

# Women Rising from the Depths of Congolese History- The Mobilization and Politicization of the Women of the Congo

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## **Abstract**

After the long struggle for decolonization, Congolese people were able to accomplish gaining independence from Belgium in 1960 and bring an end to much of their violent, corrupt history. Much of this success was attributed to Patrice Lumumba's political leadership and activism during the 1950's and 1960's. Historians and citizens of the Congo have labeled Patrice Lumumba to be the Congo's National Hero. Many historians have recognized his work and activism as the catalyst for change and decolonization in the Congo. Even though Patrice Lumumba had a significant impact on the Congo, he did not decolonize the Congo by himself. Despite the fact that this is true, the metanarrative continues to be told today in places Patrice Lumumba as one of the leading factors for the Congo's success. When researching beyond what is commonly believed, the narrative of women's contribution to the Congo's fight for decolonization is brought to light. Women had also played a pivotal role in decolonizing the Congo. Congolese women's history has been looked over by historians, political leaders, and even Congolese citizens today. One of many reasons Congolese women's impact and political activism continues to be unrecognized is because it remains to be overshadowed by Patrice Lumumba's legacy. By focusing on female political organizations and female political activists in the Congo, this paper argues through Congolese women's political mobilization and activism, decolonization of the Congo was made possible. Their work before independence and post-independence created the path for Congolese leaders and citizens to follow towards a newly independent country.

## **Introduction**

Since the 1960's the Congo has gained independence, established the first prime minister, Patrice Lumumba, and was under the corrupt leadership of Mobutu Sese Seko. Even though many historians have written and researched about the Congo and its development, there are still many missing pieces left to be studied. This includes the research about Congolese women and their political work and influence during the late 1950's to the 1960's. The history of the Congo focused on the impact of men and many historians have not

explained how Congolese women impacted the Congo. Congolese women had limited opportunities for upward mobility. This also included participating in male-dominated political activities. Before the independence of the Congo, Congolese women and girls were pushed towards domestic duties and had limited opportunities for education. Despite these barriers, Congolese women overcame this oppression and became politically active during the independence of the Congo and made a significant contribution to the process of decolonization.

The continued decades of oppression and suppression led to the political activity of Congolese women to be buried by historians under the belief that Patrice Lumumba was the leading political actor in Congolese decolonization and independence. This belief also places Patrice Lumumba as the main catalyst for change in the Congo. These accounts of history written by historians have become the metanarrative of the Congo. This metanarrative follows the idea that Patrice Lumumba's work was significant because his work and activism led to the decolonization of the Congo. Historians works have focused on Lumumba's legacy on the Congo but fail to show the significance of other political activists and leaders' work on the Congo. Lumumba's time as prime minister was short-lived; however, Lumumba is still seen as one of the great activists that fought for the people in the Congo and his country. Lumumba did not work alone and had many other activists and leaders that helped and worked beside him. Some of those people included women. Women have played a pivotal role in contributing to the Congo's decolonization. Historians have failed to show how the work of female activists has changed the Congo's history. By researching the Congo's history, Lumumba's work, and political organizations, the influence, and significance of the Congolese women will be revealed. This paper argues that Congolese women played a pivotal part in the decolonization of the Congo and became major political actors in the Congo by creating political networks, supporting the Movement National Congolese Lumumba, and continuing Andree Blouin and Patrice Lumumba's political work.

## **Historiography**

Historians like Georges Nzongola – Ntalaja and Kevin Dunn focus their work on Patrice Lumumba's legacy and his impact on the Congo's decolonization, but they fail to show the effects of Congolese women's work and activism on decolonization. In Nzongola – Ntalaja's book, *The Congo from Leopold to Kabila: A People's History*, published in 2002, Ntalaja Nzongola writes about the history of the Congo from the time of Leopold to Kabila. Nzongola analyzes the deep roots of the history of the Congo and the Congolese

predicament. He focuses on the legacy of colonialism, democracy, governance, law, and development in Africa. Georges Nzongola – Ntalaja's work follows the narrative of the Congo's history that has been told within the last 60 years that showed male political activists impact in the Congo. This narrative focuses on Patrice Lumumba being the country's national hero and being the sole contributor to the decolonization of the Congo.[1] This narrative perpetuates the misconception that Lumumba acted alone and contributed to the independence and decolonization of the Congo by himself.

