

Heavy loads: Paying homage to the women of eastern DRC

Thousands of women in the eastern part of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) work as 'load carriers'. Most local people don't give them a second thought as they pass, seeing them as part of the 'normal' landscape. But for the photographers of the non-profit organisation Free Advice they are walking symbols: their backs bent by the nature of their work, these women seem to be shouldering the burden of the political and socio-economic situation in this part of the country.

It is 10 a.m. on a Sunday on the road leading out of Mudaka, a village in South Kivu. Women are making slow progress along the road, with straps round their heads taut with the strain and their backs sagging beneath the sheer weight of their heavy loads. For it is only women, of all ages, that go to the market to sell their produce.

A first group of four, consisting of one young girl, two women and a spindly boy, trudges along the side of the road in single file. A huge canvas sack is perched high on each back, forming a white tower from which blackened wood emerges, precariously strapped in place. They are transporting *makala*, or charcoal, a product derived from the trees of the previously forest-covered hills of South Kivu. Another group follows them; they are bearing huge bunches of plantain bananas, one of the local people's staple foods. Then comes another, weighed down by loads of cassava root, another key element in the local population's diet. Stretching back further into the distance, more women – always women and some of them already quite elderly – are carrying great clusters of onions, whilst others lug huge bundles of wood.

Burdens of 40 kilos over 40 kilometres...

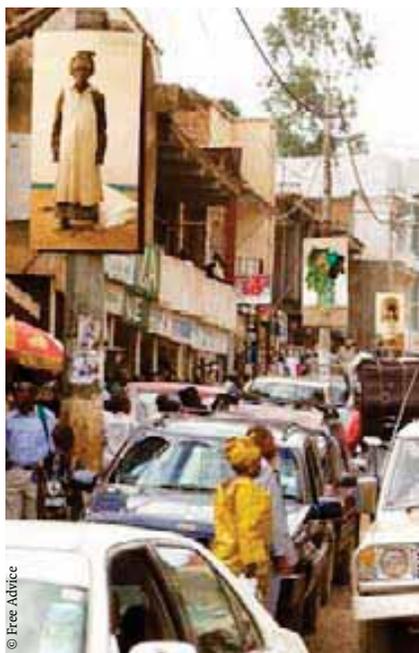
This weary procession will continue during the early hours of the day, with dozens, or even hundreds, of women passing by, bearing loads that in other countries would be seen on the backs of pack animals or, in other parts of the DRC, perched high on dangerously overloaded lorries or, when the state of the roads does not allow motorised traffic, on ingeniously customised bicycles capable of carrying as much as 60 or even 80 kilos. It is men who have the arduous job of pushing these bicycles over long distances to their cargo's final destination.

But here there are no men porters, just a few young boys among a sea of women and girls. As soon as those boys are older, they will be excused such toil, which is deemed unworthy of men. This unequal division of men's and women's work is learnt at an early age, and not just in families but also through day-to-day social and economic activities.



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The weight of the loads is gauged using scales suspended from a tree. The average load weighs 40 kilos, the heaviest 52 kilos. Little Amina, a girl just 12 years old, is carrying



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An itinerant outdoor exhibition of photographs of 'women carriers' in South Kivu

Eliane Beeson and François Vaxelaire, from the non-profit organisation Free Advice, recently travelled to Bukavu to produce a photographic report on such 'female beasts of burden' for "L'Observatoire de la Parité" (the Parity Observatory), a local NGO which aims to achieve gender equality at all levels of society. They met large numbers of women carriers along the roads and in the markets around Bukavu, and took 100 portraits of them at two warehouses converted into improvised photographic studios. The women felt so strongly about the project and their response was so overwhelming that the photographers felt a need to put their images on display locally. Thus, the

idea took shape of exhibiting the photos as part of the activities organised to conclude the third World March of Women, held in Bukavu from 13 to 17 October 2010. Hundreds of women activists from around the world went to show their solidarity with their Congolese sisters, promote women's rights and do their bit in the fight against war and poverty. Life-size portraits of women carriers were put up along the route taken by the marching activists. This powerful event took place in conjunction with numerous other activities organised by L'Observatoire de la Parité, including the broadcasting of radio spots, roundtable discussions and workshops on gender stereotypes.



necessity, because their living conditions are so tough.

Asked why their men do not help them carry produce to the market, the women replied that transporting goods, especially agricultural produce, is women's work. One even gave a physiological justification, claiming that "men's heads, and even more so their backs, are unsuitable for carrying, and that women are destined and trained for this kind of work from a tender age".

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a 22-kilo sack of onions. When asked how far they had to carry their loads, the women say they have come from villages near Kalonge, around 40 to 50 km away from the market in Mudaka. They left home at around 5 p.m. the previous day, rested between 11 p.m. and 3 a.m., and then resumed their strenuous journey until they came across us at 11 a.m. That makes a 14-hour walk!

The weight of tradition

When we asked the women why only they, rather than the men, do the carrying, most explained that this was "the tradition, custom or culture", and that carrying is one of the tasks usually reserved for women. Other women, selling cassava chips, bunches of bananas or charcoal, cited economic reasons, saying that they serve as carriers out of

Benin – Empowering women to help them guarantee food security

The aim of the Groupe de Recherche et d'Appui à l'Autopromotion durable à la Base (GRAAB ONG – Research and Support Group for Sustainable Grassroots Self-Advancement) is to help improve the material well-being and livelihoods of the most destitute people in Benin, especially women and children, by fostering a participatory, self-help approach. The organisation is also the Focal Point for Dimitra in Benin.

GRAAB ONG maintains that any human being, whether male or female, can aspire to and actually become socially, economically and culturally better off. Wanting to achieve this is an entirely legitimate aspiration, but the only way of breaking the long chain of social imbalances in the world is to consider the millions of marginalised people – the poor, women, children or members of any other vulnerable social group – as individuals who have the dignity, duty, ability and resources which can be strengthened in order for them to thrive.

Women's empowerment: a tangible activity

In the context of a women's empowerment project implemented by GRAAB ONG and financed by l'Organisation internationale de la Francophonie (IOF – International Organisation of La Francophonie), 120 women

were trained to raise rabbits and learn basic accounting to help them better manage their activities. All the women in question came from low-income households in Golo-Djigbé, in the municipality of Abomey-Calavi. After receiving their training, they were given a helping hand to set up their activities, with each woman receiving a breeding kit comprising two cages with four compartments, eight feeders, eight drinking troughs, a plastic bucket, a machete and four rabbits (one male and three females). Six months later, the women had to return the four rabbits they had been given, enabling other women to start breeding under the same conditions.

The women's activities are monitored by a female veterinary extension worker who visits each participant at home on a monthly basis,

providing any veterinary care the animals may require and offering practical guidance on a case-by-case basis. She organises meetings to plan the dates of various activities with the women and to make sure that all the women take responsibility for their particular duties. Weekly meetings between the women give them an opportunity to exchange experiences, assess whether their activities are on track, highlight any difficulties and seek solutions together.

The involvement of women from the inception phase of the project

The content of the project was based on proposals made by the women themselves and took into consideration the difficulties they face in meeting their needs. It was they who chose the rabbit because of its short reproduc-