

Equal Power— Lasting Peace

The Democratic
Republic of Congo.
No peace for women.



Equal Power – Lasting Peace
Obstacles for women's participation
in peace processes

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intro duc tion

How are transitions made from war to peace? Who has the power to build peace? Who decides what peace should entail? Peace matters to everyone living in conflict regions, so who decides the content of that peace?

Equal Power – Lasting Peace is a study about women’s participation in peace processes and the particular challenges of building a gender equal peace after a violent conflict. *Equal Power – Lasting Peace* explores obstacles to women’s participation in peace and democracy processes, in regions affected by armed conflict. The report addresses the gaps between words and practice in peace building by gathering experience and knowledge from 79 female peace workers in five different contexts: Armenia/Azerbaijan/Nagorno Karabakh, Bosnia and Herzegovina, DR Congo, Iraq and Liberia. They have a wealth of concrete experience of how exclusion manifests in practice

and how windows of opportunity may open. The aim of *Equal Power – Lasting Peace* is to investigate the intimate connection between gender, power and peace and in addition contribute to a better understanding of the power gaps that prevent women from participating in peace processes.

Summaries of the five conflicts/post-conflicts have been produced, based on the study *Equal Power – Lasting Peace*. This brochure addresses the topic “The Democratic Republic of Congo. No peace for women.”

For the complete study of *Equal Power – Lasting Peace*, please visit www.equalpowerlastingpeace.org

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67.8

Population of DR Congo in millions
(The state of world population 2011, UNPFA)

French

Official language of DR Congo

50%

Percentage of Catholics i DR Congo

66.8%

Literacy rate in DR Congo
(Age 15 and above, 2009 UNESCO)

580

Maternity mortality
per 100.000 live births in DR Congo

10%

Percentage of Muslims in DR Congo



There are more than 200 ethnic groups in DR Congo, and the major ones are: Mongo, Luba, Kongo and Mangbetu-Azande.

The Democratic Republic of Congo. No Peace for Women.

Even though the last war in the Democratic Republic of Congo officially ended in 2002, women are still being raped, particularly in the eastern provinces of South Kivu, North Kivu and Ituri. Violators of women are often members of militant groups or retired soldiers, but reports say that peacekeepers and civilian personnel at MONUSCO also raped Congolese women. The perpetrators often go unpunished because rape victims in the DRC have scarcely any access to the justice system. Rape victims are also cast out from their families and the society without much hope of reintegration and economic recovery.

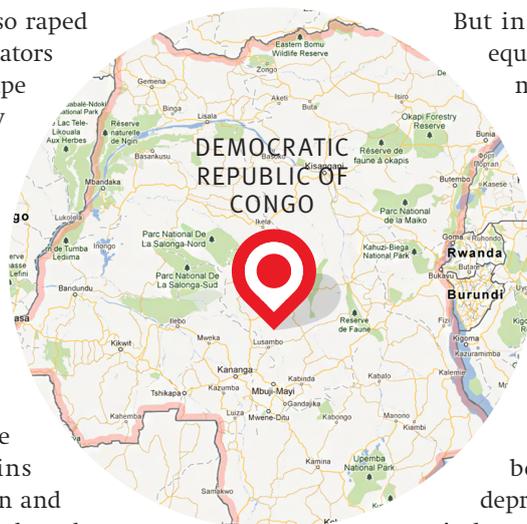
In spite of the guarantee of equal rights in the 2005 Constitution and the criminalisation of rape in 2006, the Congolese legislation remains contradictory. For example, men and women are guaranteed equal right to be presented on political party lists, but a provision in the law allows a party to ignore the rule without having to bear any consequences. Particularly disturbing is also the Family Code that guarantees women's submission to men. Women are not allowed to own property

or sign any official documents without the husband's consent.

When it comes to political representation in official institutions, Article 14 of the Constitution guarantees women "significant representation in national, provincial and local institutions" ¹ (30 per cent of Congolese institution representatives must be women).

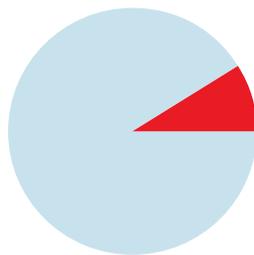
But in spite of this provision, gender equality is very far from being implemented.

Although there are no official statistics confirming it, domestic violence is widespread and on the rise. Female genital mutilation (FGM) is still in practice in a number of provinces. Despite the richness in natural resources, the DRC is still one of the poorest countries in the world with 75 percent of the population living below the poverty line. Being deprived of the right to property and independence to control their income, women are much poorer than men. In addition, women live under constant threat of being raped and have very limited access to health facilities. Maternal mortality is high, as is the prevalence of HIV/AIDS, particularly among rape victims.





