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The Restoration of Moral Values in the Democratic Republic of the Congo

Denis Mukwege

2014 Inamori Ethics Prize recipient

Ladies and gentlemen, distinguished guests,

It is an honor to be here tonight to receive the Inamori Prize for Ethics. For many years, this award has symbolized the preservation of morality within our human society.

I dedicate this award to all my fellow citizens of the DR Congo who have undergone physical and moral destruction over the years; I dedicate it to all victims of various armed conflicts that we underwent in the DRC during the last sixteen years, especially the women of Congo; and then I dedicate it to the human society that is just waking up to address the suffering endured by women and children in my country, in the heart of Africa.

Over the last sixteen years, we treated thousands of cases of rape and sexual violence and provided the survivors with medical, mental, social, and legal support. Our care kept shifting, adjusting to the constantly changing aspect of the crimes which kept increasing in atrocity. Women have suffered in the DR Congo at an unimaginable level. Unfortunately, the overwhelming scourge led us to ignore the indirect victims of these crimes: men.

From the start of the violence, in 1998, we did not take into account the moral destruction of our society. We thought we were dealing only with armed groups and that the war would pass—as is often the case everywhere—where peace eventually takes over. Unfortunately, during the sixteen years that followed, besides the women victims of violence, there were men, overlooked by all of us—the men whose wives, daughters, sisters, or mothers had been raped, but also those who simply were forced, sometimes at a very young age, to witness the rapes or participate.

Those strategies obviously aimed to destroy the core of families, communities, and the whole local society of the Kivu region. That plague that was brought to our Congolese communities infected many areas over time. Today, we are beginning to receive cases of rape way beyond the region initially affected, but mostly beyond understanding.

For the last two years, for example, we have been receiving at Panzi hospital children under ten years old, raped in the most atrocious way imaginable. We could not even imagine such a thing before. The youngest victim was eighteen months old. Faced with such a baby-victim, I must admit that even we doctors are beginning to wonder if we are still dealing with crimes committed by beings of our human species. Even animals cannot do such things to their own cubs.

Recently we received two girls, less than twelve years old, from Lubumbashi in Katanga Province, 1,400 km from Bukavu. Evil seems to be turning into a contagion.

Things are getting worse. We realize that in addition to the care and support we are already providing, we must rapidly engage in the mental health and the restoration of moral values in our society. We have the impression that we are dealing with a cancer that continues to spread and continuously mutates into new forms, becoming more and more difficult to identify and neutralize.

Yet, unlike a virus like Ebola, which we have seen the world lately unite and mobilize against, rape has not had the same worldwide mobilization over the years, although it is a voluntary barbaric act that every human can decide to reject and eradicate, that does not require microscopes or research centers in order to find a vaccine. We can make rape and violence against women and children a shame that every man will fear committing. That would be the beginning of the restoration of our morality, the restoration of hope.

To this date, some people are still denying or ignoring the scourge of rape and violence in the DR Congo, probably because they live peacefully far from the issue. We are all human and our denial will not spare us from the long-term effects of sexual violence, especially with globalization and the world becoming smaller every day. Our fate and our moral values are bonded and interlinked. We need to unite against the wrongs of our human society, wherever they occur: Syria, Ukraine, or the DR Congo.

Although most of the time we tend to focus on the physical and visible wounds, the consequences of wars and armed struggles are far more serious than what we can imagine.

In the DR Congo, terror has led to a general stampede and created the spirit of “every man for himself.” A community that was bonded yesterday has now become completely dislocated.

Husbands whose wives had been raped went into hiding, far from their community to escape the burden of humiliation. It has been the same for

the sons or brothers. The victims themselves also went to take refuge in new villages or cities to avoid stigmatization. In those new locations, for survival, some engage in prostitution or other criminal acts. Children resulting from rape or those who had been lost or abandoned, finding themselves in an uncertain life, became young prostitutes or young soldiers themselves. All that spins back to the creation of a future generation of people without morality at all, youngsters who have been taught to kill, to destroy, and to do anything to survive, no matter how evil.

In an area where HIV cases were at a particularly low percentage, we have had a sudden surge and we regularly receive new cases at our hospital. In a region where community protection was the norm, now impunity has taken over because more and more youngsters can relate more to the wrong than the right. We need to create a solidarity pattern with those victims, caring for them, restoring them instead of considering them as outcasts, which eventually leads them to form a community of their own, a community of the rejected.

Attacks in rural areas have caused a massive rural exodus, creating a surge and concentration of people in towns unable to find work, thus not generating an income. Schools can no longer fit all young students.

Intellectuals would now rather use their knowledge and skills to flee the country rather than remain in such uncertain life. The cities are thus left on their own, without reference or anyone else to put these markers in place.

But beyond all this, I did not come to just talk about problems. We saw glimmers of hope: first by women survivors themselves; some have taken back their lives, refused to give up. It encourages us doctors.

We have hope because of women like Mrs. X whom, after being raped and infected with HIV, was forced by her attackers to commit the worst atrocities, to drink the blood of her own massacred children. She managed to survive up to this date, with one daughter left, who is twelve years old today and goes to school, paid by her single mother. She was given twenty dollars about ten years ago. Today she owns the land on which she built a house and has a savings of nearly ten thousand dollars.

We have hope because groups of men have formed in villages and neighborhoods with the goal of transforming their society, taking a new look and consideration toward women who used to be considered inferior beings, mere servants with the main role of reproducing. Now men are listening and collaborating with their female partners over family responsibilities.

We have hope because we have been blessed with a country that has so many resources that we would like to share with the rest of the world.

From our human resources to our overwhelming natural resources, with the most fertile land in Africa, we can turn former criminals into productive farmers or fishermen in the thousands of miles of rivers crossing the rainforest that naturally balances world pollution and climate change. We have so much to offer to the whole world.

We have hope because Inamori believes in our struggle for the preservation of human morality.

Thank you again for your support and encouragement.