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March-April 2013 - Issue 9

DRC *in Focus*



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Gender issues in DRC

How would you define the term “gender”? During International Women’s Day on 8th March, the spotlight shines on gender issues. However, gender can sometimes be misunderstood and overlooked. What does “gender issues” mean in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC)? The protection and participation of women in the implementation of MONUSCO mandate is not a choice but an obligation, a necessity for all of us.

It is not news that women in the DRC are enduring harsh challenges and violence on a daily basis in the form of discrimination, sexual and gender based violence, displacement, looting and continual lack of representation (from village security meetings to national parliamentary level). In 2011 the DRC was named the second worst country to be a woman¹, with its record of sexual violence described as “one of mankind’s greatest atrocities”² and women and children constituting the majority of displaced people.

While the figures relating to rapes are horrific, it is important to acknowledge the wider challenges for Congolese women today. Tradition often places women at a second footing to men whereby they are often unable to buy or inherit land, widows can be stripped of their belongings and domestic abuse is considered normal in many households. While women are the backbone of the informal economic sector (they constitute the majority of vendors in markets and rural women carry out the majority of farming duties), they are very poorly represented at all decision making levels and often face harassment when

becoming political candidates or joining the ranks of the PNC and FARDC.

But women are refusing to be labeled as victims. Women’s associations are currently at the forefront of civil activism. The MONUSCO Gender Office works with the Congolese government to improve women’s protection, participation and gender mainstreaming through the National Action Plan (Security Council Resolution 1325 adopted by the DRC in 2010). The first mission of the Gender Office is to ensure that women in remote areas are aware of their rights. In addition, the Gender Office intervenes in the following areas: economic development, participation to local and national political life, mechanisms combating Sexual and Gender based Violence (SGBV). We are also working within MONUSCO to advocate for higher representation of women amongst the blue helmet peacekeepers, as women currently only represent 2% of MONUSCO military forces which presents a gap in MONUSCO’s interaction with civilians, particularly women and children.

Ending all forms of violence against women and girls should be integrated in all our endeavors and not seen as wishful thinking per se.

by Toral Pattni
UNV Gender Officer

¹<http://www.trust.org/trustlaw/womens-rights/dangerpoll/>
²Hillary Clinton, US Secretary of State, during a visit to the Kivus in 2009. <http://www.voanews.com/content/a-13-2009-08-11-voa8-68706092/409330.html>





Dr. Mukwege, Founder of Panzi Hospital, Bukavu

“Too many men consider that satisfying their sexual desires legitimates rape”

The first surprise: when he shakes your hand, his hand literally bands together with yours. The second surprise follows: when he speaks to you, his voice sounds as tender as soft flannel. With only a simple gesture and a sound, Dr. Mukwege welcomed us to his universe with simplicity and sympathy.

Denis Mukwege founded Panzi Hospital (Bukavu, South-Kivu) thirteen years ago. Since then he has healed 40.000 women victims of sexual violence. When we first met him on February 1st, the Doctor looked anxious because of the increase in the number of women victims of sexual violence in 2012/2013.

On 14th January, a grateful crowd welcomed Dr. Mukwege back to Bukavu, a city that he had had to leave after the 25 October 2012 attack in which one of his personal staff died.

Dr. Mukwege tells us about volunteerism and the situation of women in Congo through gentle movements and a soft voice.

UNV Office: In a study on men's practices and attitudes as they relate to gender equality and intimate partner violence, Promundo and Sonke Gender Justice Network released the following data about North-Kivu: "88% of men think that laws on Gender Based Violence (GBV) make it too easy for women to accuse men"¹.

Dr. Mukwege: Let me discuss this figure. You said that men think that laws on GBV make it too easy for women to accuse men. Well, what I see here at Panzi Hospital is rather different. Indeed, what appalls me is that laws are not enforced. We wouldn't have enough detention cells to put all the people responsible for sexual violence acts. You know, many girls who come here to give birth claim to be married, but their pregnancy is the "result" of sexual abuse. These women don't know the laws which exist to protect them. Many abuses on women happen because they don't know their rights and because many men consider women as objects at their disposal. I'm struck by the mentality of many men: they don't even understand that what they do is unjust and illegal.

Another figure you didn't quote is very interesting. "9 % of men experienced sexual

violence during conflict". I saw men coming here with a chopped off penis, other badly injured after being brutally sodomized. Men also are raped.

Male victims of sexual violence tend to hide their pain because they feel ashamed. Men and boys represent 1 or 2 % of my patients. But you have to know that these men frequently kill themselves because of the harshness in going back to their families and communities.

Recently you declared that "many men think that rape is nothing more than undesired sexual relations. But this is not the case. It's destruction."

Too many men believe that satisfying their desire legitimates rape. Once they have done it, they forget. Women will have to carry this burden all their life. Physical and psychological tear will never fade away. I insist: men have to understand that forcible sexual relations is neither love nor sex, it is violence, just pure physical and psychological violence.

