

Speaking the unspeakable truth

Women and girls of eastern DRC raise their voices against daily attack

*“Some people say there is peace, but we don’t live in peace. We live with rape and with hunger.”
(Girl, Kavumu)*

*“We fear all soldiers; a soldier is a soldier.”
(Woman, Kavumu)*

“Somehow, we must get it into the minds of men that women are mothers, sisters, daughters. If they thought of women that way, it would encourage them to respect women.” (Girl, Minova)

“Our grandparents lived in peace; we know it’s possible.” (Girl, Katana)

“Peace is needed. You can sleep, you can have some food, but without true security, life is uncertain and your life can be at risk at any time.” (Girls, Bishange)



True peace has not yet come for the women and girls of eastern DRC. In fact they tell stories of unspeakable violence still being experienced on a daily basis in villages and camps across the region.

The 19th June 2009 marks the one-year anniversary of United Nations Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1820¹, a resolution which aims to prevent and respond to sexual violence in situations of armed conflict, as part of maintaining international peace and security. UNSCR 1820 succeeded in placing peacekeeping as a priority in the fight against sexual violence, and also supports the full implementation of the earlier benchmark UNSCR 1325 (*Women, Peace and Security*), which asserts the importance of women’s participation in all processes related to ending sexual violence in conflict, including peace talks. These resolutions affirm that prevention of sexual violence and punishment of perpetrators should constitute an obligation, not an aspiration of UN member states.

As an international humanitarian, development and advocacy organisation, World Vision has been striving to help communities realise their basic human rights and overall wellbeing in the DRC for more than 20 years. In early 2009, World Vision began a research project involving 236 women and girls in North and South Kivu. This study was part of the organisation’s commitment to the region and was motivated by a desire of staff working in eastern DRC to give voice to some of the women and girls who have suffered most, and who, despite the high-level peace agreements, remain without a voice as they suffer unspeakable violence.²

¹ UN Security Council Resolution 1820 (2008), “Women and Peace and Security” was adopted by the Security Council at its 5916th meeting on 19th June 2008.

² Focus groups and interviews were carried out in communities and displacement camps in four territories of North Kivu and South Kivu where World Vision (along with other NGOs) is working. A total of 236 took part in 18 focus groups, 131 of whom were women and 105 were girls under the age of 18. The study took place during March and April 2009, just over a year after the signing of the Goma Peace Agreement.

On the anniversary of UNSCR 1820, World Vision's findings are a call for redoubled efforts to ensure that women play an increased role in the peace process, and in conflict prevention and resolution. We seek to bring the voices of participants in our survey to the attention of the world and those with power to negotiate more sustainable peace agreements.

This paper outlines some of the main findings and recommendations of that research, which will be published in a full by World Vision later this year.

Being a woman in eastern DRC

Despite the peace process in the region, eastern DRC continues to be one of the most dangerous places on earth to be a woman. During the decades of intermittent conflict and the establishment of a militarised environment in eastern DRC, sexual violence has indeed become "systematic and widespread, reaching appalling levels of brutality".³ While comprehensive statistics are not available, the vast scope of sexual violence cases against women is undeniable. In the medical centres supported by UNICEF and its partners in eastern DRC, 18,505 individuals – 30% of whom were children – received treatment for cases of sexual violence between January and October of 2008.⁴ It is likely that this total does not capture the full number of cases of violence, given that many victims are not able to access the inadequate health services that exist in the region.

In a comprehensive protection assessment that World Vision completed in June 2008, one of the most common threats to women and children was the risk they face of rape and sexual violence when carrying out their daily chores in isolated forests and fields.⁵ With many of their husbands killed or separated from them in the years of violence, women and older girls continue to take on the burden of caring for their families and elderly, facing tremendous risks in order to search for additional food, firewood and sometimes water outside camps and population centres.

It is clear that the lives of women and children will continue to be eroded and put at risk until a sustainable peace process is implemented in the region.

We call upon the UNSC to strongly urge all parties to the conflict in DRC that they have a duty to protect civilians and to ensure that the peace process is fully implemented.

The great fear – a reality

Eastern DRC has been plagued intermittently by war since 1996, but the 236 women and girls participating in the study, feared sexual violence and poverty above all else: 223 stated that rape was the greatest fear faced by women and girls. Indeed, when asked whether they had a close friend who had been a victim of sexual violence, close to half of the participants (116 out of 236) said that they had, or had been raped themselves.

