

# Ending Violence Against Women in Eastern Congo: Preparing Men to Advocate for Women's Rights



WOMEN *for* WOMEN  
International

**Women for Women International** believes that engaging women in rebuilding a nation's economic, social and political structures is the most effective avenue toward creating lasting social change and stability. We believe that stronger women build stronger nations. Since 1993, Women for Women International has provided 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.

Through programs providing financial and emotional support, job skills training, rights awareness and leadership education, and access to business skills, capital, and markets, Women for Women International has served more than 93,000 women, benefiting some 508,000 family and community members, and distributed \$32 million in direct aid and microcredit loans. Women for Women International operates in Afghanistan, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Colombia, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Iraq, Kosovo, Nigeria, Rwanda and Sudan.



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## Letter from Zainab

Since Women for Women International started its work in the Democratic Republic of the Congo in 2004, we have heard about the atrocities that women faced during the decade-long conflict. Even after spending the last 13 years working with some of the world's most socially excluded women survivors of war, the stories of rape, torture and sexual violence that my colleagues and I encountered as we prepared for our work there haunt me to this day.

Women for Women International has served more than 9,500 Congolese women since 2004 and, taken together, their stories reveal a chilling pattern of sexual- and gender-based violence, torture and murder. Some women were kept as sexual slaves for weeks, months, sometimes as long as a year in the bush. During that time, they were forced to cook and clean for their assigned captors.

Sometimes a rapist stayed at the woman's home for days as he continued to rape her. After attacking women in other villages, the rapists would come back a week later and unleash a second wave of violence.

After a while, we could not ignore another pattern that was emerging from the stories—how the women's husbands were dealing with the acts of rape and violence committed against their wives, daughters, and mothers. Because of the social stigma still attached to rape in Congolese society, victims were being thrown out of their homes and shunned by their families and communities.



Initially, we were angry at the men who abandoned these women who had already been through so much. We couldn't understand how a man could literally throw his wife into the street—without regard for her safety or vulnerability to disease, or for the hungry, terrified children that she was still expected to care for.

But the more we worked with the women, the more we realized we also needed to talk with the men to understand their reality. It occurred to us that, within the context of war, just as the world automatically casts women in the role of victim, men are automatically cast as violent aggressors. Just as we ask the world not to stereotype women, we must recognize when we are guilty of making similar assumptions about men.

As I thought about these stories and the anguish that the women who survived would live with for the rest of their lives, I attempted to reconcile what I had seen and heard with what I knew to be true—that stronger women build stronger nations. I thought about Bora, a young woman who told me that, "Peace means I can be protected when I am

inside my house.” I knew then that any services that Women for Women International provided to Congolese women would be incomplete if we did not also enlist men as agents of change, training traditional and community leaders to use their social capital to advocate on behalf of women’s rights and raise public awareness about the value of women’s contribution to their country’s reconstruction. Building upon a model that we piloted in Nigeria and continued in Iraq, Women for Women International launched a Men’s Leadership Program in January 2005 in eastern Congo’s South Kivu Province to do just this. This report details the program’s development, implementation and impact.

On July 30, 2006, Congo held its first democratic elections since gaining independence from Belgium in 1960. In November, Congo’s Supreme Court affirmed that Joseph Kabila was the country’s first democratically elected President in more than 40 years. Women for Women International believes that a unique window of opportunity now exists for

Congolese women. Ideals have the chance to be realized, where the rights of all citizens—women and men—are respected, where gender-based violence is unacceptable and where both women and men are active participants in creating new systems, institutions and ways of seeing the world. If women cannot fully participate, society will not be able to build a foundation for future gender equality.

In a country where a conflict characterized by its systematic attacks on women has shattered the social bonds of whole communities, peace and reconciliation will not be possible without women’s active participation and partnerships with supportive men.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'ZS', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Zainab Salbi

*President and CEO of Women for Women International*





## Executive Summary

### Background

Over the past decade, brutal local, regional, and national conflict has devastated much of the eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). Ethnic strife and civil war broke out in 1996, sparked by a large inflow of refugees from the neighboring Rwandan genocide in 1994. Rebel groups from neighboring countries entered the conflict in 1998. The war, involving seven African nations and many groups of armed combatants, is the deadliest in documented African history. Mortality surveys estimate that nearly 4 million people have died as a result of the conflict, which has been marked by gross human rights violations, often directly targeting women by using rape and other forms of sexual violence as weapons of war. A fragile transitional government of national unity has been in operation since June 2003. General elections, the first since independence from Belgium in 1960, were held on July 30, 2006. In November, the Supreme Court affirmed that Joseph Kabila had been elected President.

### Women for Women International in the DRC

In response to horrific reports of rampant sexual violence from the international NGO community and Congolese women themselves, Women for Women International launched its multi-tiered program of direct aid and emotional support, rights awareness and leadership education, vocational skills training and economic development in the DRC in May 2004 to provide services to the socially excluded Congolese women who endured, witnessed and survived these atrocities.

Echoing the reports from humanitarian and human rights organizations, many of the program participants told stories of the horrors they had endured during the conflict, including gang rape, mutilation and sexual slavery. The women also reported that because of the social stigma attached to rape in Congolese culture, they were rejected by

their husbands and other members of their communities, in some cases being deserted or literally turned out of their own homes. Still others talked about the daily battles of private violence behind closed doors. As these women began to find seeds of hope through Women for Women International's program, they called upon the organization to help them educate the men in their communities.

### Training Men to Advocate for Women's Rights

There is increasing awareness in the development field that longstanding cultural norms regarding the identity and role of women in society are a significant barrier to the full enjoyment of women's rights. The social restrictions that result from these norms are often exacerbated during armed conflict.<sup>1</sup> As highlighted by the United Nations International Research and Training Institute for the Advancement of Women, when initiatives begin to focus on men's responsibilities rather than simply dismissing them as part of the problem, we begin to envision them as part of the solution "by squarely placing men into prevention and intervention strategies. Without engaging men as partners, without enabling both men and women to understand their roles and responsibilities in ending violence – we will be attempting to resolve this multidimensional problem from a very limited perspective."<sup>2</sup>

Therefore, any effective strategy for empowering women to realize their rights must involve men in the process. In short, "mobilizing men as agents of change involves recognizing the power men have to challenge the thinking, attitudes and behaviors of other men."<sup>3</sup>

Women for Women International believes that there is now a critical window of opportunity for ensuring that Congolese women are actively included in their country's reconstruction. In a movement toward the elections, citizens approved a new Constitution in a referendum in December 2005. Yet, without concentrated attention to the patterns of inequality and discrimination against women and

the pervasive gender-based violence in the DRC, women can be easily sidelined and ignored. While mobilizing women themselves is crucial, building advocates among men for women's rights is a missing link that has received little attention.

