



Dimitra Newsletter

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RURAL WOMEN AND DEVELOPMENT

SPECIAL EDITION

Africa: Great Lakes region

Dear friends,

As already announced, the Dimitra project will soon start up its activities in the countries of the Great Lakes region. This is why this newsletter exclusively focuses on three countries of the sub-region: the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Rwanda and Burundi. We lay open the pages to organisations which have provided us with articles explaining their difficulties, their strategies and the solutions they have found to improve the living conditions of rural populations, especially those of women. The articles included here give the personal points of view of the local organisations and we have published them in full. We sincerely thank all those who have contributed to this Special Edition issue. Some broad themes are addressed: improving women's participation in political life, the consequences of conflict, with displaced populations, food insecurity, impunity and non-respect of human rights, rape and the spread of HIV/AIDS. Examples of survival strategies used by women to sustain their families and their communities are also evoked. The governments of these three countries have committed themselves to improving the living conditions and status of women and numerous policy initiatives in line with these objectives are being undertaken at decision-making level.

Peace, an indispensable factor for progress, finally seems to be in sight. This offers everyone the possibility to fully participate in the political life of their country. With 48.8% of Parliamentary seats in the October 2003 elections won by women, Rwanda is by far the most advanced country in terms of gender equality in politics and even overtakes Sweden on this matter. Before the last elections, the Rwandan parliament counted 25.7% of women. It will be interesting to see how this mass entry of women into politics will bring changes to local customs and women's expectations. Customs and traditions in these three countries often constitute an obstacle to women's full participation. Traditions in the DRC, Rwanda or Burundi, as so well described by our contributing writers, do not promote women's equality in all sectors of society and women must often remain in their husband's shadow.

The fundamental role of women within their community must be reflected by the establishment of their equal rights in legal texts and in the reality of daily life. Networking and sharing of information and experiences in this area between civil society organisations in the three countries of the Great Lakes region is most certainly an important process to support and develop.

Marcela Villarreal, Chief
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Democratic Republic of Congo: women's struggle for their participation at decision-making level

ELISE MUHIMUZI | Executive Secretary, CONAFED, DRC

CONAFED, the Comité National Femme et Développement (National Committee for Women and Development), of the Democratic Republic of Congo, is an extensive national network of women's or mixed NGOs sharing a gender approach.

It was set up in 1997 to pool efforts and focus on a common objective of improving the general situation of women and promoting the emergence of a society where there is a balance between the rights and obligations of men and women.

Conafed is therefore regarded as a coordination structure for the activities of NGOs committed to defending women's rights. Since the organisation has developed in a climate of deep-rooted customs hostile to women's emancipation, its action plan has a special emphasis on advocacy.

The organisation carries out action pro-

grammes based on the following main objectives:

- extension of the gender approach;
- context-related gender analysis to determine the clichés of relations between men and women in each individual province, to raise awareness of the wrongful attitudes underlying these relations, and, finally, to stimulate local initiatives to bring about the desired qualitative change;
- training of extension officers, particularly women, in negotiating and advocacy techniques;
- various activities aiming either to denounce discrimination against women or to consolidate what has already been achieved in the field of women's promotion.

In this article we would like to share one of the organisation's experiences in its efforts to achieve equitable representation of women in public institutions in the DRC.

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An active role in decision-making

After four years of particularly bloody war involving clashes on Congolese territory between the regular armies of 8 African countries and 18 illegal armed groups, the Congolese embarked on political negotiations which led to an agreement on the cessation of hostilities, the restoration of the territorial unity of the country, and the sharing of power.

Conafed played a very active role in preparing women to take part in those political negotiations, the aim of which being to get participants to recognise the atrocities suffered by women during war, and to recognise the unfavourable situation of women in Congolese society as well as their insignificant level of participation in decision-making bodies.

Conafed organised a national workshop on these issues with support from UNIFEM, bringing together women from all provinces and all socio-professional groups. In the course of the one-week workshop these women drew up a list of specifications to be submitted to the persons taking part in the political negotiations for examination and approval. These specifications demanded a representation rate of at least 30% women in all of the institutions of the Republic, including the Government, Parliament, and institutions supporting democracy, be laid down in the text of the Constitution.

On the same occasion, the women, and more specifically their delegates to the political negotiations, were trained in negotiating and

advocacy techniques by a Unifem consultant. United in heart and mind in these negotiations, the women delegates managed to get across the message of their organisations and accomplished their mission with flying colours.

Seize the opportunity

As a result, there is now unquestionably a larger number of women in the public institutions of the DRC - 32 of the 94 civil society delegates in the Parliament are women, and 14 of those women come from Conafed affiliates. It must be stated that Conafed seized an opportunity in order to achieve this excellent result—that of political negotiations with the purpose of producing texts to govern the nation for what is known as the transition period in the DRC.

Conafed intends to profit from this experience to avoid a future situation where women might be disorganised in their participation in forums, when their mission is to defend or claim their rights. ¶

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Rwandan women in decision-making bodies

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In the run-up to the general elections, the Pro-Femmes/Twese-Hamwe Collective organised training courses in all of the provinces of Rwanda with a view to enhancing women's capabilities in terms of citizenship and participation.

These training sessions focused on the theme of "Women can do it" and aimed mainly:

- to enhance the skills of potential women candidates;
- to teach women communication strategies and techniques;
- to enhance women's self-confidence, awareness and self-perception.

The timeliness of this training, which coincided with the run-up to the national elections, was confirmed when the participants formulated their expectations in the various training sessions held throughout the country. These

expectations can be summarised in two points:

- to be able to draw up and deliver a political speech with a programme integrating the priorities of the population;
- to identify and exchange views on the challenges facing women serving in political posts and to propose strategies.

Women participate

The women who took part in the training sessions throughout the country were potential candidates for election to political office and/or appointment to decision-making bodies. The following persons were targeted in particular:

- the (women) representatives of the associations affiliated to Pro-Femmes/Twese-Hamwe operating at the district and provincial level;
- the representatives of women's organisational structures in the provinces;
- the deputy mayoresses in charge of gender is-

– issues in the respective districts and provinces; – the women in charge of gender issues in associations operating in universities and institutes of higher education.

As a result of this training the women soon understood what they should do, and took an active part in the ongoing electoral process. A total of 210 women candidates were registered for election to Parliament and the Senate, 60% of whom had attended a training course;. Women hold 48,8% of the seats in Parliament, more than in Sweden, and 30% of the seats in the Senate are held by women.

The Collective is extremely pleased with the impact of this training. ¶

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Rural women must know their rights – and speak out to defend them

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This title summarises the key message in the speech of the Chairwoman of SAMWAKI (Sauti ya Mwanamke Kijijini), a women's group that operates in Mugogo, in the Democratic Republic of Congo's Walungu territory. The occasion was World Rural Women's Day, which is celebrated on 15 October each year. This ceremony took place in Mugogo on 16 October 2003 with a large number of participants.

Around a hundred women and men from throughout the territory, and the neighbouring ones of Kabare and Kalehe, took part in the ceremony, which not only included traditional songs and dances, but also a dramatic performance entitled "Omuntu n'owabo birhali byasi by'aha chambu" – "One human being has no right to treat another like a piece of rubbish". Through this play, composed and performed by women, the Mugogo village women could express their own view of a women's worth – as a human being on the same footing as her male partner, who she must work alongside to maintain the social balance in the home and in the community if there is to be harmonious and concerted development. The women did not mince their words, as they vigorously condemned those men who reduce women to objects, through rape and other abuses – and also those unscrupulous women and girls who have lost all respect for the man who is, after all, the pillar of the household.

Proud to be a rural woman

Another high point of this event was the succession of women speakers. The first of these was the Chairwoman of Samwaki, Ms. Cecile Mutuga. After welcoming the men and women present, she outlined rural women's situation around the world, in Africa, in the Congo, and in the local area. As she put it, there are rural women throughout the world: it is something to be proud of. It is the rural woman who supports her household, with hoe, basket and water-gourd. It is thanks to the contribution of rural women that the great cities and urban centres are fed. It is therefore not a shame, but an honour, to be a rural woman. What is more dignified for a man or woman, than to serve humanity? Here as elsewhere, she continued, rural women face the same problems, and are subjected to the same labours, the same exploitation in work and society, the same abuses. She had hard words for the situation

of Walungu's rural women in particular, who bear a heavy burden of misery caused by war. Continuing along this theme, she called on the men and women present not to hold back any longer but to vigorously denounce the widespread rapes, abuses and violence which the rural women of Walungu have suffered, and continue to suffer: the most shameful rapes in history, sparing neither the five-year-old girl nor the dying 70-year old woman. She launched an emotional appeal to all, men and women alike, to give moral and material support to the girl and women victims of such savagery. The Chairwoman begged her sisters to alert the country women of the DRC, of Africa and of the whole world, so that the highest authorities of the international community could be made aware of the suffering, humiliation and desolation of the women of Walungu, and that help could be brought to them. What is more, those responsible for these doings must be identified, brought to justice and duly punished, so that such behaviour does not become established as acceptable in the minds of men who carry weapons, as it has among the soldiers of the RCD, the Interahamwe and other militia pillaging the region, clearly bent on waging war against women instead of military targets.

Rural women must express themselves

Speaking emphatically on the same theme, the representative of the Samwaki women's groups, Ms. Ernestine Ntamwinja, denounced the trafficking in girls and young women going on in the hills of Mulume–Munen. In fact, five Ikoma-speaking Ibinza girls were recently snatched from their village by members of a so-called Hutu militia. After having abused them, they took them to a purpose-made market-place, to sell like any other goods, to others who could not be bothered to go down to the villages that had become veritable 'girl' supply centres. This was just one example among many. The meeting concluded in an atmosphere of great dismay and several women swore to never again let themselves be pushed around when it was a matter of human rights.



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How could it be, they asked, that the men they had carried nine months in their wombs could turn into such murderers and rapists? And, what is more, how could these same men avoid thinking of them as partners and instead treat them as machines?