Similar to Georges Nzongola – Ntalaja, Kevin Dunn focused on a male-dominated history of the Congo. In his book, *Imagining the Congo*, published in 2003, Dunn explores how the Western people and powers before 1960 viewed the Congo and how this negative imagery affects the Congo politically. He reveals to readers the negative connotation of the Congo was based on the Belgians presentation of the Congo. Just like Nzongola – Ntalaja, Dunn separated time periods to focus on four different historical periods. This includes the colonial invention of the Congo by western colonizers, the country's decolonization at the independence in 1960, its reinvention as Zaire by Mobutu in the 1970s, and the return to the Congo at the beginning of the early 2000s. Within each one of the time periods, Dunn then analyzes the production and contestation of the Congo's identity and the effects of male-dominated leadership and rule. Both Kevin Dunn and Georges Nzongola – Ntalaja's work give a significant amount of detailed history of the Congo, but they focus on male political leaders and activists as catalysts of change. Nzongola – Natalaja wrote about Lumumba, Mulele, and Tshisekidi. Dunn wrote about Henry Morton Stanley, King Leopold II, Patrice Lumumba, Mobutu, and Kabila.

Recently published work in 2011 by historians like Shikha Vyas-Doorgapersad and Tshombe M Lukamba continue to follow the general belief that Congolese women were not politically active during the 1950's and 1960's. Shikha Vyas-Doorgapersad and Tshombe M Lukamba work, *The status and political participation of women in the Democratic Republic of Congo (1960–2010): A critical historical reflection*, focuses on Congolese women's political activism decades after Patrice Lumumba's assassination. They both dismiss any political activity by Congolese women during the Congo's independence by stating that there was little to no political activity during the late 1950's and early 1960's. The development of Congolese women's political work began before independence in 1960. This was due to various political activists and Patrice Lumumba. Women's political activity is also overlooked within Iris Berger's work. Her work called, *Women in Twentieth-Century Africa: New Approaches to African History*, published in 2016, discussed African women's

struggle and oppression within their lives and their struggle to gain control over their own marital, sexual, and economic lives. She also demonstrates how women within Africa played a pivotal role in national and local politics. Berger does this by introducing religious organizations, political organizations, political leaders, and successful campaigns. Berger successfully reveals the significance of African women in politics in various African countries like Kenya, Ghana, Tanzania, and Cameroon. Despite being able to identify political participation in other countries in Africa, Berger continues the narrative that Congolese women were not politically active. Berger explains the lack of political participation and mobilization is due to the oppression that Mobutu Sese Seko placed upon Congolese women. It was believed that “These government tended to manipulate gender norms in ways that were detrimental to women, often by setting them up as scapegoats in times of economic and political crisis.[2] Mobutu Sese Seko’s political agenda was to create an ideology that authenticated traditional African values. He also wanted to follow Belgium’s oppressive influence and continue to deprive women of mobility to politicize and educate themselves. Traditional African values held the belief that women were just mothers and housekeepers that need to obey the authority of men and mainly their president. Even though Mobutu Sese Seko’s rule was extremely oppressive of Congolese women, they continued their political activity during this time. Congolese women continued to be a part of political organizations and contributed to Congo’s development. Berger fails to identify the contribution that Congolese women have made on decolonization.

Few historians have focused their written work on the impact of women on politics in the Congo. Karen Bouwer’s book, *Gender, and Decolonization in the Congo: The Legacy of Patrice Lumumba*, and Nadine Puechguirbal’s journal article, *Women, and War in the Democratic Republic of the Congo*, challenge the master narrative being told by Dunn and Nzungu – Ntalaja. Karen Bouwer writes about the history of decolonization in the Congo while incorporating the legacy and life of Patrice Lumumba. Bouwer uses gender analysis to understand Patrice Lumumba’s life and legacy. The book falls into three parts: one on Lumumba’s writing and the women in his life, a second part that focuses on female political activists, and a third that explores the gender politics of representations of Lumumba. Bouwer uses interviews, phone interviews, and newspapers as her primary sources and journals and reviews as her secondary sources. She takes a social-political, historical approach and uses gender and politics to guide her work. Bouwer focuses on two female activists, Andrée Blouin and Léonie Abo, and the ways that their experiences reflect the place of women in the independence struggles and how they contributed to decolonization. Bouwer gives these women a voice by

studying their biographies and works that others wrote with these women. Bouwer's work reveals that women did play a pivotal role in decolonization.

Comparably to Karen Bouwer's work, Nadine Puechguirbal writes a history that not many historians have explored. Puechguirbal explores and analyzes the story of women within the Congo during the time of civil war in 1996 and also before the war. She brings to light the constant struggles and violations women have suffered. She also illustrates to readers how the story of Congolese women is a recurring one filled with struggle and oppression. Before the war women still suffered violations of basic human rights and also had to obey her husband in every way. For example, women had to ask permission to be involved in any activities outside the household and if the husband said no she would not be allowed to attend or be a part of those activities. Even though during this time 90 percent of women were market traders, none of them held positions that ran the markets.[3] They were also excluded from council meetings and village meetings that determined local policy.