Building upon a model that we piloted in Nigeria and continued in Iraq, Women for Women International launched a Men's Leadership Program (MLP) in January 2005 in eastern DRC's South Kivu Province. The purpose of the program was to educate and train influential community members and leaders to understand their respective roles in protecting and reintegrating survivors of rape and sexual violence. The leadership roles that these men held in their communities would allow them to then reach out to other men and raise awareness about the negative impact that sexual- and gender-based violence has on the community as a whole.

Before starting the MLP training, Women for Women International conducted a baseline survey with 392 male community leaders culled from five key sectors: government, religious, traditional, security—including the police and military—and civil society. The survey revealed a high level of agreement among respondents about the need for communities and civil society organizations to be actively involved in the reintegration of survivors of gender-based violence. The men surveyed, however, were deeply divided in the ways they perceived the status of women, their roles in society and male authority. For example:

- 56.2% of respondents agreed with the statement "There is little that women have to contribute to community reconstruction and development."
- 86.3% of respondents agreed with the statement that "Men are the heads of households and the wives must obey and submit to them."

After the training, an external assessment of the program's impact, conducted through focus groups and interviews, revealed some profound changes at the household and community levels. In community meetings, topics such as the difference between consensual sex and rape and the spread of HIV/AIDS were openly discussed for the first time. In households, men told dramatic stories about how their intimate relationships were no longer based upon the exercise of power and dominance but upon mutual respect and partnership. A number of women

interviewed in the communities where training took place confirmed much of what the men reported. At the same time, many women and men also pointed to the slow nature of change related to deeply-held beliefs and longstanding customs and called for more widespread and deeper training.

## Recommendations

Based on a year of experience implementing and evaluating the MLP, Women for Women International crafted an Action Agenda for effectively partnering with men to end violence against women in the DRC:

- **Ensure long-term resources for gender training**—The MLP was able to accomplish a lot with a small amount of funding. Yet, as many participants observed, the process of changing norms and values is long and slow. An ongoing commitment to gender training is critical if long-term change is to take effect.
- **Provide rights education for women and men**—A number of participants reported that they lacked a basic understanding of what constitutes women's rights. As the new Constitution is popularized in the DRC and the country begins to develop the basic foundation of democracy, continued education for women and men about women's rights in particular and human rights in general will continue to be critical.
- **Provide gender training for military and police**—Because the military and other militia groups have been so strongly associated with the perpetration of violence against civilians, targeting women for particular atrocities, broad-based gender sensitivity training will be vital to the building of trust between the population and military and police forces.
- **Target youth for gender training**—While it is important to gain support of community elders and those in positions of status and influence, drawing young people into the process of gender relations transformation is essential to its potential for success.
- **Provide opportunities for cross-sectoral dialogue between women and men**—Communication across gender and sectoral



lines is important to build support for women's rights as well as stimulating organic peace and reconciliation activities at the community level.

- **Promote role models and success stories**—The more prominent attention that community leaders and role models receive for inspiring mutual respect and partnership between women and men, the greater the potential for widespread change.
- **Provide effective monitoring and evaluation and follow-up**—As gender training that targets men becomes a more prevalent part of community development, it will become important to effectively analyze the methods, processes and outcomes of training activities.
- **Increase livelihood support for women and men**—For women, achieving a measure of economic independence is a critical foundation for greater civic and political

participation. Economic stability will also make it more likely that the unemployed and underemployed men, including de-militarized soldiers, will be more willing to engage in discussion about their attitudes and behavior toward women and the importance of partnership in community reconstruction.

## Conclusion

Despite the ongoing humanitarian crisis in the DRC, the country is taking steps to heal from war and rebuild systems and institutions that have been broken for years. The striking transformations experienced by some of the participants in the MLP showed that by encouraging men to start with their own households and perceive, through that lens, how empowering women while ending violence against them benefits the entire community, dramatic change is possible.

**"It is the culture that suppresses the women most within the community...But now, things are changing. Our eyes have been opened. Women are being taught their rights and it is being respected... Women can now express themselves before their husbands. There is the recognition now that women also contribute to the society, and this is appreciated. Before now there was nothing of the sort. The women were nothing."**

*—Male Traditional Leader from Kabare, eastern Congo,  
after participating in Men's Leadership Program*



## I. Introduction

There is increasing awareness in the development field that longstanding cultural norms regarding the identity and role of women in society pose significant barriers to women's full enjoyment of their rights. In these situations, neither men nor women have a good understanding of "women's rights" as a concept, let alone what constitutes their violation.<sup>4</sup> Therefore, any effective strategy for empowering women to realize their rights must involve men in the process—as they often represent the economic, social and political gatekeepers of restrictive cultural norms. In short, "mobilizing men as agents of change involves recognizing the power men have to challenge the thinking, attitudes and behaviors of other men."<sup>5</sup>

While there is debate about providing resources to engage men when the resources for women's programs are already spread paper thin, Women for Women International believes that by engaging men and addressing their cultural roles and responsibilities, we no longer condemn men as simply part of the problem. Rather, we begin to envision men as necessary participants in women's empowerment. "Without engaging men as partners, without enabling both men and women to understand their roles and responsibilities in end-

ing violence – we will be attempting to resolve this multidimensional problem from a very limited perspective."<sup>6</sup>

The following report is a case study on Women for Women International's Men's Leadership Program (MLP) in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC or Congo). First, we provide a brief overview of Congo's recent history, followed by a discussion of gender in Congolese society and how the conflict intensified and complicated men's pre-existing negative perceptions of women, their roles and the value of their contributions. We then discuss the elements that prompted Women for Women International to engage men in Congolese women's journey from victims to active citizens by launching the MLP. The MLP process is then outlined, including the implementation strategy and methodology. Next, participants' stories provide insight into the impact that the program has had on their lives, and women share their opinions as to whether there has been any difference. Finally, the report discusses lessons learned during the implementation of the MLP and provides an Action Agenda for moving forward with the MLP as part of the overall strategy of preparing men to advocate for women's rights in eastern Congo.



## II. Congo's Recent History

Over the past decade, brutal local, regional, and national conflict has devastated much of eastern Congo. Ethnic strife and civil war broke out in 1996, sparked by a large inflow of refugees from the neighboring Rwandan genocide in 1994. Rebel groups from neighboring countries entered the conflict in 1998. Members of various militia groups massacred civilians on the basis of their ethnicity, and kidnapped and tortured others. Tens of thousands of child soldiers were recruited into militia armies.<sup>7</sup> Mortality surveys estimate that nearly 4 million people died as a result of the conflict, which has been marked by gross human rights violations, often directly targeting women by using rape and other forms of sexual- and gender-based violence as weapons of war.<sup>8</sup>

A national transitional power-sharing government was inaugurated on June 30, 2003, ostensibly bringing an end to the conflict, with the goal of nationwide elections within two years. However, this fragile peace agreement was undermined by renewed clashes between government and militia troops in late May and early June 2004 and further in December 2004, resulting in additional civilian deaths, rapes, and the departure of thousands of refugees for neighboring Rwanda and Burundi.

