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The International Women's Programme of the Open Society Institute: "Women in Conflict Zones: Why are governments failing and how are women's rights movements responding?"

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IANSA Women's Network/WILPF UK/Common Cause UK
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Esteemed guests, Mr Chair, and members of the panel,

It is an honour for me to be invited to speak at the Open Society Institute.

Please forgive my modest English. I am glad to be able to share my message with you today.

On behalf of the Network of Congolese woman, I thank the Women's Network of IANSA for the chance to bring to this important meeting the voices of women from the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC).

I have the responsibility from these Congolese women to inform you about the situation in the east of DRC, and to describe the terrible drama that is consuming the whole country.

For the past 10 years, after the genocide in Rwanda, the DRC, especially in the east, has been the scene of one of the world's most deadly crises. More than 4 million people have died as a result of armed conflict, violence, displacement, malnutrition and disease.

UN Security Council Resolution 1756 recognises the connection between illicit exploitation and trade of natural resources, and the traffic in small arms and ammunition in the DRC.

Despite this resolution and embargoes on arms to the DRC, despite many peace conferences and the presence of the largest peacekeeping mission in the world, we still do not have peace.

Ten years of conflict has had a terrible impact on the lives of women in the DRC. Particularly at the epicentre of the crisis in the east, where the conflict has led to widespread atrocities of gender based violence.

I belong to an NGO called SOFEBU, or Solidarity of the Women of Burhale, a village in the east of Congo. This is an association of more than 4000 women. Many members have been terribly affected and have been subjected to rape and other violence.

In this situation it is impossible to work for our living, which puts at risk the survival of these women and their families.

I have seen too many women and girls in sexual slavery, who were kidnapped at gun-point, raped and suffered genital mutilation. They become human garbage – they have nothing, are good for nothing, they represent nothing ... they are nothing.

Many have "*Fistula Obstetrica*". The vagina is completely destroyed because of gang rape by soldiers. The short term consequence: these women are incontinent. In the long term, if they are pregnant, it is probable that the mother will die in giving birth.

Even children of three years and grandmothers of 75 are among the victims.

Women have been put into a state of non-existence. On top of the physical damage from rape, these crimes are not recognised or punished. Women lose their self-esteem.

They are silent. They suffer shame and rejection by the husband or community. They have no possibility of a social life. Their poverty is made worse. They cannot seek justice, even if they know who the guilty person is.

The conflict has made a situation of anarchy.

These pictures are apocalyptic. Women do not have representation in peace negotiations, or in the elected national assembly and government. But still, women in Congo are acting in synergy.

Women's organisations are working at the local level, campaigning for peace and reconciliation. They are mobilising and advocating for Security Council Resolution 1325, and for equality in the DRC National Assembly.

They have campaigned on TV and radio, at the national and international level for democracy and the Rule of Law.

Congolese women make up 53% of the population. We understand that restoration of peace and democracy is necessary for the socio economic development of our country.

But we know that Congolese men will not help us – so we, the women, must help ourselves. We must come together in solidarity, raise awareness and work even more to reach the positions where decisions are being made.

Our method of work is awareness raising, mobilisation and participation. The challenge is that every day is also a fight for survival for Congolese women who need to find bread and water for their families.

Our slogan in French is "qu'il n'y a pas de paix sans pain, ni de pain sans paix". In English: "there is no peace without bread, and no bread without peace."

If you are starving you cannot fight for peace. We have to feed our families, but we know that without peace, we cannot do this.

Our association Sofebu was formed in 1985. From the beginning our priority was to win the fight against poverty, and at the same time to advance the position of women.

We work in solidarity, sharing information on crop farming, livestock management, and the education of their children. A very important activity is finding sources of water – Remember that we must walk a long way to get water every day.

Some men also help us, for example with construction of a well. But the women are in charge.

We have reached a situation in our village where women do have power to make decisions. This is the result of our solidarity and our collective work.

The men involved in international diplomatic negotiations should listen to the women of Burhale and other villages, and should help us to go on.

The same process, the same skills that we have developed in our work against poverty in our village, should extend to the context of peacebuilding and prevention of conflict in our country and our region.

The biggest obstacle to our participation is the war itself. The war damages so many women so badly, that they are left incapable of thinking or acting.

But Congolese women will fight to be heard.

The role of the Diaspora is also important. We Congolese women who are outside our country must lobby for women's participation, to demand that it becomes a priority and a condition for peace and socio-economic development.

The DRC government has used some diplomatic processes, with advice from other countries, but with no result. We believe this is because our government does not have enough political will of its own.

They love to sign documents and agreements – for example, they have announced the development of a National Action Plan for Resolution 1325. But they do not allocate the financial or human resources that are necessary for implementation.

We have seven recommendations

1. The international community must take bold action to bring an end to the war – for example, stop supporting rebel groups. You cannot negotiate with them.
2. End the culture of impunity: Bring to justice and punish the persons guilty of crimes - particularly violence against women.
3. Provide adequate rehabilitation and reintegration of the victims in their environment, and make DDR programmes more effective;
4. Stop the sale, the traffic and the use of guns; and remove the illegal weapons that are already in our communities.
5. Create a monitoring group to ensure the implementation of Resolution 1325;
6. Support and promote local women's associations and their networks in the diaspora. Build relationships of solidarity between NGOs in the global North and South;
7. Make sure that international development and cooperation programmes take into account the national and local contexts. After the emergency aid, we need a long term vision.

I thank you for your attention.

Marie-Claire Ruhamyia