After the war, not much has changed. Women still suffer from the continuing story of oppression. 60 to 80 percent of these women are single heads of their households and struggling for food, wood, water, and healthcare. Because of these water, food, and health care insecurities, women had to travel far and alone to obtain these necessities.[4] This led to them being susceptible to thugs and also rape. In order to survive, Congolese women had to learn to adapt and change to cope with the effects of war. Traditions began to change, and women started to control more of their own money and trade. Puechguirbal argues that this started a new phase of women becoming independent and gaining self-confidence. The Congolese women now started to become more active in politics and were involved in the peace process. Political groups like the Peace and Solidarity of African Women, Femmes Africa Solidarite, and the Women as Partners for Peace in African started to develop. Congolese women began to become less oppressed and started to make an impact on society. Bouwer and Puechguirbal's work proved that there is a history of women's influence on decolonization and politics in the Congo. Karen Bouwer's and Nadine Puechguirbal's work explores what many historians have not yet written about. Both Bouwer and Puechguirbal's work reveals the significance and impact that Congolese women have had on politics in the Congo and decolonization.

## **Methodology**

While researching the history of Congolese women's political activism, the use of a broad number of sources was necessary. Since this topic was rarely written about and secondary sources were not widely available, the use of different types of methodology was needed. I first began research about Patrice Lumumba's legacy and its impact on the Congo's history. Every work about the Congo mentions Patrice Lumumba and his legacy as a national hero. One source was different from all the other sources I read. Karen Bouwer's work focused on Patrice Lumumba's legacy but also focused on how women had a pivotal impact on his success and legacy.

By working with Dr. Bouwer, I was led to NYU and Stanford University. This is where I started with collecting primary sources from the Herbert F. Weiss collection. I traveled to Northern California in April 2018 to the Hoover Institution on Stanford University's campus which provided me with various sources that included government documents, interviews and more. I worked directly with archivists to identify sources that would help build my evidence. By reading beyond the text and analyzing what was not being said I was able to piece together the history of Congolese women's political activism.

All primary sources that were collected from the Herbert F. Weiss collection were in French. Translating these sources was a necessary task that had to be completed. In addition to traveling for sources, I interviewed Andree Blouin's daughter, Eve Blouin, about her mother's time in the Congo and her work. Andree Blouin's remains to be a pivotal historical leader in the Congo. Her ability to mobilize women and politicize them was well respected by male political leaders like Patrice Lumumba, Kwame Nkrumah, and Ahmed Sékou Touré. Her success in the Congo was because she was an incumbent expatriate feminist. Her need to be politically active and mobilize women in the Congo after leaving gave her the ability to be just as an essential catalyst for change as Patrice Lumumba. Reading her autobiography and Karen Bouwer's work provided me with the foundation to understand Andree Blouin's work and success. Interviewing her daughter helped reveal the in-depth history that explained the success of her mother's work on mobilizing women to decolonize the Congo.

## **Historical Background**

The Congo's history has been tremulous and was filled with terror and greed. The Congo was first colonized by King Leopold II of Belgium and was formally recognized in the Conference of Berlin by European Powers in 1885. Within the next twenty years, Belgian forces annex various areas in the Congo basin, which led to more control of trade and an increase in their power over the

Congo. This led to many Congolese people being forced into labor and slavery that would build transportation and other various things. Congolese people harvested rubber and ivory under King Leopold's rule. The Congolese people began to protest the injustice of the killings of innocent people during King Leopold's rule. This led to the Belgian government annexing the Congo Free State and renaming it the Belgian Congo.

During the next fifty years, there was a significant amount of unrest in the Belgian Congo. This led to ABAKO issuing a declaration of civil rights, which asked for immediate granting of civil liberties and political rights like free speech and free press in the Belgium Congo.[5] A year later local elections were held, and Henri Arthur Cornelis served as Governor and General of the Belgian Congo up until The Congolese National Movement was established by Patrice Lumumba and other leaders.[6] They were also known as the MNCL, and this movement was created to mobilize Congolese citizens to become more politically active and be a part of the development of the Congo. Lumumba's success in unifying the Congolese led to his victory in helping the Congo gain independence and decolonization. At the end of June in 1960, Patrice Lumumba became the first prime minister of the newly independent Congo.[7] Lumumba quickly assembled his cabinet that composed of influential political activists like Andree Blouin. This led to not only Patrice Lumumba but also Andree Blouin becoming the needed catalysts for change in the Congo. Andree Blouin began to mobilize women who had not yet been politicized.[8] She started and recruited for the Feminine Movement for African Solidarity.[9] Her work in the Congo made her an essential political actor like Patrice Lumumba. Their impact on the Congo was significant because Blouin's and Lumumba's work and activism became a part of the reason why the Congo was able to decolonize.

