse to use condoms. So what do they do, do they go away, find another girl? No, says Bisette. When you refuse, they have sex with you anyway. Then they don't pay you, because you complained.

SAJECEK, a grassroots organization in the rough neighborhood, found 83 girls, aged 12-17, being exploited in brothels in the area.

Wait, did I just call it exploitation? Can we call it like it is? This is rape. These girls are 12, 13, 14. This is rape. Of children. They cannot consent, this is not a choice.

“What would you need to be able to stop this work?” we ask each of the girls.

Marta: “An alternative: school or work.”

Sylvie: “Education. And maybe some food.”

Ange: “What work? First I have to learn.”

Bisette: “Studies.”

Furaha, 14: 5 Days on Foot

After 14-year-old “Furaha's” mother died in the war, she stuck close to cousins and neighbors for her regular chores. But one day, when she and four of her cousins and neighbors walked to the river to collect water, they were abducted by a militia.

For months, Furaha and her cousins were held as sex slaves in the forest. Finally, when another militia attacked, they managed to flee their captors amid the chaos.

By that time, Furaha was pregnant.

With no possessions or money, at 28 weeks pregnant and hoping to find help, Furaha walked south for 5 days.

She reached Goma and went into labor. Women from a church took her to Heal Africa.

Furaha gave birth to a premature baby boy. She didn't want to keep him: He was a reminder of the torture she endured in the forest. She was only 15, had no skills or anywhere to go after she was released from the hospital. The baby was also severely disabled, due to the premature birth.

One of the nurses brought Furaha and the baby home. Others sent money for her to attend sewing classes to make a living.

But her son is severely developmentally delayed, and will likely never walk. And in Congo, there are no services or support for disabled children. So she couldn't take the sewing classes, even with the financial help.

As is common with girl survivors of rape, with little hope of a future, Furaha began acting out. She began engaging in highly risky sexual behavior.

Within a year, she was pregnant again.

### **Solange: A Life at Risk**

"Solange", a young woman, was disabled following the birth of her first child – a severe limp, dragging her leg behind her when she walked. When her home village was attacked by militia violence, she fled, and was separated from her family. In the chaos, she found her way to Goma's Heal Africa Hospital.

After basic medical tests, Solange was told she was 16-20 weeks pregnant. She was shocked and extremely distressed by the news. According to the American nurse who examined her, in her first birth, she likely experienced pre-eclampsia, an extremely dangerous disorder in which the blood pressure skyrockets, with associated seizures and strokes. This meant she was highly vulnerable to relapse during the second birth, and even with very close medical support, it could very likely result in her death (around 30,000 women die every year as a result of this complication in child birth).

### **Beatrice, 17**

“I am 17 years and my son will turn 2 years on the 28th of December 2015. I came to the center right after I heard from a neighbor about the opportunities the center is offering to disadvantaged women and children. When I came here, I was impressed by the warm way I was welcomed, and after I had spoken to the female social worker, I felt this center was the only chance I was still having to rebuild my life after it was destroyed. I was 15 years old when a pregnancy was forced on me. I was troubled, I gave birth to my son when he was only 7 months. Being a mother is the most difficult situation I ever went through in my life and when I was pregnant, I was shocked, afraid, was thinking of the end of my life. I was thinking I should terminate the pregnancy but it was difficult because I didn't know how to do it. I felt very bad when I was impregnated, my life was disrupted. I was left alone. Then I became comforted when I started hearing the stories of others. I am dreaming for a better future. I hope I will repair and mend my life the way we are learning to mend pieces of fabric and at the end they become whole useful pieces that people like to use. The sewing skills I am acquiring will help me. They are already helping me.”

### **Elodie, 19**

“I am 19 years old and my children are 3 years old. I came to the Women's center to learn bread making and sewing. I was impregnated when I was 15 years old. Being a mother is very difficult especially when I was giving birth. I thought of the end of my life that period. But today I love my daughters, taking care of two children is very difficult. My dream is to become self-sustaining one day and be able to take care of my children. The day I learned I was pregnant was as bad, terrible as it was when I was raped. I was saddened, surprised. I should have terminated the pregnancy but there was no way and I did not know how to do it.”

