

FNF Human Rights Podcast Episode 3 – Rebecca Kabuo - the Girl from Goma: A story of courage, persistence and hope_Transcript

[00:00:00] **Masehaba Mdaka:** The girl from Goma - Rebecca Kabuo, a new generation activist from the Democratic Republic of Congo who is affectionately known as “one of the youngest prisoners of conscience” Born in Goma in the DR Congo in 1994, Rebeccas holds a degree in clinical psychology. Raised against a backdrop of war, poverty, social injustice and bad governance,

[00:00:27] Joining the non-violent Fight for Change known as LUCHA (*Lutte pour le changement*) shouldn't come as a surprise. This is a special feature podcast episode and is also available in French. My name is Masehaba Mdaka, and I work for the Friedrich Naumann Foundation for Freedom Sub-Saharan Africa. I'm passionate about human rights and was deeply impacted when I heard Rebecca's story. Today you'll hear why.

[00:00:58] **Audio Clip:** Welcome back. You're still watching the Globe. [00:01:00] Hundreds of Congolese are fleeing to neighboring Uganda as fighting intensifies for team members of the M 23 rebel group and government troops in north Kivu province.

[00:01:12] **Masehaba Mdaka:** Now, before we delve deeper and learn more about her, let us interrogate the reason our journey brings us to a country that is so well known for its mineral-rich resources. In the DR Congo, the UN's Joint Human Rights Office is comprised of the UN's Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo or MONUSCO, which was established in the year 2000 and the former Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights in the DRC, established in the year 1996. A long standing affair indeed...

[00:01:52] What we have however come to see and read about human rights atrocities in DR Congo is a far cry from the existing frameworks which were set out to protect and promote human rights. These continuous gross acts of human violations range from acts of sexual violence against women, abuses and violent attacks by armed groups against civilians,

[00:02:18] as well as displacement of civilians translating into a huge refugee crisis. In a report commissioned by the United States Department of State, it is also alleged that there continues to be other rights violations perpetuated by the government of the DR Congo which include extrajudicial killings, forced disappearances,

[00:02:42] torture, arbitrary detention, harsh and life-threatening prison conditions especially in the case of political prisoners and serious problems with the independence of the judiciary. There have also been the worst forms of restrictions on free expression, censorship of the press, internet, threats of violence and actual violence , or unjustified arrests of journalists.

[00:03:09] What can we make or understand of this dire situation? As at the year 2019, the life expectancy in DR Congo is estimated at 60 years...

[00:03:24] **Rebecca Kabuo speaks in French.**

[00:03:26] **Translator:** My name is Rebecca Kabuo. I'm a human rights activist at LUCHA. I was born in Goma.

[00:03:37] **Masehaba Mdaka:** Here's a snapshot that Rebecca gave us into her life. She playfully describes what a typical morning in the day of her life looks like: coffee, anyone?

[00:03:47] **Rebecca Kabuo speaks in French.**

[00:04:04] **Translator:** Every day I get up usually in the morning, I take coffee and any activity that I do or whatever I do, I always have my cup of coffee with me.

[00:04:10] **Masechaba Mdaka:** Rebecca's early childhood years shaped her into the person she is today. Speaking to family and school, she breaks down the realities and memories of the years that she has personally endured growing up in Goma and more specifically what she has come to define as her childhood.

[00:04:36] **Rebecca Kabuo speaks in French.**

[00:04:43] **Translator:** Thank you so much for giving me this time to talk here with you today. I was born in a place where there was conflict and [00:05:00] war. This is what I remember of my childhood. When I was just one years old there was a war. I don't really remember the story very well. My mother and my brothers told me that there was a war for liberation. At the time I was just one years old. This was to chase away the dictator at the time.

[00:06:03] **Rebecca Kabuo speaks French.**

[00:06:06] **Translator:** There was also a war in Rwanda at the time which poured over into Goma. So we had a lot of Rwandan refugees in Goma at the time.