### **Patrice Lumumba's Start of Unification and Mobilization**

In June 1960, Patrice Lumumba became the first prime minister of the newly independent Congo. Once Lumumba was announced as Prime Minister, he began to give speeches on his program and how he planned to unify the Congo and began the decolonization of the Congo. Some of these speeches and writings also focused on his stance on Congolese women and their rights. Patrice Lumumba's success in the Congo was due to his political agenda and progressive mentality towards women. Lumumba was one of few political leaders in the Congo that believed that women needed to be mobilized politically and socially. His speeches, writings, and political organizations reflected this mentality towards women and equality among all people. Lumumba knew that for the Congo to be successful in uniting and

decolonizing, women must be a part of the development of the newly independent Congo. This mentality led to the mobilization of women in the Congo. Congolese women became politically involved and came together to unite as a gender but also as Congolese citizens.

Patrice Lumumba began his political campaign by traveling throughout the Congo to gain support from Congolese people. He needed Congolese citizens to support him during this time of transition for the Congo. Lumumba gained support from political leaders and Congolese citizens by speaking about his political agenda and his belief in ending Belgium's rule. Patrice Lumumba focused on his understanding that for the Congo to successfully be independent of Belgium and decolonize that the people of the Congo must unify and mobilize. This was evident when he spoke at the Executive Committee of the Pan-African Conference in Accra on October 9<sup>th</sup>, 1959.[10] The Pan-African Conference had political organizations like the MNC, the parti du Peuple, and the UNAR in attendance. At this conference, Patrice Lumumba spoke about the "sudden awakening" of Congolese people due to nationalist leaders and organizations mobilizing them.[11] This sudden awakening also included Congolese women and their political activity. And this being due to nationalist leaders like Andree Blouin's work to end colonialism. Lumumba also spoke of the unjust maneuvers of the Belgium administration trying to subvert the political movement for independence. Despite Belgian administration trying to stopp efforts or political activists like Patrice Lumumba, the Congolese people still managed to mobilize. This success in mobilization was just the beginning of the journey to independence for the Congo. Lumumba stated in his speech that he believed in "African independence and unity" that would lead to colonialism ending and "the United States of Africa"[12].

Patrice Lumumba's speech at the Executive Committee of the Pan-African Conference in Accra led to a threat of boycott and riots against the Belgian government. Despite the fact that tension between the Belgians and Congolese hovered on the brink of chaos, the Belgian administration sent police to the meeting of the Special Congress and began firing into the crowds attending the meeting.[13] This "campaign of police repression against the nationalist" caused thirty people to die and over a hundred injured.[14] It also caused riots to occur after Lumumba's speech in Stanleyville and after the Special Congress meeting. The Governor believed that Patrice Lumumba was behind the riots which, led to his arrest and his time spent in prison on November 1 of 1959. Months later Lumumba was released due to the public's outcry and lack of evidence.[15] He was flown to Elizabethville to attend the Round Table



Conference, which led to various speeches being given and the decision for the Congo to become independent.

With the success of the Round Table Conference, Lumumba began to travel to gain more support of the Congolese and Belgians that reside in the Congo. In Lumumba's speech on February 6<sup>th</sup>, 1960 in the public meeting of the Amis de Presence Africaine in Brussels, Lumumba addressed the public and tried to convince the Belgian public and Congolese public that the two peoples have entered a new phase.[16] Lumumba knew the key to developing the Congo was unification on all levels. This included unifying the Belgians and the Congolese. The tension between both groups was still high, and Lumumba wanted to unite both groups to keep relations with the Europeans peaceful. Patrice Lumumba believed that to decolonize and become independent; the Congo could not cut all ties with the Belgians.

