

## CHAPTER FIVE

### *The Shame of "Honor"*

If a man takes a wife and, after lying with her, dislikes her and slanders her and gives her a bad name, saying, "I married this woman, but when I approached her, I did not find proof of her virginity," then the girl's father and mother . . . shall display the cloth [that the couple slept on] before the elders of the town. . . . If, however, the charge is true and no proof of the girl's virginity can be found, she shall be brought to the door of her father's house and there the men of her town shall stone her to death.

— DEUTERONOMY 22:13-21

**O**f all the things that people do in the name of God, killing a girl because she doesn't bleed on her wedding night is among the most cruel. Yet the hymen—fragile, rarely seen, and pretty pointless—remains an object of worship among many religions and societies around the world, the simulacrum of honor. No matter how much gold may sell for, a hymen is infinitely more valuable. It is frequently worth more than a human life.

The cult of virginity has been exceptionally widespread. Not only does the Bible advocate stoning girls to death when they fail to bleed on their wedding sheets, but Solon, the great lawgiver of ancient Athens, prescribed that no Athenian could be sold into slavery save a woman who lost her virginity before marriage. In China, a neo-Confucian saying from the Song Dynasty declares: "For a woman to starve to death is a small matter, but for her to lose her chastity is a calamity."

This harsh view has dissipated in most of the world, but survives in the Middle East, and this emphasis on sexual honor is today a major reason for violence against women. Sometimes it takes the form of rape, because—as with Mukhtar—often the simplest way to punish a rival family is to violate the daughter. Sometimes it takes the form of

honor killing, in which a family kills one of its own girls because she has behaved immodestly or has fallen in love with a man (often there is no proof that they have had sex, and autopsies of victims of honor killings frequently reveal the hymen to be intact). The paradox of honor killings is that societies with the most rigid moral codes end up sanctioning behavior that is supremely immoral: murder.

Du'a Aswad was a beautiful Kurdish girl living in northern Iraq. She was seventeen years old when she fell in love with a Sunni Arab boy. One night she stayed out with him. Nobody knows if they actually slept together, but her family assumed that they had. When Du'a returned the next morning, she saw the rage in her family and ran to seek shelter in the home of a tribal elder, but religious leaders and her own family members insisted that she must die. So eight men stormed the elder's house and dragged her out into the street, as a large crowd gathered around her.

Honor killings are illegal in Iraqi Kurdistan, but security forces were present as Du'a was attacked, and they did not interfere. At least one thousand men joined in the assault. So many men in the crowd shot video clips with their cell phones that on the Web you can find a half-dozen versions of what happened next.

Du'a was thrown to the ground, and her black skirt was ripped off to humiliate her. Her long, thick hair cascaded around her shoulders. She tried to get up, but the men kicked her around as if she were a soccer ball. Frantic, she tried to fend off the blows, to get up, to cover herself, to find a sympathetic face in the crowd. Then the men gathered rocks and concrete blocks and dropped them on her. Most rolled off, but she began bleeding. Some of the rocks struck her head. It took thirty minutes for Du'a to die.

When she was dead and could no longer feel shame, some men in the crowd covered her legs and bottom again. This seemed to be meant as a sanctimonious gesture of righteousness, as if the obscenity were a teenage girl's bare flesh rather than her bleeding corpse.

The United Nations Population Fund has estimated that there are 5,000 honor killings a year, almost all in the Muslim world (Pakistan's government uncovered 1,261 honor killings in 2003 alone). But that estimate appears too low, because so many of the executions are disguised as accidents or suicides. Our estimate is that at least 6,000, and probably far more, honor killings take place annually around the world.

