

# MEN BEYOND WAR



## ABOUT THE FILM

Men Beyond War (2022) is a film about traumatized men in Eastern Congo; about their challenges, recovery, their resilience, their hope, and ability to reintegrate into their families and communities. We see how these men – who lived through extreme hardship and war – try to break the vicious cycles of violence in group therapy sessions.

The film was made for [Living Peace Institute](#) in Goma with financial support from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Netherlands, and is used for community screenings in the Democratic Republic of Congo to talk about trauma and violence.



# ABOUT LIVING PEACE INSTITUTE (LPI)

Living Peace Institute (LPI) is a Congolese non-profit organization dedicated to promoting mental and psychosocial health of people in conflict areas to restore peace and stability. LPI targets men and boys, in addition to girls and women, conducts research, provides education and training, and implements psychosocial support groups in Congo and other countries ravaged by conflict and war in Africa and the Middle East.

The Living Peace Institute was created to promote mental and psychosocial health of people in conflict areas to restore peace and stability and is grounded in evidence-based research on breaking cycles of violence at home and in communities.

## Living Peace Institute Contacts

**Aloys Mahwa, Country Director, DRC:** ..... [a.mahwa@livingpeaceinstitute.org](mailto:a.mahwa@livingpeaceinstitute.org)

**Dr. Benoit Ruratotoye, Director Research and Training:** ..... [b.ruratotoye@livingpeaceinstitute.org](mailto:b.ruratotoye@livingpeaceinstitute.org)

**Henny Slegh, Director of International Programs:** ..... [h.slegh@livingpeaceinstitute.org](mailto:h.slegh@livingpeaceinstitute.org)

## KEY POINTS:

- **Masculine norms can exacerbate the trauma that men face, specifically in conflict areas**, due to gendered coping responses to trauma that include lack of help-seeking behavior, alcohol and substance abuse, use of violence against the self and others, leading to broken family and community relations and isolation.
- LPI's **trauma informed approach** focuses on reintegrating the fragmented and isolated parts of an individual's psyche after experiencing and witnessing violence, through:
  - community-based psychosocial support groups that addresses the legacies of collective trauma.
  - a gender-transformative education model that provides alternative non-violent models of coping with problems and distress based on equality in gender relations.
- A qualitative impact evaluation of the Living Peace program found that **three years after the intervention, positive changes among men, their families, and their communities continued**, including reduction in alcohol abuse, improved conflict management among couples, adoption of more gender-equitable attitudes, reduction in violence against female partners, and improved household economic outcomes.

# BACKGROUND: RESEARCH AND METHODOLOGIES

Equimundo in collaboration with local researcher partners in eastern DRC carried out the International Men and Gender Equality Survey (IMAGES) research on the effects of war on men conducted in Rwanda,<sup>1</sup> DRC<sup>2</sup> and in a demobilization center for ex-combatants in Rwanda between 2010-2014.<sup>3</sup>

These studies highlighted links between perceptions around masculinities, mental health and psychosocial problems of men, and intersecting cycles of violence at home and in communities. Results from those studies revealed the impact of men's traumatization as one of the missing pieces in peacebuilding, as a well as a key factor contributing to men's subsequent use of physical and psychological violence against female partners and their children, and self-harm.

The Living Peace Institute (LPI) was born in part out of this research. Established in Goma as a Congolese NGO in 2015, LPI has reached more than 3 million people living in conflict-affected Eastern DRC with an evidence-based proven positive impact on the reduction of violence and improved mental health outcomes for men and their families. The Living Peace methodology integrated insights from the IMAGES studies on masculinities and gender relations in the context of Eastern DRC and is framed within the cultural traditions and political realities of the DRC.

LPI uses a trauma-focused, therapeutic model aiming to prevent men's violence against women and support men's non-violent coping strategies in dealing with distress and trauma caused by the ongoing conflicts in Eastern DRC. Healing from trauma should address the obstacles to reintegrating fragmented and isolated parts of the individual's psyche after experiencing and witnessing violence by encouraging men to question or reduce their belief in the hegemonic masculinist norms that keep them from seeking help and forming healthy connections and allows them to deny trauma. Denial of male trauma and neglect of men's gendered responses to trauma are the main drivers of new violence at home and communities. As such the approach combines aspects of community-based psychosocial support groups (IASC, 2007) that are focused on coping with adversity and trauma (IASC 2012, UNHCR 2013, DeJong 2015) together with gender-transformative group education with men based in part of Equimundo's years of experience with its Program H approach. Over the years of implementation, the model evolved into a healing-centered peacebuilding approach in order to address the legacies of collective trauma, enabling peace on a societal level (Volkan, 2013, Tankink et al 2017, Hübl, 2020 Yoder, 2022).

Since 2015, the Living Peace model has been adapted for youth and adults and implemented in various conflict-affected countries and high-violence settings, including in northern Cameroon, in the Kurdish region of Iraq, with Syrian refugees in Lebanon, and in the US with youth in settings affected by high rates of homicides.