The men who were present at the ceremony did not hide their feelings. Meanwhile the rural women have had their say. These women are determined to play a decisive role in defending their rights, as well as working to improve their households, their families, their community and their country. ♪

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The consequences of the war and their impact on the life of rural women in conflict zones

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Rural women: principal victims

In addition to their extreme poverty, rural women are the most brutally treated during armed conflict.

Two major conflicts have brought tremendous unrest and bloodshed to the region of the Great Lakes, notably ethnic conflicts and armed conflicts, in which rural women are still suffering unspeakable pain. These conflicts have been very similar in nature. They can evidently be explained by demographic factors such as migratory movements following conquests or other events and by politico-strategic or economic factors. The background underlying the demographic factors gave rise to tribalism, regionalism, ethnic prejudice and clanism. Ethnic prejudice has led to carnage claiming millions of innocent victims, who continue to die to this day. In this article we simply outline the daily lives of rural women who, already shattered by the war and facing the threat of food insecurity, roam the country at the mercy of nature.

“When two elephants fight, it is mainly the grass that is trampled.”

Rural women and their children are the main victims of the clashes between warring parties, which have taken their toll. In the Great Lakes region, from the Eastern Congo to the four zones of Burundi, such as rural Bujumbura, one finds the full range of terms relating to the dishonour, indignity and obnoxious treatment affecting women. This war has inflicted the most nauseating cruelty and ill-treatment imaginable on rural women, from utter misery to sadism.

The impact of conflict on rural women and the tragedy of food insecurity

► absolute poverty

Everything has been destroyed in the events of the war and the country is devastated. Ever since the country has been going through this crisis, the deterioration in the miserable social circumstances of women living in the rural zones affected by the war has been indescribable. The outlook is bleak for these women and children, particularly widows, adolescent mothers, orphan girls who have become heads of households and other vulnerable women. They lead miserable lives in appalling circumstances. They have limited access to food and basic welfare services. Given the limited economic opportunities and the deterioration in community support and assistance mechanisms, this population is constantly subject to trauma and displacement. Since most of these

women and girls are illiterate they often lack information and know little about their rights. They are left to their own devices. Others have been virtually forgotten and have no one to confide in or to tell about their problems. They have no support except for the UN emergency relief services.

► food insecurity

– shameful and catastrophic repercussions

As the obvious source of the acute food insecurity, the war has weakened the spirit of these rural women. It has generated a latent tendency to beg, which sometimes forced them to prostitute themselves against their will, due to the anxiety caused by destitution and internal displacement. HIV/AIDS is now rife in rural areas and is spreading rapidly in spite of efforts to raise awareness. There are very many widows and young single women in rural areas and because of this poverty, unless something is done to help these women we are liable to be faced with an unprecedented disaster. AIDS is now also moving from the cities and invading the rural zones. In many cases women live in despair because they don't have access to their land, where their crops are mysteriously destroyed by thieves, unknown persons, or by unfavourable weather conditions.

They need to be brave. In order to survive, they venture out at night, at their peril, to look for food and sometimes come face to face with sadistic criminals who rape them to death. Seasons can go by without them growing any crops. The situation is similar in East Congo, where rural women have been buried alive or raped and burnt alive by rebels.

In certain areas, drunkenness and despair have become a way of life, and calorie and protein deficiency diseases ruthlessly attack these destitute and vulnerable victims. Rural women have lost their self-esteem. Their suffering is so great that they have become passive, silent and indifferent to themselves and to the problems of society.

FAO boosts morale in Mutumba through Philanthropic Action

Faced with this ocean of destitution, FAO Burundi has set to work either by supplying inputs itself in secure zones, or by supplying them to international or local NGOs, which in turn distribute them to vulnerable persons. In Mutumba, where PACT operates, over 30 women's groups have been set up and are monitored by that organisation. Over 20 of them collaborate closely with PACT, and, despite its very limited means, over 150 rabbits have been



distributed to these groups along with several goats. The municipality has given fields to the organisation so that a permanent community fund can be set up. The women long for peace and are absolutely delighted with the tools and seeds they have been given: 520 hoes, 5800 kg of beans and maize and 5200 g of vegetable seeds. This has encouraged these needy women to roll up their sleeves and prepare for the new crop season. The news has spread, and the influx of vulnerable women is steadily growing. Over 2000 have already registered and are awaiting similar support.

The rural woman: a hidden treasure

With the peace agreements that have been concluded, the rural women in the region of the Great Lakes are now living in relative uncertainty. Action must be taken to restore the rights of these women, forgotten for so long, through information and education, and by giving them the means to help themselves so as to eventually bridge the socio-economic and cultural gap which separates them from others. Rural women are a development resource, a hidden treasure which feeds a whole people from a distance. Rural areas are like a shadow, hiding heroines who attend to and are the driving force for food security in the country. May peace return to them! ♡

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Population movement in Fizi Territory

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As a result of the war of October 1996, the population of Fizi Territory was forced to flee the so-called war of liberation 'en masse'. Some sought refuge in Tanzania and Zambia, whereas the majority fled to the interior of the territory, mostly to the bush.

One year later, when the repatriation of the refugees had become operational and those who had fled to the interior of the territory began to return to their villages, the second war, that of August 1998, broke out and thus changed the circumstances yet again. This time many people were unable to leave since they had no means of getting out. The population that remained in the territory is therefore subject to displacement every time the people feel threatened. These displacements within Fizi Territory are related to the fact that certain areas are regarded as being safer than others. Major population shifts are reported in the villages of Lweba, Abela, Kalundja and Baraka Centre in the community of Tanganyika and on the Ubwari peninsula in the community of Mutambala.

In addition, people also move from one area or village to another whenever they feel unsafe. In this case the displaced persons are those who are not in their own community or who, although in their own community, are outside the villages where they usually live. They include people who have come from remote areas and have had to cover long distances on foot.

Refugees are now returning from Tanzania.

A dramatic situation

This population is currently in dire circumstances marked by:

- famine;
- lack of clothing (some are virtually naked) and shelter;
- lack of kitchen utensils and other household goods, because they left all of their possessions behind;
- the psychosis and traumatism of the horrific events they have been through;
- a high degree of poverty; and
- lack of housing, since most homes have been completely destroyed.

The result of the two successive wars is that many schools are operating but in a deplorable state of repair: some schools have been seriously damaged, others completely destroyed. Teaching material and school stationery were looted during the events of the wars.

Women: victims of sexual violence

Women and children were victims of several assaults during the two wars. With the presence of foreign militia, the FDD, the FNL, the Ex-Far and RCD and Mai-Mai soldiers, the

number of sexual assaults increased in all environments throughout Fizi Territory. As the result of this sexual violence, women who were raped were deserted by their husbands and left to look after the children; girls were raped and left pregnant and have now become unmarried mothers without any hope of support; they are anxious about their future and that of their children. The husbands of the women who were raped have now remarried, so the women now wonder if they are actually carrying the HIV/AIDS virus or other sexually-transmitted diseases. The areas where all of these victims used to live are inaccessible due to the political situation in our country. The country is now unified and there is virtual freedom of movement since the Mai-Mai and the RCD fighters are now working together—yesterday's enemies have now become friends.

Current priority needs of the population

► social reintegration

The subhuman circumstances in the environments of people living in Fizi Territory in general, and in the communities of Tanganyika and Mutambala in particular, call for humanitarian action to enable the population to return to normal life. Specifically:

- sheeting is urgently needed for reorganising temporary shelters;
- assistance is needed in the form of food and other supplies;
- microcredit needs to be made available; and
- housing needs to be improved.

► education

In view of the problems connected with education in Fizi Territory in general and in the communities of Tanganyika and Mutambala, where we carried out our mission, it is clear that some schools require rehabilitation and others need to be completely rebuilt. These schools will have to be equipped with teaching material and school stationery. Pupils should be given assistance with school supplies, since their parents are no longer able to support them for the time being or to pay tuition costs, because their property has been looted or destroyed and families have thus been impoverished. We would also point out that teachers should benefit from a 'food for work' scheme, since they are not being paid any salaries.

► agriculture

- The population needs seeds and farming tools, more specifically hoes, machetes and spades;



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- Animal farming;
- Rotary loans are needed for buying hens and goats;
- Support is needed for activities: the necessary equipment must be provided for fish farmers in order to help them to revive their activities.

► fisheries

Credit is needed for artisanal fishing, in particular for buying nets, lamps and canoes.

► crafts

Tools and equipment will have to be provided for needy craftsmen. The persons benefiting from this action belong to three trades: masonry/carpentry, joinery and bicycle repairing.

► assistance for the victims of sexual violence

- assistance for women who have been raped and have subsequently been deserted by their husbands and for the children in their care. In this context, it would be important to provide assistance with schooling and medical care;
- training for unmarried mothers in dress-making and computer technology;
- support for income-generating activities for the deserted wives and victims of sexual violence; and
- medical assistance for women who have been the victims of sexual violence. ♪

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Rape: a crime against humanity

Synergie des Femmes pour les Victimes des Violences Sexuelles (SFVS)
(WOMEN'S Synergy for the Victims of Sexual Violence)
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The context

Violence in general and sexual violence in particular, is a veritable scourge in the life of the women of North Kivu Province. Although the situation is worse in rural areas than it is in towns and cities, this does not mean that city women are not subject to rape.

The torturers

The principal torturers are persons who carry arms, the most cruel of whom are the members of armed groups—both foreign (Interahamwe and ex-Far from Rwanda) and Congolese (Mai-Mai, Mongols, Self-Defence Forces). It must be noted, however, that the members of the regular army and police force are also guilty of rape, as are ordinary civilians. What is more, women and girls in the working and school environment are often tricked into rape.

The response to the situation

We would point out first and foremost that the circumstances in our country are the result of the combination of war, impunity and certain perverse traditions, such as a custom in the Nyiragongo Territory which still allows marriage by abduction, which is commonly known as “kuterura”.

Many of the affiliate organisations of the Synergie des Femmes pour les Victimes des Violences Sexuelles (SFVS) come from the following main networks: CAFED, SYDHO, CADHO, PFNDE, SAFEDI, SAFDEF, LOFEPANOKI, WIMA NETWORK, MUMALUKU and CACUDEKI. However, SFVS is open to all organisations with a view to strengthening a particular focal area or engaging in activities in an area which is not yet covered.