The renewed fighting also meant new waves of sexual violence. Women who, after being raped in their villages, had fled to the relative protection of towns such as Bukavu, watched as the safety of their haven crumbled and their nightmare continued. As the perpetrators grew bolder, they too moved from the villages to the towns. Many women were raped again, and some women who previously had only heard of the rapes were forced to experience the horror firsthand.

The war, involving seven African nations and many groups of armed combatants, is the deadliest in documented African history, with the highest civilian death count in a war since World War II.<sup>9</sup> The sexual violence was so common and so brutal that some doctors refer to the resultant vaginal de-

struction as a combat injury.<sup>10</sup> An estimated four-fifths of rural families have fled their homes since the fighting began, and more than 2.2 million people are currently displaced within Congo's borders.<sup>11</sup>

**Population:** 56,625,039

**Geography:** The DRC is situated in Central Africa bordering Angola, Burundi, Central African Republic, Rwanda, Sudan, Tanzania, Uganda and Zambia.

**Size:** 2,345,410 sq km, slightly smaller than one-fourth of the U.S.

**Languages:** Kongo, Lingala, Luba-Kasai, Congo Swahili, French

**Religion:** Roman Catholic 50%, Protestant 20%, Kimbanguist 10%, Muslim 10%, Indigenous beliefs 10%

**Ethnic Groups:** Over 200 groups; four largest tribes—Mongo, Luba, Kongo and Mangbetu-Azande—make up about 45% of the population<sup>12</sup>





### III. Gender and Conflict in Congolese Society

Even before the conflict, there were gender disparities in Congolese society that stood between women and their rights. According to a male community leader from Bukavu, “Each tribe, each clan has its peculiar customs and cultural practices. Most of these are against the image and dignity of the woman.” For instance, a male community leader from Bagira explained that:

**“We do not know our rights. So we accept whatever is done.”**

*—woman in Uvira, DRC*

“There are certain customs which are diabolical to the very existence of women. Women are not to touch or eat chicken, meat or drink cow’s milk. These are reserved for the man. If the woman touches the heart of the fowl while cooking, she is considered a thief and appropriate actions will be taken against her because all the good things in the household are supposed to be for men.”

National maternal mortality rates are among the very worst in the world at approximately 1,837 deaths per 100,000 live births, although rates as high as 3,000 deaths per 100,000 live births have been recorded in eastern Congo.<sup>13</sup> Between 60 and 80% of women have become single heads of households due to the conflict.<sup>14</sup> These women shoulder significant burdens stemming from shortages of food, fuel and water, and the collapse of the healthcare system and other social services.<sup>15</sup>

Rape and other forms of sexual violence have been widely used as weapons of war throughout the conflict in the DRC.<sup>16</sup> According to a Mai-Mai combatant from Baraka:

“Persons who tried to defend themselves or their property were in for a rude shock. Acts of rape were a common practice. No matter our number, at any point of time, any woman whom we encountered was subjected to rape. There was really no tangible reason for all this. There was no selectivity or distinction with respect to age. For us, a woman was just there to satisfy our desires

and this manner of reasoning prevailed over a long period of time. Even women well known to us were not spared. Sometimes we decided to go and hunt for women on farms, in villages etc.”

There are traditional beliefs that if a man sleeps with a Batwa (the tribal name for the local indigenous population) woman he will be protected from death by bullets, his spinal cord will never be broken, and if he is HIV-positive,

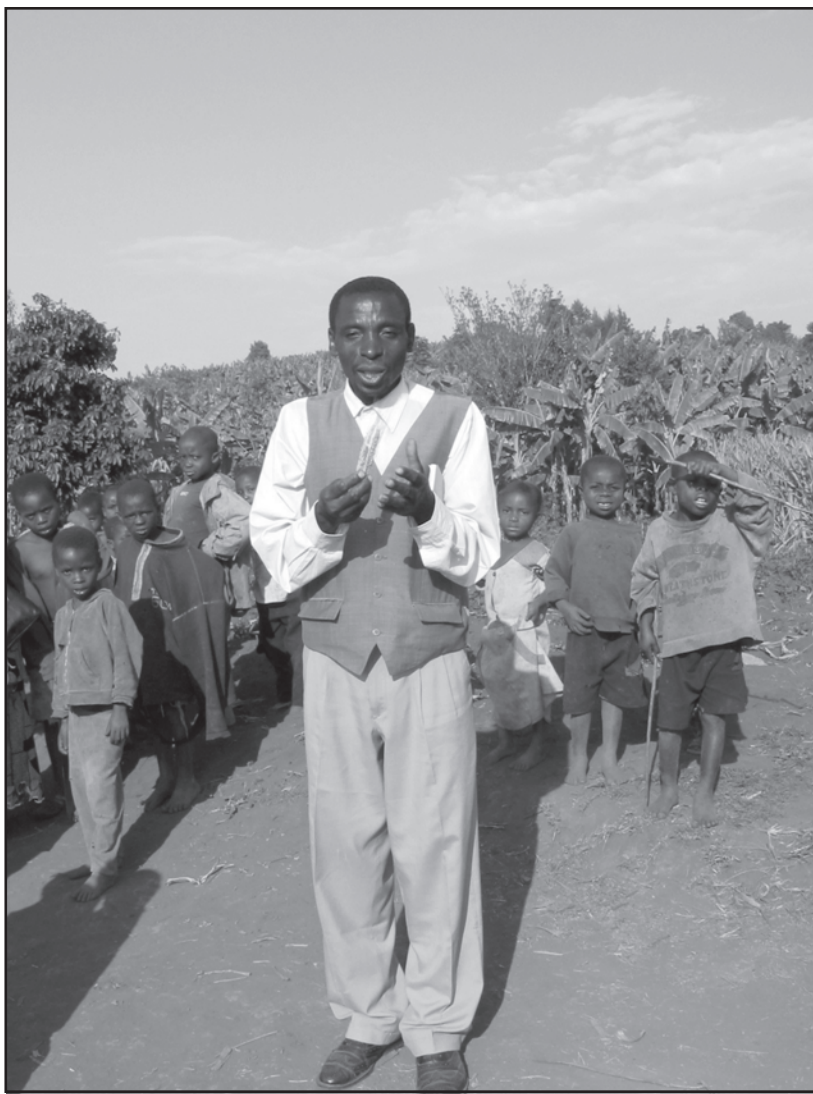
he will be cured. Sometimes these beliefs extend to cannibalism—if a man eats a Batwa woman or child, he will be strengthened.<sup>17</sup> As a result, Batwa women were special targets of violence during the conflict. Women were not only raped but also abducted as sexual slaves and kept for months. There are also rumors that the women were victims of cannibalism.