Many Europeans still resided in the Congo, and Patrice Lumumba wanted for the Congolese and Belgians to unite instead of pushing them out of the Congo.[17] This ongoing issue of unification was what Patrice Lumumba believed to be the barrier that was stopping the Congo from fully decolonizing. This belief came from looking at Ghana for inspiration. Patrice Lumumba stated that Ghana has tripled the number of Europeans living there since independence and that this unity was the reason why Ghana has been so successful in gaining independence and decolonizing.[18] Patrice Lumumba's speech in the public meeting of the Amis de Presence Africaine in Brussels sought to decrease the amount of tension between the Congolese and Belgians. He wanted to show that the new phase the Congo was entering in, was nonviolent and changing positively. By demonstrating this new phase, he hoped to unify the nation and avoid violence. The Congo had gone through so much violence in past that Lumumba did not want to replicate that violence in its future. Patrice Lumumba also mentioned at the end of his speech that for the Congo to unify and move forward, that all races and all genders must be equal.[19] Women cannot be held back like they were during the time under the Belgians. Lumumba knew that women played a huge factor in the Congo's future and success.[20] Patrice Lumumba knew that unification started at the race level but would end at the gender level. This unification would lead to equal access to voting and education for women that would benefit the nation and its people.

Patrice Lumumba continued his political agenda of unifying all in the Congo when speaking on July 19<sup>th</sup> in Stanleyville. Patrice Lumumba gave two speeches that outlined his political program and agenda.[21] Both the speeches were recorded live and also documented in the book *Lumumba*

*Speaks: The Speeches and Writings of Patrice Lumumba.* This speech was given to the citizens of Stanleyville in the Congo and was meant to unify the Congolese people and gain additional support for his political agenda. Lumumba's goals were to have all of the Congo unite and decolonize from Belgium rule. His ability to identify with the Congolese struggles and obstacles led him to be an influential public speaker during this time.

Patrice Lumumba speaks about five different topics in his first speech in Stanleyville. He speaks about Congolese Unity, Sexual Equality, Rapid Africanization, A Call to Order, and The Human Investment.[22] Lumumba emphasizes national unity and making the Congo a great nation in the heart of Africa.[23] He believes that the Congo can play a significant role in liberating Africa and making it into a free continent.[24] Lumumba also speaks about equality among all the citizens of the Congo. Whether the person is white or black, male or female, young or old, Lumumba believes that all Congolese citizens must treat each other as equals. Lumumba states that Congolese men must live on "equal footing" as Congolese women and these women should no longer be "shunted aside.[25] His stance on women is evident in his speech to the people in Stanleyville. This was one of the most pivotal speeches to the public that Patrice Lumumba gave. He addressed his whole political agenda and how much he believed that unification of the Congo would result in a ripple effect to the rest of Africa. This also was a crucial moment in Congolese women's mobilization because Patrice Lumumba publicly addresses the oppression of women and the need for equality among all.

To invest back into the Congolese people, Patrice Lumumba speaks about turning all positions of leadership to the Congolese citizens. This includes Congolese women that he believes can contribute to the development of the newly independent Congo. This "human investment" will lead to uniting the Congolese and building a great nation.[26] This is why it is necessary for Congolese citizens to work together. To do this, Lumumba believes that barriers that were created to suppress women must be broken. He also believes the barriers that were created to bring hostility between the people of the "Orientale Province" must be broken down. This will bring liberty and mobility the country and harmonization between the Congolese and the people of the "Orientale Province," which was predominantly European.[27] Patrice Lumumba's overall goal was to have peace to reign over the country and move on to the next part of Congolese independence.[28] This belief carried on to his success in mobilizing women and having them work in Congolese politics.

The disunification of the people of the Congo was the obstacle that Patrice Lumumba had to overcome. In his Stanleyville speech, Lumumba brings to light the issues that have held the Congo back from decolonizing and moving on to the second part of independence. He demonstrates how the success of the Congo depends on its citizens mobilizing and working together in peace and equality. Lumumba was trying to persuade the people of Stanleyville to follow his vision onto the second part of independence. Within this speech, Patrice Lumumba identifies what his program entails and what is needed to be successful. His overall goal is to unify the people of the Congo and treat all of its citizens equally. This involves not only the mobilization of Congolese citizens but Congolese women also. Developing the newly independent Congo will come when the Congolese people unify and work together in the Congo to stimulate a prosperous economy that will lead to decolonizing from Belgian rule. Patrice Lumumba believed this success would also lead the Congo into playing a crucial role in creating the free continent of Africa and the liberation of all its people.