Once the problems caused by acts of sexual violence targeting women had been examined, the available resources and potential of the SFVS were pooled in the following three components according to the experience of each organisation:

- the medical component, with the DOCS (Doctors on Call for Service) as team leader;
- the psychosocial component, with the Federation of Protestant Women in North Kivu as team leader;
- the advocacy and awareness component, with the CREDDHO (Centre for Research on Environment, Democracy and Human Rights) as team leader.

Achievements

► general training

- The SFVS has organised two seminars:
 - the first was held in Goma from 16-19 June 2003. The 30 counsellors invited to participate were given training to enhance their counselling and advocacy skills, as well as their investigation techniques.



- the second was held in Butembo from 9-12 August 2003 and was attended by 32 participants. The information communicated was the same as that of the Goma seminar, mutatis mutandis.

Specific actions carried out

1. Medical component

The medical component identified over 564 cases of rape over the period from May to August 2003:

- 51 cases of vesico-vaginal fistula repair;
- 428 cases of venereal infection treated;
- 96 cases of other pathologies;
- 235 cases of free voluntary screening for HIV/AIDS.

As far as medical structures are concerned, we collaborate with the following hospitals:

► in Butembo

The NGO FEPSI has one doctor, 10 male and female nurses, one operating theatre and one hospital ward with 14 beds.

► in Goma

The DOCS (Doctors on Call for Service) medical centre repairs vesico-vaginal fistulas caused by rape, treats venereal infections with complications, and carries out free voluntary screening for HIV/AIDS.

► health centres and health posts

The SFVS works with 13 health centres and health posts in this field, scattered throughout the accessible territory of North Kivu Province. The structures treat benign cases of venereal infection. The SFVS first signs an agreement with the persons in charge of the above structures.

► training

The DOCS has already organised training courses for certain doctors in charge of hospitals to which women who have been victims of sexual violence in the interior of the province are referred. The doctors trained to repair vesico-vaginal fistulas came from:

- Nyalimila Hospital
- Kirotsse Hospital in the Masisi Territory
- Mwesso Hospital in the Masisi Territory
- the FEPSI health centre in Butembo.

► welfare assistance for victims

The SFVS:

- provides financial support for special cases of rape, when requested, giving the women a sum of money so that they can start small business activities;
- provides a vegetable diet for victims who have had an operation;
- provides support to help the victims learn embroidery and dress-making, according to their abilities.

2. Advocacy component

This component, which has the CREDDHO (Centre for Research on Environment, Democracy and Human Rights) as team leader in Goma and the FJDF (Women Lawyers for the Promotion of Women's Rights) in the far North, organises two types of advocacy activities:

- preventive advocacy; and
- criminal advocacy.

Preventive advocacy consists of action aiming to raise the awareness of actors at various levels who or which can have a positive influence in reducing the number of cases of sexual violence. We can cite the following examples:

- visits to detention centres in the Rutshuru and Nyiragongo Territories, with a view to inquiring into the situation of women detainees and gathering information in the field, but also to talk to the prison authorities, prison wardens, male and female detainees, and so on, on the broader issue of sexual violence targeting women (the consequences for women who have been raped and even for their aggressors, the attitudes to be adopted to this problem by all parties, the precautions to be taken for women detainees, etc);
- distribution and display of 200 copies of messages, the content of which is fictitious but based on experience gained in the efforts to combat acts of sexual violence committed against women. These messages are sent officially to political and administrative authorities such as the Governor, military and police chiefs in the province, etc., as well as to international actors such as OCHA, ECHO, MONUC, UNICEF, the Human Rights Office, UNDP, IRC, NRC, CONCERNE, CECI, MSF/Holland, Radio OKAPI, etc;
- the daily broadcasting of these messages in the media (OKAPI Radio and the National Radio and TV Broadcasting Corporation) with a view to reaching other target groups

such as school-children, parents, women, the legal authorities in general, neighbours who ridicule women who have been raped instead of helping them obtain justice, and so on;

- in order to get the message across—through the national radio and TV network, for example—it needs to be broadcast three times a day for a whole week. At Radio OKAPI the messages are read out by women in French and Swahili, and commentaries are also broadcast to explain them. Furthermore, some organisations post the messages on the main door of their building. A total of eight messages have been drawn up and broadcast at the rate of one per week.

Criminal advocacy consists of:

- accompanying victims or their families to the legal authorities with a view to taking action against the perpetrators. They are guaranteed free legal assistance. We would point out that only one of the cases we are following up has been brought before a court; it is due to be adjudicated very shortly;
- drawing up letters for lobbying the authorities in order to persuade them to act in favour of victims by taking the matter up and apprehending their tormentors;
- contacting the authorities either in person or by telephone with a view to speeding up legal procedures.

3. Psycho-social component

All of the victims have been given counselling by our women councillors; the following methods are used:

- our women councillors in the field take measures to assuage the trauma as soon as they contact victims before referring them to the health structures;
- during medical treatment the victims are given counselling by the councillors monitoring their case. The SFVS provides four councillors, who work on a duty rota so that one is always available at the DOCS to help victims.

These three components work together to provide the best possible support for victims.

Donors

Aide Humanitaire Suisse (Swiss Humanitarian Aid) is SFVS's only donor to date. 🇨🇭

☉ Pole Institute - Synergie des Femmes pour les victimes des violences sexuelles (SFVS)

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A worrying increase in the number of rapes in Burundi

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Rape: a worrying rise in cases

Rape, which is one of the cruelest forms of violence inflicted on women, is now becoming widespread and Burundi society unfortunately just seems to shrug. Cases involving the rape of little girls, women and elderly grandmothers are reported every day from various parts of the country, but action is only rarely taken to relieve the suffering of the victims or to discourage the perpetrators from committing this appalling crime.

Several studies carried out by the Bujumbura municipal council and in some of the camps for displaced persons have provided information on the various forms of violence inflicted on the women of Burundi, the extent of the phenomenon, and the effects on the victims and their families, (Iteka League).

The data collected by the Ntorengaho Association, an affiliate of the Collective of Women's Associations and NGO's in Burundi (CAFOB) which deals essentially with assistance for adolescents who have been the victims of sexual violence, show that certain provinces are more affected than others. This is the case in particular in the provinces of Ruyigi, where 91 cases were registered, Muramvya (60 cases), Bururi (36 cases) and Bujumbura Municipality (86 cases) during the period from January to November 2003. The same source indicates that over 90% of the victims are female and are between 10 and 30 years of age.

Although the issue is becoming a matter of growing concern, only tentative measures have been taken to crack down on it. For it is difficult to define the phenomenon for several reasons - in particular, fear of retaliation, shame, lack of support, fear of stigmatisation, fear of a bad reputation, lack of credibility of the public services, the weakness of the victims, and the dispersion of families in wartime.

A listening ear for victims

Since March 2003 the Collective has been involved in action to combat violence inflicted on women through the establishment of a centre where the women can talk to someone about their experience and obtain legal guidance through the Association of Women Lawyers, which is a member of the Collective. This centre provides assistance for an average of 250 women each year, while the Ntorengaho Association has assisted over 440 victims. Cafob carried out several field activities in this specific area in the context of the 16-day action campaign against violence inflicted on women, which was launched by UNIFEM and the Co-ordination Office for Humanitarian Affairs in Burundi in December 2003. The Collective has already held an awareness

campaign to inform the public about the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) in the provinces of Rural Bujumbura, Karusi and Rutana and has now extended that campaign to the province of Ngozi. Although it has already reached 1000 women, this figure is still much too low given the tremendous task on hand. In the same context, the Cafob Alert Group organised a one-day high-profile conference at the United Nations Information Centre in order to publicise the phenomenon of rape and raise awareness in the bodies involved in dealing with it, namely the local administration in the municipality of Bujumbura, the police corps, the media, the Ministries of Education, Health, Justice and Human Rights, and women's associations and partner organisations.

Looking to the future

The Ntorengaho Association has decided to launch an awareness campaign targeting members of the army and police corps, as well as members of armed groups, since these various bodies are regularly accused of perpetrating the crime. The information obtained from the adolescent girls who come to consult the officers in the Association indicates that 20 cases of rape had been committed by members of armed groups by the end of 2003 compared to 23 cases by members of the government troops.

The current extent of this phenomenon has been a contributing factor in the increase of undesired pregnancies, with all the socio-economic consequences they entail (traumatism, poverty, street children), but above all it has contributed to the spread of HIV/AIDS, which has become a real development problem in Burundi. At the same time, the population is becoming more aware and is being mobilised to try to curb this scourge.

As regards the prospects for the future, Cafob and its member associations plan to define a concerted strategy with a view to playing a pioneering role in the fight against rape in Burundi. A project has already been drawn up for a planning workshop, but we are still looking for donors. 🇨🇭

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Women face up to the impact of HIV/AIDS

SOURCE: IRIN PLUSNEWS, 25 NOVEMBER 2003

As the 10-year Burundi civil war winds down, Kinama township, set against the hills of the capital, Bujumbura, is once more becoming the bustling place it used to be.

Living with AIDS

A rutted dirt path just off the tarmac leads to a hardened mud courtyard and Gloriosa Bam-boneyeho's house.

In 1994, one year into the fighting between the Tutsi and Hutu ethnic groups, she fled her village in central Burundi to rejoin her husband, a security guard, in Bujumbura. Unknown to her, he had acquired a new wife and small child.

As a legally married wife, Gloriosa exercised her rights, and said: "You are my husband, this is my house, I am staying." She went to court and obtained the right to stay in the sitting room while the couple shared a room across the courtyard.

Three years ago Gloriosa fell sick—she was HIV-positive. "I didn't know that HIV/AIDS existed until I came to Bujumbura," she told PlusNews.

When the second wife was also diagnosed HIV positive, the couple blamed Gloriosa and she was physical abused. After the death of the other woman, the husband and three-year-old daughter moved in with Gloriosa. Although initially reluctant to accept them, she realised they all needed each other.