In any case, that figure doesn't begin to capture the scope of the problem, because it doesn't include what might be called honor rapes—those rapes intended to disgrace the victim or demean her clan. In recent genocides, rape has been used systematically to terrorize certain ethnic groups. Mass rape is as effective as slaughtering people, yet it doesn't leave corpses that lead to human rights prosecutions. And rape tends to undermine the victim groups' tribal structures, because leaders lose authority when they can't protect the women. In short, rape becomes a tool of war in conservative societies precisely because female sexuality is so sacred. Codes of sexual honor, in which women are valued based on their chastity, ostensibly protect women, but in fact they create an environment in which women are systematically dishonored.

In Darfur, it gradually became clear that the Sudanese-sponsored Janjaweed militias were seeking out and gang-raping women of three African tribes, then cutting off their ears or otherwise mutilating them to mark them forever as rape victims. To prevent the outside world from knowing, the Sudanese government punished women who reported rapes or sought medical treatment. When one student, Hawa, was gang-raped and beaten by the Janjaweed outside Kalma camp, her friends carried her to a clinic run by Doctors of the World, an aid group. Two French nurses immediately began caring for her injuries, but several truckloads of police stormed the clinic, pushed aside the French nurses who tried valiantly to resist, and burst in on Hawa. They dragged her out of the clinic and carried her off to prison, where she was chained to a cot by an arm and a leg.

The crime? Fornication, for by seeking treatment she was acknowledging that she had engaged in sex before marriage, and she did not provide the mandatory four adult male Muslim eyewitnesses to prove that it was rape. Sudan also blocked aid groups from bringing into Darfur postexposure prophylaxis kits, which can greatly reduce the risk that a rape victim will be infected with HIV.

Mass rapes have been reported at stunning levels in recent conflicts. Half of the women in Sierra Leone endured sexual violence or the threat of it during the upheavals in that country, and a United Nations report claims that 90 percent of girls and women over the age of three were sexually abused in parts of Liberia during civil war there. Even in places like Pakistan, where there is no genocide or all-out war, honor rapes arise from an obsession with virginity and from the authorities'

indifference to injustices suffered by the poor and uneducated. Shah Syed, a prominent gynecologist in Karachi, says that he frequently treats young girls from the slums after rapes. And then, unless the girl kills herself, the family has to move away; otherwise, the perpetrators—who are usually rich and well connected—will terrorize the family and eliminate them as witnesses. And the police are worse than indifferent.

“When I treat rape victims, I tell the girls not to go to the police,” Dr. Syed added. “Because if a girl goes to the police, the police will rape her.”

The world capital of rape is the eastern Congo. Militias consider it risky to engage in firefights with other gunmen, so instead they assault civilians. They discovered that the most cost-effective way to terrorize civilian populations is to conduct rapes of stunning brutality. Frequently the Congolese militias rape women with sticks or knives or bayonets, or else they fire their guns into the women’s vaginas. In one instance, soldiers raped a three-year-old girl and then fired their guns into her. When surgeons saw her, there was no tissue left to repair. The little girl’s grief-stricken father then committed suicide.

“All militias here rape women, to show their strength and to show your weakness,” said Julienne Chakupewa, a rape counselor in Goma, Congo. “In other places, there is rape because the soldiers want a woman. Here, it’s that but also a viciousness, a mentality of hatred, and it’s women who pay the price.”

“We say ‘women,’” Julienne added quickly, “but these victims are not adults. They are girls of fourteen, even children of six.”

In 2008, the United Nations formally declared rape a “weapon of war,” and Congo came up constantly in the discussions. Major General Patrick Cammaert, a former United Nations force commander, spoke of the spread of rape as a war tactic and said something haunting: “It has probably become more dangerous to be a woman than a soldier in an armed conflict.”

One of those Congolese victims is Dina, a seventeen-year-old from the town of Kindu. She wore a blue shirt and bright multicolored skirt as she told us her story, an orange head scarf fastened demurely over her head. Dina was shy, speaking softly through an interpreter, and she smiled often in nervousness.

One of six children, Dina grew up working on her parents’ farm,

growing bananas, cassava, and beans. Two of her brothers attended school for a bit, but none of the daughters did. “It’s more important to educate boys,” she explained, and she seemed to believe it.

