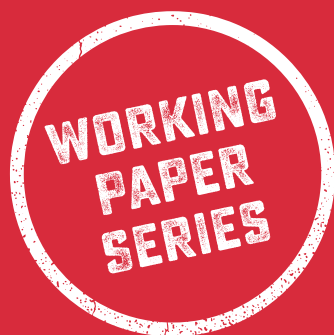


**Gender integration
and peacebuilding
in eastern
Democratic Republic
of Congo: The case
of Uvira territory**

Léonard Shukuru Shemitalo



SÉRIE INSECURE LIVELIHOODS / OCTOBER 2024

This paper is published as a Working Paper in the Insecure Livelihoods Series. Under the Working Paper format we publish high-quality, ongoing work from ten promising scholars who were selected for the Insecure Livelihoods Fellowship program. Centred around the dynamics the Insecure Livelihoods Series is known for, this series of working papers give a platform to the academic ongoing work of the fellows. These working papers share the usual quality and insight of the Insecure Livelihoods Series and simultaneously take a slightly more academic approach to independent, regular and field-driven information and analysis on the complexity of conflict and security in the Great Lakes Region.

AUTHOR

Léonard Shukuru Shemitalo est sociologue et doctorant à la Faculté des Lettres et des Sciences Humaines Ain Chock (FLSHAC) à l'Université Hassan II de Casablanca au Maroc.

INSECURE LIVELIHOODS SERIES

The Insecure Livelihoods Series publishes independent and field-driven information and analysis on the complexity of conflict and security in the Democratic Republic of Congo. Its reports are based on independent, non-partisan and collaborative research.

CONFLICT RESEARCH GROUP (CRG)

Director: Koen Vlassenroot

GOVERNANCE IN CONFLICT NETWORK (GIC)

Coordinator: Tomas van Acker

www.gicnetwork.be

PUBLISHING

Editor: Sam Kniknie

Designer: Marie Wynants, achttien.eu

© Governance in Conflict Network, Ghent University, Belgium. 2024



Gender integration and peacebuilding in eastern Democratic Republic of Congo: The case of Uvira territory

Léonard Shukuru Shemitalo



Summary

The eastern region of DR Congo is an area that has been plagued by repeated wars and armed conflicts for more than two decades. This study looks at gender integration and peacebuilding in eastern DR Congo, more precisely in the territory of Uvira in South Kivu. To produce a scientific analysis, we asked ourselves one main question: how do local women's committees contribute to and participate in peacebuilding?

Agency theory was used as the theoretical starting point of this study. It enabled us to discover the power of action of women and men who formed local peace committees. These committees have enabled women and men from different classes, ethnic groups, religions, professions and other categories (e.g. persons with a disability), long excluded from the processes, to become involved in conflict resolution and see peacebuilding activism as a social transformation for sustainable development. These women and men have developed the power to act on their own, regardless of the perception of socio-cultural constructs.

The empirical data was collected through qualitative analysis, semi-structured interviews and focus groups carried out in the Uvira territory in South Kivu. This study analyses and explains how and why women and men excluded from the peace process came together in local peace committees to facilitate the integration of gender into the peacebuilding process and the restoration of security in local governance. It explains how local peace committees have influenced gender relations in peace negotiation arenas in a society where the patriarchal system is more prevalent.

Table of Contents

1 INTRODUCTION	6
2 CONTEXT, STATE OF THE ART AND POSITIONING	9
Context	9
Women's struggles in the peacebuilding process	11
State of the art and positioning of research	12
3 METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK	14
4 ANALYSIS	16
Roles and operation of local peace committees	16
Deconstructing the normative discourse of gender equality	17
Women's participation in peacebuilding	20
The contribution of local committees to peacebuilding	21
Conservative tendencies in relation to the gender approach	23
5 CONCLUSION	24
BIBLIOGRAPHICAL REFERENCES	26

Introduction

United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325, passed in 2000, stresses the importance of improving the participation of women at all levels of decision-making in national, regional and international mechanisms for conflict prevention, management and resolution. It also requires member states to take into account the inclusion of women in and to increase their role and contribution to the peacebuilding process. The lack of coercive measures by member countries and the implementation of this resolution remain almost non-existent. Women are under-represented in conflict resolution processes in several member countries in conflict, notably DR Congo.

In DR Congo, this resolution has encountered enormous difficulties in all the country's institutions, where gender inequalities are apparent. In the eastern part of the country, where armed conflicts have taken place for more than two decades, these repeated conflicts have had harmful and devastating effects on women and girls, who are often victims of sexual and gender-based violence.

Many studies have focused on understanding the effects of war on women's bodies. However, there is much less research on women's agency. Based on three groupings of three chiefdoms that make up the territory of Uvira and the town bearing the same name, this study shows that women and men are social actors and carry out actions (individual and collective). For example, women are activists committed to collective causes (Martin de Almagro, 2016). They develop strategies to gain access to these largely male-dominated spaces. They have diverse profiles and equally varied career paths. In their actions, they also encounter other visible and invisible constraints that compromise their actions on the ground. There is no systematic, in-depth study that analyses and describes women's trajectories and actions for peace within decentralized territorial entities such as chiefdoms or towns. Secondly, the

paradigm of 'women as peacemakers' remains simplistic and only partially applied to women. The originality of this scientific work lies in the fact that women and men excluded from peace negotiations by cultural norms have been able to overcome all these barriers and become peacemakers. They have changed the discourse of victimisation and become peacemakers.