Although an exact number is not known, international organizations estimate that hundreds of thousands of Congolese women were raped during the war.<sup>18</sup> Some women have been raped and tortured in the presence of family members. Yet, as Human Rights Watch reported in 2002, the problem is deeper than the war itself as “rape and other sexual crimes are not just carried out by members of armed factions but also increasingly by others in positions of authority and power, including the police, and by opportunistic common criminals and bandits, taking advantage of the prevailing climate of impunity and culture of violence to abuse women and girls.”<sup>19</sup>

As soldiers are demobilized and men attempt to return home, the physical and emotional impact of such horrific sexual violence continues to plague the survivors and tear at the social fabric of Congolese communities in profound and complex ways. Many of the women who were raped have now been abandoned by their husbands. On the surface, it is clear that the social stigma that rape

carries in Congolese society has caused many men to abandon their wives because of the perceived shame that the women's victimization would bring to the families. However, in interviews and focus groups, the men revealed more nuanced reasons for

their actions, such as their own feelings of inadequacy over not being able to protect the women—be it their wives, daughters, mothers or sisters—as well as the fear of HIV/AIDS and other sexually-transmitted diseases.







## IV. Launching the Men's Leadership Program

While a number of local and international organizations in eastern Congo, the heart of the conflict-affected area, have been offering health services or humanitarian assistance to address the aftermath of war, Women for Women International bridges the gap between emergency humanitarian assistance and long-term reconstruction by giving women the tools, knowledge and skills to move from crisis to self-sufficiency and active participation in the reconstruction of their families, communities, and, ultimately, their nation.

Women for Women International launched a program in Bukavu, DRC in May 2004, which has served approximately 9,500 women in a year-long process of emotional and financial support, rights awareness and leadership education, job skills training and economic development.

After participating in the program and experiencing transformative changes in their own lives,<sup>20</sup> many of the women felt that, in

**"We have been helping women to become established persons. We are sharing knowledge about their rights as women and providing economic support...If Women for Women International wants to help them reintegrate properly into the community and lead normal lives then something has to be done to include the men—education."**

*—Judithe Registre, former Country Director of Women for Women International-DRC*

reality, there was only so much that they could do—that in order to truly reshape the vastly unequal landscape of gender relations in eastern Congo, a different kind of effort was needed to address Congolese men's perceptions of and attitudes toward women, and the severe limitations that these perceptions and attitudes place on Congolese women's economic, social and political participation and empowerment.

These women's recommendations prompted Women for Women International to design a program that focused on the education and training of male community leaders to use their influence to help develop measures to protect survivors of rape and sexual violence. With several years of experience training male community leaders in Nigeria to advocate for women's rights, covering topics such as HIV/AIDS, harmful traditional practices and women's economic participation,

Women for Women International launched the MLP in eastern Congo in January 2005.



## V. Bringing the Message Home: Structure of the Men's Leadership Program

When men are excluded from community-based efforts to empower women, women's lives may improve in the short term, but there will be very little "effect on the overall institutional, societal and structural transformations needed to achieve true gender equality."<sup>21</sup> This is why Women for Women International designed the MLP to target the male leadership in each community, preparing them to leverage their community influence to create trickle-down changes in attitudes at all levels and engage men in intervention, prevention and reconciliation efforts. The specific objectives of the MLP were to:

- a) Train and educate community and traditional leaders on violence against women and its impact on the community.
- b) Enhance the capacity of community and traditional leaders to develop strategies to address the varied impact of violence against women on the community.
- c) Strengthen community structures to better respond to violence against women through changed attitudes and perceptions on sexual violence and women's rights.

### Methodology

The first step in designing the program and methodology involved working with other community organizations and leaders in communities throughout South Kivu Province where Women for Women International already worked to understand the various power structures and identify those groups with the greatest influence in shaping social norms and attitudes. These communities included Bukavu, Fizi, Kabare, Shabunda, Uvira,

**"In our customs, we have popularly held notions like 'women always think like children,' and 'they never mature beyond 14 years.'"**

*—Military Officer,  
Kalehe, DRC*

Walungu, Idjwi and Kalehe/Bunyakiri territories. An assessment team identified five key sectors of public life that male leaders participating in the training should represent: government, religious, traditional, security—including the police and military—and civil society.

Next, the assessment team administered a survey to 392 men of stature in the communities to assess their knowledge and attitudes about rape and sexual violence and more

broadly about women's status and rights in society. More than half of the men surveyed (58.5%) were at least 40 years old; 93.4% reported that they had at least completed primary school; 61.9% completed secondary school and 21% attended or completed higher education, which are both higher percentages than the estimates available for the broader population. Of this group, 70.3% were employed, with 38.6% in the government, 21.6% in teaching and only 13.3% in agriculture and 8.7% self-employed.

The respondents were relatively well-educated men from several sectors of society, and their answers highlight the scope of change required for major shifts in attitude and behaviors toward Congolese women. As expected, the survey revealed a number of challenges to overcome in terms of men's perception of women's roles, equality between men and women and male authority over women. For example:

- 44.4% disagreed with the assertion that men and women are equal.
- 41.5% disagreed with the notion that wives and husbands have the same rights in society.
- 35.8% believed that women's ability to reason is less than men's.

- 82.3% disagreed with the statement that a married woman who generates income must be allowed to freely manage her funds as she sees fit.
- 56.2% of the respondents strongly agreed/agreed with the statement “there is little that women have to contribute to community reconstruction and development.”
- 87.2% of respondents agreed with the statement that “men are the heads of households and the wives must obey and submit to them.”
- 53.6% agreed that a dowry is a symbol of a husband’s full authority over his wife.

Cross tabulations of survey data revealed several interesting correlations between education levels and views about women. Higher levels of education were correlated in several instances with more favorable views towards women, including perceptions about the acceptability of violence against women, exclusion of rape survivors from the community and women’s property rights. Regarding employment status, 75.6% of employed men surveyed believed that women and men should have the same rights in society, while only 56.8% of unemployed men believed the same. In many cases, those employed in agriculture reported less favorable views toward women’s rights than those engaged in government or teaching.