All the local residents knew that there were soldiers from the Hutu Interahamwe militia in the area, so Dina was fearful whenever she went out to farm the crops. But the alternative was to starve. One day, because of the danger, Dina cut short her work in her bean field and headed back to town well before sunset. As she was walking home, five Hutu militia members surrounded her. They had guns and knives and forced her to the ground. One of them was carrying a stick.

“If you cry out, we will kill you,” one of them told Dina. So she kept quiet as, one by one, the five men raped her. Then they held her down as one of them shoved the stick inside her.

When Dina didn’t come home, her father and friends bravely went out to the fields, and there they found her, half dead in the grass. They covered her and carried her back to her home. There was a health center in Kindu, but Dina’s family couldn’t afford to take her: there to be treated, so she was cared for only at home. She lay paralyzed in her bed, unable to walk. The stick had broken into her bladder and rectum, causing a fistula, or hole, in the tissues. As a result, urine and feces trickled constantly through her vagina and down her legs. These injuries, rectovaginal and vesicovaginal fistulas, are common in Congo because of sexual violence.

“My people had no tribal conflict with them,” Dina said of the soldiers. “Their only purpose was to rape me and leave me bleeding and leaking wastes.” This culture of brutality spread from militia to militia, from tribe to tribe. In just the Congolese province of South Kivu, the UN estimates that there were twenty-seven thousand sexual assaults in 2006. By another UN accounting, three quarters of the women in some areas had been raped. John Holmes, the UN undersecretary general for humanitarian affairs, says flatly: “The sexual violence in Congo is the worst in the world.”

One of the warlords whose troops have been implicated in the rapes is Laurent Nkunda, a tall, genial man who served us dinner in his comfortable mountain lair. He passes himself off as a Pentecostal pastor and piously wore a REBELS FOR CHRIST button on his uniform, apparently because he thought it would win him American support. Before he offered us drinks and snacks, he said grace. Nkunda insisted that his troops never rape anybody, adding that the only time one of his sol-



diers did rape a woman, he executed the soldier. Yet everyone knows that rape is routine. When Nkundanda presented some of the prisoners of war whom his soldiers had seized from rival armed militias, we asked them about rape.

"If we see girls, it's our right," said one, Noel Rwabirimba, a sixteen-year-old who said he had carried a gun for two years. "We can violate them."

United Nations peacekeepers did little to stop the rapes. Former ambassador Stephen Lewis of Canada, one of the most eloquent advocates for the world's women, has suggested that UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon should make mass rape a priority and pledge to resign if member countries don't support him. "We're talking about more than fifty percent of the world's population, amongst whom are the most uprooted, disinherited and impoverished of the earth," Lewis said. "If you can't stand up for the women of the world, then you shouldn't be Secretary-General."

Women have suffered grievously in the genocides of Rwanda and Darfur. Men, too. In Rwanda, when the genocide was over, 70 percent of the country's population was female because so many more men were killed. In Darfur, after interviewing several women who told of having been raped when leaving their camps to get firewood, we asked the obvious question: "If women are raped when they get firewood, then why don't they stay in the camp? Why don't the men collect firewood?"

"When men leave the camp, they're shot dead," one of the women

explained patiently. "When the women leave, they're *only* raped." In almost every conflict, mortality is disproportionately male. But whereas men are the normal victims of war, women have become a weapon of war—meant to be disfigured or tortured to terrorize the rest of the population. To travel in eastern Congo and talk to villagers is to uncover layers and layers of routinized rape. In a camp for displaced people, we asked to speak to a rape victim, and one was immediately brought over. To ensure her privacy, we took her under a tree away from other people, but after ten minutes a long line of women formed nearby.

"What are you all doing here?" we asked.

"We're all rape victims," explained the woman in front. "We're waiting to tell our stories, too."

