

THE DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF CONGO SURVEY:

Stronger women

Stronger nations

**“One woman can change anything.
Many women can change everything.”**

Christine Karumba – WFWI's Country Programme Director for DRC



WOMEN *for* WOMEN
International

THE DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF CONGO TODAY: A 2010 SURVEY

The scale of the violence in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) is well documented; more than 5.4 million people have died in the conflict in the DRC since 1998. The death toll is the equivalent of an Asian Tsunami every 6.5 months; a September 11th every 2.5 days. Despite all of these hard hitting facts, the plight of Congolese citizens in the Kivus is mostly ignored by the world at large.

In June 2009, Women for Women International (WfWI) surveyed 1,784 grassroots women throughout the Eastern DRC, asking them about their views and personal experiences. Researchers also surveyed 246 men, creating a total of 2,030 respondents. The sample group included current male and female participants in WfWI's programmes, WfWI programme graduates, beneficiaries of other non-governmental programmes, and men and women with no WfWI affiliation.

In order to collect broad perspectives of ordinary Congolese women, the sample includes participants from different urban and rural locations in the Eastern DRC. The sample was mostly rural (72% of women were from rural locations and 65% of the total men and women participants sampled were from rural locations) and therefore focuses the spotlight on a population rarely accessed or prioritised. The distribution of the sample roughly mirrors the demographics of the country.

Our survey has found that fear – owing to cumulative incidents of trauma and violence – persists and impacts daily life. Insecurity limits growth, change, and opportunity and locks the country in poverty. **Over 75% of the women surveyed reported thinking a lot about upsetting events.** Yet despite this backdrop of war, poverty and sexual violence, women in DRC are holding families together. **Their**

resilience keeps them afloat as they continue to perform critical daily tasks despite lingering sadness. **Of the women we surveyed, a staggering 93% are working, though only 7.4% do so in the formal economy.**

Despite all these grim realities Congolese resilience and strength shines through. Women keep working, keep supporting their families and keep believing that peace is achievable. **63% of those surveyed agreed that there can be peace within Eastern DRC in the next 12 months.**

WOMEN OF DRC: CAUGHT IN A GENDERED CONFLICT

Out of 100 women in DRC:

- 40 are displaced
- 75 do not own a mattress
- 40 never attended school
- 50 eat only one meal a day
- 75 earn \$1 or less per day
- 80 think a lot about upsetting events
- 65 think about hurting themselves
- 80 are from villages that have been attacked
- 75 think their current village will be attacked
- 50 of their spouses left because of war
- 50 are afraid to work outside of their home
- 80 are unhappy with their life today

Women have been specifically targeted within this conflict. In just the first 9 months of 2009 there were 7,500 reported cases of rape in Eastern DRC alone. The situation is so extreme that Margot Wallström, the UN's special representative on sexual violence in conflict, has recently called DRC "the rape capital of the world."¹

The largest UN mission in the world has been unable to provide the appropriate security needed to protect civilians from militia violence. Individuals are now also threatened by a new face of violence—that of their neighbours. Communities are victim to a "civilian adoption of violence" with increased rates of sexual violence by civilian perpetrators.² The lack of military discipline, policing, judicial recourse, and legal protection of women exacerbate the symptoms by creating an environment of impunity.

While the DRC has a constitution upholding the principle of gender equality and is party to several human rights treaties addressing women's rights (supporting the fact that sexual violence is a crime against

humanity), laws are generally poorly implemented and customary practices take precedence over the gender-sensitive legislation that does exist. Women account for 8.4% of the Lower House and only 4.6% of the Senate.³ Only 6 of the 119 judges in Eastern DRC are women.⁴

In spite of this extreme, gendered violence and structural inequality, women are holding families and communities together. Inspiringly, most people report being able to complete tasks critical to daily survival.

The Stronger Women, Stronger Nations: 2010 DRC Survey provides an insight into the situation of both men and women in DRC. It shows how no one is exempt from the stranglehold of violence on the population – men and women, boys and girls – all endure the costs. Security is consistently ranked by the population as the priority issue for improving living situations and it is the linchpin for community recovery. Without a resolution of the broader conflict, a normal life for the population is not possible.

¹ *Tackling sexual violence must include prevention, ending impunity – UN official*, UN News Service <http://www.un.org/apps/news/story.asp?NewsID=34502> April 2010

² *"Now the World is Without Me: An Investigation of Sexual Violence in Eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo," Harvard Humanitarian Initiative and Oxfam International, April 2010.*

³ *Women in National Politics Database, Democratic Republic of Congo Statistics for National Assembly and Senate, Inter-Parliamentary Union. Available at: <http://www.ipu.org/wmn-e/classif.htm>*

⁴ ICG, "Beyond Victimhood," 3.

KEY FINDINGS OF THE SURVEY:

1 Health and emotional well-being are severely degraded by violence

Violence and insecurity is still a daily reality for the people of the DRC. 80% of women surveyed report having their former village attacked and 75% believe their current village will be. The war is taking its toll on family structures. 74.7% reported having lost family members due to the war, 80.1% have lost family due to illness.

The constant atmosphere of violence and insecurity and the breakdown of the family due to war is leading to a near mental health epidemic in the Kivus. **77% of men and women surveyed report thinking about upsetting thoughts and 60% report fair or poor emotional health.**

Nonetheless, people's resilience keeps them afloat, as they appear to be able to perform critical daily tasks despite the severe psychological pressure they are under.

2 Health and wealth go hand in hand

The vast majority of women surveyed are involved in income generating activities, however small. Of the women we surveyed, almost all (93%) are working. However, importantly, only 74% of those who are working are in the formal economy. Clearly there are significant barriers in accessing stable, community-developing jobs. Despite the number of women working, 95% are living in absolute poverty, and women in our sample are well below accepted average income levels.