Women in Burundi: twice the risk of men

"Burundian women are faithful to their husbands. It's in our culture, so it is a shock to find ourselves HIV-positive," said Seconde Nsabimana, a counsellor at the Society of Women Against AIDS (SWAA) and President of the Burundi Network of People with HIV/AIDS. She herself has been living with HIV/AIDS since 1988.

Burundian women are twice as likely to be infected as men. In urban areas infection rates for women reach up to 13%, while only 5.5% of men are estimated to be living with the disease.

An estimated 11.3% of adults in Burundi are believed to be HIV-positive.

But an increase in HIV/AIDS infections among girls aged 16 to 20 is a cause for concern. An early sexual debut and sexual relationships between older men and teenage girls were high-risk factors for urban and semi-urban girls, studies on social behaviour have found.

"The extreme precocity of girls' sexual relations is a serious problem," Nsabimana commented.

HIV rates continue to rise among women in their twenties, suggesting they are infected either by marrying an infected older partner

or through their husband having extra-marital sex.

Another reason was that despite their HIV-positive status, men refused to use a condom with a spouse. Gloriosa's husband refused to do so until Nsabimana convinced him to get tested, be counselled and use a condom to avoid re-infection.

"Men alone have the decision and responsibility of using a condom," said Josephine Nyonkuru, SWAA-Burundi (Société des femmes contre le Sida) national coordinator.

The female condom is becoming popular among women living with the virus. SWAA began promoting it last year, after a survey found that 87% of women who had tried the femidom said it was useful, 63% preferred it to the male condom and 76% felt it empowered them to prevent HIV infection and unwanted pregnancy.

The catastrophic impact of conflict

Although HIV rates are stabilising in urban areas, they have been rising quickly in the countryside, where 9 out of 10 Burundians live. "War, with its retinue of displacement, rape, misery, family turmoil and lack of prevention work explains this rise," a report by the National Council for the Fight against AIDS (CNLS) noted.

Up to one million people have been displaced since 1993. Despite the signing of the Arusha peace agreement in 2000, armed attacks continue.

Women have inevitably borne the brunt of the conflict and are often forced into prostitution to stay alive. Isabelle-Lise Barema, SWAA coor-

dinator in Bujumbura said: "Displaced women are very vulnerable to HIV, they need food for their children and end up with HIV."

SWAA provides medical, economic and psychological support to 2,500 people living with HIV/AIDS in Bujumbura and another 2,000 in six provinces. Most are war-affected women with infections dating from the first years of the conflict.

Rape by soldiers, rebels and bandits during attacks or after kidnapping, has placed women at even greater risk.

To make matters worse, traditional practices like "gutera intobo" (sex between the father and the daughter-in-law), "gusobanya" (sex between a man and his sister-in-law) and "guru" (inheriting the wife of a deceased son or brother) may also be contributing to the spread of the disease.

Action plan and support

Now that the war is drawing to a close and the country is opening up, Burundi has stepped up its response to the pandemic with the implementation of its US \$233 million National Action Plan 2002-2006.

The government, NGOs and the Catholic church run 80 testing and counselling centres nationwide. About 1,200 people are currently receiving anti-retroviral drugs (ARVs). Funding from the World Bank and the Global AIDS Fund would enable 10,000 more to start free treatment by 2005, Joseph Wakana, CNLS executive secretary, said.

The community-based National Support Association for People with HIV/AIDS (ANSS), which offers comprehensive medical, psycho-



social and economic support to over 1,000 HIV-positive people, has 550 members on ARVs, of whom half are very poor.

Changing attitudes

However, ARVs did not solve everything, warned ANSS coordinator Dr Marie-Josee Mbuzenakamwe. "Social stigma, psychological needs, rent, food, and school fees must be sorted out as well." The staff at ANSS are now faced with the challenge of helping unemployed, uneducated women taking ARVs to become productive members of the community.

Back in Kinama, Gloriosa cooks a meal of peanuts, peas, cassava and maize, which she grows for sale and her own use on a nearby plot through a SWAA income-generating project. She also regularly conducts AIDS awareness sessions with neighbours. In spite of the hardship, Gloriosa has learned to live positively with the disease. "She has become a respected community leader, open to change," said counsellor Nsabimana. 🍌

Article from the website of GENDER-AIDS 2003 (gender-aids@healthdev.net)
GENDER-AIDS is an international forum dealing with the issues of gender and HIV/AIDS



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AVEGA: Association of Widows of the Genocide – ‘Agahozo’

DANCILLE MUKANDOLI | AVEGA President



- to organise and carry out activities which can help to improve the living circumstances of widows and assist members who are unemployed by helping them to learn a trade;
- to promote the education of the orphans and victims of the genocide;
- to seek friends who are willing to cooperate with the association to help it achieve its objectives;
- to develop cooperative relations with other associations operating at both the national and the international level;
- to take an active part in the reconstruction of the country and in the development effort in the various sectors and to support the reconciliation efforts which the government has introduced;
- to defend the interests of the widows of the 1994 genocide—social, economic, political or of any other nature—and to fight to ensure that justice is done;
- to perpetrate the memory of the genocide victims for ever.

The AVEGA association came into being after the genocide. It was created to give widows new hope and to reintegrate them into society. It is a non-profit, non-governmental association, which was set up in Kigali on 15 January 1995 on the initiative of a group of 50 women who escaped the genocide.

Through its activity programmes the association has endeavoured to help its members to readjust and to return to a normal life.

The following programmes have been set up in each region:

- capacity-building programme;
- programme of support for grassroots groups (microfinance);
- advocacy, justice and information programme; and the
- psycho-socio-medical programme.

Our group cooperates with other groups at the local level and is a member of the PRO-FEMMES/TWEESE HAMWE collective of women’s associations.

Genocide: a universal crime

We are already in touch with several organisations at the international level, and we plan to enhance North-South relations. Since genocide is a universal crime, it is our duty to cooperate with North and South so that together we can seek solutions to the numerous consequences of the Rwandan genocide. It is our cause which empowers us. Moreover, with the cries of our martyrs how can we remain silent or forget? We also hope to stay in the frontline of the reconstruction of our country and of any activities aiming to establish lasting peace therein.

Women heads of household

As the result of the genocide many women have become heads of household and have taken over responsibilities which were culturally attributed to men. The women of Rwanda are fighting together to overcome all of the legal barriers to their economic and social advancement. As a result of their struggle, the fact that they have assumed responsibilities as heads of household, and have thus gained self-confidence, enables them to take part in decision-making bodies. Our organisation is like a library of the genocide, perpetuating the memory of events. It acts as a meeting centre for its members and as a substitute for their families who were exterminated during the genocide. We are fighting for a better future, a future where widows feel that they are of use to society. With the help of development, our mission is to fight ignorance and to combat all forms of violence. 🍌

Avega is an association of widows of the genocide.
Our group is composed of founding members, general members, sympathising members, and honorary members. Its task is:
– to promote the development of widows of the genocide, who have suffered tremendously as a result of the atrocities and massacres perpetrated against their person and their loved ones;



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Promoting equality between men and women in grassroots communities through oral African literature

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The oral tradition in DRC

As part of the fight against poverty, an experiment is being carried out to promote equality between men and women in grassroots communities, using myths, folktales and other forms of oral African literature. This literature has a socialising function, that is to say, the aim is to promote or maintain the social status of one party in relation to the other.

In Kongo oral literature the myth of the creation of the original man describes him as a being called Mahungu, who was both man and woman. This omnipotent being was able and allowed to do everything except walk around a sacred tree known as the “Ba dia nseke”, the savannah palm. However, overcome by curiosity, Mahungu eventually defied the ban and walked around the tree, whereupon he was suddenly divided into two parts, which were both equal and unequal. The first half was male, the giver of life, with a function of secretion. The second half was female, the bearer of life, with a function of giving birth. In fact, through schizogenesis, the two beings were similar to the multiplication of metazoa in biology, so that, contrary to Judeo-Christian cosmogony which describes woman as being descended from the ribs of man, none of the beings born of Mahungu can claim original superiority. Thus, within the community, equality between men and women must be seen in a new light, different to our traditional concepts.

But myths and folktales do not always depict harmonious relations between men and women. Women are often seen as the original cause of all despicable acts in society. Everything that is connected with the left or left-hand side is feminine – “kikento”, whereas men or things masculine represent positive forces, the right or right-hand side – “kibakala”. Hence the insult, “niama nguaku” (“the stupidity of your mother”) – no one would ever say, “niama s’aku” (“the stupidity of your father”). The expression simply does not exist.



Culture: constraint and motor for social change

Using elements of local culture to promote development is an asset that must be used judiciously, because culture is both an obstacle to and a motor for social change within communities. In view of the fact that several outreach tools aiming to bring about social change in grassroots communities are making little headway, the question arises as to whether the best means of fighting poverty are basically those which have proved effective in the West or whether it would not be better to also consider the strong dynamic arising from grassroots pressure or social bonds which are expressed in music and folktales, in other words, which are based on oral African literature.

During the negotiations for a peaceful solution to the conflict in the Congo, the performances of the Bejart theatre companies and the concerts of the star Warrason were used to cement the resolutions adopted for the country's return to peace, which proves once again that culture must be used to promote development. Observation of the experience gained in involving the population in the most significant political events of the country, abundantly justifies using culture as a matrix for alternative ways of promoting development within grassroots communities. Oral literature and the other elements of local culture contain nu-

merous factors which greatly enhance development tools or models.

The work carried out by the Base de Recherche-Action pour la Culture et le Développement (Implementation Research Base for Culture and Development - BRACUDE) consists of identifying, analysing and systematising these tools and the knowledge of the people in order to devise new community development tools. These are generally only used at sessions in villages and neighbourhoods, but with the advent of community radios new information media are now within our reach in this part of the Democratic Republic of Congo, where we operate. ♪

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‘Radio BUBUSA’ on the lips of the rural women of Walungu/South Kivu

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The weight of tradition

In traditional Bushi society, women are not allowed to attend meetings about their families, their households or their communities. And in particular they are not allowed to speak in front of men. These bans are laid down by custom and everyone endorses them, or, to be more precise, men support them and women endure them passively.