For Dina, lying incontinent and paralyzed in her home, life seemed to be over. Then neighbors began telling her family about a hospital where doctors could fix injuries like hers. The hospital is called HEAL Africa, and it is located in Goma, the biggest city in eastern Congo. The family contacted HEAL Africa's representative, and he arranged for a missionary plane to carry Dina to Goma for treatment. HEAL Africa covered the expense.

Dina was taken from the Goma airstrip by ambulance to the HEAL Africa hospital; it was the first time she had ever ridden in a car. Nurses gave her a plastic diaper and put her together with dozens of other women, all of whom were incontinent because of fistulas. This gave Dina the courage to try to stand and walk. The nurses gave her a crutch and helped her hobble about. They fed her and began a course of physical therapy, and added her name to a list of women waiting for fistula surgery. When Dina's day came, a doctor successfully sewed up her rectovaginal fistula. Then she underwent more physical therapy as she prepared for a second operation to repair the hole in her bladder. Meanwhile, Dina began to wonder what she would do postsurgery, and she decided to stay for the time being in Goma.

"If I return to Kindu," she explained, "I'll just be raped again." Yet after the second surgery, which also succeeded, Dina decided to go back to Kindu after all. She missed her family, and in any case the war was also reaching into Goma. It seemed to Dina that she might be just as vulnerable if she stayed, so she chose to return to the maelstrom of Kindu.

## "Study Abroad"—in the Congo

In the cauldron of violence and misogyny that is eastern Congo, the HEAL Africa hospital where Dina was treated is a sanctuary of dignity. It is a large compound of low white buildings where patients are respected. It's an example of an aid project that makes an extraordinary difference in people's lives. And one of those helping patients like Dina is a young American woman named Harper McConnell.

Harper has long, dirty-blond hair and very white skin that seems to redden more than tan under the tropical sun. She dresses casually, and with the exception of African necklaces dangling on her collar, she looks as if she could be on an American university campus. Yet here she is in war-torn Congo, speaking excellent Swahili and bantering with her new friends who grew up in the Congolese bush. She has taken a path that more young Americans should consider—traveling to the developing world to "give back" to people who desperately need the assistance.

Young people often ask us how they can help address issues like sex trafficking or international poverty. Our first recommendation to them is to get out and see the world. If you can't do that, it's great to raise money or attention at home. But to tackle an issue effectively, you need to understand it—and it's impossible to understand an issue by simply reading about it. You need to see it firsthand, even live in its midst.

One of the great failings of the American education system, in our view, is that young people can graduate from university without any understanding of poverty at home or abroad. Study-abroad programs tend to consist of herds of students visiting Oxford or Florence or Paris. We believe that universities should make it a requirement that all graduates spend at least some time in the developing world, either by taking a "gap year" or by studying abroad. If more Americans worked for a summer teaching English at a school like Mukhtar's in Pakistan, or working at a hospital like HEAL Africa in Congo, our entire society would have a richer understanding of the world around us. And the rest of the world might also hold a more positive view of Americans.

Young people, women especially, often worry about the safety of vol-



**H**arper McConnell  
with a friend  
at the HEAL Africa  
hospital in Congo  
(Nicholas D. Kristof)

unteering abroad. There are, of course, legitimate concerns about disease and violence, but mostly there is the exaggerated fear of the unknown—the mirror image of the nervousness that Africans or Indians feel when they travel to America for their studies. In reality, Americans and Europeans are usually treated hospitably in the developing world, and are much less likely to be robbed in an African village than in Paris or Rome. The most dangerous part of living in a poor country is often the driving, since no one wears seat belts, and red lights—if they exist—tend to be regarded as mere suggestions.

American women sometimes do get unwanted notice, particularly if they are blond, but it's rarely threatening. Once women have settled in at their destination, they usually find it safer than they had imagined. Western women are often exempt from local indignities and harassment, partly because local men find them intimidating. Women volunteers often have more options than men do. For example, in conservative cultures, it may be inappropriate for an American man to teach female students or even talk to women, while an American woman may well be able to teach either boys or girls and to mix with local men and women alike.