Rape destroys everything including identity and self-esteem. It destroys femininity in a woman. This will remain a trauma for



According to the Promundo et Sonke Gender Justice Network statistics reports, 9% of men and 22% of women have experienced sexual violence during conflict; one third of men admit committing sexual violence; three quarter of men believes women who do not dress "decently" are asking to be raped.

Women victims of sexual violence are receiving care at Panzi hospital, Bukavu, February 1, 2013.

¹http://www.wikigender.org/images/1/1b/Summary_Report_of_the_Wikigender_Online_Discussion_Engaging_Men%26Boys.pdf



the victims. Many years later they will still be crying and afraid of men for decades. Even after a long period of time, many of them can't have orgasms.

When you came back to Bukavu on 14th January, you stated: "we must continue to respond to violence with love". A month before, the United Nations Resident Coordinator in the DRC, Mr. Soumaré, told us that "volunteerism is love". If I merge these two quotes in a syllogism I could conclude that volunteerism is a positive way to respond to violence.

It's true. Definitely true. Volunteerism is self-giving. Giving oneself for the sake of somebody else, this is the very definition of love. And how can we make this world a better place without love?

The United Nations Volunteers are here to contribute to peace and to a more sustainable development. I strongly appreciate their work. Your readers know as much as I that volunteers work tirelessly without financial gain, but are rewarded by the love they give to and receive from those they help.

As you know, everybody can volunteer regardless your age or social background. Professor Guy Bernard Cadière, director of the European School of Laparoscopic Surgery, comes regularly to Panzi Hospital to volunteer. He usually only comes for one week, as often as he can, to operate around twenty patients. One can think this is not much, but I don't. He comes and saves lives. He doesn't ask anything. This is the very essence of volunteerism.

Combating sexual violence in DRC

Since the conflict in the Great Lakes began in 1996, sexual and gender-based violence has always been a recurring problem in DRC. The scale of the abuses and their physical, emotional and economic consequences continue to reinforce instability. The drivers of sexual violence are complex but recognized to stem from state fragility and the lengthy nature of the conflict. Over time both community protection mechanisms and the status of women and girls have gradually been eroded. Furthermore the fragmented command structures of both militia and government security forces (FARDC) have led to the use of sexual violence as a military tactic.

In 2009, the Congolese government endorsed a nation-wide strategy against sexual



Mother taking care of her child at Panzi Hospital, Bukavu, February 1, 2013

violence, the Comprehensive Strategy for the Fight against Sexual Violence in the DRC, in line with United Nations Security Council resolutions. This strategy sets up a structure for overall coordination of actions performed by all actors in the field of the fight against sexual violence in DRC. It aims at preventing, protect and respond to sexual violence.

The MONUSCO Sexual Violence Unit has been established to support the DRC Government efforts in implementing Comprehensive Strategy. Two UN Volunteers, Alejandro Sanchez and Angus Lambkin, are currently assigned to this unit.

See <http://monusco.unmissions.org/Default.aspx?tabid=10817&language=en-US>



Seny Dounahara, UNV Electoral Assistant, during a roundtable on “the evolution of women’s participation in elections since 2006”.

Women and politics in post-conflict area

There is no peace without women’s contribution

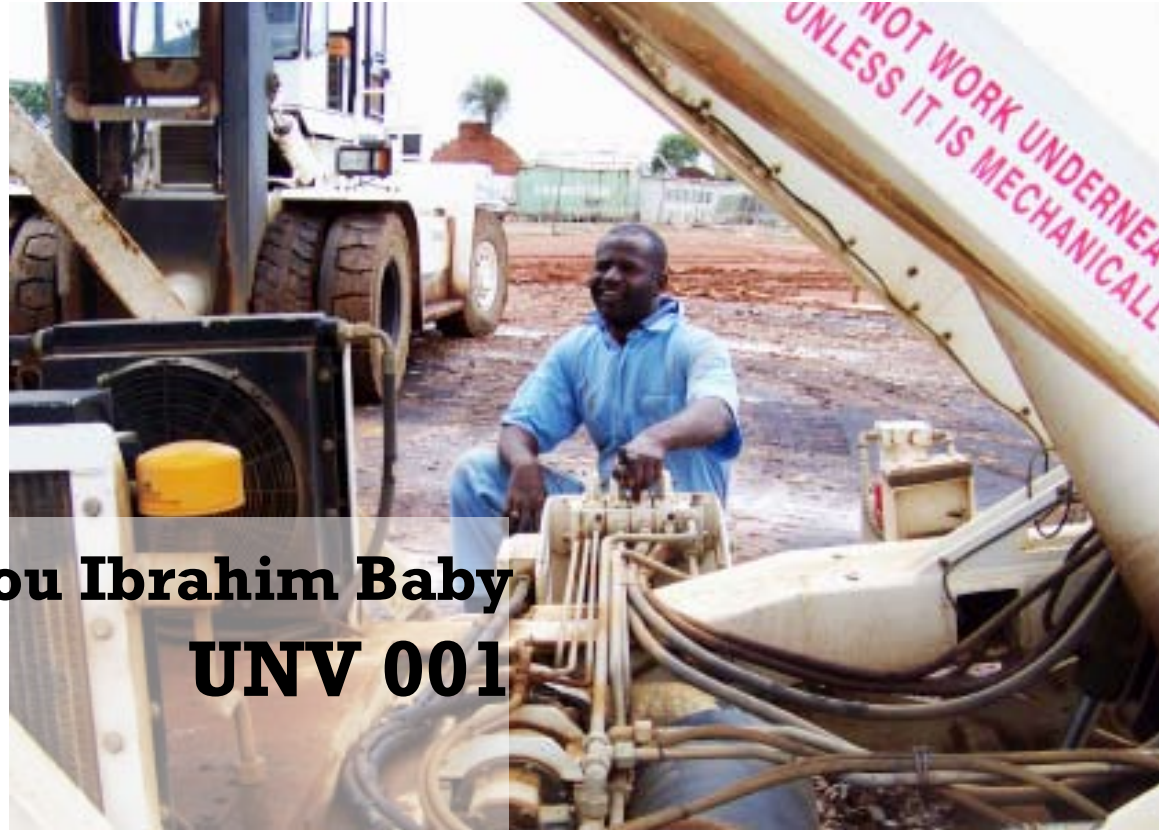
The 1999 and 2007 violent clashes in the Ituri region had a great impact on women. As UNV Electoral Assistant and Focal Point on Gender and Elections, Seny Dounahara says: “The post-conflict reconstruction poses challenges for the advancement of gender equality in Ituri.”