Regardless of where they live, participants feared rape when they left their homes, and some even feared attack inside their own homes.

"I feel most insecure at home – they come and take your husband, sometimes they rape you and tell your husband to rape your daughter." (Woman, Kavumu)

Those in displacement camps spoke of how their makeshift huts made of banana leaves and plastic provided no protection from men intent on violence. Even those in host communities, where homes are normally better constructed, noted there is little they can do to prevent armed men from entering by force at night. No girl or woman was immune from this fear. In their communities, anyone of any age can be raped – from a young child to a woman late in her life.

³ UN Security Council Resolution 1820, June 2008, preamble.

⁴ "Justice, Impunity, and Sexual Violence in Eastern Democratic Republic of Congo," report of the International Parliamentary-Expert Mission Addressing Impunity for Sexual Crimes in the Democratic Republic of Congo, November 2008.

⁵ World Vision Eastern DRC HEA Programme Humanitarian Protection Assessment Report, August 2008, was carried out in Kirotshé, Masisi, Shasha IDP camp, and in Beni territory from 7 July-1 August, 2008.

“Teachers demand sex in exchange for passing marks; even at school, we are pursued by our teachers and our peers for sex.” (Girl, Katana)

“There is no way to protect ourselves; in order to prevent them from killing us, we give in.” (Girl, Katana)

Participants revealed that those who are raped and then left alone are the “lucky” ones; others are subjected to serious injuries, abduction or even death.

“At night, near my house, a group of soldiers came and raped my neighbour. After they raped the mother, they killed three people in the same family on one night.” (Woman, Katana)

“You are not just a victim of the trauma caused by rape, you are also a victim of HIV and AIDS.” (Woman, Katana)

“The pillaging and killing happens especially at night when it’s raining. People cannot hear the gunshots because they time the shots for when the thunder is sounding. They do this so neighbours will not hear the shots and will not come to help.” (Girl, Minova)

All this appears to be happening despite the UNSC Resolution 1820 – and the subsequent Comprehensive Strategy on Combating Sexual Violence in DRC – that aimed to address sexual violence in conflict situations and to empower women in war-torn countries.

We welcome the newly-adopted Comprehensive Strategy on the fight against Sexual Violence in the DRC and call upon the United Nations Security Council to sustain its significant political commitment and increase its engagement on the issue, as well as human and financial resources so that these high-level political objectives become a reality on the ground.

The soldiers’ war against women

Despite attempts to find solutions to the conflict, 16 out of the 18 focus groups (223 participants) named armed groups – often described as “men who wear uniforms” – as the main perpetrators of violence against women and girls. It appears that these armed men come from a number of different groups: soldiers, police, bandits, as well as civilians.

“Any man in a soldier’s uniform is a rapist and we fear him.” (Woman, Katana)

While the experience of women and girls differed across North and South Kivu, 16 of the 18 groups (218 participants) were nevertheless convinced that one of the big threats to their safety and security was the continuing presence of FDLR in their areas and were therefore advocating that only if the FDLR returned to Rwanda would they and their communities truly be secure.

In the focus groups there were repeated calls for the government and the international community to send the FDLR “home”, but half of the groups noted that dialogue and negotiation, not a military option, should be the way to achieve this. Many feared that if military force was used to push the FDLR back to Rwanda, civilians could become casualties in the ensuing warfare.

“When the [joint] operation began, the FDLR became much more aggressive and began killing people.” (Woman, CCLK displacement camp)

The March 2009 Ihusi agreement integrated the CNDP into the Government army in order to strengthen the fight against the FDLR. Eight the groups felt this integration had increased insecurity in their area.

“CNDP are the ‘champions of raping’. By mixing the FARDC and the CNDP, the FARDC has become like the CNDP.” (Girl, Nzulu displacement camp)

“We were afraid when we heard the news about the integration of CNDP because these are the same people who killed and raped in our villages. Just because they are integrated into the FARDC, we don’t see how they can have changed their behaviour.” (Girl, Minova)

The women and girls felt a united military force would not be possible until all soldiers were well-paid, disciplined and living in military barracks at a clear distance from civilian populations. It appeared that in the absence of barracks in outlying areas and regular pay, FARDC forces embedded themselves in the local population, helping themselves to food, money, and raping women and girls because there were few controls over their behaviour.