Neither the Penal Code nor the Family Code of the Democratic Republic of Congo contains any reference to **domestic violence** (<http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/country,,RBC,,COD,,45f147152d,o.html>).



9%

Share of women in parliament (Progress of the world's women 2011–2012).

But not all is negative in the DRC. In spite of the fact that civil society has so far mostly played the role of service provider, women's organisations have helped push through many of the legislations described above, including the adoption of CEDAW and the national action plan for implementation of UNSCR 1325. They have participated in the Inter-Congolese Dialogue in Sun City and left a significant mark on the process. They are irreplaceable in helping rape victims seek justice. Together with the Ministry for Gender, women's organisations are revising the Family Code aiming to remove all provisions that are discriminatory towards women.

Experiences of power and participation

This part presents the findings from field research in the DRC in January 2012. Interviews with two focus groups were conducted with eight participants in Bukavu and five in Kinshasa from key women's organisations, as well as interviews with key informants from civil society and some key actors at the national and international formal levels.

Participation and exclusion in theory and practice.

"Women's power... it is really invisible. And it is mostly due to tradition. According to tradition, the woman cannot say: 'I am tired'. It is her duty to work from early morning until late. Women don't even have power at the family level. The woman can be dealing with some farm activities... during the time of harvest the yield is for the husband and the woman goes empty-handed. And if she dares claim her rights, the husband can decide to leave her, saying you are no longer my wife."

This description, given by one of the participants in the focus group in Bukavu, the provincial capital of the conflict-ridden South Kivu province, captures how the everyday life of Congolese women continues to be a struggle for survival: economically, socially and physically. The ongoing conflict has not only cemented the traditional view on women as being subjected to men, but it has also brought staggering poverty and a constant threat of sexual or physical violence.

In the immediate aftermath of the war women's

organisations got an opportunity to raise their voices during the national peace negotiations in Sun City in 2002 and demand not only an end to hostilities but also a greater say in the transitional period. In the peace agreement, the Electoral Act and the Constitution from 2005, women's organisations successfully added a number of important formal rights, including gender equality in all the important decision-making bodies and the new rape legislation in 2006. As one young focus group participant said: "Not very long ago we had practically no legal rights. So especially the Constitution from 2005 is a big step forward". The big challenge is to implement the laws to make them more than mere "words on paper".

"I would like to stress that Congolese women have all the power: political, social, economic. However, there are different categories: (there are) women who are informed but they are a minority. They understand how things work and can make decisions. Then there is the category of grassroots women. They (also) have all the power but they live in ignorance. They have no education, they are not informed, and they are dominated by tradition. If there was solidarity between women who are informed and those from the grassroots I think the impact would be positive regarding women's problems in the DRC."

A number of informants thought that the window of opportunity that opened just after the war now has been shut again. The legal framework for strengthening women's position in the political sphere was in place – but on a more concrete level very little has happened. "Why are we talking about women having all this power when it is not so in reality?" one participant was arguing.

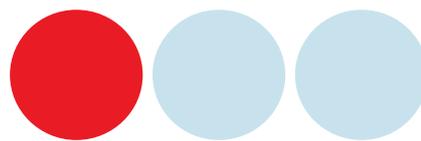
The reasons for this closed window of opportunity are many – the most striking one is the failure of the government to seriously take up women's issues and propose gender-sensitive legislation. The informants also thought that the Congolese women's commitment has steadily weakened since 2006 mostly because they were disappointed about not being more involved by the women in governmental positions.

"I feel that women are less and less engaged in this process... In the first part of the process, the women were very active. Now the process has become more formal, with structures and institutions like STAREC and the Amani programme². Before it was more informal, more



The year the law on sexual violence was added to the penal code. The conception of rape was given a broader definition and criminalised.

2006



The demand of a **30 percent** quota for women in parliament was rejected, but women managed to push through a guarantee of **30 percent** women in various democratic institutions, such as the Electoral Commission and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission.¹¹²

on a grassroots level. We don't feel now the strength that women had before."

Empowered by their contribution to peace negotiations, women organised awareness raising campaigns prior to the 2006 elections. Their aim: to use the spotlight put on women's position and women's rights during the peace negotiations and make it more sustainable by increasing the number of women candidates as well as encouraging other women to vote for them. The campaigns were successful, the majority of registered voters in the 2006 presidential and legislative elections were women. And even though only 42 out of 500 elected parliamentarians were women and six more appointed to government positions, the mere fact that women had entered the formal political scene was considered a great success.

"What we are doing is not for us, probably not even for our children. Maybe the children of our children one day will taste the fruit of what we are doing."

The rural-urban divide. The lack of communication and accountability.

