

# WOMEN'S MOVEMENTS IN THE DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF THE CONGO

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The study aims to map existing women's movements advancing the 'Women, Peace and Security' agenda in the provinces of Ituri, North Kivu, South Kivu, Kinshasa and Haut Katanga, in the DRC. The study provides a brief overview of these movements, looking at their composition, location, challenges and needs, as well as their links and relationships with other movements, including human rights networks.

The methodology comprised a document review of the few reports, publications and studies available on networks in the field of women, peace and security and on networking for women's rights in the DRC in general, as well as 36 in-depth interviews, conducted over a period of 2 months (September and October 2023) and mostly face-to-face. The interviews targeted four categories of actors: women's networks, associations of groups with specific needs or marginalised groups that are not part of existing networks, representatives of state authorities at provincial and national level, and regional or international stakeholders working in this field in the DRC. The members of these different categories were identified according to the criteria of geographical distribution and coverage, type of structure, and themes covered in relation to the area of women, peace and security.

This mapping identified a total of 54 women's networks operating in the provinces of Ituri, North Kivu, South Kivu, Kinshasa and Haut Katanga, including networks at local, provincial, national and regional level, formal and informal, and old and new networks. This demonstrates the existence of widespread activism for women's rights in these provinces, and a commitment by women's organisations and activists to work in synergy. However, not all the networks are equally active, and there is some overlap between them. Often, they cover the same areas of intervention and themes; they share very similar demands and methodological approaches; and the same individuals/organisations belong to several networks.

The members of these networks are not just women's associations. There is a porosity between civil society and other actors that gives rise to a variety of mixed structures. Members are individuals, community structures, women in politics or business. This shows the adaptability and resilience of women activists, as well as their ability to seek allies.

The networks analysed, with a few exceptions, have limited representation of marginalised groups or groups with special needs. These groups are often beneficiaries of the networks' actions rather than members. Associations working on the rights of LGBTQ+ people are generally the most excluded from these types of platforms.

The leadership of women's networks is usually built around one person, usually an adult, urban, educated woman. There is very little delegation, which poses governance challenges. Relationships between network members are fairly fragile, with a general lack of trust and commitment that for some members depends on existing funding. In addition, generational turnover within women's networks is fairly irregular, and sometimes non-existent.

The influence of international partners (INGOs, international organisations and donors) on the networks is quite strong: they play not only the role of funders, but also the role of networks' co-initiators and facilitators. This influence can also have negative effects, such as the development of a multiplicity of networks and a certain overlap between them, the fragmented and uncoordinated nature of women's organisations and networks, or their economic dependence to the detriment of social mobilisation and their internal cohesion.

The specific and exclusive thematic focus on "Women, Peace and Security" is almost non-existent, except in government coordination mechanisms to implement the NAP 1325 and two or three networks. Most activists work on a broader human rights or gender equality agenda, or on one of the concrete aspects of 1325, and feel that they are defenders of human rights or of women's rights.

Coordination and internal and external communication vary greatly between the different women's networks. The networks are not yet realising their potential to raise the profile of their activities or to connect with younger generations. They use some social networks, but not as their main means of communication or social mobilisation.

The different women's networks operating in the same area know each other. However, this knowledge diminishes at rural communities' level (when there is no physical presence of this network) and when they are associations working on the rights of certain marginalised groups or groups with specific needs. Associations defending the rights of the LGBTIQ+ community, for example, seem to have more links with more general human rights or peace-building networks than with women's networks. The relationship between the various women's networks is one of both competition and collaboration, with the potential to grow in strength.

**Based on this analysis, the following recommendations are addressed to international partners working or interested in working with women's networks on the women, peace and security agenda:**

- **Assess existing women's networks, in particular their leadership and governance system, their internal coordination, their composition, and their actions. Strengthen selected networks and avoid the creation of new networks.**
- **Support networks to strengthen their governance, internal coordination and communication. Promote inclusive, cohesive and rotational leadership, encouraging intergenerational exchange initiatives, and supporting diversity in network membership.**
- **Support thematic, methodological and/or geographical specialisation of networks with the intention of promoting their knowledge, experience and assets, and better defining their claims and approaches.**
- **Strengthen the external communication capacities of women's networks with the aim of improving their connection with citizens and promoting a rapprochement of the population to the themes of the women, peace and security agenda.**
- **Bring existing networks closer together, by sharing information and organising joint activities.**