Eleven of the 18 groups (143 or 60% of the 236 participants) felt any agreement to successfully bring a lasting peace to eastern DRC should involve specific mechanisms to reform the military.

“The Government should take care of its army, provide them with uniforms and food and shelter them in a big army camp so they don’t continue to roam in our streets and take our things.”
(Woman, Katana)

Eleven of the 18 focus groups (166 or over 70% of participants) in the study even felt that, far from protecting them, the FARDC was a threat to their safety. More than two-thirds of the participants (162 of the 236 women and girls) advocated for the soldiers to leave and to be replaced by well-trained, well-paid police.

We call upon the UNSC to urge the DRC Government to create and support a robust Security Sector Reform strategy that will ensure proper training, payment, command structures and housing for the FARDC and the National Police (PNC).

This must go hand in hand with an urgent and thorough reform of the judicial system.

Protecting communities

In eastern DRC, World Vision has trained 2,500 government soldiers and police officers in International Humanitarian Law since October last year. Three-day workshops, with modules in human rights law and humanitarian principles, focus on protection of civilians. World Vision has also formed community protection committees, set up safe places for children to discuss sensitive issues, distributed firewood and introduced fuel-efficient stoves into displacement camps to reduce the number of dangerous trips women make to the forest.

What women want

The importance of women’s participation in the peace process was stressed in both UNSCR 1325 and 1820; therefore World Vision asked women and girls what they would include in a peace agreement for eastern DRC.

Justice

One of the most prevalent recommendations from women and girls was to ensure those responsible for violence are punished. Seven of the 18 focus groups spoke of the apparent impunity for soldiers who raped, noting that police seemed powerless to seek out and arrest soldiers, or that they succumbed to bribery.

“Nowadays if a soldier kills he is brought by his friends to a place called prison and then after two or three months you will see the group come back and come back stronger than before. Telling you, humiliating you, that you did nothing, ‘we are now stronger than we were before and we can cause more damage to you than we did before’, they say. All this is due to impunity. There is no law punishing people who do bad things.” (Woman, Katana)

Freedom from poverty

As a result of more than a decade of war, communities in eastern DRC are living in extreme poverty. Many regularly go hungry, mainly because they are unable to access their fields or harvest their crops. Looting and theft by armed men means women are often left with little food for their own needs, let alone enough to sell at market.

Those who have suffered sexual violence are particularly vulnerable. The study found that husbands and families often abandoned women and girls who had been raped, leaving them alone, without a support system, land to cultivate, an education, or any means of earning an income.

“Most husbands reject their wives because of being raped as if it were their own will to be raped. Then the husband takes a [a new wife] who won’t accept the children to live as her own.” (Woman, Katana)

Mothers voiced concern that if they were not able to pay school fees, their daughters would not be able to continue their education, and would thus find that there was no way out of their poverty.

“How can we think about [getting involved in] a project when we know there is a threat on us? If you buy a goat or something you add to the threat that was already facing you.” (Woman, Katana)

A third of the women and girls (6 out of 18 groups) felt poverty reduction through the creation of jobs for both men and women was key to the long-term recovery of the area. Others saw access to education as a vital means of establishing and securing a sustainable peace.

The women and girls in the study felt that enhanced employment opportunities would help them to become more independent and self-sufficient, making them less susceptible to prostitution or early marriage.

“If you want peace in Congo, you have to give jobs to our husbands, pay teachers, pay soldiers, and pay people working for the government.” (Woman, Kavumu)

“If you’re displaced, the children will no longer study. Some of them become street children and when they become street children, they become a very easy target. They become bandits because street children are easily corrupted. This is a great danger for the future of this country.” (Woman, Katana)

We call on the UNSC to urge and demand the UN and donor governments to provide funding and assistance for longer-term recovery and rehabilitation assistance for eastern DRC, alongside robust humanitarian assistance allocations to address continuing acute emergency needs.

We further call for the development of programmes aimed at the prevention, recovery and reintegration of child survivors of sexual exploitation, including increased access to education for sexually exploited children, as well as initiatives that address the root causes of this growing trend.

Sustainable peace

In recent years, several peace agreements have been signed, which aimed to end the recurring conflict in eastern DRC. Each of these peace agreements was brokered in high-level global and regional fora, giving little weight to community consultation.⁶ The peace negotiated in these agreements has not yet filtered down to the local community level where the most vulnerable continue to live under oppression and fear.