The widespread participation of women in the 2006 elections was not repeated in 2011. 47 women were elected to government positions. The focus groups saw many reasons for this: not only did the traditional patriarchal structures hinder women from participating, they were also inhibited by the mutual distrust between women at provincial and local levels and women in positions of power in Kinshasa. Congolese women's organisations were deeply disappointed when the women parliamentarians often prioritised party politics ahead of women's rights issues. One of the most blatant examples occurred in 2011 after efforts to advocate for the passing of the proposed amendment to the Electoral Act that would guarantee equal representation of women and men. During the subsequent parliamentary vote, many female parliamentarians were not even present.³

"The elite doesn't come from the women's movement. They don't even speak the local language. They are there (in power positions) because their families are influential, because their husbands have a lot of money. Many women have never struggled for gender issues, or peace processes. So the women at the grassroots don't have any confidence in them. Also, some women in power don't

recognise the contribution of local women's organisations to their promotion."

The participants were concerned about this lack of connection between women at different levels in society. This huge gap between the very few who hold the power and the powerless rest was an endless source of mutual distrust and hampered communication. At the same time, with the lack of infrastructure in a country as big as the DRC, the contact between the civil society organisations in the east and the stakeholders in Kinshasa in the far west is virtually impossible. The parliamentarians can hardly be accountable to their constituencies since they can't visit them regularly.

"There should be communication between the different spaces where decision on issues relating to gender are taken. We analyse things and make decisions... however there is a problem with connecting the decisions taken within our institutions and the decision-making spaces. The connection between those actors does not exist."

The participants thought that it is not enough to have more women in politics, the status of women can only truly improve if women politicians are given high-ranking positions within their political parties, as well as in parliamentary commissions and working groups. However, many organisations emphasised that at this stage, the mere number of women is crucial, because very few men are prepared to join in the fight for women's rights.

Moreover, the informants thought that it is the women themselves who contribute to their exclusion from political participation. Women who live in rural areas have little or no access to education, are subordinated to men and very poor and subsequently completely absent from the struggle for women's political rights. As such, they sometimes tend to think of female politicians as 'rebels' or 'prostitutes'.

"A lot of work needs to be done at village level — a lot of information, awareness, and it has to be done bottom-up. Women at the grassroots, their problem is to find something to eat, some manioc. When we talk about gender parity, they say parity for what? What should I do with that parity?"

Peace and security. Striving for greater participation.

Even though many women's organisations already existed before the war, they had not participated in any peace negotiations preceding Sun City in 2002. The increasing ethnic and nationalist divisions in the country during the conflicts resulted in a split both between and within some organisations. One woman described the tensions and resentments experienced by the women in her own organisation at the time of the conflict:

"It was really difficult, because every single woman was affected. We didn't talk to each other anymore, we thought that the other was the enemy, and everybody in the room cried. So, I asked every woman to speak about what had happened to her, and everybody spoke and said that this is the community that is responsible for my misfortune. They all blamed each other. But afterwards, when all had talked and all had cried, we made a plan of action. Because we realised that as women, we had nothing to do with this matter of war, we have lived together, we have worked together, we have studied together, why can't we even look at each other today?"

The women described how the situation became better, but that a lot of mistrust still exists among women.

"Yes, it has been better, since... The contact has restarted but it is not like before, we are still a bit afraid and have no confidence. We don't know what the other is thinking. And others we cannot meet at all. It is not like before the war."

The power of Congolese women lies within the family. They are the ones who bring 'harmony' to the couple, separate the fighting children or make peace between neighbours. However, in spite of their role as small-scale conflict-solvers, women were not given a stronger position in matters concerning peace on national or regional levels. The reason for this, according to the participants, was the strong tradition of leaving all matters of peace and security to men.

"...Both men and a lot of women think so. And a consequence of this is that when a woman deals with peace questions, people don't consider them. That is the reason why most peace agreements fail."

However, for Sun City, the women were better prepared and ready to fight for peace and security for themselves and their families. As the National Coordinator of the regional peace initiative International Conference on the Great Lakes Region (ICGLR) expressed it⁴: "They were an institution. And a very strong institution. There was no way of ignoring them, because they were so present."⁵

Women had a strong presence in the ICGLR. They came with very powerful messages of sexual violence in the Great Lakes region, and managed to anchor these messages well in the governments.

"The conference is inclusive, and it is participatory. The key stakeholders in the peace process must all be together, including women. Because women have been victims of the conflict in the region, and because women are more and more active and should take part in the discussions about solutions... And since the regional process came after the internal process, women were ready."

