

## **UN Commission on the Status of Women 2008**

The role of widows in sustainable prosperity

Widows Rights International

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### **The situation of widows in Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC)**

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

In my country, widows do not have any rights. I know because I lost everything when I became a widow. I have a photograph of the house my husband and I built together and lived in for 28 years together. It was the house we raised our 4 children in. But two months after my husband's death, his family had written "This woman is a thief" on the front door. They ordered me and my four children to flee.

Widowhood in Congo cost me everything. But it is not just me.

Although we don't have any reliable statistics due the recent war, a lack of infrastructure and defective national and local institutions, some observers say that widows constitute almost 10% of the female adult population. Approximately 43% of women are heads of households. For example, certain reports of local NGOs based in the east RDC, describe an exponential increase of the number of widows which could be as much as 40% of the population. There are even villages consisting of only women and children, as all men have been killed during the war. It is a situation that requires an urgent and particular attention.

So how exactly are the rights of widows being violated? And why is the Congolese government not taking action on this in its policies?

There are some existing legal frameworks. The Congolese Family Code, CEDAW (1979) and the African Charter on the human rights state clearly that when civil marriage ends through death, the woman has the right to remain in the home. Other instruments adopted

by the DRC are clear on the issue, such as the Platform of Beijing, the UN SC RES 1325, the declarations of Durban, Dakar, Maputo and the Solemn Declaration of the African Union in Addis Ababa . But there is a complete lack of political will demonstrated by the Congolese State in the application of these instruments when it comes to widows.

As a Congolese widow, I can testify personally that widowhood reduces women's participation in the citizens' struggle for economic and social development.

I worked hard to contribute to my house and family during my 28 years of marital life. I was a teacher of history and geography, I had baking and tailoring businesses, I set up an NGO helping other women to generate income at the grassroots level.

But after my husband's death, I was left deprived and unable to enjoy the fruit of my work. Not only was I left distressed and vulnerable, but the situation changed my children's lives as well. It also affected the lives of my female colleagues, such as those who depended on my business and NGO to raise their own children. My husband's family threw all the paperwork from my NGO out on to the street. Today, many of these women survive by begging and are unable to access justice and resources; despite existing laws.

My case has been in court for the past 7 years, and my elder daughter and son, who have now grown up, have taken the matter into their own hands to defend me.

Although I am a social and women's rights activist; and was very active within the DRC civil society movement, so far no voluntary organisation of human rights or rights for widows group has been able to support my case due to lack of financial institutional support. Even the DRC Ministry of Gender Affairs is unable to support the problems of widows due to lack of funds or political will.

Many cases of widows do not reach the court or even have a successful outcome in the DRC. I even know the case of a widow who had to pay out 30.000 US dollars to her lawyers to go to court to recover her property and other assets that was confiscated after the death her husband. This case demonstrates in which extend widows have to go, in order to enjoy their rights in the DRC. Only a handful of widows can actually fight for their rights, most widows do not have any means and are forced into poverty.

However, despite this discrimination and impoverishment, many widows continue to assume all their responsibilities and be fervent actresses in the fight against poverty. They are contributing to the development of Congolese society and so should therefore be viewed as an asset to the country, rather than something invisible and worthless.

So it is a great opportunity for me to speak on behalf of widows from the DRC here at the 52<sup>nd</sup> Session of the UN Commission on the Status of Women. It is especially important for me to address the plight of widows as we discuss the theme of "Financing for Gender Equality and Empowerment of Women". I urge you to consider widows' rights by putting forward the following recommendations:

- I urge the Congolese State to demonstrate a clear political will for effective support toward widows and the application of the law.
  
- I urge the International Community, through its different structures and agencies, to encourage and to assist the Congolese authorities to assume their responsibilities, and work with the numerous widows' groups operating in the RDC. We recommend equally to both the Congolese Authorities and the International community, to set up studies and observational offices/programmes for a better collection of data and for monitoring the situation of widows in RDC. Support must be given to grassroots structures currently operating for women from both the national and international community in order to reach the objectives of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), relating to the empowerment of women.
  
- This will empower women and improve the solidarity towards widows
- Enable to finance legal aid for organisation that support widows
- To establish and finance micro-credit to promote entrepreneurship
- Rehabilitate and integrate widows in the society

Widows are not just discriminated women – they are the very actresses of sustainable prosperity.

Thank you