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**BRIEFING PAPER ON THE SITUATION  
OF WOMEN HUMAN RIGHTS  
DEFENDERS  
AND THEIR PROTECTION NEEDS  
IN THE EASTERN DEMOCRATIC  
REPUBLIC OF CONGO**



Since 2018, and until 2020, Protection International has been implementing a project in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), financed by the German donor Zivik. This project places women human rights defenders centre stage. In this context, it is necessary to better understand their specific situations, challenges and protection needs. It is also important to take into account their own assessment of the situation and their own recommendations. Based on the reports and studies produced as part of this project<sup>1</sup>, this document therefore aims to synthesize the lessons learned during the activities carried out.

**Women human rights defenders are all women who peacefully defend human rights - for women, for men, for all. They are often attacked for who they are - their identity as women - and for what they do - the struggle for human rights for all.<sup>2</sup>**

### SITUATION OF WOMEN HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS IN NORTH AND SOUTH KIVU

#### *Structural barriers to work and the status of women human rights defenders*

Besides the challenges faced by all human rights defenders (HRDs) in DRC, women human rights defenders (WHRDs) face specific social, cultural, economic and political structural challenges that not only hinder their work in promoting human's rights, but also harm their status as women in daily life and the role society traditionally assigns them. The DRC context is characterized by violence, and such a violent context harshly affects women. A patriarchal society, backward customs and poverty particularly affect women human rights defenders, generating specific threats and risks that differ from those suffered by male HRDs.

The female participants in the capacity building workshops organised as part of the project (in its pilot phase; the workshops involved only women defenders) highlighted other structural barriers that affect the capacity of women to engage in human rights defense, such as the lack of access to financial resources, the non-implementation of national and international laws guaranteeing women's rights, the priority given to men's education and the low school enrolment rate for girls, as well as limited access to employment and land ownership.

#### *Specific risks and threats to women human rights defenders*

We were able to observe **3 consistent patterns** of risks and abuses against women human rights defenders, patterns with objectives to penalize those who dare to speak out:

- Stigmatization connected to actions that are considered sensitive in DRC: support for victims of sexual violence, sexual and reproductive rights, the right to access land for women.
- The use or threat of use of sexual violence: in addition to the security challenges faced by all human rights defenders in North and South Kivu, women human rights defenders also face gender violence, whether directly related to their work as defenders or not. Thus, domestic violence, rape and sexual harassment are recurrent problems. In addition, the sources of threats affecting women human rights defenders in some cases come from political-administrative authorities and security forces.
- The use of sexual and gender stereotypes: women defenders are victims of humiliation and stigmatization in grassroots communities due to social and cultural beliefs and traditions.

1 Protection International RDC. *Etude de base sur les besoins de protection des femmes défenseuses des droits humains au Nord et au Sud Kivu*. Rapport Final. Décembre 2018; Protection International. *Evaluation Interne: Autonomisation et protection des défenseuses et défenseurs des droits humains (D/DDH), pour contribuer à la prévention civile des crises, au règlement des conflits et à la consolidation de la paix en République Démocratique du Congo (RDC)*. Décembre 2018/Janvier 2019; Protection International. *Rapport de formation sur l'intégration de l'approche genre dans la protection des défenseur-e-s des droits humains (DDH)*. Avril 2019; Protection International. *Rapport de formation sur la sécurité et la protection des DDH et l'intégration du genre*. Mai 2019; Protection International. *Les défis des femmes défenseuses des droits humains à l'heure du rétrécissement de l'espace de la société civile*. Document interne. Mai 2019; Protection International. *Situation des femmes défenseuses des droits humains du Nord Kivu*. Document interne. Février 2017.

2 Definition adapted from JASS - Women Crossing the Line: <https://www.justassociates.org/en/women-crossing-the-line>

In South Kivu, women defenders are sometimes referred to in Swahili as “Shindikana”, which means “difficult women” suggesting that they do not submit to traditional marital authority and to mock husbands dominated within the household by such wives. They are also called “men-women, failed women, women without morals, prostitutes”. Women defenders point out that these messages coming from the community are intended to make them feel guilty by painting them as bad mothers, or corrupted women.

### THE PLACE AND ROLE OF WOMEN HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS IN CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANISATIONS

#### *A limited role within Civil Society Organisations (CSOs)*

A study commissioned by Protection International in DRC showed that gender issues are not adequately taken into account within human rights organisations from civil society<sup>3</sup>. Indeed, the number of women in CSOs is limited. When women are part of a CSO, they rarely have the same level of responsibility as men.

Finally, resources devoted to the protection of women defenders are almost non-existent. For example, none of the organisations surveyed in the study included a specific line for the protection of women defenders, taking into account their specific needs and the types of threats they receive, in their budgets. WHRDs organisations also have more difficulty raising funds than mixed or purely male organisations, which suggests that support for women’s organisations does not seem to be a priority for donors.

#### *A lack of legitimacy*

When asked about the obstacles to women’s integration into decision-making roles within gender-mixed human rights organisations, all men argued that the reasons would be related to poor work experience, untimely motherhood, and African women’s indiscretion and inability to keep professional secrets. These reasons echo the fears expressed by women during the workshops and reflect the patriarchal structures in place in North and South Kivu. These elements are a symptom of the lack of legitimacy of the work of women human rights defenders, which is rooted in the same social structures mentioned above. In many organisations, the work of women human rights defenders is considered secondary or even incidental, and the work of HRDs is often considered to be outside the competence of women.