[00:06:17] **Rebecca Kabuo speaks French.**

[00:06:23] **Translator:** Later on in my childhood when I was about five or six, there was also a volcano that erupted in my city.

[00:06:32] **Rebecca Kabuo speaks French.**

[00:06:43] **Translator:** When I think of my childhood, I think of the difficulties of going and fetching water on a daily basis, trying to bring things back to the house that we needed.[00:07:00]

[00:07:11] **Rebecca Kabuo speaks French.**

Translator: In my childhood I remember, I always had to help my mom. I always had to go to the market, we have to help out. I remember seeing my brothers doing the same thing as well, bringing things back home, trying to find resources. This is what I think about when I hear the word childhood.

[00:07:43] **Rebecca Kabuo speaks French.**

Translator: Except my childhood was different. Well, I know that some people had an easier childhood. They stayed at home a lot. They didn't have to go out and fetch things as much as I did. So this is just my context, my story, my landscape.

[00:07:54] **Masechaba Mdaka:** Getting to live in DRC at the time when there were refugees from other countries, like Rwanda, with the increasing and intensified security concerns at the time – Rebecca was just a baby then. Looking back as adult now, Rebecca reflects on how has this impacted her.

[00:08:19] **Rebecca Kabuo speaks French.**

[00:08:26] **Translator:** I don't have any memories of the time really because it was in 1994 and that's when I was born.

[00:08:43] **Rebecca Kabuo speaks French.**

[00:08:48] **Translator:** What I do remember from this time is that they were isolated. They were not really inhabitants of Goma. They lived in refugee camps. So, no, I didn't have any Rwandan friends at the time.[00:09:00]

[00:09:07] **Rebecca Kabuo speaks French.**

[00:09:15] **Translator:** As an adult in hindsight, I can see that this time was a time of really high security issues in Goma.

[00:09:41] **Rebecca Kabuo speaks in French.**

[00:09:52] **Translator:** The authorities didn't shoulder the responsibility of looking after refugees in the DRC. There was huge security issues in north Kivu in the east of the country at the time. [00:10:00]

[00:10:01] **Rebecca Kabuo speaks in French.**

[00:10:18] **Translator:** And there are people who have, who are still there. They've been there since 1994. They are in the Northern part of the city.

[00:10:27] **Masechaba Mdaka:** The DRC is seeing 2 generations of its people living through a war. Unfortunate inheritors of a war they had no part or say in its origination. Rebecca shares about what a day in the life of an ordinary Congolese civilian is like.

[00:10:46] **Rebecca Kabuo speaks in French.**

[00:11:24] **Translator:** In Goma I don't actually have any contracted work. So what we do, we get up in the morning, we go and fetch our necessities. We go and fetch water, and then we go in search for a job or any way that we can make some money to survive.

[00:11:42] **Rebecca Kabuo speaks in French.**

[00:12:02] **Translator:** Goma women in particular have small businesses and they are all over the city anywhere they can get to. And they try to sell small artifacts and things that they make wherever they can make wherever they can make money.

[00:12:19] **Rebecca Kabuo speaks in French.**

[00:13:22] **Translator:** For the majority of people in Goma, there is no such thing as a typical day. You never know what you're going to be doing from one day to the next. You wake up in the morning, you might be contracted so to speak, to work on a farm. You might be offered a job elsewhere. You never know where you're going to be.

[00:13:40] That the sole aim is to go and find water, find electricity. If that fails. You go and find wood, you go and burn the wood so you can heat your home so that you're not cold. And then you just try and find any way possible to try to make money so that you can survive so that you can feed yourself, you can feed your family.

[00:13:58] This isn't the case for [00:14:00] everybody. Some people do have jobs, but for the majority of people in Goma, this is what their day-to-day life looks like.

[00:14:08] **Masechaba Mdaka:** I was interested to find out whether she would you say that the people of DRC are politically polarized or if people really and truly are concerned with survival and hope? I also wondered whether people have an idea of what a normal, stable way of life would be.

