

# Recognising the contribution of women to households and communities

Nicknamed “Maguy”, Marguerite Atilomoi lives in Yanonge, 60 km from Kisangani, in the Democratic Republic of Congo’s Orientale Province. This dynamic rural woman is involved in an agricultural producer organization and in the Union of Producer Organizations of her area. She is also the moderator of a Dimitra community listeners’ club in Yanonge.

## Could you describe your background?

I was born in Lokomba, 5 km from central Yanonge. That is where I spent my childhood. After completing the 5th year of secondary school at the Agricultural Technical Institute of Yanonge, I abandoned my studies to go and live with my boyfriend, who later became my husband. Very soon, I was expecting my first child, in 2008. Also very soon, I realized that I had made a mistake in abandoning my studies and I began asking my husband to help me finish my secondary education. Since he refused to pay my school fees, and was against me taking up my studies again, I left him for a while and returned to my family home, with the blessing of my parents and encouraged by my older brother. I obtained my state diploma at the end of the school year 2010 – 2011 and went on to become an agriculture instructor. In the end, I went back to my husband and today I am the mother of two children.

## When did you become involved in civil society?

In 2008, the Agricultural Rehabilitation Programme in Orientale Province (PRAPO) was encouraging communities in Yanonge to form an agricultural producer organization (APO). I was enthusiastic about the idea and since I was the only woman on the steering committee, I was elected gender officer for our APO.

In 2011, seeing the very active role I was playing in the APO, members of other APOs which make up the Union of Producer Organizations of Yanonge, elected me to be the Union’s Vice-President.

In August 2012, FAO’s Dimitra project came to Yanonge, in the Eastern Production Basin, to carry out a baseline study and raise awareness about the Dimitra community listeners’ club approach. I found it very interesting and

I asked a great many questions. Then, three weeks later, I received an invitation to take part in the initial training workshop organized in Kisangani, on the Dimitra community listeners’ club approach, participatory communication and gender.

It was only then that I began to have a clear understanding of what the gender approach really means and I made the decision to support the project for raising awareness and setting up listeners’ clubs in our area.

## How did you become the moderator of a Dimitra community listeners’ club?

As I said, I was the only woman on the various committees of the APOs in Yanonge. As the Union’s Vice-President, I had organized awareness-raising sessions for setting up and organizing community listeners’ clubs. That is why the members insisted that I take on the role of moderator of this new space for exchange and action, which would bring everyone together. We decided to call it “Etumba na nzala”, which means “fighting hunger”.

## What are the goals and activities of the APO and the Union?

Since we are talking about the goals and activities of organizations in which I myself am active, I will just say that with the APO, we are seeking to improve agricultural production, in terms of both quantity and quality. In my role as gender officer, I try to highlight the work of women.

The Union of Producer Organizations aims to bring the APOs together, so that they are better equipped to deal with the various problems faced by farmers: seeds, cultivation techniques, etc.



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**And the goals of the community listeners' clubs?**

The Dimitra listeners clubs encourage the dynamic of participatory communication, women's leadership and women's empowerment to fight against poverty and improve food security. In short, they help boost the socio-economic development of women and communities who adhered to the approach.

**What challenges have you faced and how have you overcome them?**

In terms of challenges, my major concern is that society should acknowledge the contribution made by women to the daily life of households and communities. When I talk about society, I mean men, but also women themselves, who underestimate their knowledge and their power.

I have taken as a model two women who have left a mark on social life here in Yanonge: Irène, an agronomic engineer and facilitator for the Principal Operator of the East Basin (a group of agricultural producer organizations) and Sister Berthe, who works as a manager at Caritas and is gender officer on the management board of our Union. So I have decided – and this is what I try to do on a daily basis – to reach out to all women who can neither read nor write, so as to lift them out of ignorance.

**Have you encountered family difficulties in working for women's emancipation?**

No, aside from some resistance on the part of my husband, it must be said that my parents, and especially my eldest brother, have given me a great deal of encouragement. My brother often congratulates me when he sees that I have achieved one or other of my objectives.

And I feel invigorated, proud of myself and motivated.

**Have you encountered any resistance when you have talked about gender issues?**

Although my husband does not formally prevent me from taking part in the various activities of the organizations in which I am involved, he does sometimes disagree, because he thinks my behaviour is not in keeping with customs and practices. Many husbands still do not allow their wives to take part in public activities. These are not just traditional constraints; it should be said that there is also always an element of jealousy involved.

**Were there any difficulties in your dealings with the authorities?**

Oh yes! Very often. The intelligence service and the police always find a reason for insisting that we ask their permission, even to hold an ordinary meeting, and especially when it's a case of a major event, such as the annual ceremonies to mark March 8 [International Women's Day]. Sometimes, the authorities go as far as demanding taxes; otherwise we have to spend hours explaining the reason for holding a simple meeting!

**How do you see the future for women in your country?**

The future is promising, even if it is still going to take some time. A number of women have now joined different organizations with social aims (community listeners' clubs, tontines, agricultural producer organizations, etc.) that encourage and advocate the promotion and empowerment of women.

**“Women underestimate their knowledge.”**

Four listeners clubs in Yanonge started organising literacy courses, together with community radio, targeting women who cannot read or write. Nineteen women have signed up so far.

The Congregation of the Daughters of Wisdom has also just opened a social care centre in Yanonge, which teaches home economics and cutting and sewing. Twenty-seven young mothers have joined up.

As far as women's leadership is concerned, out of ten listeners' clubs that are in the process of forming a network in Yanonge, six have women as moderators, while in the other four, women occupy the post of deputy moderator.

**Do you have a message for our readers on the issue of gender equality?**

A child, whatever its sex, deserves special attention. And women require just as much special attention as men in terms of both rights and duties!