The situation was a bit different during the peace process for the volatile eastern parts of the DRC, the Goma process. The Goma process began in 2008 and functioned as a forum where a broader sector of the society could express their concerns and grievances. This part of the conference was open to all: the civil society, the warring parties and international observers. However, when the more detailed negotiations between armed groups began, civil society did not participate. The few women who were included were all representing various armed groups.⁶

The Goma process is monitored by the governmental programme STAREC. According to a person responsible for activities within the framework of STAREC in South Kivu, women have been involved in the entire process: from participating in peace talks, through the implementation of stabilisation activities to being the beneficiaries of measures taken to rebuild the society. Among STAREC's priorities is the reduction of sexual and gender-based violence, as well as the overall protection of civilians. However, the programme has not developed any particular protection system adapted to the specific needs of women. As an example of how this can be done, the women mentioned an initiative by the UN stabilisation mission MONUSCO to accompany women to and from the market and thereby providing protection from sexual violence.⁷

The participants were generally dissatisfied with the work of STAREC. They thought that women at the grassroots level have not been sufficiently involved in the framing of interventions. Several organisations in the east were involved in concrete peace work; they organised awareness-raising campaigns about the peace agreement and about UNSCR 1325, and assisted female ex-combatants. The focus group participants thought that, at the same time, the conflict is now entirely about gaining control over areas rich with natural resources, which is why there is little incentive among combatants to end it. This has made it increasingly difficult for women's groups to have any fruitful contacts with the combatants.

"In the east there are groups of women from civil society who have had contacts with these groups. But since their objective is not well known, it is difficult. When they rape and kill women from their own village, steal cows from villagers and exploit the mines in their own communities, it is the community that is suffering. There are some delegations from women's associations that try to get in touch with the warriors, saying when you do this you are not making the government suffer, you are making the community suffer."

Poverty and corruption: the main hindrance to women's participation.

“Poverty is the big thing that blocks women from participating in decision-making spaces. It is because men have understood that in order to subordinate women they have to keep them poor. During the campaign period, the candidates come with gifts, they buy the votes, and all this is because of the extreme poverty.”

More than 61 per cent of Congolese women live below the poverty line.⁸ Although they traditionally are providers of food and care for their family, they have no control over their income as it traditionally belongs to their husbands. The women become dependent on their male relatives. Prohibited to sign contracts or take a loan from a bank without the husband's approval, they have very small chances to improve their situation. There is also very little political will to change the situation. Poverty is therefore considered to be one of the main factors contributing to women's subordination to men.

And where there is poverty, there is corruption. One of the participants talked about a politician who openly bragged about buying votes that brought him to power and therefore felt no responsibility towards the community that voted for him. Since women are among the poorest in the society, they are most likely to accept money or small gifts. For the same reason, more men than women candidates have the resources to buy their votes, a practice that is widely accepted. Lack of financial means is a serious impediment for women with political ambitions, according to women's organisations.

“When I went to a community to sensitise them to the need to vote for women candidates they said to me: you speak very well, but where is the money? If we don't get money we won't vote for them... That is a reason why many women don't even try to be candidates, because they have no money to spend. During this election, we even had some sort of deflation. There was such a need of banknotes to be distributed in the provinces that all the money went there and very few banknotes were available here in Kinshasa... The women are very, very poor, that is a serious hindrance to their participation.”

Increasing the number of female political candidates and voters is one of the main objectives for women's organisations. They therefore developed a very pragmatic approach to poverty:

“When I went to the villages to sensitise women before the elections I told them that the money being handed out actually belongs to the community. So I told them this is your money, take it, eat with it, but don't vote for them.”

Lack of health and lack of security.

The Congolese people generally have little or no access to health care. The prevalence of HIV/AIDS among women victims of sexual violence is very high. According to

witnesses in South Kivu and Maniema, cited in a UN report, some foreign armed groups deliberately infected as many women as possible with the disease, so that it could spread among the rest of the community.⁹

Therefore, women's organisations consider one of the most pressing issues to be ending sexual violence, and the brutality with which it is carried out. The consequences of rape often go beyond mere health matters. They often have devastating effects on victims, on children born as a result of rape and on the entire community.

“The whole family is ashamed. The whole family has been raped and is destabilised. The victims are obliged to move, to go away.”

A number of the women's organisations has created programmes focusing on increasing rape and violence victims' access to medical and legal aid. They have also organised awareness-raising campaigns and helped change attitudes towards victims of rape. “Most women who have been raped are not accepted back into the community, no matter if they have children or not. But thanks to campaigns by us and other organisations, little by little, this attitude is changing.”

Women activists also concretely assisted victims of mass rapes in Walikale in North Kivu.¹⁰ The participants report that although sexual violence has decreased in urban areas like Bukavu and Goma, it is still very common in remote areas, especially close to mining sites. The women said that the most brutal forms of sexual violence were committed by foreign armed groups in the 1990s. They also described how sexual violence is trivialised and considered to be the woman's issue. One of the participants recalled how her organisation tried to raise the issue by arranging a meeting with different stakeholders:

“One time we wanted to bring together women from the media, organisations, and relevant authorities. The authorities had accepted the invitation. But of 15 invited, no one showed up on the day of the meeting. They didn't even delegate to someone else. They had all confirmed one day before, but the day of the meeting, when I called to see what happened, they were all absent.”