[00:14:30] **Rebecca Kabuo speaks in French.**

[00:14:49] **Translator:** It's not easy to have hope when you have no security. When you don't have basic needs like food, access to water, electricity, a good education, a good healthcare system.

[00:15:34] **Rebecca Kabuo speaks in French.**

[00:15:39] **Translator:** So, no we don't often hope. For some people, hope is there. I have hope. I have hope that there will be change one day. The first thing that we did at LUCHA was work. Young people would often leave their universities or education system, but then they wouldn't have worked so we concentrated on getting them work.

[00:15:51] **Rebecca Kabuo speaks in French.**

[00:16:03] **Translator:** Some people have hope. They believe that change is possible, but then there are other people who really are living in survival mode, who really can only think day by day.

[00:16:12] **Rebecca Kabuo speaks in French.**

[00:16:22] **Translator:** The political issue was really in society until about 2016. People weren't really thinking about it. People weren't even talking about politics. It wasn't really an issue. But today, there's waves of activists and lots of organizations in our part of the country and now people are talking [00:17:00] about politics a lot more than they were before.

[00:17:03] **Rebecca Kabuo speaks in French.**

[00:17:20] **Translator:** Now, even women who are on a market store, selling tomatoes or whatever they might be selling, they will be having political discussions with their customers. This isn't something that we saw decades ago.

[00:17:35] **Rebecca Kabuo speaks in French.**

[00:17:49] **Translator:** Now people are more and more aware that they have the right to know what's going on in politics and in their country.[00:18:00]

[00:18:00] **Rebecca Kabuo speaks in French.**

[00:18:01] **Translator:** But of course there are always those who are not interested in politics by nature.

[00:18:06] **Rebecca Kabuo speaks in French.**

[00:18:16] **Translator:** Sometimes it's women because for a long time it's been a man's world. It only belonged to those who had degrees, worked in politics or you have some degree of education.

[00:18:33] **Masechaba Mdaka:** As with many human rights defenders in Africa and around the world, there is always a story, the defining moment that resulted in the conscious decision to be a frontliner in defending human rights. Rebecca passionately refers to this as her "Why".

[00:18:51] **Rebecca Kabuo speaks in French.**

[00:19:10] **Translator:** In 2012, there was a battle that took place and a war that broke out in North Kivu.

[00:19:19] **Rebecca Kabuo speaks French.**

[00:19:41] **Translator:** And this is when LUCHA really started its work. And my older brother was actually the head of this CSO, this civil society organization.

[00:19:54] **Rebecca Kabuo speaks on French.**

[00:20:27] **Translator:** And I saw my brothers courage and I think, "Why not me?" Why don't I join? Why don't I be part of this movement which is not a violent movement at all, for which really demands things from the government. It demands things from authorities? And we all know the history of my country, the history of my country is shrouded in violence.

[00:20:47] And I really wanted to make a point of being part of this organization, which is non-violent and which demands change, which is something that we're not allowed to do in my country.

[00:20:57] **Rebecca Kabuo speaks in French.**

[00:21:20] **Translator:** And then in 2013, there was a big campaign that took place and my brother told me all about it. At the time I wasn't really an activist, but that's when I really thought ,I need to join LUCHA. I really want to do something and I especially want to do something about the water situation.

[00:21:40] **Rebecca Kabuo speaks French.**

[00:21:44] **Translator:** This was a campaign called Goma wants water. And it was a campaign that LUCHA led. And since that day I have been an [00:22:00] activist with LUCHA.

[00:22:02] **Masechaba Mdaka:** LUCHA is a non-violent and non-partisan youth civil society movement founded in June 2012 in Goma, the capital of North Kivu. LUCHA, which has this year celebrated 10 years of existence, and its members have been instrumental in organising civil society to call for the respect of the rule of law and human rights in DRC. Rebecca shared a memorable moment about the time spent and work she has done with LUCHA.

