

Raising women's voices for sustainable solutions to conflict and crises

Women and young people make up 70% of the Democratic Republic of the Congo's (DRC) population. They are an asset for the country; however, they are hardly considered in the making of policies. We need to provide a space where young Congolese like me do not lack opportunities, a space where they can fully thrive and fulfil their potential. That is how we can bring a new history for our country.

In the DRC, women are most affected by conflicts because violence against women is used as a weapon. There are so many stories of traumatized women who experienced sexual abuse, forced marriage, and undesired pregnancies.

The main problem lies in the perception of women. They are restricted to lower positions. However, women play a big role in their families and communities. Their role is even more critical in ensuring the survival of family members during conflicts. They are also particularly involved in peace movements, but that involvement remains limited. When it comes to decision-making, women are left behind. That is why our policies don't produce effective solutions to conflict and crises.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, women's situation worsened. Violence against women increased, and women were also most affected economically because they are mostly working in the informal sector. Many recovery efforts were deployed in the face of the health crisis, but they didn't pay particular attention to the informal sector. However, the World Bank reports that in developing countries, [the informal sector accounts for a third of GDP and an astonishing 70% of all employment](#).

It is impossible to talk about sustainable development while leaving women and young people behind. Women need to be empowered until they get to decision-making positions, because they are the ones who understand their situation, more than the people who maintain a patriarchal system and come up with ready-made solutions.

Women first need education, so that the culture and customs they are rooted in do not prevent them from thinking outside the box. The mental health approach is also essential: women need some time and space to recover psychologically from violence and conflict. Women also need to be empowered economically. It starts with skills enhancement and entrepreneurial support like crowd funding and business credits. Once they have a steady income and can provide for their families, they can start thinking about gender equality and get involved. Our platform Young Women Leaders for Peace uses informal education and technology to amplify women's voices. We organize community theatres, door to door campaigns and radio broadcasts to spread our work around eastern DRC.

We work with UN programmes and laws are being updated but we don't see the impact of this work. That is where I see a need for research and data collection: we need first to understand what women need to bring better solutions. Research should focus on specific needs and specific situations for developing strategies that are adapted to different contexts. It is critical for researchers to avoid using intermediaries, and instead listen directly to the people who are targeted.

I hope for the day when we will forget about violence, conflict, and guns. I hope for the time when women and men will be equally considered, when young people will have opportunities to thrive in all domains.

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