Patrice Lumumba's progressive beliefs also reflected in the Movement National Congolese Lumumba, also known as the MNC or MNCL. Patrice Lumumba's political activism and work led to the creation of the MNCL. The members of the MNCL's primary goal was to support Patrice Lumumba and his political agenda. Their goals and principles reflected the progressive ideals that Patrice Lumumba practiced. These goals and policies focused on the betterment of the Congolese people and the independence and liberation of the Congolese from colonial control. This also included the improvement of Congolese women's lives. The MNCL was one of the leading political organizations that offered Congolese women the opportunity to be politically involved in the process of gaining independence for the Congo and decolonization. In their document called *Les Principes Du Programme Du Mouvement National Congolais* or *The Principles of the Program of the Congolais National Movement*, the MNCL discusses their goal to liberate the Congolese people politically, economically, and socially.[29] It also states that their organization condemns that exploitation of people and even discrimination of people.[30] In the first meeting of the MNCL on December 28<sup>th</sup>, 1958, Patrice Lumumba addressed all the members of the MNCL asking them for their support and active collaboration of all Congolese citizens, which included men, women, and children.[31] Lumumba also asks for the Congolese patriots to mobilize and seeks the support and mobilization of women.[32] Patrice Lumumba recognized that Congolese women had dealt with decades of oppression and needed to be liberated. Their support and mobilization would lead to the success of the decolonization of the Congo. This

is the reason for Lumumba's push to include women in the MNCL and also the fight for universal suffrage.

Congolese women became more involved in MNCL; they began to demand the same political rights as the Congolese men.[33] Their participation in the MNCL began to increase, and Patrice Lumumba began to recognize the need to create a campaign for the suffrage of Congolese women. Lumumba knew that Congolese women's attitudes were starting to change and that they were starting to mobilize themselves politically.[34] Congolese women started to become the catalyst for change in the Congo, and Patrice Lumumba knew that he needed to mobilize them to achieve the ultimate goal of decolonization and independence. Lumumba also understood "that the educated young people no longer regard women as people who should stay in the background" and he intended to "capitalize on the progressive trend, on the tide running in favor of women." [35] This complete support from the MNCL and Patrice Lumumba provided Congolese women with the foundation to continue to mobilize in higher numbers. Congolese women began to come together and become political activists that demanded change in Congolese society. These changes included the decolonization of the Congo and Patrice Lumumba becoming prime minister of the Congo. Patrice Lumumba stated that "women all over the country are beginning to agitate, to demand independence." [36] Congolese women began to rise above the oppression that colonial Congolese society placed upon them. Congolese women gathered and no longer asked for equality and change, but they demanded equality and change. In congress meetings, Congolese women gathered and one gave a "magnificent speech" where she stated, "If we're not allowed to vote in the coming elections, we're going to sabotage them." [37] This political activity and attitude change led to Congolese women having the ability to become a political actor in the process of decolonization. The MNCL continued to remain politically active with women's involvement for decades after it was established. They also held international meetings in locations like Holland and Paris with the goals and principles of continued decolonization of the Congo and universal suffrage and liberation. The success of the MNCL was due to their progressive policies and objectives that were developed by political activists like Patrice Lumumba. Their success also contributed to the mobilization of Congolese women. The MNCL and Patrice Lumumba supported Congolese women's contribution to the Congo. This led to Patrice Lumumba recruiting political activists Andree Blouin into his presidential cabinet and also to leading the movement to mobilize Congolese women.

### **Andree Blouin: Congolese Women's Catalyst for Change**

Patrice Lumumba viewed women as equal to men and believed that they should have the opportunity to not only obtain an education but be a part of the political environment that was in the Congo. Lumumba also wanted to “mobilize women politically” and sought women’s support. Lumumba believed that women could make a difference in the Congo politically and believed that they were no longer just background figures in Congolese society. This led to his push for progressive reforms for Congolese women. Patrice Lumumba stated, “when you civilize a man, you only civilize an individual; but when you civilize some women, you civilize an entire nation.”[38] This quote represented Lumumba’s position on Congolese women. His position is also evident in much of his political work which was influenced by Andrée Blouin. Andrée Blouin was born in the Congo to a French father and Congolese mother. She was placed in an orphanage when she was young and left when she was young to pursue a life outside of the Colonial run orphanage. Her success later in life within politics led her to pursue working with political activists to liberate the people of Africa from colonial rule. Blouin began her work in the Congo when she returned to Central Africa after working with Sekou Toure. Blouin had the leaders from the African Solidarity Party reach out to her and ask her for help in creating the same success in mobilizing women that had happened in Guinea.