[1] <https://www.equimundo.org/resources/masculinity-and-gender-based-violence-in-rwanda-experience-and-perceptions-of-men-and-women/>

[2] <https://www.equimundo.org/resources/gender-relations-sexual-and-gender-based-violence-and-the-effects-of-conflict-on-women-and-men-in-north-kivu-eastern-drc-results-from-images/>

[3] <https://www.equimundo.org/resources/a-study-of-gender-masculinities-and-reintegration-of-former-combatants-in-rwanda-results-from-images/>

# LIVING PEACE MODEL

## Localization of findings in a context-appropriate model

LPI uses a bottom-up, group therapeutic approach to address men's traumatization as a source of violence against women next to men's involvement in other forms of interpersonal and community-based violence. Men often hold on to social norms of manhood as self-protection mechanisms to maintain control and power over himself and others aiming to protect personal failures in being a strong and important man. Deep-rooted injuries from colonialism, where men were downplayed as lower rank Congolese citizens, left its traces of trauma in masculinity perceptions, that are transmitted over generations. Unraveling omnipotent self-perceptions on masculinities requires self-reflection in quality interpersonal relationships—to help recognize the impact of trauma and adopt alternative ways of dealing with being man. By targeting men as the primary vectors of change, LPI addresses numerous expert recommendations to expand its focus from exclusively women when working to prevent sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV).



Source: LPI Ecological Model

The socio-ecological model is at the core of LPI's theory of change. Building on the ecology of the violence model of the WHO (2002), insights on collective trauma legacies (Volkan, 2006, Buhl, 2022) and successes of systematic therapy, LPI uses a systematic therapeutic approach by giving living systems (such as groups of men, family, youth, or community groups) nudges that help them to develop new patterns of behavior.

## How does it work?

Living Peace groups are organized in the communities with fifteen men per group, meeting weekly for three-hour sessions throughout 12-15 weeks. The sessions take place in the community, and are led by trained, local facilitators. LPI participants and facilitators are identified in partnership with community leaders and security sector officials, who are trained to identify those most likely to benefit from psychosocial group therapy. In doing so, they remind men of Bazra, a traditional local conflict resolution mechanism where community men sit together to resolve problems and conflicts. Over the course of the 15 weeks, spouses, family members, neighbours and community members are included in the programming.

LPI encourages participation by emphasizing confidentiality and volunteerism, and its training modules are targeted to all different categories of participants, including non-violent men. Since 2015, more than 10,000 men, and spouses, families, and neighbours in more than 50 communities in Nord and South Kivu and Ituri participated in Living Peace groups.

# THE IMPACT

A qualitative impact evaluation of the Living Peace program (supported by the World Bank and the Sexual Violence Research Initiative) (Tankink et al. 2017) found that three years after the intervention, positive changes among men, their families, and their communities continued, including reduction in alcohol abuse, improved conflict management among couples, adoption of more gender-equitable attitudes, reduction in violence against female partners, and improved household economic outcomes.

Two evaluations carried out for EKN (Embassy of the Kingdom of the Netherlands) by different consultant firms (INFOCUS in 2018 and ADE in 2022) confirmed the long-lasting positive results as found earlier: violence reduction, improved social and family cohesion, improved support of men to women in the households, better health, and economic conditions at individual and family levels. In the community, the team (2022) detected increased awareness related to gender equality, positive masculinity, and condemnation of SGBV, positive effects on security personnel regarding SGBV prevention, improved professional ethical performance in police and army, and improved relations with the civilian population ([www.Government.nl](http://www.Government.nl).)<sup>4</sup>

A Cluster Randomized Controlled Trial study was carried out between 2018-2021 to determine whether LPI reduces domestic violence due to mediating effects of reduction of psychopathology through improved positive masculinity attitudes, family and social life, and psychological states. The results showed a significant decrease of PTSD symptoms and substance abuse in the case group compared to the control group in both males and females. During post-intervention, the level of mental wellbeing, perceived social support and general self-efficacy were substantially increased in participants from the case group compared to those from the control group in both males and females. Of interest, there were relatively few statistically significant differences observed between case and control immediately after the intervention (endline 1); but many were observed at endline 2, 1.5 years after the intervention.

The Living Peace intervention (LPint) is unique because it works with the perpetrators to change their violent behaviors. This breaks the cycle of violence directly (i.e., men are less violent) and indirectly (i.e., influence on children and wider community). The studies done so far provide clear evidence that LPint has an impact on the participating men and their families in terms of reducing violence against women. Mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS) for participants contribute to community peacebuilding because they address men's wounds of war that often lead to future conflict.

In our years of working with men in the DRC and other conflict-affected areas, we are convinced that we must: (1) acknowledge the collective impact of trauma that goes beyond individuals, (2) identify and name men's trauma, (3) understand how cultural-specific constructions of masculinities affect trauma and (4) offer a social space where men, alongside women, can make sense of their trauma and communities and social service systems support and encourage men to seek support for trauma. Demining land of anti-personnel mines is, as is demining the minds of men in conflict settings, slow and painstaking; it often takes years of careful attention. And it is ultimately a collective responsibility.

[4] <https://www.government.nl/documents/reports/2023/01/31/endline-evaluation-of-the-living-peace-project>