

UN Commission on the Status of Women 2008

Peacebuilding - is it a woman's job?

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On behalf of the Network of Congolese woman, I would like to thank the IANSA Women's Network and the sponsors of this panel for the opportunity to bring the voices of many women from the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC).

Peace is a universal value, its construction, maintenance and consolidation must be a matter for all. Peace is the fruit of social justice as well as the foundation for sustainable social and economic development.

It is men who start wars. We believe therefore that the universal spirit of women must be raised to defend peace.

Women are "life givers" and so are instinctive peacemakers. Because of their ability to create new life, they also demand a peaceful world in which to protect and nurture this life.

We only have to look around the world to see how women are involved in peace making:

- Many of the campaigns for peace and human rights in the world were founded by women.
- Women are leading the fight against poverty, HIV/AIDS and destruction of the environment. They are also leading in the prevention of conflict, the fight against small arms and nuclear weapons.
- History has shown that women can change and influence the world's gravest situations.

I am from the DRC. During my entire life there, my country has been in constant conflict. I have lived through dictatorship, rebellion and armed conflict. The last few years have been the very darkest yet.

The conflict has reached indescribable levels of horror. Most people in my country live in complete poverty. They are powerless to stop the continuing degradation of their lives and economic potential.

Now in the face of all this, we see an emergence of feminine leadership in all domains of local and national life. Women are leading in health, informal economy, education, human rights, VIH/AIDS, and for the return of peace.

Women's organisations are leading these missions with real clarity. Working at the grassroots level, they are braving arrests, torture and even death. This is why African women happily greeted the UN Security Council Resolution 1325 that urged efficient and effective participation of women in peace building and reconstruction. Of course, we already knew African women could do this, as they demonstrate extraordinary fortitude in their daily fight for survival alone. It is the women who provide the food and education to their families during these times of conflict, not the men. Without women, nobody in Africa would be alive.

The Congolese woman is perceived as sub-human or a mere object in the eyes of many men. Women are underestimated. Men come and ask for women's votes, but do not place women in positions of power in their political parties.

Regardless of this discrimination and stereotyping, Congolese women have continued to juggle the huge demands on their lives: fighting for their survival, health, education, the environment and the most basic of needs.

Despite their impoverishment, the Congolese woman has realised that peace is fundamental to this daily struggle.

Alas, the voice of women in the DRC is not heard. The work of Congolese women is not recognised or respected at the national and international level. These women do not receive

adequate institutional support. Take the example of the work of many AIDS agencies. African women are already doing tremendous work against AIDS at the grassroots level. But instead of providing financial assistance to empower the women in the long term, the agencies only give money to certain organisations and ignore the voices of women at the grassroots level.

We need international agencies to see this work directly and see how it is making real changes to people's lives. I myself have been denied funding for projects that were making real progress towards reconciliation because the aid agencies did not recognise my work at this very grassroots level. Sadly, my experience is all too common in Africa.

The international community need to acknowledge the particularities of each conflict. UN SC Resolution 1325 says that women's participation in peace and the socio economic reconstruction of the DRC must be a priority. But this is meaningless to most Congolese women because they are so busy providing for their children. We need small, but significant steps. For example, I was involved in a project in Kinshasa, where we used the church to reach out to local women. We showed them how to make, and then sell jam. One woman cannot do this alone, but if three or four women buy ingredients together, then they can create a small business. At the same time, we would then educate them about HIV and their electoral rights.

When women realise that they have electoral rights and can enter politics, then Resolution 1325 does become meaningful.

Therefore a national action plan of operation must be established that meets the reality of life in the DRC.

There are several examples to illustrate the work of Congolese women in the Peace building.

During the whole peace process to end the war and in the advent of democracy in the DRC, from Gaborronne to Addis Ababa, from Nairobi to Sun city; from Pretoria to Kinshasa, from Nairobi to Goma; in spite of their under representation at negotiations tables, women have acted in favour of peace and reconciliation in the DRC.

In 2002, with the support of UNIFEM, the Caucus of Congolese Women drew up a memorandum appealing for sustainable peace during the Inter-Congolese Dialogue in Pretoria and played a significant role in the decisive second phase DRC Peace Process. Congolese women only had one agenda, the end of war and the rebirth of a state with the rule of law. Meanwhile most men were divided and were only seeking power sharing.

In all the DRC provinces, many women were working in synergy for peace, advocating and lobbying for UN SC RES 1325, as well as for parity in the national assembly, campaigning on TV, radio, at the national and the international level.

Given this positive and encouraging portrayal of courageous Congolese women work for peace, it is very unfortunate that this work is not recognised and that their voices are neglected. Regardless of the demographic majority, there is an extremely low representation of women in the recent DRC elected institutions and appointed government officials. We saw these marvelous peace builders overlooked once again, at the recent peace conference in Goma. There were 800 participants at this conference, but no more than twenty women. Yet this conference was sponsored by MONUC. It is indeed shameful that a UN agency allowed this to happen.

Although Congolese women are fighting against a system which keeps them impoverished, discriminated against and atrociously abused, they continue to advocate for peace. Their work needs to be recognised and respected at the national and international level. These women need to receive adequate institutional and financial support and specific help to empower them for the long term. Women are crucial to ending the war and restoring peace in the DRC. But we need political will to ensure this.

Thank you.