There are countless opportunities to volunteer at the grassroots. Most of the aid programs we refer to in this book welcome volunteers, as long as they stay for a few months to make the visit worth the trouble. We've noted contact information for these organizations in the appendix. Time spent in Congo and Cambodia might not be as pleasant as in Paris, but it will be life-changing.

Harper, who grew up in Michigan and Kansas, was studying political science and English at the University of Minnesota, not sure what she would do afterward. She had studied poverty and development and was feeling restless and pressured with graduation looming. Then, in May of her senior year, she heard that her church was exploring a relationship with a hospital in Congo. The church, Upper Room, in Edina, Minnesota, understood something important: The congregation should not just be writing checks but also getting actively involved. So Harper talked to her pastor about the Congo arrangement, and by the end of the meeting Harper had agreed to go live in Goma to oversee the relationship with the HEAL Africa hospital.

"We want to educate our congregation about eastern Congo and give them the chance to come and see life here," she says. "I also provide the church with the reality on the ground to make sure that projects which are dreamed up in offices in the United States actually meet the needs in the field."

Harper stays in a nice Western-style house in Goma, with the couple who founded the HEAL Africa hospital: a Congolese doctor, Jo Lusi, and his wife, Lyn, from England. Jo and Lyn take up one room in the house, which is always crowded with visitors and guests. And while it provides a sanctuary from the chaos of Congo, the generator still goes off at 10 p.m.—and don't count on a hot shower. Then there's the countryside, which often feels as if it's a century or two behind Goma. One day Harper was bubbling with news: "One of our teams just went to a village that hadn't seen a car since the 1980s. They called it 'a walking house.'"

HEAL Africa is a major hospital. Officially it has 150 beds, but there are usually 250 patients, and it manages to accommodate them. There are 14 doctors and a total staff of 210, all of whom are Congolese except for Lyn, Harper, and one other person. The hospital manages to have clean sheets, but there are still just two gynecologists in an area with 5 million people. Getting electricity, water, and bandages for the hospital is a nightmare, and corruption is overwhelming. In 2002, a nearby volcano erupted, and when the lava reached the building the hospital burst into flames. Most of the hospital grounds were covered in eight feet of lava, but with support from American donors, the hospital was rebuilt as soon as the lava had cooled.

For a young, single person, living in a place like Goma can be tedious and confining. Harper broke up with her boyfriend of two

years when she moved to Congo, and although she regularly gets marriage proposals from drivers, there isn't any dating scene. Once she contracted malaria and ended up in her own hospital. But she felt a measure of pride at finally enduring the standard African ailment. As she was lying feverishly in her hospital bed, nourished by an IV drip, she awoke thinking that she saw Ben Affleck looming over her hospital bed. She soon realized it was not a figment of her delirium: Affleck was visiting Congo and had come by to wish her well.

There are also compensations for the lack of shopping malls and Netflix movies. Harper has undertaken two major projects that make her excited to get out of bed each morning. First, she started a school at the hospital for children awaiting medical treatment. It can take several months before children with orthopedic problems receive care, and they often come from rural areas with no decent schools. So Harper found teachers and put together a classroom. The children now can go to school six days a week. At the age of twenty-three, Harper became the principal of her own school.

Second, Harper started a skills-training program for women awaiting surgery. Many of the patients, like Dina, spend months at the hospital, and they can now use the time to learn to sew, read, weave baskets, make soap, and bake bread. Typically a woman chooses one of the skills and then works with a trainer until she is confident that she can make a living at it. When the woman leaves, HEAL Africa gives her the raw materials she needs—even a pedal sewing machine, if she has learned tailoring—so that she can generate income for her family afterward. Those who have trouble absorbing vocational skills are at least given a big block of salt so that they can break it up and sell little bags of salt in the market to survive. The ability to earn a living transforms the women's lives.