According to the EU delegation in Kinshasa, the government is increasingly irritated at everybody's desire to report on sexual violence, as well as at donors pressing the government to increase the struggle against it.¹¹ But participants reported that while international donors continue to urge the government to do something about the violence against women, they also have interests in the country's natural resources and therefore tend to leave the Congolese government alone.

“There is international business in the death and violence in the DRC. Everybody is getting their share of the profit. Panzi hospital has become a tourist place, people come to see how many women have been raped.¹² But today she is healed, tomorrow she will be raped again

and come back to Panzi. We have to stop the cause of the violence. And the international community is not interested.”

The focus groups explained how sexual violence is not only used as a tool in the conflict. A woman applying for a job as a civil servant may have to offer sex in return. And school girls are sometimes forced to have sex with teachers or headmasters in order to get good grades that would enable them to continue their education. One of the organisations specializes in assisting school girls with legal assistance and sensitising teachers and communities to the problem.

The work of women’s organisations is becoming increasingly more difficult because they and their families are being threatened.

“Women activists get a lot of death threats. Over the telephone, by SMS, e-mail, or they send someone to warn you. All of us have received such threats. I have been threatened by local politicians, governors and members of parliament.”

Quite often, women’s rights activists and women politicians are slandered and women sometimes withdraw from their activism and political positions because their morals are being questioned. This intimidating tactic also makes many women work behind the scenes in order to remain anonymous.

“We have a government that cannot provide security. This means that a lot of actions concerning peace are made by women, but this is not known to the public.”

Impunity. No justice for women.

“If a person is sent to justice today for having raped a woman, tomorrow you can see him walking down the street again as if nothing happened. And it is because of corruption.”

According to STAREC, the use of sexual violence has lessened due to increased awareness and an increased number of imprisoned perpetrators.¹³ A high-ranking officer in Bukavu affirmed that among the 750 military staff imprisoned in South Kivu right now, the majority have been found guilty of sexual violence.¹⁴ However, women’s organisations consider corruption, lack of gender awareness among staff and the prominence of traditional justice some of the key factors for the malfunction of the justice. Because of this, and because of high costs of legal proceedings, many families are forced to settle through customary law. For example, when the perpetrator is known, men from the two affected families settle the matter financially. The woman neither gets legal justice nor economic compensation.

One of the organisations was involved in the government-led initiative to have more women in police forces and the justice system as a part of the SSR process. But true political will at the highest level was almost non-

existent and the organisation had to explain to the government why a gender component in the security sector is so important.

“Frankly, there is a problem with the Gender Ministry. They should play an important role in the security sector reform, but they don’t. So we are a bit frustrated.”

The international community. Dependency and disappointment.

The participants recognise the importance of the international community and the support that women’s organisations received for the peace negotiations in 2002, as well as for advocacy against sexual violence afterwards. However, the women were also sceptical about the international community’s actual interest in taking action to change the dire situation for women in the DRC.

“Yes, we have collaboration with international partners on sexual violence, and also with the ICC.¹⁵ But we have the impression that even when we make recommendations, nothing happens, there is no implementation. I have been to the US, to a meeting with the Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, and I have been to the ICC. I have always brought with me the same very concrete recommendations. But still we have the feeling that nothing is being done.”

Several women thought that the world is reluctant to intervene in the DRC due to the regional dimension of the conflict. They pointed out that the destabilisation began shortly after the arrival of millions Rwandans who sought refuge in the DRC after the genocide in 1994. The women also thought that many countries have interests in the mining industry and are therefore unwilling to put pressure on the Congolese government to change things. One of the participants explained: “We have come to the conclusion that the war in the DRC will never stop. And why? Because there are mines. And as long as we have all this fortune, the war will continue”. At the same time, the DRC, especially the government, is extremely dependent on generosity of international donors. “Weak governance”¹⁶ was identified as one of the country’s main problems. Severe lack of financial and human resources, as well as a tendency to rely on international investments in major infrastructure underscore this identification.

Some participants thought that the major presence of international NGOs is not always positive, particularly when they seem to be disinterested in transferring their knowledge to Congolese organisations and sometimes compete with local organisations by taking over the work that the grassroots should do.