The disparity that emerges between the power that men wield over women in the running of the community, in the light of what men produce and what women produce in that village world was one of the reasons why the women’s organisation SAMWAKI (Sauti ya Mwanamke Kijijini or “the voice of rural women”) was set up in 2002. Samwaki aims to help rural women realise their full potential so that they can play an active role in the development of their environment.

But how can women take part in the development of their environment on an equal footing with their male partners if they stay huddled in the background, isolated and marginalised? Samwaki has a clear vision: rural women must first be helped to gain access to information and communication. They must be given a place where they can express their views, display their talents, discuss their successes and failures, and so on. The burden of custom and tradition is admittedly an obstacle in this context, but so are the many forms of prejudice which burden women, as well as the fact that they have little access to education and training.

Promoting oral traditions

Having taken up the challenge, Samwaki has had periods of great success, interspersed with periods of difficulty due to the above obstacles. As Ms. Adeline Nsimire, a founding member and coordinator of Samwaki explains, “the major difficulty we met with when we launched our activities was gender-related and connected with the purpose of our association. Before approaching the womenfolk we first had to identify the men to be approached and then raise their awareness. People were sceptical. They called us “kasahene ashubala oku bihebe”, that is to say, the nanny goat that urinates on the billy goat. The qualifier was quite intolerable, but we persevered, with the support of some of the men of course. One of the features of Samwaki is that it does not take the place of rural women.”

Samwaki devotes the major part of its activities to promoting oral tradition. This is African tradition, and it is also the tradition of the peasant environment, where most women have not learned to read or write. But these illiterate women have something valuable and better to give other women in their environment and in



© Sophie da Câmara

society as a whole – and that is their experience, information, a moral lesson.

Kabubuso, a cry that has become a “radio”

Whenever women are called to lend a hand in the chief’s field it is their husbands who order them to go, and the next morning they rise early. The women who are called to do this work have barely met or consulted together, but each of them knows that she will not be alone. The bravest early riser breaks the morning silence, opening her lips and letting out a piercing cry. This is the “kabubuso”, the woman’s voice. In the distance another woman replies, then another... and finally several others join in and the whole village is alerted. They then meet on the main road and walk along with their hoes on their shoulder, chanting songs and dancing. This spontaneous communication, the way they meet and the atmosphere they create were what attracted Samwaki’s attention and prompted the organisation to guide the rural women of Mugogo to a society of information, exchange and communication. Oku BUBUSA is the medium of the rural women of Bushi and Walungu, their mouthpiece and their rallying power.

Radio Bubusa: the radio of the villages

Radio Bubusa is now like a real radio channel in our villages. This rallying cry gathers many women together in the information and communication centres that the Samwaki has set up, where they can obtain information, inform others, exchange ideas or propose a complaint to the Samwaki organisers. Radio Bubusa broaches a variety of subjects: information on women who have been raped and deserted, crop growing, animal farming, health, the environment, micro projects, education, etc. Bubusa “broadcasts” are songs, dances, sketches, or folktales, while the above activities are the equivalent of information programmes. They are complemented with other informa-

tion which Samwaki puts together and makes available to the various women’s groups and other village women’s organisations.

Raising AIDS awareness

One of the main Bubusa “broadcasts”, which was enthusiastically received by a wide audience, was a sketch performed by women on the transmission of HIV/AIDS, a play through which the majority of villagers were informed that there were indeed cases of AIDS in our villages. This information contradicted the idea that the disease only concerned the rich, particularly people living in cities.

Women speak out

The rural community of Mugogo is now quick to respond to the Samwaki programme produced through the women’s groups. People enjoy the dances and songs, the folktales and sketches. But the rural women always use these events as an opportunity to comment on their situation, and in this way the menfolk also have an opportunity to listen to the women in a society where, prior to the launching of Samwaki’s activities, they were not allowed to speak out. Since the oral dimension of “Radio Bubusa” makes it similar to radio broadcasting, the inhabitants of our villages call the piercing cries of these women “Iradiyo Ly’akabubuso”, which means “radio using the voices of women”. ♪

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The place of women in Burundi society

CYRILLE SINGEJEJE | PRAUTAO, Burundi

Local sayings and women's social position

It is now a recognised fact throughout the world that, although women are kept in a position of inferiority with regard to men, they play a very important role in society. It would simply be dishonest to ignore that fact. Our association, PRAUTAO, has decided that it would be more appropriate to use sayings and common expressions in Burundi to describe the role played by women in our society so as to give you a general idea of how Burundi society sees women, rather than to analyse the status of women from our own point of view.

1. Girls are generally called "umunyaki-go", which means "the one from the backyard"—and speaks volumes about how girls are rated.
2. Then there's the saying: "inkokokazi ntibika isake ihari", which means, the hen can't sing when the cock's around—meaning that women must lower their voice or indeed say nothing in front of men.
3. If a woman leaves home after a row with her husband she generally goes back to her parents, and her mother says to her gently but firmly, "subira yo ni ko zubakwa", in other words: "Go back. That's life together"—a saying which requires the woman to resign herself to the way things are, since she has no other choice but to return to her husband and give in.
4. Another saying that one often hears is: "amazi akenye ahariwira impfizi", which can be translated more or less as follows: "When there's not enough water for the herd, the little that's left is for the bull." In other words,



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when a family is hard up, the man is served before his wife and children and, if necessary, he is the only person to be served.

5. Burundis nevertheless understand that without women they would get nowhere, and they express this in the saying: "umuhusha-tunga ahusha umugore". This expression is difficult to translate, but means more or less: "The surest way to miss prosperity is to end up with a bad wife!"

Changing the situation of women

In Proutao we have thus concluded that:

- women must no longer be excluded from any important decisions;

- the fact that women are making their voice heard does not mean that they are becoming arrogant towards men – far from it;
- men have no right to ill-treat their wives or to be encouraged to do so by the women themselves through their attitude of resignation;
- there is no reason why the husband should be the only person to manage family property or to enjoy that property as the sole beneficiary;
- women must be attributed the importance that is their due and the recognition to which they are entitled as the guarantors of family welfare and thus of development.

Our organisation is concerned about the status of women in Burundi since over 80% of our partners/beneficiaries are women. Our methodology is to bring about the creation of peasant women's associations, even if it means subsequently providing technical, moral and financial support for them. We thus collaborate with over 500 rural women's self-help associations scattered over six of the provinces in our country. Our organisation works in rural areas, where it tries to increase the volume and the quality of the 'family cake' to be shared out, so as to reduce the sources of disputes, while encouraging exchange and dialogue. 🍷

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Remarkable progress in less than two years – Support for Promoting Gender Equality Project - Burundi

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Social change

The social change associated with the advent of equal and equitable gender relations has made lightning progress in Burundi as a result of a sustained action launched by a MASPF (Ministry of Social Affairs and Women's Promotion) project which was financed by UNDP and implemented by UNIFEM, entitled *Projet Appui à la Promotion de l'Égalité des Genres* (the Support for Promoting Gender Equality Project) or APEG.

Although launched in 2001, this project has only been fully operational and fully staffed since July 2002. Its overall objective is to create an environment conducive to gender equality. An important prerequisite for achieving this

objective is a change of mentality at the cultural level, so people are encouraged to adopt an attitude in line with the concerns of human rights and social justice vis-à-vis the weight of tradition.

However, there have already been several achievements—we shall cite but a few: a national gender policy has been adopted, 400 people have been trained, gender units have been set up in all ministries, there are 35 national gender trainers, a gender database has been created, and a parliamentary bill has been introduced on inheritance, systems of matrimonial property and gifts. Furthermore, the Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW)

has been translated into Kirundi, the national language, and a study has been carried out on capacity-building needs in the Ministry of Social Action and the Promotion of Women. The present article illustrates the work that has been done.

Adoption of a national gender policy in Burundi

The adoption of a National Gender Policy by the Burundi Government on 30 September 2003 is undoubtedly a major accomplishment of the efforts made in the gender field in Burundi, and one of the leading achievements of the APEG project, since awareness and advocacy are absolutely essential elements of the

work to change the existing social structures and ingrained socio-cultural practices. The culmination of these efforts – the adoption of the policy by the Council of Ministers – was very carefully prepared through several training and awareness workshops. The highest authority in the country, Domitien Ndayizeye, the President of the Republic, had stated in “Equité-Infos” (Equity-Info), the newsletter of the APEG project published in April 2003, that he would “give precedence to a woman candidate in appointing persons to senior posts, where candidates had equal qualifications”. For his part, the Vice-President of the Republic, who comes from a different political-ethnic background, acknowledged at the session of the Council of Ministers on 30 September 2003, which he chaired, that women were subject to unequalitarian and inequitable treatment as regards participation in decision-making in Burundi. Both of these leaders have therefore been won over to the gender approach. A further unmistakable sign of progress observed at the recent congresses of the main parties in power, i.e. the Front pour la Démocratie au Burundi (FRODEBU), which is the party of the President of the Republic, and the Union pour le Progrès National (UPRONA), the party of the Vice-President of the Republic, was that both parties independently expressed their desire to apply a women’s participation rate of at least 30% in the governing bodies of their parties. Yet the Arusha Agreement, which is the basic reference text, only made provision for one woman in five in certain institutions, such as the National Assembly.

Improving women’s representation

On the other hand, contrary to all expectations, the decrease of almost 5% in women’s participation rate in the last government of 23 November 2003 came as a surprise and disappointment to the supporters of social justice, equality and equity amongst citizens. It was all the more difficult to understand since the same government had just adopted the National Gender Policy on 30 September 2003, which included precisely a women’s participation rate of at least 30% in its objectives for the immediate future. This contradiction underlines the need to include this progress in statutes and regulations such as the Constitution and to exert pressure to obtain budgets which will guarantee that the gender approach is integrated. In conclusion, the National Gender Policy is an important tool with which pressure can be brought to bear on all actors in the gender equality field to eradicate discrimination and other gender-based disparities. The fact that this policy covers all aspects of the life of the country is very positive.