The majority of men surveyed held positive attitudes regarding community perspectives toward violence against women despite the experiences described by women from their own communities who joined Women for Women International’s program. For example, 72.6% agreed that community members are concerned about the psychological impact of rape and sexual violence, and 90.7% supported the notion that community leaders should encourage sympathetic attitudes toward victims and their families. They expressed strong agreement over the role of government, local and international organizations in the reintegration and rehabilitation of survivors of rape and sexual violence.

On a more personal level, 91.4% agreed that there are good reasons for a husband to stay with his wife after she has been a victim of rape and sexual violence. These views might reflect their own first-hand experience with violence against women, as 74.9% reported that acts of violence or sexual violence were committed against women in their

communities. In even more personal ways, the group of men surveyed was a particularly war-affected group as 72.9% lost family members due to war, and the majority suffered material losses as well. For example, 67% of men who reported acts of sexual violence in their communities also believed that there is never a time when it is okay to sexually assault a woman, while only 45.6% of the men who did not report violence in their own communities agreed with this statement.

The group was divided about general attitudes toward violence against women as 40.2% disagreed with the idea that there is never a time when it is okay to sexually assault a woman and 44.7% also disagreed with the idea that military and para-military troops do not have the right to hit, punch or shoot a civilian woman. At the same time, a significant percentage of respondents (44.1%) did not agree that society’s view of women is part of the reason why rape and sexual slavery have been common during the war.

## Implementation

In addition to the survey, the assessment team consulted with other organizations and women from the communities to identify priority issues for the training, including:

- Economics: The value of women’s work and the impact of sexual violence on community economic development;
- Politics: Community rebuilding in a post-conflict context and the importance of ensuring women’s participation in constitution-building and elections;
- Family and Health: Role of leaders in improving community health, including HIV/AIDS awareness and prevention and preventing violence against women;
- Education: Equal access to education for girls and boys, the role of education in community development and sexual violence prevention; and
- Project Design: Integrating a gender perspective into community project design and implementation.

Training materials were adapted from Women for Women International’s manual, *Community, Responsibility and Effective Leadership: A Men’s Manual*, to ensure there was sufficient and effective

tive emphasis on the priority issues.

Women for Women International conducted a “first level” training with seven selected leaders in each of the five sectors in a five-day workshop. Following the training, each leader was charged with identifying 10 to 15 additional men of influence in their communities to participate in a “second level” of training. Where possible, training at this level was conducted by leaders who had completed the initial training and were given a small stipend as an incentive. Men who received trainings at this second level were also encouraged to identify ways to continue outreach in their own spheres of influence.

The program included two additional components to help increase awareness about the themes addressed in the training at the community level:

1. *Working Groups*—Leaders who participated in either the first- or second-level trainings were assisted to form working groups with

both male and female citizens in their communities to share ideas and work together to build solutions to the problems posed by sexual violence and the need to fully support and integrate survivors of violence into community development activities.

2. *Raising Public Awareness*—MLP staff launched a public awareness campaign to emphasize the need to support rather than stigmatize women who suffered rape and other forms of violence. At the core of this campaign was a poster, broadly distributed, that depicted influential local leaders, such as a village chief, and village women who accept and support a survivor of rape. The poster’s image was developed by a Congolese artist with the guidance of a committee that included Congolese gender and community development, legal and medical experts, local UN specialists and a rape survivor from the Women for Women International program.





## VI. “You Have Taught Us How to Fish”: Experiences in the Men’s Leadership Program

The program’s primary goal was to build strategies to support and reintegrate survivors of rape and sexual violence. Interestingly, however, participants’ comments after the program reflected a shift in attitudes and viewpoints about the status of all women and their value in society and steps taken or a desire to put this into action in their own lives.

To assess the nature and magnitude of such changes and understand the program’s challenges, Women for Women International contracted Wilbert Tengey, a leading African gender and qualitative research expert from the Gender Development Institute in Ghana to assess the outcome of the first eight months of the program by conducting focus groups and interviews with participants and women from their communities. Eight focus group meetings were conducted with a total of 138 men and 22 women.<sup>22</sup> A sub-sample of in-depth interviews with men who took part in the focus groups provided additional details about their attitude and behavior before they participated in the program and how they perceived any changes. Focus groups and interviews captured viewpoints of slightly more than one-third of the original survey respondents and a small group of women in their communities.

### Participants’ Stories

Many of the women and men interviewed as part of the assessment reported fundamental

**“This training was of great help to me. I came to the realization that rape could have far-reaching economic and health consequences, especially as a result of social disintegration. Here I was, no longer living with my wife, living in a state of disharmony, a situation that only went to exacerbate the psychological trauma suffered by my wife and me.”**

*—Community Leader, Bukavu, DRC*

changes in their perception of women, the practical application of equality between men and women at the household level and improved communication between husbands and wives, in addition to changes that specifically addressed survivors of sexual violence. For instance, a male community leader from Bukavu said:

“Before coming in contact with MLP, I was an ordinary person going about my business. I respected the norms and culture of my tribe. For me, as a man, I considered women as slaves. My wife had to do all the household chores and she did not have the right to complain. She was always in the house, had no right to go out and meet other women. She had no right to inherit my property. After my participation in the MLP, another view of life had been given to me. My eyes were opened. A new life was given to me. I now appreciate women as human beings with rights. I appreciate the work of my wife in the house. I have learnt that women and men can work together to look after their children. Women can also give advice to men. As a result of my new perspective, I have put all my property in the name of my wife, so that she can inherit it.”

Several responses revealed an increased awareness of issues addressed in the training and indicated a commitment to spread information in institutions such as the church or the military. A Mai Mai combatant described using rape as a weapon of war, adding that there “was no selectivity or distinction with respect to age. For us, women were



just there to satisfy our desires.” After the MLP, he said that “The training has helped us [former combatants] to develop the awareness, that, everyone has rights. Since the training, our perceptions have changed...I apply what I learned during the training to my family life...my brother’s wife and my own sister were raped. When the news got to me, my immediate reaction was the temptation to go into a relapse and continue with the acts of rape. However, the training has helped me to perceive such incidents as accidents which were beyond the control of the women involved. They did not desire what had happened to them, neither were they as victims blamable. It was therefore wrong for the community to continue to stigmatize and marginalize them.”

During one focus group discussion, participants reported how in a certain community, a traditional court sentenced a man for domestic violence, a new event for them. Another representative reported that where he lives, the “whole community” now accompanies a rape victim to court to present her case.