MONUSCO is a major international actor in the DRC. MONUSCO’s mission is, through collaboration with local communities, to provide protection for civilians in the conflict-affected provinces of South and North Kivu and Orientale, particularly in the remote areas of those provinces. Women’s organisations don’t trust MONUSCO’s

capacity and willingness to really make an impact, especially when it comes to the disarmament and repatriation of foreign armed groups. The regional dimension of the conflict, and the wealth of the DRC make them doubt the true reason for the international commitment.

Analysis

Exclusion

In spite of the fact that there is an official document guaranteeing peace to the Congolese people, fighting and violence are still an every-day occurrence, particularly in the east. Women are still excluded from decision-making mechanisms, and in certain areas, the post-conflict period has only brought them more suffering. Women in the eastern provinces live in extreme poverty and under constant threat of being raped or otherwise attacked, which makes it impossible for them to take part in anything beyond the struggle for mere survival. Their rare participation in public life often increases the risk of being attacked, physically or morally.

Corruption contributes to the exclusion of women: the majority of the poor are women without financial means to fully take advantage of their rights. There is a lack of political will to improve the women's socioeconomic situation, leaving them without tools to improve their subordinate position.

While several laws on women's equality have been passed, very few are implemented. The weak government barely controls its own territory, let alone areas far away from the capital. Hence, even though the parliament in Kinshasa may remove exclusionary paragraphs from the legislation, these measures often have little or no impact in the daily lives of women in South Kivu.

Another important observation is how the weakness of state and its institutions has made the civil society organisations become main providers of social services to the population. Being preoccupied with the care of their communities, many CSOs often find it difficult to work with policy and advocacy.

Finally, women's organisations lack competence and good communication and dialogue with women in formal positions of power, making them even more excluded.

Achievements

Despite the extreme hardships, women in the DRC have continued to work for peace. They have shown great courage by approaching armed groups and asking them to lay down their guns and stop violating women. At the local level, women's organisations have been instrumental in assisting women victims of rape and other forms of sexual violence. In many cases, the support of civil society is the only assistance available to these women. When financial means were available, women activists participated in international fora and showed the Congolese women's suffering to the world. They have

also testified at the International Criminal Court. Their testimonies, and those of women from other conflict-ridden countries were the underlying motivation for the adoption of UNSCR 1960 putting an emphasis on naming and shaming of perpetrators of sexual violence as a way to reduce impunity.

Through their persistent awareness-raising work in their communities, the values and attitudes of people has begun to change. The stigma of rape has been reduced and fewer women have to leave their homes on account of it. Although a small step forward in itself, it shows clearly that change is possible and that women's grassroots organisations and their close ties to their local communities play a crucial role.

At the national level, women in parliament and within the government administration are working hard to push through the revised Family Code as well as the National Action Plan on the implementation of UNSC Resolution 1325. One concrete result of this work is the participation of women in the stabilisation programme STAREC. Although progress is rather slow, the new more gender-just laws give women's organisations the legal and moral framework to carry on. By providing training in women's rights, the organisations hope to increase the number of gender-sensitive women political candidates.

Women have also defied the deep mistrust that existed after the war and continued the cross-border cooperation with women's organisations in the region. Therefore, these organisations can serve as role models for the restoration of peace on a larger scale.

Challenges

The challenges that lie ahead are enormous, both for the women's movement and the DRC in general. While the Congolese Constitution contains many far-reaching provisions on women's right to participation, the implementation process is still staggering. Women have realised that in order to increase their participation in formal structures, they need to build alliances with men. And even though men are also trapped in gendered societal norms, they are more and more beginning to acknowledge the women's right to participate and hence to facilitate the implementation of gender-just laws.

However, in order to really have an impact in decision-making bodies, it is not only important to increase the number of women in the parliament, but also to increase gender-awareness among the women already there. This poses a major challenge, particularly since women who don't follow the official party line and advocate for women's issues risk being marginalised within their party and losing whatever power they have. Many women mistrust the capacity of other women when it comes to formal decision-making. In order for competent women political candidates to be willing to join a political party dominated by women and not men, a lot of awareness-raising will be needed.¹⁷

Geographical and mental gaps will also have to be bridged in order for all women to be able to speak with one voice. The successful regional cooperation between

women shows that overcoming the deep-rooted distrust is possible and that the process of ethnification of the country can be reversed.

The gap between customary and modern law also needs to be tackled. Women's groups have the very important task of involving traditional leaders and sensitise them to women's right to participation. And maybe the best approach is to build capacity on local and provincial levels first, since the obstacles on the national level are so huge.

The DRC is facing enormous socioeconomic challenges. As long as women are kept poor, there is little room for them to become actively involved in political life. During and after the war, however, more women became the sole breadwinner in the family, giving them more power at least in the private sphere.¹⁸ In many cases, this new role has triggered their ambition to take a more active part in public and political life.¹⁹ The challenge now is to make this possible.