Training for concrete results

The other extremely important aspect of the tremendous work carried out by the Support for Promoting Gender Equality Project are the measures taken to step up training and promote awareness. Training has been provided



for 400 people in all socio-economic sectors including members of Parliament, Senators, members of the government, women leaders, trade unionists, journalists, and members of civil society. Gender units have been set up in all ministries. Of the 35 national gender trainers, 5 were given further training abroad. These motivated units generally exert influence on the people around them; several networks have been created and others are in the pipeline. Concrete actions are reported regularly; we shall cite two as an example below. The gender-trained team of journalists in the Burundi Press Agency, including the president of the journalists’ union, have revolutionised the procedure for proposing the allocation of a first home to members of staff by getting the principle accepted that any member of staff, irrespective of any property bought by her or his spouse, can be allocated a first home on the basis of the criteria of years of service and repayment capacity. Several female members of staff had formerly been penalised on the pretext that their husbands had already bought housing. This was a notorious form of injustice towards women, particularly when a marriage failed. This achievement has placed all women in middle and top management in a position where they can purchase their first home, a measure which will no doubt gain ground in the other regions of the country. A further example of awareness with concrete results has just been illustrated in the Burundi National Radio and Television Corporation, where a memorandum protesting against injustice towards women in promotion to senior posts has just been drawn up and signed by almost 100 members of staff, both men and women. These irregularities are expected to be rectified very shortly. Furthermore, specific radio broadcasts promoting the gender approach are planned, which will focus in particular on activities in the rural world with local press correspondents. After two years of operation, the APEG project has thus achieved remarkable results. With the

adoption of the National Gender Policy and the relevant plan of action, it has just acquired rich and exciting raw material for future application. And the outlook is very promising, since the project has just got off the ground. It will need means to implement its policy so as to embrace the many and varied aspects of promoting the gender approach.

Towards a veritable revolution of rural women with regard to Burundi tradition

The most striking example in this field is a series of ongoing negotiations aiming to achieve full investiture of Burundi women in the social category of elders (abashingantahe). It is an illustration of how the APEG project supports other projects for promoting the gender approach. According to Burundi tradition, only men have been able to be invested as “elders”. These are persons of great integrity and with very high social status, which is strengthened by the fact that they settle disputes at all levels of social and national life, particularly in the immediate environment, on a voluntary basis. The wife of an “elder” (mushingantahe) also enjoys a certain level of social esteem but does not have access to the social and public functions of the mushingantahe. This institution has thus constituted a form of social injustice. With the contribution of the Support for Promoting Gender Equality Project a negotiation process was recently opened with a view to having women accepted as “elders”, mushingantahe. The project hopes that this process will lead one day to the full investiture of Burundi women. ¶

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The implications of gender-based division of labour for agricultural production of peasant farmers: the case of the Yaka people in the Kasongo Lunda region

PÉLAGIE MAKIENDIKA | PDF - Pôle de Développement pour la Femme (Centre for women's development), DRC

It is a well-known fact that 80% of the Yaka population, 550 km to the South West of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, depend on farming for a living. Agricultural production is traditionally the women's task.

This gender-based division of labour, which has become established as a principle in Africa, has many different implications on household agricultural production. This is particularly the case for women, who are the main agents and driving force behind the rural economy and who provide for the family and cover social needs. They are overburdened with hard and heavy work ranging from household tasks to farming activities (sowing, crop and soil maintenance, harvesting, selling produce, etc). whereas men devote themselves mainly to preparatory tasks which range from slaughtering to clearing and, to a lesser extent, harvesting.

Furthermore, since the subsistence economy is the predominant, or indeed the only, model found in farming activities, the efforts of the rural population in general and of rural women in particular, are limited in that yield depends primarily on muscular strength and rudimentary crop-growing techniques (hoes, machetes, rakes, etc.).

As the result of climate change, continuing deforestation and advancing savannah, this form of agricultural production is steadily declining and the purchasing power of the population is dwindling.

Awareness-raising work

The concept of group-work and partnership between women and men in farming the land and managing resources is still a myth in Yaka rural communities, due to a number of stereotyped ideas, misconceptions and prejudice, particularly with regard to women.

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(PDF) has thus carried out actions targeting local rural associations and focusing on women's rights and fundamental freedoms in an effort to change this mentality, which subjugates Yaka women and relegates them to the rank of second-class members of society. There is fierce cultural resistance to gender awareness, but the participation of Yaka women themselves and the strategic involvement of men are now proving necessary, and indeed essential, if sustainable development is to be achieved.

In the same line of thought, these rural women in the Kasongo Lunda region (some 550 km south-west of Kinshasa in the DRC), like all other peasants, are faced with the problem of optimising agricultural production, since it is very often the dealers buying their produce who fix the prices, regardless of the sacrifices made by these peasant women. These dealers have a virtual purchasing monopoly and demand half of output as payment. In other words, if 50 bags of ground nuts are produced, they charge 25 bags for transporting the other 25 to the marketing centre with a view to earning a profit; otherwise, produce is sold for one-third or one-quarter of the price of manufactured products. This is a situation where women are veritably exploited by men.

Given this state of affairs, the level of income of these Kasongo-Lunda peasants is far from improving; in fact poverty, with all of its corollaries, is on the increase.

Women organise themselves

Despite the many-faceted crisis, local rural organisations have been running campaigns to raise awareness at grassroots level under PDF supervision and have been helping the population to organise to a greater extent by forming associations and collectives in order to cope with the system.

One tremendous problem remains, however, and that is the problem of improving the state of roads and finding the necessary means for facilitating the evacuation of products to consumption centres. It is by opening up roads that we will be able to promote and maintain the associations that have already been started and that we can help to raise the income level of the Yaka women of Kasongo Lunda. 🙌

📍 Pôle de Développement pour la Femme (PDF)

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'The Bipupula Mamas'

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There has been an acute problem of poverty amongst women in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) for over a decade, and the situation of women has steadily deteriorated as the result of looting and successive wars. Despite the efforts made by the government and by civil society organisations, Congolese women are still subject to various forms of discrimination, which prevent them from playing an effective role in the reconstruction of the country.

The fact is that women account for 51.5% of the Congolese population; 90% of the population is living under the poverty line, and women account for over half of that number. After the crises that have shaken the country, 80% of households now owe their survival to women, who, although traditionally confined to the household, have been engaging in informal survival activities in the streets for over a decade. Due to their initiative and know-how, women play a key role in the perception of household problems. They devise solutions and do not hesitate to take action—with or without their husbands' blessing. In their survival strategy they have family labour at their disposal—i.e. the children (of both sexes). In their efforts to develop activities to cope with their destitution, these women have extended their maternal reflexes to small-scale production, particularly where they can use the experience they have gained over time and broaden their role in the community (street catering, work in the fields, raising of small animals, etc.).

They have taken to field activities, supported to a lesser extent by rural men and even less by urban men, who have unprofitable jobs or have lost their jobs. It is these women who produce 75% of the food consumed¹, despite the many problems with which they are confronted regarding access to and control of resources and inputs.

Several factors have contributed to the deterioration of the situation of women:

- It is customary for women, who are mothers, to be the main providers of food for the family. They are responsible not only for providing the meals that are eaten but also for fetching water, collecting wood, working the land, trading on a small scale, and generally engaging in inventive self-help activities.
- Another factor is the lack of efficient management of the activities in which they are involved. In most cases farming activities remain the primary resource and the main activity on which all other strategies are based,

namely small-scale trading and market gardening (vegetables), the rearing of small animals, food processing, etc. Agricultural produce is either consumed directly or sold at the market. A distinction is made between low income-generating products (amaranth, pondou or cassava leaves, matembele or yam leaves) and high income-generating vegetables which are highly prized in urban centres, such as aubergines, celery, cabbage, chives, cucumbers, etc.

The income obtained from the sale of agricultural produce often serves to feed the family, cover medical care, and finance the children's schooling. This form of farming lacks innovation and is carried out with rudimentary tools, often in an unhealthy environment, in which the women themselves are not protected against injuries of any kind. In short, they know nothing about modern farming techniques, and when they do manage to use fertilisers or other chemicals they do so without any expert guidance. Compost is beyond their means due to the lack of appropriate advisory services. In short, these women use the methods and tools that were used by their grandmothers.

The same applies to the processing activities which they carry out with rudimentary equipment (mortars, boards, axes, etc.); this equipment requires tremendous physical effort and eventually damages their health—as is the case, for example, with the making of 'chikungue' or the use of firewood, etc.

Strategies employed

Several strategies are used to try to remedy the situation, starting with solidarity amongst the women themselves. This can be developed within the family or community—tribal or other—or can focus around a church or other targeted activity.

'The Bipupula Mamas'

The "Bipupula² Mamas" and/or "handy mamas" are an example of solidarity between economic actors who carry out the same activity, and the "sisters" are another example of solidarity focusing around a church. "Bipupula Mamas" are women who help flour merchants to divide up sacks of cassava either in the warehouse or at the market for shoppers who do not want or cannot afford to buy a whole bag—and they keep any leftovers ("dust") and other scraps for themselves. This "dust" is intended either for domestic consumption or for sale at the evening market. "Handy mamas" work as messengers in markets and never miss a chance to manipulate naive customers, fiddle things, auction things, etc.; in fact they will do anything, if it means that they can take something home with them in the evening. These groups work together in solidarity and tip each

other off (about the arrival of boats or trucks, etc.), the aim being to earn something at the end of the day.

The formal and informal associative world

Another strategy employed is to join an organisation, whether structured or informal. The desire to increase their incomes or enhance their purchasing power can induce women to join an association (an NGO or other organisation) in order to benefit from the assistance of that structure, the survival of which depends, amongst other things, on membership subscriptions. As the result of structural adjustments and other numerous factors such as looting and war, Congolese women have long realised that forming associations is another way to survive. There are two forms of association—informal likelembas or tontines, and formal associations. It is the tontines—an informal form of solidarity—with which these women are most familiar. However, these groups are becoming less popular, as the result of the current crisis. For how are women to pay their subscriptions if they cannot cover their families' basic needs? So Congolese women are caught in a vicious circle—although one still finds occasional tontines that have managed to keep going.