*“In North and South Kivu, we women defenders are considered as second-degree defenders compared to male defenders.” Woman HRD, DR Congo*

Sometimes women human rights defenders do not recognize themselves as defenders. For the sake of modesty, they promote the defence of the rights of the victims they support and do not define themselves as defenders.

#### *A driving force*

Despite this, all the testimonies collected reflect the drive and increasing motivation of women human rights defenders. This driving force defies the effects of oppressive structures, such as a lack of self-confidence, a lack of education, or fear of reprisals or resistance due to their actions.

When empowered to do so, women human rights defenders develop their own protection mechanisms. For example, using local security companies to protect themselves; they set up psychological support mechanisms for themselves through prayers in their respective churches, as well as psychological support for acquaintances and family; they may change homes within their extended families, or keep a low profile. These examples testify to the present driving force of women human rights defenders. They highlight not only the worrying lack of a protection mechanism specific to women’s needs, but also the pressing need to strengthen the capacities of women defenders in the field of security and protection.

3 Protection International RDC. *Etude de base sur les besoins de protection des femmes défenseuses des droits humains au Nord et au Sud Kivu*. Rapport Final. Décembre 2018 - <https://www.protectioninternational.org/en/publications/baseline-study-protection-needs-women-human-rights-defenders-north-and-south-kivu>

### CAPACITY BUILDING FOR WOMEN HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS

#### *Identification of needs*

The evaluation of the training courses on protection management, organised by Protection International, highlighted the contribution of these trainings in several aspects, such as knowledge of the concept of human rights defender and gender, awareness of the importance of managing their own security, as well as women human rights defenders' own perception of their security and protection.

Thus, both the baseline study and the Protection International trainers during the workshops found that women human rights defenders not only have a very diverse understanding and conception of their work as women human rights defenders, but also a lack of knowledge of the concept of women human rights defenders as defined by the [UN Declaration on HRDs](#), as well as national and international mechanisms for the protection of HRDs. This lack of knowledge can be a problem when determining their rights and what resources they could access. In addition, many workshop participants mentioned that until then, they had focused primarily on the needs of the victims they were accompanying, without regard for their own safety as women human rights defenders.

*"I didn't consider myself a defender until I received training by Protection International. I focused my contextual analysis only on the victims of violations without worrying about my own vulnerability as a HRD. I accompanied the victims by ignoring the risks and threats that were hanging over me at the office, on the road and even at home." Woman HRD, DR Congo*

The trainers were also able to observe the expectations generated by the organisation of the workshops, testifying to the fact that this is a new area of concern for women human rights defenders, and that they have little formal knowledge about how to ensure their protection. Protection International workshops have thus contributed to some security measures taken by women human rights defenders, such as the establishment of registers, the installation of security trunks, or increased attention to their environment.

#### *Beyond the workshop: the challenges in the transferral of knowledge*

This project identified knowledge transfer as one of the main challenges facing women's advocacy organisations after the workshops. Knowledge transfer through the feedback of workshop content and the application of acquired knowledge is a challenge for civil society organisations. The creation of focal points is supposed to provide solutions to these difficulties, but the first evaluation of the project showed that a monitoring and supervision effort is necessary to ensure the sustainability of this work.

### RECOMMENDATIONS

#### *Capacity Building*

- Capacity-building for women human rights defenders requires the identification and inclusion of their specific needs during the workshops, taking into account gender-specific risks. These needs must shape the methodology and content of the workshops, such as conducting a differentiated risk analysis with women human rights defenders.
- Address internal gender-based violence and inequality in workshop sessions by introducing exercises that highlight it as well as encouraging internal reflection by promoting women's full and active participation in human rights activities without gender discrimination.
- Develop a vision of support for women human rights defenders' CSOs that goes beyond the workshop format to include long-term support for CSOs in the implementation of security plans and work on institutional and/or collective security management.

- Support CSOs of women human rights defenders in their funding requests by integrating security management as a cross-cutting element. A good description of risks and threats in the context would help CSOs to justify the acquisition of equipment or resources needed to implement security measures.
- Support women human rights defenders in their efforts to raise awareness and mobilise their communities for the respect of women's rights among guardians of customs and other customary bodies.
- Support women human rights defenders in their efforts to promote their place and role within CSOs.

### *Protection of women human rights defenders at decision making level*

- Promote advocacy actions and campaigns to raise awareness and value the work of women human rights defenders (e.g. on 29 November, Women Human Rights Defenders Day) and fight structural violence in order to change the discourse on women human rights defenders.
- Address the social, economic and cultural structures that are at the root of the situation of women defenders in North and South Kivu.
- Mobilise and involve male HRDs, as allies and not as adversaries, in the protection of women human rights defenders to engage them in changing the social norms, attitudes and gender stereotypes that perpetuate discrimination and inequality.
- Encourage the Congolese State to recognise the work of the women human rights defenders and ensure their protection.
- Promote protection mechanisms that specifically address the needs of women human rights defenders, going beyond physical protection to include access to health-services, as well as considering the psychological and economic well-being of women human rights defenders and their families.
- Promote the inclusion of articles that protect women human rights defenders in provincial and national laws of human rights defenders.



Congolese women human rights defenders receiving training by Protection International DRC, 2019.



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