Closely linked to poverty are education and the high level of illiteracy among women. Through increased education and more awareness, it will be easier for women to claim the rights that actually are enshrined in the Constitution. Women must realise that political participation is not a favour, it is a right. Education is also essential when it comes to security. To counteract the high level of impunity that still prevails, members of the police force and the military must be educated about the rape law and the rights of women, in order for the women's cases to be put forward.

To overcome these challenges, collaboration with the international community is essential. Financial support from the international community is of vital importance since it will motivate the Congolese government to improve women's participation and security. Even though the international community has been instrumental in drawing attention to sexual violence committed against Congolese women, there is a risk that other areas of concern are forgotten. Women's organisations also need support, both financially and in capacity building, so they can focus on political participation and other issues that will form part of the future. For a very long time, the women in the DRC have played a crucial role in the peace-building process while traditional structures have hindered them from getting their due recognition. It is time that all this experience and know-how is taken into account.



things to bear in mind

To the international community

1. Finding

An important role was played by the international community ahead of the peace negotiations in 2002. Likewise, the DRC has received a lot of support from the international community in highlighting the issue of sexual violence and bringing it to the fore of the world's attention. Still, the participants expressed a strong ambivalence regarding the actual interest of the international community in taking action in order to do something about the dire situation of women.

Recommendation

The international community must respect and work according to the priorities identified by Congolese actors and not develop its own agenda from an “outside” perspective.

2. Finding

The UN Special Representative on Sexual Violence in Conflict has dubbed the DRC the “rape capital” of the world. In the eastern provinces of South Kivu, North Kivu and Ituri, the rate of sexual violence committed against primarily women and children, but also men and boys, is still very high, especially in rural areas in the mining districts. The perpetrators are primarily men in uniform: either militias or members of the national security forces. However, peacekeepers as well as civilian personnel within MONUSCO have also been accused of rape.

Recommendation

The international community must further ensure that their staff acts according to its code of conduct and respects international and Congolese laws and regulations, e.g. those related to sexual violence. The international community should be a role model for the requirements placed on Congolese partner organisations/institutions about counteracting sexual and gender based violence and promoting gender equality.

3. Finding

Despite all its natural resources, the DRC is one of the world's poorest countries. Decades of mal-governance and armed conflict have led to an extremely precarious situation for the majority of the population. More than 75 per cent of the population live below the poverty threshold and more women than men are on the absolute margin. The economy is dominated by agriculture and although women bear the main responsibility for tilling the fields, men control the income since, according to tradition, women cannot own land. Even though the law has changed in this respect, tradition still prevails in many areas. Another factor contributing to poverty among women is lack of security, making it difficult for them to leave home in order to work on the land.

Recommendation

Better links and increased cooperation between humanitarian organizations and organizations that work for a long term development should be established in order to fight the extreme poverty that women live in.

4. Finding

During the conflict, sexual violence became endemic, particularly in the eastern parts of the country. Even today, rape and other forms of sexual violence constitute a serious threat to women's security and restrain them from participation in public life. What originally was used as a weapon of war later became part of the overall breakdown of societal norms, with devastating effects on women.

Recommendation

Sexual and gender based violence must be counteracted through addressing the root causes of violence, for example through changing attitudes and behaviors that discriminate and oppress women. Increasing women's participation in the political and public life is closely interlinked with fighting sexual and gender based violence.

5. Finding

There is a great need to build alliances with men. Although men, just like women, are trapped in the distinctly gendered societal norms, an increasing number are beginning to acknowledge women's right to participation and hence to facilitate the implementation of gender-just laws.

Recommendation

Congolese men on all levels should be made aware of the importance of gender equality and increase their participation in counteracting sexual and gender-based violence. One way of increasing men's understanding and involvement in these matters is to develop cooperation with men's organizations and networks.

To the Congolese Civil Society
and Congolese decision-makers

6. Finding

Several legislative acts and provisions adopted during the last decade have strengthened women's legal rights. Already in 1987, the DRC ratified CEDAW and in 2010 a national action plan for the implementation of UNSCR 1325 was adopted. In the Constitution from 2005, there are also several articles guaranteeing women's rights and equity, for instance, by providing for the principle of equality between men and women. In 2006, provisions on sexual violence were added to the Penal Code. Rape was given a broader definition and criminalized. However, the Congolese legislation remains contradictory due to the existence of several laws that nullify the gender-sensitive paragraphs. An area of concern is the Family Code, which limits the autonomy of married women, who are obliged to obey their husbands in his function as head of the household. At the time of writing, the Family Code is being revised with the aim of removing all discriminatory texts relating to women.

Recommendation

Congolese decision-makers must ensure the implementation of existing laws that are in favor of women's participation in decision-making. Gaps and contradictions in existing legislation impeding women's political participation must be removed.

