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Behind the Scenes: Suffering, Writ Large

By [KASSIE BRACKEN](#)

To the left of the metal detectors, below the General Assembly chamber, an image looms — 7 feet tall and 10 feet wide. In it, Amandine sits facing a white clay wall, her back to the camera. Her face is not visible, nor is her belly, swollen in pregnancy.

Amandine, 14, is one of many victims of sexual violence in Congo.

The photograph's size means it cannot be missed by diplomats and tourists as they walk through the north lobby of the United Nations headquarters. Perhaps some will feel compelled to stop and read the picture caption, with unpalatable terms like “obstetric fistula.” Perhaps some will feel empathy for girls like Amandine. Perhaps some will feel compelled to try to make a change in Congo.

But [Leslie Thomas](#) is sure of one thing: people will notice. “We believe in big,” she said, “really really big. You cannot lock this stuff away in a box or make it arcane.”

Ms. Thomas is the founding executive and creative director of [Art Works Projects](#) and the curator of its traveling photography exhibition “[Congo/Women](#),” currently on view at the U.N.

She hopes that by increasing the visibility of conflicts — quite literally — she will “grab the attention of those not normally concerned with human rights.”

Orange lettering on the wall at the United Nations proclaims, “The average lifespan of a woman in the Democratic Republic of Congo is 46 years.” It is one of many grim statistics for a troubled region. The area's rich natural and mineral resources have made it susceptible to political corruption. And rape is a common weapon of war during periods of instability.

[Last month, Lens highlighted the work of Dominic Nahr in "[Uneasy Congo](#)."]

The photography in “Congo/Women” — together with essays and video interviews online — explores the systemic violence against women, and the political and economic factors that sustain it. The images are provocative and disturbing: a malnourished child being measured in a clinic; the severed arm of a mother of three, lost while defending her children; a 70-year-old victim of gang rape awaiting counseling; child soldiers leaning against a fence, machine guns in tow.

The image of Amandine (*Slide 13*), taken in Goma by [Lynsey Addario](#), is one of 38 photographs in the exhibit, which includes the work of Marcus Bleasdale, Ron Haviv and James Nachtwey. The collection includes eight larger-than-life-sized color portraits, punctuated by smaller black-and-white images (all of them dye-sublimation prints on fabric).

“What saddens me in most of these situations is when the civilians become so inured to the misery and pain that they barely react anymore,” said Ms. Addario, who has worked in many conflict zones. “I have interviewed a countless number of women in the D.R.C. who simply speak about their assault as if it were part of their fate, and unavoidable.”

Mr. Bleasdale said: “You speak with the father, you speak with the mother, and they praise God their child hasn’t been raped yet. But they assume it will happen.”

For Ms. Thomas, the ultimate goal is to help humanity by putting these photographs in the public eye, as well as in front of policymakers. She said she was inspired to try to make a difference three years ago, after reading an account of an ethnic killing of a Sudanese child. “I was holding my baby, and I just cried and cried when I read this,” she said.

Her initial idea, to produce a documentary, seemed potentially too time-consuming. Then the concept came to her of projecting enormous images onto museum exteriors. She recalled facing only three challenges: “We didn’t know any photojournalists. We didn’t know how to project images. And we had no money.”

Undaunted, she built a group of volunteers, photographers and sponsors for the first project, “[Darfur/Darfur](#),” in which images of the Sudanese conflict are projected on to building facades. Since 2007, “Darfur/Darfur” has been seen in more than 35 cities.

In the case of “Congo/Women,” Ms. Thomas was inspired by an image Mr. Bleasdale took in Mungbwalu in 2004 (*Slide 6*). It shows a baby cradled by many hands, bathed in water and light. It could be a baptism, but the caption offers a cruel revelation: it is the funeral preparation for Sakura Lisi, an 8-month-old victim of anemia brought on by malaria. Mr. Bleasdale had met Sakura’s family members 10 days earlier, as they searched desperately for medicine.

Of the image, he said: “It was just so much tenderness — the ultimate showing of a mother’s love. What you can’t hear in this image is the mother whispering goodbye to her.”

Another poignant story is told by an image of the feet of Lucie, a 16-year-old whom Ms. Addario met in a shelter in Goma (*Slide 12*). Her swollen toes and discolored skin offer the only visible clues to her fate. Handicapped by elephantiasis, Lucie could not run away when fighting broke out in her hometown. She was raped and arrived at the shelter six months pregnant.

The portraits of Amandine and Lucie are beautifully composed and made even more striking by their colossal framing. Yet neither's face is revealed, a subject of debate among the "Congo/Women" collaborators. Ms. Thomas made a conscious decision to either obscure or conceal the faces of rape survivors, as a protective measure.

Not everyone agreed wholeheartedly with that decision.

"I had several women I was interviewing say: 'Take my picture. Show the world how we are suffering,' and I couldn't honor that," Ms. Addario said. "I believe we have to leave that decision up to the people themselves, provided they are aware of how the image will be used."

Mr. Bleasdale said it could be difficult to determine consent in a charged atmosphere, where language barriers play a role. "When I show them my camera and I ask survivors if I may photograph them, 90 percent say yes," he said. "Then I show them a magazine and try to explain what will happen to the photograph, and 90 percent say they do not want their faces to be visible." Ms. Addario, who takes similar measures, says her experience with survivors in Congo has been the opposite.

Though many remote towns do not have easy Internet access, the threat of retaliation cannot be completely discounted. Mr. Bleasdale recounted a case in which a husband came across an image of his hospitalized wife on an aid organization's Web site. "They'd kept the reason for her hospitalization from him," he said. "When he'd realized she'd been raped, he left her — just abandoned her."

Ms. Thomas said she still pondered the decision to survivors' faces.

"I am not a journalist, so I think that may be why I may be more conservative, but by trying to do good did I do bad?" Ms. Thomas said. "I think these are very hard waters to navigate."