### **Cecile, 16**

“I am 16 years old. And my child is 1-year-old already. I came to the center primarily to join the literacy program since I had never been given the chance to

go to school because my parents were very poor and I was not their first priority. My life was destroyed by being impregnated when I was about 14 years old. I never wanted to become a mother at that age. I wanted to grow up like other girls. It's so difficult to be a mother. I have nobody. I have nothing. It's a very heavy burden for me to be a mother. My dream is to become one day a person able to take care of myself and my child. When I knew I was pregnant, I was under a high shock. I felt I should die and stop suffering on this world. My father left my family several years ago and went to a gold mining site and had never come. We have no idea if he will come back or not. I have no idea what my future or the future of will look like. I think I should kill myself.”

### **Valentina, 17**

“I will turn 17 years old in a week. I came to this Women’s Community Center because I had no other choice. I live here, this center has become everything for me: My shelter, my home and my family, and above all my comfort and my new hope. My daughter will be 2 years old in February 23rd. I came to this center to learn sewing skills and literacy. Being a mother is so hard, very difficult. My daughter and myself have nobody and nothing except the new hope we are getting from the Mumosho Community Women’s Centre. I was impregnated when I was in grade 3 secondary school. That was the beginning of destruction of my life. My dream is to rebuild my life one day but not really sure how I will go about it. I need to become able to take care of myself, and my child. My father was killed when I was 12 years old. My entire life has been a suffering. My other dream is to get a chance to go back to school one day and study Law and become a lawyer to defend and protect the oppressed.

### **Marie, 16**

“I am 16 years old. My daughter is 6 months old. I came here to learn new life skills. My life is worthless for the time being. I am living a very bad life because of being a mother unexpectedly. I am dreaming to be able to go back to school, get a job, take care of myself, and my child. When I knew I was pregnant, I felt to be the most misfortunate person in the world. I was raped but it was only after 3 months that I knew I was pregnant. I wanted to kill myself. I was not sure I would survive

the pregnancy and I never wanted to be pregnant. My dream is to become able to take care of myself, my child, and my mom. The programs at the women's Center have transformed my life at different levels."

### **Antonia, 17**

"I am 17 years old and I am so unhappy to be what I have become. I came to this center because I wanted to learn some vocational skills after I was impregnated and was forced to cut off school. Being a mother for me is the most difficult thing and situation I've ever gone through. It is difficult to take care of a child when you have nobody, you have nothing. I want and dream to become a Medical Doctor. When I knew I was pregnant, I felt it was the end of my life and I was not able to terminate the pregnancy because it was force on me."

### **Julie, 17**

"I am 17 years old and my son is 1 year and six months old. I came to the center to get an opportunity to rebuild my life. I have no father, no mother. I was unfortunately impregnated by unknown armed people who raped me. It is very difficult to be a mother, especially when you have to provide support to the child, when he's sick or hungry and you have nothing to meet these needs. My dream!!! I had never been lucky to go to school because my parents died when I was 11 years old. I suffered and I am suffering a lot. The only moment I feel I am a person is when I come here at the women's center to be in a group. I dream to become able to work for myself and be able to help my child and myself. I had no ways to terminate the pregnancy. I did not know what to do when I discovered I was pregnant. I was afraid, I was thinking I was going to die of the pregnancy. My life has been paralyzed entirely."

### **Panzi: 50 Babies**

According to Naama Haviv, approximately 50 children are being raised at the Panzi Hospital in Bukavu, where their mothers, primarily survivors of rape, left them. "Those women are never coming back. The children think Dr. Mukwege is their father."

### **Wandolyn: Rejecting a Baby from Rape from “Gift from God”**

“Wandolyn” was brutally gang raped by Congolese soldiers. Despite her husband’s efforts to hide the attack, Wandolyn developed severe infections from her injuries, and had to seek medical help. It was there she learned she was pregnant.

Severely traumatized by the rape, Wandolyn rejected her baby girl for months and later spent 9 months in a mental hospital to try and deal with the trauma.

Below is her story, in her words, with some quotes.

“I was so sad about my pregnancy. I didn’t know what to do. I preferred dying than remaining with that pregnancy as days went by.

“I delivered a baby girl. They brought the baby to me. I didn’t even like to hear about that baby. I didn’t even like to see that baby as I considered it the source of my misery and suffering. I said I wouldn’t even look at that baby. Whenever they brought that baby to me, I was crying with the presence of the baby.

“They had to ask other women in maternity to give some milk from their breasts to the baby. After 2 months the doctors called me and told me they were tired of asking milk for the baby. They asked me to take the baby. I said no. The presence of the baby was a stimulus to me. I was suffering a lot when seeing the baby.”