7. Finding

Particularly in the eastern provinces, insecurity and the hardships of everyday life have made it difficult for the population to engage in civil society activities.

Lack of funds made it virtually impossible to travel to Kinshasa or abroad to participate in training or in important forums for discussion. Nevertheless, throughout the whole peace process in the DRC, from the late 1990s until now, civil society organisations in general and women's organisations in particular have taken an active role. However, the efforts of women's organisations to a great extent have gone unnoticed.

Recommendation

Congolese decision-makers should build closer links with and facilitate information sharing and exchange with local communities and CSO:s.

8. Finding

Overall, the disconnection between women at different levels in society was of great concern to the participants. The huge gap between the chosen few – both men and women – with power and the overwhelming majority without power was a hotbed for mutual distrust and lack of communication. In addition, the vastness of the country and the lack of infrastructure – roads, IT or even a functioning postal system – made it virtually impossible for civil society organisations in the eastern provinces to have regular contact with stakeholders in Kinshasa in the far west. Or for that matter, for parliamentarians to be accountable to their constituencies by paying them regular visits.

Recommendation

Foras should be created, enabling women at local levels and women in decision-making positions on different levels to meet. Through these foras, information sharing and exchanges will be made possible and the dialogue and the mutual understanding between different levels will increase.

9. Finding

During the conflicts, there was a split between and within some organisations as a result of the increasing ethnic and nationalist divisions in the country. There are tensions and resentments experienced by the women at the time of conflict.

Recommendation

Foras should be created to allow for women active in CSO:s to meet. Through these foras, contact and cooperation will be facilitated, the mutual confidence will increase, and the competition between women in civil society will decrease.

¹ CEDAW Alternative Report 2004, 9.

² STAREC is a governmental monitoring program for the Goma peace process. The Amani program government-initiated peace program for the eastern DRC.

³ Personal interview, Kinshasa, January 21.

⁴ ICGLR is an inter-governmental organisation comprising 11 countries in the Great Lakes area. The aim of the organisation, founded in 2000, is to bring peace and stability to the entire region.

⁵ Personal interview, Kinshasa, January 21.

⁶ Telephone interview, Geneva, May 16.

⁷ Once a week, on market days, women were accompanied to and from the market by peacekeepers in order to maintain their safety. This initiative came to a halt around the election period in November 2011, when the troops were needed elsewhere.

⁸ Peace Women 2010, 1.

⁹ UNHCRH August 2010, 320.

¹⁰ More than 300 women and men were raped by armed men over four days in the summer 2010. See Amnesty 2010.

¹¹ Personal interview, Kinshasa January 24.

¹² Panzi Hospital in Bukavu, South Kivu, treats victims of sexual violence and has become famous for its work during the conflict. The international media are flocking to the hospital.

¹³ Personal interview, Kinshasa, January 23.

¹⁴ Personal interview, Bukavu, January 23.

¹⁵ International Criminal Court.

¹⁶ Personal interview with a representative from the EC Delegation, Kinshasa, January 24th, 2012.

¹⁷ CEDAW Alternative Report 2004, 31.

¹⁸ International Alert, November 2010.

¹⁹ Global Network of Women Peacebuilders, October 2010, 40.

The Kvinna till Kvinna Foundation supports women during times of war and conflict to increase women's power and influence in society. We collaborate with over 130 organisations that empower women to participate in working for sustainable peace and rebuilding.

In wars and conflicts, violence against women and girls is used as a method of warfare. Women are subjected to mass rape, are mutilated and killed. Women are locked in their homes and girls are not allowed to attend school. Women's voices are silenced if they express what they think and feel.

But history shows that women are important actors in the struggle for peace. The world witnessed this in the Balkans, in Liberia and in Northern Ireland. Yet women are seldom allowed to play a part in deciding how to arrive at peace and democracy. This is why The Kvinna till Kvinna Foundation exists. Our partner organisations educate people in women's human rights, they work with women's health issues and combat violence against women. They create meeting places for women, where it

is otherwise difficult to meet. They wield political influence and create dialogue across the borders of conflict.

Kvinna till Kvinna is a Swedish Foundation which supports women's organisations in Central and West Africa, the Middle East, South Caucasus and the Western Balkans.

The role of The Kvinna till Kvinna Foundation is to provide financial support and mediate contacts between organisations, in co-operation with our partner organisations. Our mission is to participate in empowering women's movements in regions of conflict.

We influence development assistance and security policies by contributing to increased awareness of the situation of women in conflicts and the importance of women's representation in peace processes. We spread information about women in conflicts to the general public, government bodies and organisations in Sweden, and at the EU and UN levels.

We support studies and research relating to women's conditions in conflicts and the positive effects of women's participation in peace initiatives.



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