[00:22:37] **Rebecca Kabuo speaks French.**

[00:22:45] **Translator:** When you're a human rights activist in my country, there are repercussions.

[00:22:51] **Rebecca Kabuo speaks French.**

[00:22:58] **Translator:** When Kabila was in power, the [00:23:00] former president.

[00:23:03] **Rebecca Kabuo speaks French.**

[00:23:13] **Translator:** There was a lot of oppression. There was a lot of kidnapping. There were a lot of murders.

[00:23:20] **Rebecca Kabuo speaks French.**

[00:23:29] **Translator:** I participated in lots of campaigns for education, for good elections for, uh, access to water, electricity for better living standards.

[00:23:41] **Rebecca Kabuo speaks in French.**

[00:23:54] **Translator:** to have access to the internet. For everyone to be able to have a mobile phone, to be able to buy credit, to communicate.

[00:23:58] **Rebecca Kabuo speaks in French.**

[00:24:08] **Translator:** One of the consequences of this was that the telecommunications companies decided to cut all communication. So, we led another campaign.

[00:24:25] **Rebecca Kabuo speaks French.**

[00:24:29] **Translator:** So we had lots of protests. We were arrested. We were beaten.

[00:24:38] **Rebecca Kabuo speaks in French.**

[00:24:43] **Translator:** So we had lots of protests. We were arrested, we were beaten. I was detained more than 13 times

[00:24:47] **Rebecca Kabuo speaks in French.**

[00:24:54] **Translator:** Sometimes I was tortured. I even have scars on my body.[00:25:00]

[00:25:02] **Rebecca Kabuo speaks in French.**

[00:25:05] **Translator:** I was whipped by the police and I had to go undergo surgery on my right leg. [00:25:16] I've been in prison three times. [00:25:28] the longest time I spent in prison was six months. [00:25:54] It's difficult to talk about it because you relive it, but at the same time, you tell yourself this is for a good [00:26:00] cause.

[00:26:09] **Rebecca Kabuo speaks in French.**

[00:26:12] **Translator:** The painful this is that the officer who is whipping you has nothing. He doesn't have water, he doesn't have electricity. His children don't go to school.

[00:26:24] You're fighting for his rights and yet he is the one who is harassing you. He's the one who's torturing you.

[00:26:34] **Rebecca Kabuo speaks in French.**

[00:26:38] **Translator:** Sometimes you get confused, you get lost. You think what's the point? Why am I doing this?

[00:26:51] **Rebecca Kabuo speaks in French.**

[00:26:58] **Translator:** It's also difficult for [00:27:00] family to watch you go through this during your activism.

[00:27:11] **Rebecca Kabuo speaks in French.**

[00:27:17] **Translator:** So yeah, why I do what I do. I'm angry about the situation, the lack of water in my region and many other things

that I mentioned, but my main “why” was that everyone should have access to water in Goma.

[00:27:32] **Masechaba Mdaka:** Rebecca is again one of a handful of female human right defenders working in the DRC. Imagine what that must be like. She described for us what activism in general looks like and more specifically what it is like being a female human rights defender, in an environment that sees heinous crimes against women.

[00:28:03] **Rebecca Kabuo speaks in French.**

[00:28:09] **Translator:** This is not an easy topic to talk about. It's not easy to be a woman and an activist. [00:28:22] First of all, we are in this patriarchal system where the man decides, the man has the final word, the man is the one who dictates the rules of the game.

[00:28:46] **Rebecca Kabuo speaks in French.**

[00:28:51] **Translator:** It's not easy. Not at all.

[00:28:53] **Rebecca Kabuo speaks in French.**

[00:28:59] **Translator:** It's not [00:29:00] easy to be part of a movement where 90% of people are men.

[00:29:10] **Rebecca Kabuo speaks in French.**

[00:29:21] **Translator:** It was really difficult for me at first because my mum really took it badly. She thought, “I haven't raised my daughter well. I've done something wrong.” And it was difficult for me to see my mom go through that - blame herself.

