

Congolese women activists in DRC and Belgium

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Congolese women are energetically engaged in peacebuilding, both in DRC and abroad. Their voices – inspired by different experiences and presenting different perspectives – deserve greater recognition.

The Democratic Republic of the Congo has one of the highest numbers of women's organisations of any country in Africa. The economic, political and social crises of recent decades inspired the local population to mobilise in order to substitute for the absence and faults of the state in certain sectors such as health, infrastructure and education. The higher education system in then-Zaire in the 1970s and early 1980s produced highly skilled graduates with few employment prospects who – seeking to utilise their skills and change Congolese society – often created local activist NGOs.

Congolese women have become strongly mobilised. One striking example is the creation of the Congolese Women's Caucus which gathered together a group of women's representatives during the Inter-Congolese Dialogue in 2002 in order to draw up an official declaration and create a plan of action that would contribute to implementing UN Security Council Resolution 1325. Their work contributed to raising awareness of the major role that Congolese women could play for the

benefit of society and encouraged many women to mobilise. Four organisations in particular reflect Congolese women's commitment to working to improve their living conditions: CAFCO (Cadre de concertation de la femme congolaise), CONAFED (Comité national des femmes pour le développement), Cause Commune RDC and Caucus de Femmes (RDC-Bukavu).

Activism in Belgium

The contribution of the Congolese diaspora to the peace process in DRC is increasingly recognised by international institutions. DRC was a Belgian colony and many Congolese fleeing DRC chose to come to Belgium. The first Congolese citizens to come to Belgium – before the 1990s – were generally from the élite, intending to study and then return to positions of power in their country of origin. Within this flow, women either came as students themselves or as members of families of students. Most of them were educated and many of them set up organisations in Belgium. With the worsening economic and political conditions in DRC, few returned

there while more left DRC in search of security and better opportunities. Nowadays, the number of asylum seekers from DRC is still quite high and the proportion of women is more or less equal to that of men. Congolese student migration remains high with a great representation of women in comparison to citizens of other African countries.

As in DRC, female Congolese political mobilisation in Belgium appears to be highly dissociated from that of men. Sexual violence against women in DRC has been an important trigger for activism by Congolese women; among several hundred Congolese organisations in Belgium, women's organisations have tended to be more active and more numerous than their male counterparts. Among these are AMUKA ("wake up" in Swahili) and AFEDE¹ (Action des femmes pour le développement), whose main mission is to support and to raise awareness on women in DRC who are victims of sexual violence and other forms of discrimination. FIREFEC² (Forum interrégional des femmes congolaises) is another energetic organisation, composed of women who come from all over DRC and supporting a similarly wide range of women in DRC to improve their social, economic and political condition. Last but not least, CPPS – Caravane pour la paix et la

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Congoese women
living in Belgium
at the closing
action of the Third
International
Action of the
World March
of Women held
in Bukavu,
South Kivu



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solidarité – mainly focuses on the integration of Congoese women from the diaspora into Belgian society and the building of transnational social ties with women in DRC. Some initiatives are more individualistic, such as the photographic project ‘Stand up, my mother!’ funded by the NGO Impact Sud.

A number of Congoese women are closely involved in the World March of Women.³ The closing activity of the Third International Action of the World March of Women took place in Bukavu (South Kivu) in DRC, on 13-17 October 2010. In total, 42 national delegations from around the world attended the march which brought together almost 20,000 people. Congoese women based in Belgium travelled to Bukavu as part of the national delegation of the World March and others attended as individuals (supported logistically by CPPS), making them one of the most numerous international delegations.

Women gather in these groups, whether formal or informal, as they share either a residential affinity (province of origin) and/or an elective affinity, based in this case on their concern for women victims of sexual violence in DRC. Those criteria are not mutually exclusive and are often intertwined. Other actions result from personal initiatives and take place through social networks between Belgium and DRC. Congoese women in DRC mobilise some of the resources they used to have in their country of origin in order to be able to act locally, and some groups of women, or even women on their own, support a number of actions undertaken by local groups. They may have been members of these organisations before they left DRC. With occasional

visits between the two countries, new transnational ties are being made, and new local structures are being built that are designed to be supported from abroad.

Difficulties encountered by the diaspora

Congoese women in Belgium encounter varying obstacles in their efforts to build transnational civic links and contribute to the peace process in DRC. They have to liaise with women in the field who are already organised but who may have different perceptions of peace and conflict, of the role of women in Congoese society, of what actions are needed in response to sexual violence, and so on. Moreover, women in DRC do not always understand why Congoese women abroad decide to become activists. Many say that if they themselves had the chance to migrate they would prefer to start a completely new life, far from what is happening in eastern DRC.

Other women regard the diaspora as competitors. There are many international organisations and NGOs looking to hire staff; local women feel that women from the diaspora may be more likely to be hired than local women or that they may even attract financial resources to their diasporic organisations that local women might have otherwise secured. Last but not least, a classical vision seems to persist of what international solidarity means. Foreign aid and support were provided by ‘white nations’ for several decades and therefore new actors such as women from the diaspora are perceived as ‘little aliens’ (*petits ovnis*). There is some mistrust of the diaspora, arising perhaps from a lack of

knowledge and understanding of their real intentions.

Varied identities

Similarly, the female component of the Congoese diaspora is not a homogeneous community. Women activists will have left DRC for varying reasons and they do not all originate from conflict zones. Those who experienced traumatic experiences of violence may have a perception of the conflict which differs from that of women who have not had a similar experience. Some may not wish to risk their right to reside in Belgium by getting involved until they receive confirmation of permanent residence. Varying and sometimes conflicting perspectives on how to participate in the peace and development processes of their country of origin may be particularly evident in tensions between first- and second-generation female migrants. And lastly, to gain legitimacy in the Belgian context as well as in the Congoese one, women must know how to deal with a set of multiple identities (as Belgians of Congoese origin in Belgium versus Congoese of Belgian origin in the DRC, and as women).

The work of local Congoese women and of those who live abroad is underestimated and their potential often overlooked. Women’s voices are not as audible as they should be. Yet, in the shadow, women in DRC and in countries such as Belgium are actively engaged in building partnerships to promote and support peacebuilding in DRC.

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1. <http://www.afede.net/>

2. <http://couleuraurore.skynetblogs.be/post/6845122/firefec>

3. http://www.mmf2010.info/our-action/action-a-bukavu?set_language=en