Several training participants reported that their attitude toward their wives had changed and that they had actually taken steps to change their behavior in the household. In the context of the discussion of rape and its impact on individuals and communities, it appeared that several participants were able to take a critical look at the power dynamics of their own sexual relationships. Some reported that institutions in their communities, such as churches, were also involved in raising awareness about the difference between rape and consensual sex. After participating in the MLP, a male community leader from Walungu offered the following:

“I cannot imagine a situation before now when my wife will refuse me sex. She could not, because that would result in severe beating from me. She was my property and I could use her in any way possible. Whether she enjoyed the sex or not was not even discussed. The important thing is that I enjoyed it. But things are different now. I have to request to have sex with her. When she does not

agree because of sickness or something else, I do not force her. I now treat her as a human being like myself.”

Others developed an appreciation for the value of women’s household work and took steps toward a more equal division of labor in the household, while still others re-examined and challenged traditional customs and rights. A male community leader from Bukavu said:

“I now understand that women can also work.



There is division of labor, so I do not restrict my wife from working. There is collaboration between myself and my wife. We both now manage the home, and the situation is very beautiful. The situation was not like this before I was trained by MLP. In the past, I did not value the work of women and totally disregarded it. I did not allow my wife to do any work.”

Another male leader from Bukavu stated:

“You have taught us how to fish instead of giving us fish. With or without money some of us will continue to work. The training has given us valuable information and we have learnt a worth of lessons. We must all start the change process from our homes and become a beacon of light for others. We must become role models.”

Women also reported change on several levels, including an increased dialogue between men and women and a willingness of men to accept women’s viewpoints where they previously had disregarded them:



“Family planning was not a topic ever discussed. It was men who decided how many children and when. Women were just ‘baby producing machines.’ Now there is a little willingness of men to discuss the topic.”—*Female Community Leader, Izege, DRC*

“I was neglected by my husband. I was only a sex machine for him. He used me as he wished. I could not argue with him or refuse him sex. Today, I too can give him advice and he takes it. There



is more peace and harmony in the home. I can talk to my children without my husband being there.”—*Female Community Member, Bukavu, DRC*

“I am now very happy. My husband prepares me well before sex. We now talk, converse before sex. It was not like this before when he just jumps on me and does his own thing. He has learnt a lot of good things from the MLP.”—*Female Community Leader, Walungu, DRC*

“Some men left their wives because the rebel soldiers had raped them. Through counseling by the MLP leaders, some men have accepted to take back their wives. Women and men meet to discuss the problems of the community.”—*Community Member, Bavira, DRC*

“Change is a slow process, and everyone cannot be touched at the same time. With my husband, he now understands that rape can occur with a wife. Anytime a wife does not give consent for sex and it happens, it is rape.”—*Female Community Member, Walungu, DRC*

Other women reported increased mobility and freedom to participate in community activities, and some indicated that the program had actually offered them the space to form their own groups:

“I now have my liberty. I feel I am now a human being. I can go out to meetings. Look, I am now here with you. Before, it was impossible. I was a slave, locked up in the house by my husband daily. I dared not go out of the house.”—*Female Community Leader, Bukavu, DRC*

“Women have now formed their own associations where they meet and discuss things among themselves. They elect their own leaders. The men allow and encourage it and do not interfere.”—*Women’s Community Group Leader, Bavira, DRC*

According to some respondents, restrictive traditional laws related to land and property rights were beginning to be challenged. A woman from Izege said, “Within the legal situations, the rights of women are beginning to be respected. Some laws about inheritance and land, negative to women, are being challenged and changed in favor of women.”

Several women noted, however, the long process and difficulty of cultural change. Many demanded more education about their rights and more training for men, like the woman from Uvira, who said, “My husband accepts now that I can go for meetings. This is a big thing for me. But I think this is only the beginning. I need to know my rights.”

In addition to the positive results reported, focus group discussions highlighted the pervasive nature of gender-based violence in many communities in eastern DRC. In addition to the rape and violence brought about by war, many participants spoke out about domestic violence, marital rape, and the general attitude of male superiority that prompts mistreatment of women. A civil society representative from Izege said, “Sexual violence is culturally implanted. Without total peace, rape will continue because the perpetrators are in the mountains. Although we have learned a lot from MLP, there should be a peaceful environment to implement what we have learnt.”

Participants discussed issues such as kidnapping for early marriage and violence against women who do not bear children or do not produce male offspring. Many participants blamed the

deep-seated nature of traditions and customs and emphasized the long process needed to change, while others blamed more immediate violence on outside forces such as foreign armies that took part in the DRC's war. Some also indicated how difficult it is to change norms and values in an environment of conflict, insecurity and upheaval. According to a male traditional leader from Uvira:

"We have begun to see the process of positive change coming on within the society. We are giving positive support even now to the new changes. We are also learning in the process. But it will take time for all the messages to take effect. Some of these cultural norms have been lifelong. We can not change all overnight."

## Extraordinary Agents of Change

One of the measures of success of a program that hopes to inspire long-term change in behavior and attitudes is the cultivation of individuals who become role models and agents of change in their own communities independent of any requirements of the program. One of the most powerful stories to emerge from the MLP was that of Kayembe Tshibangu, a community leader who was so inspired by the training that he and his family began spreading the message to numerous families in his community:

"My name is Kayembe Tshibangu, head of Mushumune Commune in Bagira, Bukavu city. I am a father of five. I was a normal man, living with my family in a normal way. I behaved like every man within the society. My wife was a slave to me, she had no rights and had to respect me absolutely. She was always in the home, and could not go out to meet other women. She belonged to me, because at our marriage, I paid a bride-price—the dowry, which gave me all the authority to treat her as I wished. She was at my mercy for sexual activity, anytime, anyplace, anywhere. Refusal went with punishment. I was a complete tyrant in my home. When I arrived at home the children and everyone ran away, because the "lion" had arrived. It was a complete and absolute dictatorship. This was because I did not know any alternative way of living.

"After 18<sup>th</sup> August 2005, the day of encounter with the Men's Leadership Program of Women for Women International, things changed completely.

I was converted and took on a new life. Even my children and family asked what had happened to me. They could not believe it. It was too good to be true! They thought it was a dream, and it would go away after some time, like a mirage. No, never again will I go back to my old self. My family members and I are now friends, comrades. We talk and laugh together, and there is peace in the home. No more tears, no more sorrow. My wife has become my friend. I now listen to her and take her advice.

"Like a true convert, I want my other friends to learn what I had learnt. So I go from house to house, together with my wife and children to dialogue with other households. When they see us, they are shocked and surprised, and want to listen to what had brought about the new image, the change. Invariably they are also touched and the change process goes on and on. Some people do not accept the message of change on the first encounter. As a follow-up strategy, we divide ourselves; husband to husband; wife to wife; children to children. We adopt a one-on-one approach. There is constant interaction at the household level. So far, we have touched the lives of 58 families, but the work goes on and on."