[00:29:40] **Rebecca Kabuo speaks in French.**

[00:29:50] **Translator:** Because within the patriarch if your child grows up well and everything goes well, then the dad gets congratulated. But if something goes wrong and the child ends up being bad in some way, then the mother is the one who gets the blame.

[00:30:16] **Rebecca Kabuo speaks in French.**

[00:30:16] **Translator:** My mum really struggled. We had family meetings and my mum was told, "you haven't raised your daughter well, because look what she's doing. She's involved in this activism."

[00:30:17] **Rebecca Kabuo speaks in French.**

[00:30:24] **Translator:**[00:30:34] And then when I went to prison, that was so difficult for her. Being detained, that was so difficult for my mom.

[00:30:42] **Rebecca Kabuo speaks in French.**

[00:30:57] **Translator:** and we have a perception in my country and in [00:31:00] Africa in general that women don't go to prison.

[00:31:06] **Rebecca Kabuo speaks in French.**

[00:31:09] **Translator:** This really didn't sit well for my mom and for my family.

[00:31:15] **Rebecca Kabuo speaks in French.**

[00:31:30] **Translator:** It was really difficult for her in the beginning. But today I really feel that my responsibility is to talk to people, to explain my perspective, my point of view.

[00:31:37] **Rebecca Kabuo in French.**

[00:31:42] **Translator:** At first, it was even difficult for me to understand why I was involved in activism. I didn't really fully comprehend my "why".

[00:31:56] **Rebecca Kabuo in French.**

[00:31:57] **Translator:** But today I understand that [00:32:00] women are those who are suffering the most.

[00:32:10] **Rebecca Kabuo in French.**

[00:32:12] **Translator:** We can take the example of lack of security.

[00:32:18] **Rebecca Kabuo in French.**

[00:32:30] **Translator:** Women are the ones who give life, who give back and yet they are the ones who suffer because their son or their daughter is going to be kidnapped. Their daughter is going to be raped. Their child is the one who's going to be involved in armed conflicts. The mother is always the one who suffers

[00:32:58] Women are the ones who have to [00:33:00] stop studying. Women are the ones who have to go out and get water early in the mornings. Always women.

[00:33:12] **Rebecca Kabuo in French.**

[00:33:12] **Translator:** Looking after the household, it's women.

[00:33:17] **Rebecca Kabuo in French.**

[00:33:22] **Translator:** In my country, women are the only ones who take care of the house. Women are the one's who suffer.
[00:33:28] So really for me, that means that women should be in the front line of activism.

[00:33:54] **Rebecca Kabuo in French.**

[00:34:01] **Translator:** Women have to front liners. They have to commit themselves to that. It's not easy. Really we've become aware of the suffering that we go through. The suffering that our mothers have gone through we would be in the frontline. Women must spearhead the fight.

[00:34:14] **Masechaba Mdaka:** I was interested to know more about her engagement with international agencies and organisations who have recognized her passion and steadfastness along this uncertain path towards an envisaged peaceful Democratic Republic of Congo.

[00:34:32] **Rebecca Kabuo in French.**

[00:34:43] **Translator:** Yes, I was recognised by several international agencies and organizations.

[00:34:55] **Rebecca Kabuo in French.**

[00:35:01] **Translator:** It's nice to be recognized.

[00:35:06] **Rebecca Kabuo in French.**

[00:35:07] **Translator:** It's lovely to go and travel abroad to conferences and talk about my struggles.

[00:35:23] **Rebecca Kabuo in French.**

[00:35:27] **Translator:** If the people in my country don't understand then to me it's a lost cause. There's no point to it.

[00:35:30] **Rebecca Kabuo in French.**

[00:35:35] **Translator:** I want my country to acknowledge what I'm doing. Of course it's really nice to have this international recognition, but it would be even greater to be recognised in my country.