The formal associations are either NGOs or other structured organisations. Whereas community initiatives have been emerging in the DRC to cope with the threat of poverty, women have long remained on the sidelines, confining their role to that of invisible actors in the community. NGOs have been developing rapidly in the DRC since 1990, whereas those in which women are visible have only been emerging tentatively since 1995, as the result of campaigns on gender awareness, women in leadership and the involvement of women in decision-making bodies (in 1996).

Groups in which women form the majority of the membership now abound, not only in the city of Kinshasa but throughout the country. Women are making their voices heard in every field—in development NGOs, NGOs working in the human rights field, NGOs working for peace and democracy, etc. ¶

¹ DSRPI2000

² "bipupula" means "to dust"

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Stories of rural women in the Democratic Republic of Congo

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The celebrations for World Rural Women's Day went on for a fortnight in the DRC, from 15 to 30 September 2003. Several activities were organised to honour Congolese rural women, both in the provinces and in the capital city of Kinshasa.

On that occasion the Ligue Congolaise pour les Droits et Développement de la Femme (Congolese League for the Rights and Development of Women - LICODFE) brought together 200 women farmers and market gardeners and fisherwomen living in the villages of the Maluku municipality, a rural municipality on the outskirts of Kinshasa.

The organisation of this Rural Women's Day had two objectives: first, providing information for rural women in order to raise their awareness, and, second giving them the chance to speak in order to make their voices heard.

Lack of information: a major constraint

Rural women in Maluku play a major role in the food security of the urban population of Kinshasa by supplying agricultural commodities such as cassava—a staple in the Congolese diet—sweet potatoes, beans, vegetables, fish and mushrooms. In addition to their agricultural production, they play a stabilising role in rural areas. But these rural women are confronted with the serious problem of lack of information due to the long distances between their villages and the city centre and the lack of electricity and sources of information such as radio, television and newspapers. This situation fosters ignorance among rural women, who are unaware of their rights and of the advantages that are vital to their development, such as education, training, and access to microcredit and to agricultural and fishing inputs.

The rural women of the DRC do not yet realise that they are entitled to their own land, as land in the Congo traditionally belongs to men, while women work on it and give away half of the yield to pay the rent. This keeps women in a state of poverty, since they work with hoes on small plots and have to share the harvest with the landowner.

World Rural Women's Day was celebrated in the women's communal field in Maluku on 18 September 2003. The women were honoured by the presence of the Minister of Women's Affairs and the Family, the Minister of Rural Development and the Mayor of the municipality of Maluku. The day was marked by three major events: the rural women were informed through the various messages received; they then took the floor themselves to speak about



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their experiences; and their agricultural produce was displayed and sold.

The importance of agricultural work to development

The Minister of Women's Affairs and the Family and the Minister of Rural Development congratulated the women on the highly commendable and beneficial work they do for the benefit of the urban population. They stressed the importance of agricultural work in development and the role played by women in household stability both during and after the war.

Ms. Marie Jeanne Tusey, the Licodfe Coordinator, informed the women on their right to own land (right of ownership) and asked the Mayor to act as the rural women's spokesman in contacts with the traditional chiefs to help them obtain low-cost land.

Ms. Tusey also spoke of women's right to health, emphasising reproductive health and protection against and/or prevention of sexually transmitted diseases and HIV/AIDS. She explained the various means of infection and described preventive methods for avoiding it. She also advised the women to practice birth control in order to avoid too frequent and repeated pregnancies, which are one of the causes of the high maternal and infant mortality rate in the DRC.

Hardship of daily life in rural areas

The rural women then took the floor to express their thanks for this first opportunity to express themselves and spoke at length on

their suffering and on the hardship of daily life in rural areas. Several pressing problems include the improvement of housing, access to drinking water and primary healthcare, as well as access to microcredit.

The women expressed deep concern about the attitude of sponsors, who devote much more attention and finance to urban environments, leaving out rural areas, which act as grain suppliers to the towns and cities. They expressed their hope that both the local and the national authorities as well as international partners would come to their assistance to improve their living conditions.

The event concluded with the exhibition and sale of agricultural and fishery products. Delighted participants and visitors marvelled at the large quantities of cheap cassava tubers, vegetables, and fish and purchased a week's provisions.

With the guidance of Licodfe, the rural women of the DRC appeal to anyone who can help them improve their living conditions. ¶

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Women carry the torch in the accomplishment and perpetuation of COPED missions

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Although rural women's development is not the fundamental priority of the Council for Education and Development (Coped), the Council has come to realise over the years that without women the results of its actions would be very weak. For although the NGO has worked to promote women through several specific projects, it is now abundantly clear, after 30 years of operation, that the positive results achieved are to a large extent the fruit of women's efforts.

Coped was set up in 1974 with the objective of providing gender-neutral socio-economic support for rural populations. To begin with, its field of action covered the geographical region of the south of Burundi: Bururi, Rutana and Makamba. The main missions assigned to the organisation were to fight hunger and poverty, to fight ignorance, and to fight disease in rural areas, although its efforts were not limited to these activities. As the various projects progressed, however, Coped gradually changed and its field of action rapidly expanded. It became a regional non-governmental organisation (NGO) in 1989 and soon afterwards the General Assembly decided to extend its area of involvement to cover the entire country. The organisation operates in 11 of the 17 provinces of Burundi with an annual operations budget of over € 2 million; it has a permanent staff of some 50 agents and executive employees. In addition, just recently, the EU member states decided to set up Coped Belgium with a view to serving this cause even more effectively.

The place of women in Coped actions

Women have proved to be the real driving force behind Coped missions; they act discreetly but are like a quiet force that moves mountains. It is women who to a large extent have borne the burden of the organisation ever since it was established. It was not obvious in 1974 when the organisation was established, but now that 29 years have elapsed and the results have been assessed it can be said with hindsight that Coped owes a great deal to women in its projects, particularly with regard to the sustainability of its action.

Women: a driving force in the fight against hunger and poverty

The photo of a woman with a child on her back, a hoe on her shoulder and a bundle of firewood on her head is the cliché of rural women in Burundi. It is perhaps a picture that shocks, but seen positively it symbolises

the central role played by women in the home and thus in rural society in Burundi. They play a predominant role in development and education in the rural world.

The major areas on which Coped focuses its action in its efforts to fight hunger are: the distribution of microcredit in rural areas for crop and animal farming, projects to improve cattle and goat breeds, action to provide breeders' seeds, action to promote fishing in Lake Tanganyika, the distribution of food in the context of humanitarian aid, the running of nutrition centres, measures to provide training in the management of microcredit, etc.

Women are involved in all of these activities; over 75% of the persons involved in the designing and actual implementation of the various projects launched are women. One might—understandably—imagine that men are still the main actors because they are often the first to be approached, but this is merely an illusion. The menfolk are like the title of a book in block capitals; the womenfolk are the thousands of lower-case letters which ultimately make up the subject matter and give the book substance.

However, it need not pride itself on being the only organisation which has this vision of things, for it is in fact patently obvious that women are the driving force behind the efforts to fight poverty in the rural environment. Most importantly, it is also women who strive to keep the projects going as long as possible. It is they who perpetuate our work. Furthermore, the number of women members of the Development Committees in the various administrative districts (hill country, regions, municipalities, etc.) is steadily increasing.

Fighting ignorance

One might be tempted at first sight to think that women tend more to be beneficiaries rather than actors in this field, but the contribution which women make in projects for combating ignorance is irrefutable. Projects have developed considerably over the last few years thanks to support from partners who are very aware of the problem. The crisis in Burundi has not only exhausted the economy; it has also destroyed a large proportion of the country's human capital and of the official and informal education structures.

Fighting disease

Women are the central figure in the home, and it is they who are the first to suffer the effects of poverty, ignorance and, in particular, disease both physically and psychologically. It is difficult to quantify the efforts they make in this field in the rural environment. Since visits



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by health centre agents, nurses and/or doctors are very sporadic, it is the womenfolk who provide this care to the best of their ability and often with great difficulty.

Coped sees women as absolutely essential partners in the accomplishment of its mission to fight disease.

In all of these efforts to combat disease, the majority of the partners are women. The services address women as the main actors in the family health field. Here again women play an essential role: they form the majority of the organisation's partners both upstream and downstream, working to implement projects and to uphold objectives.

To sum up, the Council for Education and Development owes a great deal to women in the accomplishment of its missions. The very positive results obtained in almost 30 years of effort to fight poverty, ignorance and disease can be attributed to the extensive participation of rural women in its projects.

However, it is after the implementation of projects that their contribution becomes even more valuable. Coped is convinced that women account for 80% of the sustainability of its fundamental objectives. The organisation therefore has a certain moral debt, which it must try to pay by devoting a larger share of projects to action geared exclusively to women's development. ¶

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Adult literacy training: a tool in the service of grassroots development

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As part of its programme for supporting self-help initiatives in the grassroots community, OAP – l'Organisation d'appui à l'auto-promotion' – (Self-help Support Organisation) intervenes through various activities, in particular project funding, training and awareness campaigns.

This community is composed of numerous groups and associations with a wide range of objectives, and most of its members are illiterate. The high rate of illiteracy in its structures has a negative effect on results. Women are often excluded from management organs because they cannot read or write, whereas it is they who take an active part in the various actions that are launched. Their access to organisational training is also limited.

Progressive and ongoing action

OAP, which is convinced that literacy training is an important development tool and means of raising awareness, launched a functional literacy programme in 2002 at the request of the community with a view to ensuring that activities would be well run and profitable. This programme, which complements other training courses, targets adults in the province of Bujumbura Rural, which is the organisation's impact area. Action will be progressive and continuous with a view to enabling the majority of the members of the population to monitor and manage their development through reading and writing.