Even though she was hesitant about the backlash the African Solidarity Party may receive for working with a political activist that was a woman, Blouin took on the opportunity of returning to the Congo where she once lived as a child. The African Solidarity Party quickly had Andree Blouin travel to the Congo. Once she was there, she began to mobilize women for the African Solidarity Party, also known as Parti Solidaire Africain or PSA. Her political work and success in Guinea and the Congo led to her being respected by many male political leaders like Pierre Mulele, Antoine Kingotolo, Raphael Kuikie, Antione Gizenga, and other influential political leaders. Her unique ability to mobilize women politically and socially was recognized by Patrice Lumumba. Soon after joining the PSA and helping them with their work, Lumumba had Andree Blouin work as chief of protocol in the Congo. Andree Blouin was involved in being a diplomatic liaison to European governments during the transition to independence and also worked regularly with Lumumba, Gizenga, and Mulele.[39]

Andree Blouin’s work was trusted, and her ability to mobilize the masses was vital to have women be active politically and also key to the Congo decolonizing. Blouin’s work and influence were influential during the time of independence of the Congo. Her name and Patrice Lumumba’s would be written side by side together in major news publications.[40] Like other

female activists, her story and impact has been forgotten and overshadowed by Lumumba's legacy. Lumumba was an ardent supporter of Blouin, and she was always under attack because she was a woman in politics. Even though she had a lot of criticism, Lumumba admired her ambition to fight for decolonization. Lumumba stated, "our enemies attack her all the time. Not for what she's done, but simply because she is a woman, and she's there, in the thick of it".[41] She continued to receive criticism after accepting a position with Lumumba's government.

Andree Blouin's work also was viewed as a threat to Belgian colonialists. Blouin knew that her presence in the Congolese society would not be welcomed by the Belgians. When she first was invited to the Congo, Blouin stated, "I felt honored, but my first reaction was to refuse, I was afraid that my presence might bring prejudice to their cause. "Think of the Belgians' reactions," I said. "They would certainly assume the worst since I come from Guinea. This might bring you problems. It might damage your chances in the elections." But the group refused to hear my excuse. "We need you there," Antoine Gizenga said. Antoine Gizenga was the co-founder of the MNCL and was a significant part of the party's success. He stated that "The women of the Congo have not been politicized like the women of Guinea. You can help us to awaken the women to their part in the political and social development of our country."[42] As Andree Blouin suspected, the Belgian government began to see Blouin as a threat to their power within the Congo.

Colonialists and political leaders saw Andree Blouin as a political threat like Patrice Lumumba. Critics would attack her and state that she was a "prostitute in disguise" because of her work with powerful men and the mere fact that she was a woman in politics.[43] Other people who were threatened by her would state that she was a communist.[44] The Belgians who controlled schools and churches in the Congo preached that Andree Blouin was a leader of communism in the Congo and the movement to unify Congolese women and liberate them should be condemned because it was being led by her.[45] Belgian churches and schools taught this to convince Congolese girls and women not to follow the movement. Critics also believed that she had too much influence on Lumumba and named her as the "evil genius" of the Lumumba government.[46] Critics continued to try everything possible to diminish her political career. "Later, the influence she was reputed to have on Lumumba's actions led journalists to refer to the work of the team "Lumum-Blouin," and they also called her "the prime minister's Eminence Grise," and "the Courtesan of all the African chiefs of state.[47] Blouin had made significant contributions during the campaign for decolonization. This caused the Belgian colonialist to believe that Andree Blouin to be too powerful of a

political actor in the Congo. They feared her political work and ability to mobilize women would lead to the decolonization of the Congo. Blouin coming to the Congo made the Belgian government begin their campaign to stop Blouin from succeeding in mobilizing women.[48] They began threatening Andree Blouin with keeping her family in their custody. Her mother was subjected to being beaten by soldiers and later became paralyzed from her injuries, and Blouin's family would be held hostage while she traveled for political activities.[49] Authorities did this so they could force Andree Blouin to act in a manner that did not threaten their position in the Congo.

The Belgian government also began to keep tabs on Andree Blouin and her whereabouts secretly.[50] They would document her whereabouts and continued to try to stop her from pursuing her work.[51] The administration generals that were in charge of immigration also continued to try to stop her from traveling and also requested that she leave the Congo.[52] They continued to deny appeals and requests for Blouin to continue her work in the Congo. Even though the Belgian Colonial government tried to stop Blouin, she continued to ignore their requests for her to leave and respond to their letters. The Belgian Colonial government began to demand that Andree Blouin's visa be denied an extension, and that she is sent back to South Africa.[53] Andree Blouin was aware of their intentions of stopping her from mobilizing women and working with political activists in the Congo.[54] Their reasoning for denying Andree Blouin's extension was because she was the leader of the Feminine Movement for African Solidarity and the goals and principles of the movement supported the decolonization of the Congo and a revolution of the Congo.[55] They also believed that Andree Blouin was a threat to their power because she supported the emancipation of the African woman and was able to mobilize women in Guinea successfully. The Belgian colonialist did not want what happened in Guinea to occur in the Congo. Despite their efforts, Andree Blouin was able to mobilize women and have them become politically active in the Feminine Movement for African Solidarity.[56] Andree Blouin was able to take all the criticism and obstacles that Blouin received and remained to be a groundbreaking political activist.