The profound nature of some of the stories that emerged from the focus group discussions and interviews shows that the training touched a deep chord and inspired a new way of perceiving gender relations and, in several cases, clear and positive action. At the community level, the training and the formation of working groups to advance the issues enhanced public awareness, as evidenced by shifts in attitudes and communities coming together to take collective action—as in the example of the "whole community" that now accompanies a victim of domestic violence to court. Some of the most significant changes took place at the household level. In some cases, they involved a shift in attitude, and in others, they also included significant shifts in behavior. Some participants' stories also reflect the fragility of change and how a person long conditioned to believe and act a certain way could slide back into old patterns without peer or community support. Finally, the stories showed what is possible when committed individuals are inspired to become agents of change in their personal spheres of influence by serving as persuasive role models.



## VII. Lessons Learned

Women for Women International learned some important lessons during the process of implementing the MLP in the DRC. The process of conducting focus groups and interviews uncovered some recommendations from the participants themselves for administering the program. Other suggestions evolved from observations and analysis conducted by the consultant who assessed the process and outcome of the program. The selected lessons below include those that may be applicable to similar programs implemented in other areas.

### **Assess Interest and Commitment Among Leaders Selected for Training**

Analysis revealed that in some instances leaders were selected for training without first assessing their interest or level of commitment to the issues to be covered in the training. While some may have developed an interest over the course of the training, it may be more effective to ensure that each person who goes through initial training expresses some degree of interest, particularly if they are being recruited to conduct further training. This engagement will help ensure that first-level trainees will actually use their positions of authority to support the goals of the program and be effective role models in their own spheres of influence.

### **Determine Appropriate Length of Training Relative to Materials Covered**

Many participants said they did not feel three to five days of training was long enough to get into sufficient depth in the training areas. It was especially challenging for some to rapidly digest the training materials, an issue of particular importance for those who were to conduct their own training among their colleagues. Some felt that it would be more effective to have an initial training session with at least one follow-up session once participants had a chance to reflect upon the issues discussed, or per-

haps a series of trainings spread out over a longer period of time. Some of the challenges include the time and expense required to gather the men for training, and in the case of the communities targeted in the DRC, a lack of reliable transport made it difficult for people to meet easily.

### **Design Training Materials Appropriate to the Individuals Being Trained**

Women for Women International's men's training manual was well-suited to most of the sectoral leaders in the first level of training. Some felt, however, that simplified materials would have been helpful as they proceeded to train colleagues at other levels. Some of the second level of trainees who were encouraged to do grassroots outreach in their own communities would have liked to have some very simple materials to support their efforts. While the program's public awareness campaign did include posters and radio spots aimed at a wide audience, the campaign's activities were not underway by the time most of the training took place. Community theatre could also be very effective for transmission of ideas at the grassroots level.

### **Offer Sufficient Guidance for Community Outreach**

Men who completed the second level of training in this program were encouraged to continue outreach in their own communities. While this came naturally for some in the context of meeting with neighbors, speaking with church congregations or addressing rank-and-file members of the military, others felt that their efforts could have been strengthened by additional training in methods or techniques for conducting broad community outreach.

### **Allow Time for Reflection While Program Is Expanding**

The program was rolled out simultaneously in several communities. While this allowed for signifi-

cant reach within the targeted geographic area, additional insight about program implementation could have been gained by having time to reflect on how the program was working in one area before expanding to the next. It is also possible that the total number of communities reached could have been smaller, instead placing more attention on continuing training and deepening outreach in areas where a critical level of interest and excitement had already been generated.

## Identify a Component of the Training to Include Women

Men provided indisputably effective role models for other men during the course of the program.

However, the interviews and focus groups revealed that not only men are resistant to change. Some of the most effective community outreach, which evolved spontaneously from the training, involved a male-female team that conducted discussions with couples in their own homes. Some participants suggested that women with strong leadership potential could be trained at a specified stage of training, and men and women could then form teams to conduct household outreach. Another possibility is to provide support and guidance to husband and wife teams to do community outreach. In this program, those who exhibited evidence of positive change in their own households became extremely powerful role models for their friends and neighbors.







## VIII. Action Agenda

This Action Agenda highlights opportunities to take advantage of the momentum generated by the trainings, discussions and attitude and behavior changes inspired by the MLP. It also takes account of some broader needs that program participants identified as critical to fostering an environment where lasting transformation of gender relations is possible.

### **Ensure Long-Term Resources for Gender Training**

Women for Women International's MLP was able to accomplish a lot with a small amount of funding. As one participant stated, "with or without money" some of those who experienced the training would continue to spread the messages in their communities. Women for Women International's funding was for one year, enabling the organization to launch a pilot program and learn a number of important lessons from its implementation. Yet, as many participants observed, the process of changing norms and values is long and slow. Multi-year funding commitments to gender training are critical to the sustainability of this process.

### **Provide Rights Education for Women and Men**

A number of participants reported that they lacked a basic understanding of what constitutes women's rights. As the new Constitution is popularized in the DRC and the country begins to develop the basic foundation of democracy, continued education for women and men about women's rights in particular and human rights in general will continue to be critical.

### **Provide Gender Training for Military and Police**

The relationship between the civilian population and the military and police is tenuous in many parts of eastern DRC. Military and police forces are among the groups frequently accused of gender-based violence. The Men's Leadership Program

showed that change among these groups is possible, but many perceive this process to be slow. Because the military and other militia groups have been so strongly associated with the perpetration of violence against civilians, targeting women for particular atrocities, broad-based gender sensitivity training will be vital to the building of trust between the civilian population and military and police forces.

### **Target Youth for Gender Training**

Youth represent the majority of the population. One female youth leader said during the focus group discussions, "the youth are a critical factor within the process of change. If the mentalities of the youth are changed, there is a possibility of change in the community." While it is important to gain support of community elders and those with positions of status and influence, drawing young people into the process of gender relations transformation is essential to its potential for success.

### **Provide Opportunities for Cross-Sectoral Dialogue Between Women and Men**

As part of the MLP, men and women from different sectors of society, which have usually been isolated from each other, had the opportunity to come together and form working groups to address the issues discussed in the trainings. This communication across gender and sectoral lines is important to build support for women's rights and stimulate organic peace and reconciliation activities at the community level.

### **Promote Role Models and Success Stories**

The MLP showed the power of strong role models in inspiring new ways of thinking at both the leadership and grassroots levels. The more publicity that the role models and their techniques for inspiring others receive, the more widespread the change has the potential to become.

## Provide Effective Monitoring and Evaluation and Follow-Up

As gender training that involves men becomes a more prevalent part of community development, it will become more important to effectively analyze the methods, processes and outcomes of training activities. For example, it would be very useful to return to the communities a year or more after training to understand what changes lasted, which were only cosmetic and what obstacles still remain. This will help develop an effective methodology for future programs.

