On this Centenary of International Women’s Day I would like to tell you about two women. One was born in South Vietnam – the other was born across the world in the Democratic Republic of Congo. They have never met and almost certainly never will. They are connected by their relationship to me – and the fact that I worked in South Vietnam as a young woman and now, after retirement, volunteer in the DR Congo. And they share something else – the experience of prolonged suffering as women caught up in the obscenity we call war.

Mai, the Vietnamese woman is more than 80 years old. Her war, a war which had much to do with ideology and the struggle of international super powers played out within the country of Vietnam, lasted as long as 50 years and saw ½ a million civilians die, another million injured, just in the South. Shu Krani (her name means ‘give thanks’), a Pygmy of the Congo, is in her 20s and has really never known peace in her land where almost 6 million people have died in what is the deadliest war since World War 2. But there are no Australian troops in Congo so it is unlikely you will know very much about the war there. The ongoing conflict in Congo is related to the international scramble for the rich natural resources of the country and to the tribalism which has also blighted the lives of people in neighbouring Rwanda and Burundi.

Vietnam is at peace now and flourishing with development and tourism. But during Mai’s lifetime she saw the lush green fields full of bomb craters and unexploded mines; the forests defoliated and irrigation systems wrecked. Schools were camps for displaced people and she knew her sons would have to put life and limb at risk and join the army as soon as they turned 17. But in 1975 the war came to an end and like many others she hoped for peace and a settled life. It was not to be - her family were branded ‘unproductives’ because her husband had been a government servant. He was forced to become a fisherman to survive, her girls were denied access to education and her teenaged sons still had only one future – in the army fighting new enemies on the borders with Cambodia and China.

She schemed with her husband and they equipped a small fishing boat to take the enormous risk of escaping one night. Pirates met them on the high seas where so many Vietnamese women were raped and so many of the refugees perished without record. Mai’s husband and his brother were killed – gun shot killed one of her little girls and shattered the arm of another. Eventually, Mai and her family found refuge in Sydney – they struggled in the early years to establish a life here. She worked to see her children learn English and get the education they were denied back home. She worked to see her children complete university degrees, to have the security of steady employment, to buy a home so they would never be homeless again. They still work hard – and contribute in meaningful ways to this society. Mai keeps active growing familiar veggies in her back yard and enjoying her Australian grandchildren.
Shu Krani and the women of the Congo face a special form of terror in their war. Throughout history, rape has been a given in war. Now, the Eastern Democratic Republic of Congo holds the world’s highest record for rape, gang rape which I call rape torture. Raped women – including little girls, may be mutilated with weapons and sticks, left with fistulas –leaking holes – between the vagina, bladder and or bowel – and perhaps also HIV positive and pregnant to the rapist. While some of this rape is just generalized violence in a culture of impunity for men who commit sexual assault, in many instances it is used as a weapon of war. Women are the mainstay of the society but when terrified of being raped they can’t go to work in the fields or beyond the village to gather water and wood. Families are broken up, village life is destroyed and people are forced to leave their land and sole asset to gather in camps closer to the city. About one million people are displaced around Goma where I have been working. For several years I have been conducting short term training workshops for rape/trauma counselors in an indigenous Christian hospital in Goma – the HEAL Africa Hospital, founded by a Congolese orthopedic surgeon - and have heard first hand the suffering of these women who are often also abandoned by their families. When I listen to their stories I wonder how they have the courage to get up every day and go on with life.

Life isn’t easy for anyone in the DR Congo – with 38% inflation and the Congolese franc losing half its value last year. And in Goma in the east where the conflict has been concentrated life is particularly difficult. 2/3rds of the city was buried in lava when the volcano above it erupted in 2002. Goma’s roads are giant pot holes, and become giant puddles in the wet season. Most people don’t have running water or electricity; there’s no garbage collection; you have to pay to send a child to school or gain access to the public hospital. But life for a pygmy woman is by far the worst.