[00:35:49] **Rebecca Kabuo in French.**

[00:36:02] **Translator:** I would love for my government to acknowledge what it is I'm doing.

[00:36:05] **Rebecca Kabuo in French.**

[00:36:12] **Translator:** I would love for them to recognize my commitment. Of course I'm grateful for international agencies, for their recognition. But for me, it would really mean everything for my country to acknowledge what I'm doing.

[00:36:32] **Masechaba Mdaka:** As a young person, a human rights defender and above all a Congolese citizen, I wanted to hear what her dream of a future for the DRC is. One has to wonder if

the idea of Freedom and Peace can be realised for DRC before the next generation is ushered in.

[00:36:59] **Rebecca Kabuo in French.**

[00:37:05] **Translator:** It's difficult to talk about the future. It's very uncertain.

[00:37:14] **Rebecca Kabuo in French.**

[00:37:27] **Translator:** But I do think that it's possible. It's possible to have a better future and to live in a country where peace rains.

[00:37:46] It's really in the hands of the population and the authorities. They have the responsibility. [00:38:00]

[00:38:08] Our biggest work today is to really make the population be those that demand things.

[00:38:18] **Rebecca Kabuo in French.**

[00:38:26] **Translator:** We want people to be aware of their power and their responsibility.

[00:38:36] This is the definition of democracy: for the people by the people power to the people.

[00:38:45] **Rebecca Kabuo in French.**

[00:38:54] **Translator:** If people, however are unaware of their power, then yes, the [00:39:00] future will be uncertain

[00:39:14] But if people take power into their own hands, yes, we can have a better future for sure.

[00:39:19] **Rebecca Kabuo in French.**

[00:39:27] **Translator:** Because the people who are leading us today, where do they come from? They are part of the population.

[00:39:36] **Rebecca Kabuo in French.**

[00:39:36] **Translator:** So we have to start with education. We have to educate our populations so that our leaders become responsible leaders.

[00:39:50] **Rebecca Kabuo in French.**

[00:40:09] **Translator:** Then we will have some leaders who are accountable. We will have a country that is peaceful. We will have [00:40:18] water, education, electricity.

[00:40:22] **Rebecca Kabuo in French.**

[00:40:35] **Translator:** Our leaders will understand that they have a lot of work to do because they have people to answer to, they have a whole population who have demands.

[00:40:49] **Rebecca Kabuo in French.**

[00:40:52] **Translator:** That's my perception of the future and I have hope.

[00:40:59] **Translator:** [00:41:00] I have hope that people will be aware of their responsibility and that power. And this is also part of my "why". This is why I'm continuing with my struggle and my fight.

[00:41:14] **Masechaba Mdaka:** Reflecting on this episode has brought me to a different place and understanding around this ongoing, relentless conflict ravaging the people and terrain of the DRC for years. Rebecca speaks of remembering conflict as a part of growing up, growing up within lack and scarcity.

[00:41:40] With the ray of hope, will and courage in her mother and her brother which today has fueled her indignation to fight for what she knows is better, what she knows is right and just... The people of DRC living day by day in survival mode, longing for certainty. Her own tales of capture and torture which have left indelible marks in her memory.

[00:42:10] What does 26 years look like to you... Rebecca Kabuo, a girl from Goma? From one of our youngest prisoners of conscience, to your ears and hearts. My right, Your right, Our right, humanity is for us All...

[00:42:34] This has been our third episode of season 3 of "Let's talk human rights – The Friedrich Naumann Foundation sub-Saharan Africa (FNF) is an independent German organisation that is committed to promoting liberal ideals and politics in Africa such as human rights, the rule of law, democracy, innovation, digitization and free trade. By conducting campaigns,

[00:43:14] media events, seminars, workshops, study tours, cultural happenings and training courses the foundation promotes human rights including freedom expression, freedom of the press, children's rights and LGBTQIA+ rights and engages against violence against women and capital punishment. If you are interested in our activities.

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