“Women in the Ituri region represent a large part of the Congolese voters. Yet, their participation in politics is very low. There are only two women represented among 26 national deputies and only one woman at the provincial government. Similarly, women are almost absent from decision-making and command positions”. Seny talks about the need of increasing women’s political participation and promoting fair representation in order to enhance the process of peace and sustainable development in DRC. “Indeed, women, as agents of socio-economic development and cohesion, play a key role in peace building and conflict resolution. Although women’s involvement in political decision-making is essential to consolidate peace, they are

too often marginalized.”

As part of her job, Seny encourages women to participate in politics and pushes them to take part in the electoral process. “Whilst there were women candidates at the 2011 elections, only a few of them acceded political functions because of poor education, poverty and the burden of customs. Hence, raising awareness of communities and local leaders on gender equality as well as promoting education for girls and participation of educated women in political parties are key to increase their representation in politics and then advance peace and development in the region”, Seny says.





Alhamdou Ibrahim Baby **UNV 001**

“Being the first UN Volunteer in the DRC is an honor and a great opportunity to me.”

MONUSCO has one of the largest UNV workforce of all UN missions. Baby Alhamdou, from Mali, was far from realizing it when he was deployed as a UNV Vehicle Mechanic in 2001. The experience of Baby has a place of choice in the annals of the history of the UNV programme within MONUSCO: as the first UN Volunteer assigned to the mission, Baby not only led the way to many other volunteers, but he also sets an example of commitment to peace.

Arrived when Laurent-Désiré Kabila was murdered in 2001, Baby was at the forefront of MONUSCO field operations for seven years. “I worked across the Congo in a rather tensed context: Kinshasa, Matadi, Mbandaka, Basankusu, Bukavu, Uvira and other duty stations. In many places I faced rebel attacks nearby. I’ve never been evacuated given that I was in charge of the evacuations. Thus, during the capture of Bukavu by rebels in 2004, I was the only one authorized to carry out the trans-

portation of evacuees from the MONUSCO base to the airport. It was stressful, I was afraid but I didn’t show it, I came here to contribute to peace in DRC and that’s what I did,” said Baby.

About his years as a volunteer, Baby is full of praise: “Being a UN Volunteer within a peacekeeping mission was an exciting experience that gave me the opportunity to make my contribution to peace. If I had to do it again, I definitely would. Volunteering has completely changed my life for the best”, he said. In 2008, the Baby’s UNV adventure came to its end when he was recruited by MONUSCO as a Transport Assistant in Lubumbashi.

ONE DAY IN CONGO...



Zaire 74 was a live music festival that took place from 22 to 24 September, 1974. This legendary festival featured top African and Afro-American musicians including: James Brown, BB King, Bill Withers, Celia Cruz, Miriam Makeba and much more. For three consecutive days Kinshasa lived in the hectic rhythm of R'n'B, Blues and Soul music. Altogether, 80,000 people came from across the globe to attend the event.

This festival was organized as a side event of one of the greatest boxing matches ever, i.e. the fight between Muhammad Ali and George Foreman, known as the "Rumble in the Jungle", that took place a few weeks later, on



The festival was intended to promote racial solidarity and cultural cooperation between Africa and African Americans. The choice of the Zairian capital for holding this event had a strong political and symbolic connotation. Whilst African-Americans were struggling for civil rights in the United States, Africans were trying to affirm their identity against former Western metropolis.