"The women are so excited about Harper's program," said Dada Byamungu, whom Harper hired to teach sewing. As we talked, a raucous group of women surrounded Harper, teasing her and thanking her in Swahili, all at the same time—and she was laughing and retorting in rapid-fire Swahili. Dada translated what the women were saying: "They say that they will lift Harper up and make her their queen!"

If you were to come to dinner at our home, you would see lovely woven reed placemats made by women at HEAL Africa. Harper has set up a little shop at the hospital to sell goods like these that the women are making, and she's trying to sell them on the Internet and in

American department stores as well. If you're an American university student, there's something else that Harper did that may be more relevant: She is setting up a study-abroad program for Americans who want to spend a month at ULPGI, a university in Goma. The Americans will take courses with Congolese students, spend time in the classroom and the field, and write research papers together in small groups.

Harper also tries to encourage donors in the United States. The hospital has an annual budget of \$1.4 million, more than one third of which is contributed by individual Americans (more information is at [www.healafrika.org](http://www.healafrika.org)). Only 2 percent of those donations go to overhead and administrative expenses; the rest is plowed into the hospital. The hospital even accepts gifts of airline miles, to fly staff back and forth, and it eagerly welcomes volunteers and visitors.

"I'd rather have someone come here and see what's going on than write a check for one or two thousand dollars, because that visit is going to change their life," Harper says. "I have the privilege of hearing from church members and other visitors about how their time at HEAL Africa has turned their worldview upside down and changed their lifestyle at home."

As Harper jabbars away in Swahili with her African friends, it's clear that she is getting as well as giving. She agrees:

There are times when all I want is a fast Internet connection, a latte, and a highway to drive on. Yet the greetings I receive in the morning from my coworkers are enough to keep me here. I have the blessing of carrying a purse sewn by a woman waiting for fistula surgery at the hospital and watching how these new skills have changed her whole composure and confidence, of celebrating with my Congolese friend who was accepted for a job right after he graduated from university, of seeing children in school who previously never had the chance, of rejoicing with a family over their improved harvest, of dancing with my coworkers over a grant awarded for a program. The main factor that separates me from my friends here is the opportunities I was given as a first-world citizen, and I believe it is my responsibility to work so that these opportunities are available to all.

## CHAPTER SIX

*Maternal Mortality—One Woman a Minute*

Preparation for death is that most Reasonable and Seasonable thing, to which you must now apply yourself.

—COTTON MATHER, IN A SERMON,  
ADVISING PREGNANT WOMEN

No one reading this book, we hope, can fathom the sadistic cruelty of those soldiers who used a pointed stick to tear apart Dina's insides. But there is also a milder, more diffuse cruelty of indifference, and it is global indifference that leaves some 3 million women and girls incontinent just like Dina. Fistulas like hers are common in the developing world but, outside of Congo, are overwhelmingly caused not by rape but by obstructed labor and lack of medical care during childbirth. Most of the time, such women don't get any surgical help to repair their fistulas, because maternal health and childbirth injuries are rarely a priority.

For every Dina, there are hundreds like Mahabouba Muhammad, a tall woman who grew up in western Ethiopia. Mahabouba has light chocolate skin and frizzy hair that she ties back; today, she tells her story easily, for the most part, occasionally punctuated with self-mocking laughter, but there are moments when the old pain shines through in her eyes. Mahabouba was raised in a village near the town of Jimma, and her parents divorced when she was a child. As a result, she was handed over to her father's sister, who didn't educate her and generally treated her as a servant. So Mahabouba and her sister ran off together to town and worked as maids in exchange for room and board.

"Then a neighbor told me he could find better work for me," Mahabouba recalled. "He sold me for eighty birr [ten dollars]. He got the money, I didn't. I thought I was going to work for the man who bought me, in his house. But then he raped me and beat me. He said