“Peace agreements are just the political way. For me the rebels killed my parents and now the president says we are together. In my heart, how can we be together? As you see me here, I am a widow. My two daughters gave birth to babies because of rape. I am not able to accept this peace.” (Woman, Minova)

“The leaders who created these agreements had the pleasure of signing them but they did not honour the implementation.” (Girl, Bishange)

“If peace were established we would breed livestock and dig and harvest our fields without any problem. We would not be stigmatised for rape and rape would really end. Our husbands wouldn’t reject us saying we had been raped and the prevalence of HIV and AIDS would surely diminish. Our children wouldn’t become street children because they would go to school together. The social and economic situation would be reconstructed.” (Woman, Katana)

We call for the increased participation of civil society groups, particularly women’s and youth groups, in the monitoring and implementation of a new “roadmap” for peace in eastern DRC.

We call on the UN to work with the Government of the DRC and the Great Lakes Special Envoys to build a unified mechanism among key donors and governments in the region that would support a more effective peace process.⁷

⁶ While the Goma Peace Process that resulted in the Actes D’Engagement in 2008 included more than 1,400 participants, including a large number of civil society representatives, the Actes D’Engagement (the only legally binding agreements signed by the warring parties) were developed among the key power-brokers only. The Goma Peace Process Working Group reports developed by the other participants and accepted by the Conference as a whole have no legal weight in themselves.

⁷ This would renew and reinvigorate support for the implementation of the protocols in the International Conference of the Great Lakes Region Compact on Stability, Security, and Development.

Keeping the peace in eastern DRC

The UN has deployed its largest peacekeeping force to eastern DRC with a primary mandate to protect civilians. The presence of MONUC within communities was one of the topics on which all agreed: none felt secure as a result of the peacekeeping forces being deployed in their area.

There was a clear sense that MONUC troops had failed to protect citizens and their communities and it appears the behaviour of some peacekeepers had actually endangered or infringed on the rights of women and girls.

Participants described how MONUC contingents based close to their villages had allowed attackers to pass right by them on their way to loot and kill. Some participants also noted that MONUC rarely had a long-term presence in the most insecure areas, while they appeared to have a more sustained presence in seemingly more stable parts of the region. A number of female civil society interviewees noted that MONUC appears to place more emphasis on observing rather than acting to prevent or address rights abuses.

“When you have a problem, even if your house is burned, they can’t move; they [MONUC] stay in their compound.” (Woman, Kavumu)

We call upon the UNSC to develop, with the input of Congolese civil society, detailed and transparent plans, with clear benchmarks, for how it will achieve, monitor, and measure its performance against its protection of civilians mandate.

We further call for an increase in the number of civilian protection peacekeeping personnel in MONUC, including uniformed female personnel, with expertise and experience in addressing sexual violence, ensuring an increased number are stationed for sustained periods in outlying MONUC bases.

We also urge the UNSC and the DRC Government to empower local women’s groups and women leaders to represent women’s views and engage in public decision-making so that they can articulate their specific needs for justice and physical protection.

Conclusion

The voices of women and girls in eastern DRC are crying out to be heard. Their voices speak of hunger and fear experienced on a daily basis. They are witness to and victims of rape and abandonment, violent theft and displacement. Their words bear testimony to the resilience of women and girls living in one of the worst places on earth to be born a girl.

These are voices that have not often been heard over the sound of gunfire in their communities or above the views of men who hold positions of power in their society. However, the women and girls of eastern DRC offer profound insights into their own lives, their communities, and the long-term peace and security they deserve.

“Our grandparents lived in peace; we know it’s possible.” (Girl, Katana)

Over and above anything else, one theme is common to all: True peace has not yet come for the women and girls of eastern DRC.

Quick guide

FARDC (Armed Forces of the Democratic Republic of Congo) – The DRC Government army

CNDP (National Congress for the Defence of the People) – a former mainly-Tutsi rebel group, which integrated with the government army as part of a peace agreement earlier this year.

FDLR (Democratic Liberation Forces of Rwanda) – A predominantly-Hutu rebel group, many of whose members are accused of taking part in the 1994 Rwandan genocide.

MONUC (United Nations Mission in Congo) – The UN’s largest peacekeeping force in the world.