## Increase Livelihood Support for Women and Men

Program participants and community members consistently brought up the issue of the need for economic development activities. For women, achieving a measure of economic independence is a critical foundation for greater civic and political participation. Economic stability will also make it more likely that the unemployed and underemployed men, including de-militarized soldiers, will be more willing to engage in discussion about their attitudes and behavior toward women and the importance of partnership in community reconstruction.







## IX. Conclusion

Women for Women International's MLP uncovered an energy and a commitment to address not only the consequences of rape but domestic violence, property and inheritance rights, girls' education and a host of other issues that affect women's status and participation. Program participants had little or no immediate incentive to change. Yet, some walked miles in the rain and mud over poor roads to talk about the difference the program had made in their lives. With little guidance, others found ways, in the words of one participant, to become a "beacon of light" for others in their communities by literally knocking on doors and sharing the training's most important messages. Increased harmony in the home and the satisfaction of personal transformation became its own reward. In some

communities, energy stirred up by the program was palpable as men and women opened up to discuss sensitive issues with each other that had never before been openly discussed. People spoke up to demand more training.

These ripples are clear signs of hope. However, without adequate resources and support to continue similar gender training activities on a wide scale, this energy could easily be deflated by the magnitude of need and suffering. Program participants were clear about the need to continue the program and not to lose the momentum. The time is ripe to hear their call and support community leaders in the DRC to build a movement of women and men to become equal partners for positive change in their homes and communities.



## Endnotes

- 1 Marie Vlachova and Lea Biason, eds. "Women in an Insecure World: Violence against Women—Facts, Figures and Analysis," Geneva Center for the Democratic Control of Armed Forces, 2005, p. 109.
- 2 United Nations International Research and Training Institute for the Advancement of Women (INSTRAW), "INSTRAW Programme on Men's Roles and Responsibilities in Ending Gender-based Violence." [http://www.eurowrc.org/13.institutions/5.un/un-en/15.un\\_en.htm](http://www.eurowrc.org/13.institutions/5.un/un-en/15.un_en.htm).
- 3 Association for Women in Development (AWID). "Working with Men for Women's Rights." <http://www.awid.org/publications/primers/waysmeans2.pdf>.
- 4 "Women in an Insecure World," p. 279.
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- 6 INSTRAW, "Men's Roles and Responsibilities in Ending Gender-based Violence."
- 7 Amnesty International. "Democratic Republic of Congo: Children at War." September 9, 2003. <http://web.amnesty.org/library/index/ENGAFR620342003>.
- 8 International Rescue Committee. "Congo: Nearly 4 million Dead in 6 year Conflict." July 16, 2006. [http://www.theirc.org/where/democratic\\_republic\\_of\\_congo\\_38\\_million\\_dead\\_in\\_6\\_year\\_conflict.html](http://www.theirc.org/where/democratic_republic_of_congo_38_million_dead_in_6_year_conflict.html).
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- 12 "Democratic Republic of the Congo." CIA World Factbook. <http://www.cia.gov/cia/publications>.
- 13 Oxfam. "No End in Sight: The human tragedy of the conflict in the Democratic Republic of Congo." August 2001. [http://www.oxfam.org.uk/what\\_we\\_do/issues/conflict\\_disasters/noend\\_drc.htm](http://www.oxfam.org.uk/what_we_do/issues/conflict_disasters/noend_drc.htm).
- 14 Nadine Puechguirbal. "Women and War in the Democratic Republic of the Congo." Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society, vol. 28, no. 4 (2003): 1273.
- 15 The conflict has also severely disrupted the education system—the last recorded enrollment rate was 47% for girls and 52% for boys. World Bank Group. "Democratic Republic of the Congo at a Glance." August 2005. [http://devdata.worldbank.org/AAG/zar\\_aag.pdf](http://devdata.worldbank.org/AAG/zar_aag.pdf). In 2003, the female illiteracy rate was 44.9%, as opposed to 23.8% for men. Globalis-Congo, DRC. [http://globalis.gvu.unu.edu/indicator\\_detail.cfm?Country=CD&IndicatorID=126](http://globalis.gvu.unu.edu/indicator_detail.cfm?Country=CD&IndicatorID=126). Before the conflict, the legal and institutional framework of the country recognized men as heads of households and required that married women obtain their husbands' permission for activities outside the home.

- 16 For an account of sexual violence suffered by Congolese women during DRC's war, see Zainab Salbi's "Journey to Eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo" at: [http://www.womenforwomen.org/downloads/Zainab\\_Trip\\_Report\\_November\\_2003\\_July\\_2004.pdf](http://www.womenforwomen.org/downloads/Zainab_Trip_Report_November_2003_July_2004.pdf).
- 17 The Batwa make up about 3% of the total population. Locally, they are referred to as the "Pygmy" population. The Batwa community in South Kivu and North Kivu were made landless in the 1960s, as Mobutu's government repossessed land for a national park. This had a significant economic impact on them, as they could only be laborers for landowners. In addition to living in the bush and being landless, the Batwa community suffered a great deal during the recent war. The Batwa were a target for killing by all sides because they don't possess ID cards. That made them vulnerable to killing even by the DRC army, as the rebels also don't carry ID cards.
- 18 Human Rights Watch. "The War Within the War: Sexual Violence Against Women and Girls in Eastern Congo." June 2002. <http://www.hrw.org/reports/2002/drc/>.
- 19 Ibid., 23.
- 20 Out of a sample of 300 graduates interviewed in 2005, 92.3% indicated that they were self-employed and earning regular income upon graduation, while 58% of this group was unemployed at the start of the program. Graduates reported that their ability to speak in public and voice their opinion had increased and all were prepared to vote in the DRC's constitutional referendum.
- 21 AWID, "Working with Men for Women's Rights," 1.
- 22 Focus group participants, both women and men, were selected by members of the communities where training took place. Male participants were chosen in order to represent all the sectors of leadership that took part in the program: government, religious, traditional, security and civil society. The discussions and interviews were conducted in French and Swahili with English translation. Quotations from focus groups and interviews have all been translated from French and Swahili to English. Original language was only edited where syntax errors greatly hindered comprehension.







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WOMEN *for* WOMEN  
*International*

4455 Connecticut Avenue, NW, Suite 200

Washington, DC 20008

T 202-737-7705 | F 202-737-7709

[general@womenforwomen.org](mailto:general@womenforwomen.org)

[www.womenforwomen.org](http://www.womenforwomen.org)

1 Warick Row

London SW1E 5ER

T 020 7808 7850

[general@womenforwomen.org](mailto:general@womenforwomen.org)

[www.womenforwomen.org.uk](http://www.womenforwomen.org.uk)

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