The programme pursues the following objectives:

- to teach the population, and in particular the members of grassroots associations and groups, the basics of reading, writing and arithmetic;
- to change the mentality of illiterate peasants so that they can become real actors in development, able to take initiatives and bring about innovation;
- to encourage those who have achieved literacy to improve their production activities through rational management;
- to enable the illiterate to gain access to modern means of communication through reading and writing.

In order to achieve these objectives 35 extension officers/adult literacy trainers were trained and given the task of teaching literacy to the population in the surrounding areas. Once that initial training session had been completed 24 adult literacy centres were opened in the 11 municipalities which make up the province of Bujumbura Rural.

Programme assessment:

- 2002: over 500 people, 70% of whom were women, received the first certificates after passing a test on completion of the 6-month training course;
- 2003: over 1 million people are currently undergoing literacy training.

Partial results of the programme

Rural libraries have been set up and are now operating in all of the centres. This enables successful students to continue to read and to take correspondence courses in rural development using the books of INADES-FORMATION. The acquisition of reading, writing and training habits are consolidated by regular visits to the library, where readers can borrow books to read at home. Rural women, who formerly spent all of their time on rural and household tasks, now find a few minutes to sit down in the library.

The management of the activities of the groups and associations is now becoming transparent in many places, because these structures now have treasurers who can read and write and thus keep accounts. We have in fact observed that structures in which all of the members have taken part in literacy training programmes are coping very well with their organisation, each member making his/her own contribution in a democratic and transparent manner.

The exchange and circulation of information has been facilitated: the population no longer has to travel elsewhere to present grievances to OAP or other partners. Successful students now send their claims far afield by writing campaign letters and sending letters of complaint and letters claiming their rights to the competent authorities.

The literacy programme has been very beneficial for women, who are proud to be able to write to their children or friends living far away, without having to disclose their secrets to an intermediary in order to have letters written or read.

Through reading, rural women have now become aware of the scourge of AIDS. Rural libraries thus constitute a community tool for helping women to obtain information easily on the dangers of AIDS and how to fight the disease. Women now have a place in organisations which raise awareness and organise grassroots development. In fact now they can even pass on messages—something which as illiterates they could not, and did not, dare to do. ♪

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Women's promotion through information and communication technologies (ICTs)

CPVI - Centre pour la Promotion et la Vulgarisation de l'Informatique (Centre for Promoting and Extending Computer Technology), DRC

Computers are proving to be an indispensable and essential tool for strengthening the advocacy skills of women in civil society.

Yet most of them know nothing about this new multimedia technology, although it is a potential source of relevant and useful information for enhancing their ability to participate in decision-making and for actions to promote their social advancement and defend their rights. In view of this deplorable situation, the Centre for Promoting and Extending Computer Technology (CPVI) has been organising training sessions in computer skills ever since it was set up in 1998.

Realising the growing importance of objective, relevant and useful information for strategic decision-making and for planning advocacy action, the CPVI makes its computer equipment available to women for training sessions. These focus on Word, Excel, Internet Explorer, and an introduction to creating Web pages. Impressed by the boundless functionalities of computers, the women have realised that it is essential to master this new technology.

Exchange and networking

By organising training sessions in computer skills the CPVI aims to highlight women's abili-

ties in the effort to promote peace in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) and to train women in leadership so that they are able to fully participate in the professional world on an equal footing with men. In addition to broadening the women's information and communication knowledge and activities, these training sessions also help them to acquire new knowledge and socio-professional skills in the fields of electronic collection, processing and dissemination of information. This opens up new prospects for them and enhances their advocacy skills as well as their ability to present arguments to defend their rights. Through the information that is available on the Internet they learn to correspond with associations operating in other parts of the world to defend women's rights and discover other forms of advocacy and means of denouncing the abuse, crimes and violence inflicted on women. All of this information exchange constitutes a formidable weapon and a body of knowledge with which they can take informed decisions and adopt positions, particularly with a view to the forthcoming elections in the DRC. A synergy has been created between the various women's networks which exchange information and organise colloquiums, conferences, symposiums, discussion forums, and so on.

Having taken part in the peace negotiations in the DRC, women are still in the minority in almost all of the institutions established for the transition period: 12% in the Parliament, 3% in the Senate and 0% in the Presidency.

In order to ensure that information is widely disseminated, in line with its main objective, the CPVI has opened two information centres specifically in the outlying municipalities of N'djili (in Bonsomi School) and Kintambo (in the Mbungu Gallery), and a third centre has just opened in Alfagiri School in Bukavu.

It is no longer surprising to see that there is now a majority of women in the CPVI centres; they come to read or send e-mails, type up documents or correspond with their new partners on the latest information received on the violation of women's rights in the occupied territories of the DRC or on the Comprehensive Agreement and the Transition Constitution. ♪

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When microcredit promotes family harmony

THE OLAME CENTRE - DRC

Today the important role and place of women in socio-economic life in the DRC is an established fact. For ever since the Congolese State has been failing to assume its responsibilities towards the population (poor governance, failure to pay wages and salaries, etc.) women have developed survival instincts that are adapted to the extreme situation imposed on the Congolese population.

They are thus prepared to take numerous risks in self-help initiatives in order to feed "God's bits of wood", to use the expression coined by Sembene OUSMANE. This woman, who is fighting for the survival of her family in a predominantly agricultural and entrepreneurial society, is central to several activities associated with artisanal production, transport, processing and marketing of goods.

The Olame Centre, which proposes its long years of experience in the granting of microcredit to development associations with a view to supporting entrepreneurship amongst women, is the Technical Branch of the Bukavu

Archdiocese in South Kivu Province in the east of the DRC, which is responsible for promoting women and the family.

Entrepreneurial spirit

The Olame Centre has been involved in encouraging self-help initiatives since 1959 and currently supports 28 women's groups, 90% of which are in rural areas. The dynamism of the women of South Kivu Province deserved support, and the idea of granting credit was motivated by developing the entrepreneurial spirit displayed by certain members of the partner associations. In order to compensate for the absence of savings and credit institutions and thus of a banking system in the Congo, the Olame Centre courageously embarked on a programme of microcredit.

The first stage of the process involves identifying the financial management skills of the group or association, and working with the members to identify which activities are economically profitable in their particular environment and analysing their potential financial yield. This is then followed by training courses in how to run a small business, the Olame Cen-

tre's credit policy, and joint security.

The credit granted takes the form of revolving loans in these groups with an annual interest rate of 10% spread over 11 months. Given the high demand compared to the amount of funds available, we are able to lay out an average of \$500 per group of +/-18 members.

Recovery is facilitated by the loan committees that are set up in each group by the members themselves to ensure self-administration. In each household the couple manages the amount borrowed, since their mutual agreement is one of the preconditions for obtaining the loan. This is then granted to the partners as a couple, who then automatically become responsible for the amount advanced. These loans are seen as a real breath of fresh air in our society, which has been torn apart by an unprecedented economic crisis exacerbated by seven years of war.

Despite these challenges we manage to achieve a recovery rate of 76% by the repayment date, and the impact is encouraging, since families manage to cover their basic needs such as schooling for the children, medical care, clothing and food. ♪

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Association Femme et Environnement au Burundi (AFEB) (Association for Women and the Environment in Burundi)

GODELIEVE KARIKURUBU | AFEB, Burundi

The Association for Women and the Environment in Burundi (AFEB) was set up in 1995 during the political and economic crisis which Burundi was, and still is, going through, and which has resulted in a vicious circle of environmental deterioration and increasing poverty.

Women, who are at the very heart of human reproduction and education, as well as household and community food security, are the worst affected by this tragedy. Unfortunately, the fact is that they play a major role in the deterioration of the natural resources which they constantly exploit using archaic methods. What is more, the social and legal status of women, their heavy workload in terms of time and the fact that they are illiterate are all factors which constrain their integration as actors for sustainable development.

The overall objective of AFEB is to contribute to the national programme for rehabilitating and protecting the environment and eradicating poverty in Burundi, by providing gender support and training for the rural people.

Our specific objectives include gender-focused support and training for groups in rural communities on sustainable management of natural resources; promotion of job-creation and income-generating projects which are educational and demonstrative and have a multiplier effect; and promotion of environment and peace education, by developing themes linked to these

areas. These themes integrate the population-development-environment dimensions.

Our fields of intervention are land and water, wood and energy, farming and food production, fishing and fish farming, biodiversity, human culture and settlement, and health.

A participatory approach

The projects we run in the various communities are launched through an inclusive and participatory process. We carry out assessments using the Accelerated Research and Participatory Planning Method.

Our activities include:

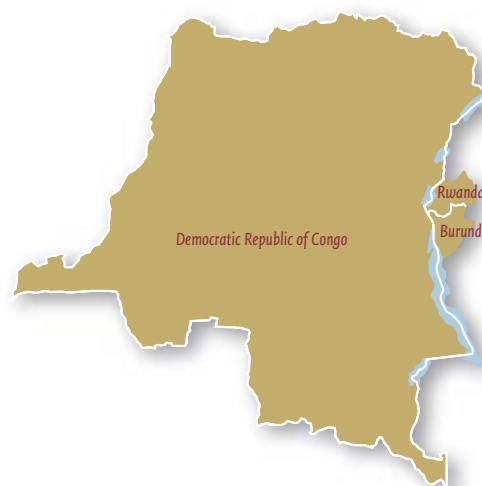
- projects which include crop-growing, forestry and animal production practices (mixed farming, goats, cows, trees for afforestation, multipurpose trees and fruit trees);
- a project for developing a model village offering optimal living conditions: decent housing, availability of water and electricity, a primary school and a vocational school, a health centre, a farm that uses modern crop-growing techniques, and a pleasant environment for 100 families of vulnerable women in the context of integrated rural development;
- alternative activities structured around the Kibira National Park such as mushroom growing and fish farming combined with animal breeding (goats, rabbits, hens, pigs, cows, etc).

The plan for the future is to make a significant contribution to sustainable human develop-

ment, by multiplying projects aiming to integrate environmental protection into action to enhance food security, promote health and energy production and develop tourism in grassroots communities. The result will help to eradicate poverty and protect the environment. ♪

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