Pygmy women like Shu Krani are at greater risk of rape and all the other consequences of the conflict because many people in Congo do not consider them fully human. I was told this a number of times on my most recent visit when I was trying to establish tenure for 360 people on land which had been bought for them but from which they were being evicted. Their traditional homes and way of life in the forests are now denied them due to the war and measures to preserve the forests and wild life – it seems gorillas are more important than people. Without a champion to take up their cause they have no rights, no justice for crimes against them. I saw a soldier lift his boot to kick a sick child in his path as if she were a diseased dog.

Shu Krani’s home is a flimsy grass humpy with a dirt floor, too small for her to stand upright when she goes inside. It has no furniture, just a few lengths of cloth to keep out the cold in the wet season when the temperature at night goes down to 11 degrees. Shu Krani has 3 children of her own and also cares for her 10 year old orphaned sister. Shu Krani hires herself out as a farm labourer for Bantu farmers whenever possible but without a regular source of income she and all the families in the camp are starving. Malaria is endemic and they are all suffering the associated health problems of unsanitary living conditions and malnutrition. Shu Krani’s little sister, Giselle, has infected lesions on her foot and I took the whole family to Goma and the HEAL Africa Hospital for
health checks. The lesions on Giselle’s foot are tumors and I am still waiting for test results and advice on what has to be done for her. The children are all underweight for age and show symptoms of kwashiorkor and worm infestations.

But Shu Krani’s children are better off than some in the Pygmy camp in that they still have a mother who is determined enough and still young enough to fight for a better life. One piece of land which had been bought for the pygmies of her tribe in 2006 has rich volcanic soil. The former owner, exploiting the vulnerability of the Pygmies, chased the people off the land – easily destroying their grass humpies and new gardens. He has kept the land fallow and empty knowing that it will only increase in value when the conflict is over – in fact it has already trebled in value in the past 5 years. Nevertheless, in one corner Shu Krani has made her secret garden, growing sweet potatoes for her family.

This past visit I was able to secure this and another piece of land for Shu Krani and her people. I worked with a pygmy rights agency and a prominent Congolese lawyer who has a heart for these people – and with donations from my friends and church. They now have two pieces of land – one piece to live on, one to farm. An agency of the International 7th Day Adventist Church has committed to building shelters for them – just wood and iron sheet houses of 2 rooms with 2 windows and a door – a door the women can close to protect herself and her possessions. Each house will have a latrine attached so that they don’t have to fear to go to the communal latrine at night. And I consulted with another non-government agency in the area which teaches raped women to sew and arranged for Shu Krani and 2 other women to begin classes. The next project is to buy each of the 90 families machetes, hoes, rakes, spades, watering cans, pruning shears: all the tools and seedlings they will need to establish small farms to improve their diet and provide some income from anything left over to sell. I already paid annual fees for 55 of the school age children to go to the local schools last September – results of the mid year tests were announced even while I was there last month. Amazingly, one of the pygmy boys in junior high came second in the class of 120 students, another came 4th – evidence that the pygmy children, despite their living circumstances, are capable of benefiting from education.

Now back to Mai – when I was preparing for this last trip to Congo I spoke about the Pygmy project to one of Mai’s daughters. When she heard of their plight, Mai opened her heart to the needs of her Pygmy sisters across the other side of the world and donated $1000 to help. Mai knows what it is to suffer in ways that most of us in Australia cannot even imagine.

In this centenary year of International Women’s Day, in Australia we still do not have equal pay for equal work for women. But around the world today our sisters in many countries have so much more to endure. They suffer, like Shu Krani, due to war and civil strife, poverty and oppression, denial of full human rights, and especially due to denial of access to education and all the life opportunities it brings. Do not forget them in affluent Australia. If you are a woman of faith, pray for them. If you are a woman of means, find an agency that supports maternal and child welfare or women’s development and gender equality and donate regularly to their work. If you are a woman with influence in your
community, use your voice and your influence to lobby for women who are denied a voice, denied influence, denied equal rights - wherever they may be.