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# Women’s participation strengthens peace work

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*Politics and conflict resolution in the Democratic Republic of Congo are areas reserved for men. But a new project, strengthening women at the local level, aims to break this pattern of discrimination.*

# Women's participation strengthens peace work

*Anna Lithander*

Violence, harassment, slander, threats, poverty, and corruption are some of the many obstacles facing women taking part in the daily life and future of their societies in the war-torn Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). Several of the organisations in the region working with women's rights and peace have been subjected to violent threats and harassment.

In the DRC, politics is not considered to be something that women should occupy themselves with. For many women, the mere thought of participating is totally alien, and women who do are at times even singled out as "rebels" or "prostitutes".

Still there are many strong women in the country who try to enhance women's involvement in politics. To support these struggles and to contribute to a more equal and sustainable peace, two organisations, the Swedish Kvinna till Kvinna Foundation and the Life & Peace Institute (LPI), have teamed up to finance a three year long project for women in conflict resolution.

LPI has worked with peace processes on a local level in eastern DRC since 2002.

– For several years we have tried to incorporate a gender perspective in our work, but we haven't been able to do it systematically. With the help of Kvinna till Kvinna and the Congolese women's organisations that they work together with, we hope to reach more women and make sure that their voices are heard when local disputes are being resolved, says Zaurati Nasibu at LPI in Bukavu, eastern Congo.

The conflict resolution methodology used by LPI is based on long term work which seeks to resolve local conflicts involving as many parties as possible to achieve peace. So far, however, not many women have been present and active. One reason is that LPI engages in participatory peace processes, letting parties to the conflict decide for themselves who takes part in meetings and dialogue processes. Imposing a gender quota is in itself contradictory to this methodological approach.

– We advertise about information meetings, but not many women come. Clearly we need to have a different approach. Perhaps we should invite women separately? says Loochi Muzaliwa from LPI.

– In the women's organisations we also work with women's peace issues, but we lack strategies and we don't have the right connections. In this project we can all come together with our different points of view, but with the common idea that women are central in achieving lasting peace. We are very positive about this collaboration, it feels really important, says Gégé Katana from the women's rights and peace organisation Solidarité des Femmes Activistes Pour la Défense des Droits Huimains (SOFAD).

## Strongly committed project participants

The project kicked off in November 2012, when men and women from nine different women's and peace organisations from eastern Congo came together in a two day meeting held in Bukavu. They discussed everything from how traditions discriminate women, to what the UN resolution 1325 on women, peace and security really means.

– Can we talk about women's rights and participation at the same time? one of the participants asked himself and initiated a loud discussion.

– People have no idea that there is a UN resolution on women in conflicts – education and training will be needed, another person around the table said.

– Women make up half the society. They must be part of the work, otherwise the peace won't last, a third participant pointed out.

The meeting ended with the participants listing the concrete tools they thought they would need to be able to work more systematically on women's participation in peace work.

The peace organisations expressed a desire to learn more about what a gender perspective really means and about legal and other documents that support women's rights. The women's organisations wanted to learn more about mediation, negotiation techniques and conflict analysis.

– In Association des Femmes des Médias we support women in rural areas and often help out as mediators when women who have been raped have been disowned by their families. We need to learn more about good mediation techniques, so that we really can help people reconcile, says Julienne Baseke.

Since the start of the project there have been two more meetings on the special techniques used in LPI's conflict resolution method. Two organisations, namely the women's organisation SOFAD and the peace organisation Union Pour la Paix et le Développement Integré (UPDI), have been selected to cooperate in a pilot conflict resolution project in three different areas of the Uvira territory that is currently dealing with conflicts. The aim is to see more women taking part in the resolution talks and hopefully that will lead to more sustainable solutions.

*Translation: Malin Ekerstedt*