



Theme: Advancing women's rights in fragile states

# Women use radio to fight sexual violence

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Armed with microphones, female journalists are using the media to fight the war on women's bodies in the Democratic Republic of Congo.

It's 4pm on Monday afternoon in Bukavu, a border town that hugs Lake Kivu in the eastern DRC. A group of young Congolese women are gathered on the second floor of an office building, discussing what they learned in a journalism training session that day. Posters line the walls in French and Swahili promoting radio programs and the ending of violence against women.

In the next room over, a woman is hunched over a computer screen, eyes trained on the audio levels, fingertips hovering over the keyboard as she listens intently through headphones. Tapes, piled high in rows in a shelf beside her desk, threaten to spill over. Behind her, a recording area has become a nursery for the moment, as a baby sleeps soundly wrapped in a colourful kanga. Ugali (a starch dish with a dough-like texture) and a jar of peanuts rest on the desk, the remnants of a late lunch.

This is the office of the South Kivu Women's Media Association, also known as AFEM (Association des Femmes des Médias du Sud Kivu). Started in 2003, the organization uses radio to change the position of women in society through educational programming, news reporting, and by providing skills training for to-be journalists.

Chouchou Namegabe, Director and co-founder, started the group as a reaction to the problems women were facing because of the war, and particularly, to combat rape and sexual violence. "We found that women had many problems and we thought as journalists we could do something by using our power, our power which is microphone and media, to help change the situation of women," says Namegabe who worked as a journalist for eight years prior to starting AFEM.

The process of creating an all-female journalism band was rife with challenges, including finding reporters. Women either weren't trained or were working for other news outlets. AFEM began providing training to fill the skills gap, and the group that started as three, now has over forty members. The main office is in Bukavu, but the organization works with 350 women that are part of rural community radio clubs. AFEM is working to expand the opportunities for women in the media, by changing attitudes about gender roles and creating access to professional development.

It aims for a long term impact that will educate the masses on the importance of women's rights in the community, while providing professional skills to aspiring journalists and employment opportunities for working journalists.

AFEM began actively fighting sexual violence on the airwaves when it created a campaign in 2006 called, "Challenging the silence: women media against sexual violence." The point of the campaign was "to give the voice to the voiceless women, survivors, who didn't know how to talk about their stories," says Namegabe.

The organization is as much journalism as it is advocacy. Namegabe has testified before The Hague International Court of Justice and the U.S. Senate Foreign Relations Committee. "We want it to stop," Namegabe says. "Really to stop. What we heard, what we are seeing about the rape and sexual violence in eastern part of Congo is really unbelievable." Although no statistics are definite, VDAY, a movement to end violence against women and girls, cites hundreds of thousands of rapes in the DRC since 1996.

Namegabe refers to stories including the insertion of branches and stones into women's vaginas after being raped, the use of fuel and fire, humiliation and torture in front of, and sometimes by, family members.

"When we started it was very hard to get victims to give their testimony. But after, they were happy to talk to you, to give you testimony, and to be broadcasted." Women told Namegabe being able to speak on the radio was the first step to healing internal wounds. Further, upon the broadcasts being heard, other women started contacting AFEM: "They came to us, and said, 'I was thinking I was the only one to have such a problem. But I listened to a testimony from another village, and I want to also give my testimony because I want it to stop. I don't want it to happen to other people.' They want to give their names. They want to give their identity because they want it to stop."

Search for Common Ground (SFCG) is an international NGO that is also working in the DRC and using media to end sexual and gender based violence. Thomas Paul Banze is in charge of the Media Programs in DRC. Sitting in the recording room for SFCG in Bukavu, Banze explains the role media plays in changing perceptions and understanding the complexities of the issue.

Speaking in French, Banze says, "Sexual violence occurs for many reasons. The first reason is war. Sexual violence is used especially in this province as a weapon of war." But in addition to rape being used as a tactic of war, Banze also cites cultural stereotypes that can treat women as objects. "Women aren't well considered, they're not respected enough."

And that is what these kinds of media programs are trying to change.

Although Namegabe says she gets discouraged when she hears new cases, or sees impunity given to perpetrators. But she also says she can't stop. "When I make an evaluation, I see there is a small change. I know, when I meet with the survivors and see their engagement, the smile they show me, it give some courage to continue."

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