The creation and success of the Feminine Movement for African Solidarity was one of the major political groups that Andree Blouin was able to organize and guide. Her ability to identify with the Congolese women and understand their oppression gave her an advantage in mobilizing Congolese women. When Andree Blouin returned to the Congo, she began her tour across the country to mobilize women. She traveled with Antoine Gizenga, co-founder of the MNCL, and various other male political activists to help gather support for the MNCL and also Patrice Lumumba.[57] During this tour, Blouin realized that

Congolese women desperately needed to be liberated.[58] These Congolese women were also looking for opportunities to be politically and socially involved in the development of the soon to be independent Congo. This was evident when Andree Blouin began her tour and was able to unify Congolese women so quickly. During her first few months in the Congo, Andree Blouin spoke at meetings twice a day every day with the goal of mobilizing Congolese women.[59] In only one afternoon, Blouin was able to sign up 4,325 women to the organization in Kikwit.[60] And later that night during her second meeting of the day over 6,000 women and 3,000 men showed up to hear her speak.[61] At the end of 1960, Andree Blouin was able to enroll over 45,000 Congolese women to the Feminine Movement for African Solidarity.[62] These 45,000 members just came from the provinces of Kwilu, Kwango, and Kasai.[63] Andree Blouin's success in being able to listen and identify with Congolese women led her to become the main reason for the mobilization of Congolese women for liberation and decolonization.

The newly enrolled 45,000 members of the Feminine Movement for African Solidarity began to show their support to the MNCL and Patrice Lumumba. These Congolese women knew that the MNCL and Patrice Lumumba were the keys to liberation and the decolonization of the Congo. Congolese women knew that if they were a part of the development of the newly independent Congo that they would be able to break the oppression that had been occurring since the Congo was colonized. To continue the success of Andree Blouin's mobilization efforts, Congolese women continued to hold meetings after Blouin left to continue her tour.[64] Members were elected to lead the groups in each province. A few of the "strong women" were selected to continue the work that Andree Blouin had established.[65] This feminine movement and grassroots movement was a "veritable women's crusade." [66] These women continued to follow Andree Blouin's bylaws and principles. They held meetings within their own homes and continued to support the MNCL and contributed to the success of Patrice Lumumba becoming Prime Minister and the decolonization of the Congo. They were able to contribute to decolonization by continuing to mobilize women and demand change in the Congo.

Andree Blouin knew that cooking and feeding political activists would keep morale up and by consistently speaking about the injustices were occurring against Congolese women would bring success to her campaign.[67] Congolese women followed in Blouin's footsteps and continued to keep morale up for the decolonization of the Congo and the liberation of its women. By setting up a strong foundation and strong women to lead the movement,



Andree Blouin was able to make Congolese women's political participation remain a part of Congolese history for decades after independence.

New phases of independence of Congolese women and political participation continued to occur after Blouin's work. The establishment of political groups in the late 1950's like the Peace and Solidarity of African Women, Femmes Africa Solidarite, and the Women as Partners for Peace in African continued on the movement that Andree Blouin made so successful.[68] The narrative that once was written that held Congolese women as background characters was no longer true. Congolese women started to become single heads of their households.[69] Traditions that once held back Congolese women began to change, and women started to control more of their own money and trade.[70] This new phase of women become independent and gained self-confidence. The Congolese women now started to become more active in politics and were involved in the peace process. They began to fight against oppression and started to make an impact on society and decolonization.

## **Conclusion**

Patrice Lumumba's impact on the Congo has forever changed its history. His legacy continues to be told of him being the country's "national hero." Even though his political work and life have been significant, it was not the only factor that led to the decolonization of the Congo. Historians have fallen into writing a narrative that holds Patrice Lumumba as the sole reason why the Congo gained its independence and decolonized. This history has overshadowed the other political activists that have dedicated their lives and political work to the Congo. These political activists include Congolese women and a French woman Andree Blouin. Andree Blouin devoted her whole life to liberating women and the decolonization of all countries of Africa. Her legacy was carried on by Congolese women that also dedicated their time to mobilizing women to develop the newly independent Congo. The social and political development of the independent Congo was impacted by not only male political activists but also Congolese women. Congolese women continued their efforts in decolonization and political activism for decades after independence and continued to enroll women in the Feminine Movement for African Solidarity. Despite suppression, oppression, and overshadowing Congolese women continued to demand equality and change. They no longer chose to remain to be background figures in the Congo and began to be political actors instead. Congolese women today continue to fight oppression at every level, but their political history will slowly become a part of the narrative told by historians today.

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