

## **The situation of Congolese Women: War, Peace building, Participation and Feminism.**

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August 2007, In the Democratic Republic of Congo, women's rights have, in theory, been institutionalised in the constitution since the 1960s. However, the DRC government, and society generally, fail to protect women, probably due to the fact that the law is only respected when it applies to women or families of those who are privileged enough to be able to afford to pay for their rights.

Nevertheless, in the early eighties, there was an emergence of leadership, which was visible in the movement of women who were involved in informal trade and were economically empowered, as well as those women who fought hard for the change of certain laws in the Congolese constitution. Unfortunately, due to the economic and political context of that era, this early movement struggled to have an impact on the application of the law as well as on the general condition of women in the DRC. Poverty, lack of education/instruction, coupled with a terrible retrograde patriarchal mentality and inadequate support of women in many part of the DRC, led to a general unawareness by women, specifically of their civil rights.

Furthermore, since 1996, following more than a decade of a regional and civil conflict involving more than five neighbouring countries, rape and atrocious deliberate genital mutilation have been used as weapons of intimidation and war, in addition to the daily occurrence of rape in Congolese society. This further destroyed women's self-esteem in this patriarchal society where these endemic abuses, although punishable by law, are still seen as taboo. This condemns women to silence or to face shame, rejection and isolation. This consequently reinforces the culture of impunity in the DRC and is exacerbated by women's poverty and lack of any means of seeking any form of justice even when they know the perpetrators.

Following the Beijing Declaration, a small group of women (politicians and civil society representatives) formed a cross-party Congolese Women's Caucus which, supported by UNIFEM, played a significant role in the decisive second phase Peace Process in the DRC conflict in 2002. They were represented in the Inter-Congolese Dialogue (ICD) and drew up a memorandum appealing for sustainable peace in the DRC.

Although these women relentlessly advocated and lobbied for UNSCR 1325, as well as for parity in the national assembly, campaigning on TV, radio and to the government, it seems that their participation was considered, hypocritically, only symbolic by Congolese men. The strategy used

to involve women in the DRC's peace building and transitional government was one that had a weakening effect on women leaders of civil society organisations.

However, in time of crisis and difficulty, feminism brings Congolese women together. They have always shown their unity and determination to work together and remain strong. It is estimated that the DRC has one of the highest number of women's organisations in Africa, particularly activist organisations.

Although Feminism has a negative connotation in the DRC, I prefer to define Feminism to my fellow Congolese men not only as a revolution for women but as guarding women's rights all over the world against discrimination and abuses in systems, traditions, religions or what society imposes on women. Feminists have and are still defending our basic human rights, working towards ensuring that we have equal entitlement to rights, protection and opportunities, to reach our potential, to have our voices or opinions heard and considered, and not to be denied the possibility to be individuals who, regardless of sex, religion or race, are free to participate, choose or live as best as we could wish to within or outside systems, traditions and religions.

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In Peace,

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UK WILPF

COMMON CAUSE UK, platform of Congolese women in the UK

WDDRC: Women for the Development of DRC

FCE: Federation des Congolais de l'Etranger.