Women with higher income levels have better physical health and well-being. They save more money to support their families and eat more meals per day. They are respected by their families and communities, think less about hurting themselves, and know where to seek help and information.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Improve the security situation

Improved security results in a variety of improvements for women; from strengthening the economy to preventing sexual abuse. Improving security includes increasing policing, judicial recourse, and the legal protection of women. When asked what they felt would help to prevent sexual violence, women surveyed mentioned increasing access to justice, more visible enforcement efforts, and promoting increased rights awareness in communities. Lack of security creates the conditions for violence, which is the root of the extreme psycho-social needs of the population.

Address mental health

Despite extensive documentation on the detrimental effects of trauma on reconstruction and development, only a small percentage of funds cover mental health programmes. An increased focus on mental health is needed and in order to ensure women's priorities are advanced, women must be at the decision-making table. Given the disproportionate impact of violence on women, they have a critical interest in promoting peace.

3 The war burdens women with increased responsibilities

Only 2.4% of women reported that their spouses remain at home, this spousal separation inflicted by the war leaves women to shoulder enormous burdens as they take over tasks formerly carried out by men in addition to those for which they are traditionally responsible. Lack of security makes these tasks even harder.

4 Men suffer along with women

Men have been affected by sexual violence at a higher level than previously understood, with similar emotional effects as women. Male abuse victims suffer from extremely high rates of unemployment.

5 Group participation offers enormous recovery benefits.

Overall 80% of women surveyed agreed or strongly agreed that group participation helps them to make friends, express themselves, increase their incomes, and participate in the community.

Group participation leads to empowerment. Women who participate in groups are likely to be civically active, from participating in community activities to running for local leadership positions. They also have a greater awareness of their rights – the first step towards advancing social change.

Group participation also contributes to emotional well-being. Women who participate in groups with other women rate their emotional health higher and can look to the future with more optimism – an important ingredient for creating a stable, prosperous society.

Invest in women

The link between health and wealth means that investment in women has broad multiplier effects which strengthen communities. A series of studies have found that when women hold assets or gain incomes, family money is more likely to be spent on nutrition, medicine and housing, and consequently children are healthier.

Involve men in solutions for women

Men are key allies in women's advancement and must be involved to change the lives, opportunities, and prospects for women. Many men want to be more inclusive but need skills and awareness.

Channel local momentum for peace

Despite the grim realities, Congolese surveyed late last year were optimistic about the future of the region; a majority (63%) believe there can be peace in Eastern DRC within the next 12 months. Policymakers must harness this grassroots support for peace, to make negotiation stakeholders accountable to their local communities.

WHAT WE DO

Women for Women International (WfWI) is an organisation that has been working with women in war torn nations for 16 years. We provide women survivors of war, civil strife and other conflicts with the tools and resources to move from crisis and poverty to stability and self-sufficiency, thereby promoting viable civil societies.

Our belief is that stronger women make stronger nations; we believe that if women are given access to knowledge and expression of a voice, as well as access to and control of resources, this will create lasting political change. By actively involving women in development, countries can move from crisis and poverty to stability and self-sufficiency.

Since 2004, WfWI has provided direct support to 31,195 women in the DRC; there are 11,811 women currently in our programmes. Our year long programme offers participants rights awareness and life-skills training, as well as individual relationships with sponsors who provide direct financial assistance and emotional support through letter writing. Participants also receive vocational and income-generating assistance through business start-up services, access to capital and input supplies, and perhaps most importantly, identification and development of market linkages to help bring products to market.

For example, 106 women are now making a living from tile production after participating in our programme. With significant local demand in particular from neighbouring Rwanda, tile making is a lucrative and sustainable income-generating activity. Production breaks down into three areas: tiles for housing, cooking pots for domestic purposes and ornamental pots for decoration. The women have been trained in business planning and development and are now actively building a co-operative.

An innovative Men's Leadership Training Programme sensitises male leaders to crucial women's rights issues and prepares them to leverage their community influence on behalf of women. Engaging with men is paramount for lasting community change.

The impact of Women for Women International's Programmes

The survey was comprised of roughly equal numbers of Women for Women affiliated and non-Women for Women affiliated respondents; 890 women had participated in our programmes and 894 had not.

Women who have participated in our programmes are more aware of their rights and therefore engage more actively within their communities. Our programmes empower women economically, which has knock-on effects for women and children's health.

WfWI-affiliated women reported overall better health than non-WfWI-affiliated women, they are also almost twice as likely to have been tested for HIV/AIDS. Women who participate in groups rate their emotional health higher than those who do not, though the majority of both groups describe themselves as unhappy. **WfWI-affiliates' incomes are on average 40% higher than those who have not participated in the programme** – an encouraging testimony to the power of group participation and skills building opportunities for women.

WfWI-affiliated women are twice as likely as non-WfWI-affiliated women to report a variety of community engagements, showing that when women have knowledge of their rights, they choose to actively engage in society.

	WOMEN FOR WOMEN AFFILIATED	NON-WOMEN FOR WOMEN AFFILIATED
Women reporting either fair or good health	57.8%	32.5%
Women reporting poor health	19.6%	37.4%
Women that have been HIV tested	45.7%	29.1%
Women that report themselves to be happy	28.5%	9.7%
Income levels, average per month	\$33.84	\$23.42
Participated in community activities	76.9 %	30.3%
Organised community action	32.2 %	10.3%
Voted in elections	31.4 %	10.3 %
Have no knowledge of their rights	2 %	53.6 %



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