In order to carry out a scientific analysis, we asked ourselves one main question: how do these local women's committees contribute to and participate in peacebuilding? We also asked what strategies these local women's committees use to build resilience despite the various barriers they encounter in local governance.

This study is relevant because it looks at the deconstruction of the normative discourse on gender equality in conflict and post-conflict societies. It aims to challenge previous research on gender issues to not reproduce or fall into the discourse of certain feminist organisations and non-governmental organisations. The aim of this research is to distance itself from this normative discourse, which is consistent with the invisibility of women in the peacebuilding process and their political participation. Some movements promote the victimisation of women, portraying a negative image of women in conflicts, forgetting that they can be agents of peace or insecurity. This study also aims to understand the socio-historical context of the creation of local peace committees and their role in local governance. The aim is to understand how these structures have influenced the balance of power between men and women, between these committees and the administrative bodies in the peacebuilding process and in local governance.

The presence of local peace committees in these rural areas has changed the gender balance of power in the peacebuilding process, and the political and administrative authorities currently feel accountable for the absence of a gender dimension in this process. These committees have gained legitimacy within society, which is why they settle family conflicts, gender-based violence and transhumance conflicts before these conflicts are dealt with by the responsible institutions. In the villages of Luberizi and Lemera, these committees play the role of regulators and transformers of conflicts in order to maintain social inclusion and cohesion.

These committees have changed male and female perceptions of gender prejudice and stereotypes in the peacebuilding process. Thanks to these peace structures, female members of the committees have been elected and appointed *chefs d'avenues* (representative of unit of ten households) and *chefs des villages* (village representative) where the patriarchal system is practised, as is the case with Badetwa Adela in Luberizi, who was voted in by men. These structures have succeeded in creating a communication network that makes it easier for them to combat anti-social behaviour, but also enables them to continue lobbying in order to maintain the gender equality that has been achieved at local level in the consolidation of peace. This network has made it easier for some women to become more active in the fight for gender equality.

Beyond the legitimacy that these peace committees have been able to gain within society, there is resistance from men and women who try to hold on to traditional and customary values, and from religious practitioners who continue to advocate that women should not speak in public. Agency theory was used to understand this study. It enabled us to discover the power of action of the women and men who formed local peace committees. These committees have enabled women and men from different classes, ethnic groups, religions, professions and other categories, for example disabled people, long excluded from these processes, to become involved in conflict resolution and see peacebuilding activism as a social transformation for sustainable development. These women and men have developed the power to act alone, regardless of the perception of socio-cultural constructs.

The empirical data was collected through qualitative analysis, semi-structured interviews and focus groups carried out in the Uvira territory in South Kivu. This study analyses, understands and explains how and why women and men excluded from peacebuilding processes came together in local peace committees to facilitate the integration of gender into the peacebuilding process and the restoration of security in local governance. It explains how local peace committees have influenced gender relations in peace negotiation arenas in a society where the patriarchal system is more prevalent.

Context, state of the art and positioning

Context

Gender inequality can be seen in the peacebuilding process in South Kivu in all the agreements that have been reached over the past two decades. Gender must be analysed in all sectors of society. Belonging to a particular gender should not be seen as a barrier to accessing certain positions in the political arena and the peace process (Bereni, 2012). This means that the behaviour, expectations, and different wants of women and men are equally taken into account and encouraged by the community. This does not mean that the two sexes have become or should become identical, but rather that their positions and participation in public functions will no longer depend on their gender (male or female). This study on gender integration in peacebuilding in eastern DR Congo seeks to understand and assess the prevailing socio-cultural behaviour, the unequal power between the dominant and the dominated, and the laws that underpin this inequality. In this study, equality aims to demonstrate how men and women have access to opportunities, responsibilities and even rights in the peacebuilding process in eastern DR Congo. Equality is also about a balanced distribution of men and women in decision-making positions, in the execution of operations (vertical segmentation) and in sectors of activity: social, economic, financial, etc. (horizontal segmentation). In this context, equality is based on skills, know-how and interpersonal skills.

More than sixty years after the independence of the DR Congo, gender inequality is observed in the various forms of peacebuilding and peacekeeping processes (Yatala, 2018). To this day, women are obstructed to participate and

note low involvement in political issues. Gender inequality in electoral processes is justified by traditional gendered values, which attribute an inferior status to women as a result of patriarchal stereotypes and prejudices, low schooling for girls, the social division of labour. It should be noted that despite the existence of legal texts – such as the constitution, laws and regional agreements ratified by the DRC – guaranteeing this equality, they are not fully applied and remain unenforced. It should be pointed out that various religions (Islam, Kimbanguism, Catholicism and Protestantism) are among the factors that hinder women’s participation in public life and keep them in a state of inferiority complex compared to men. Illiteracy, poverty and early marriage among girls are another significant obstacle.

In the Democratic Republic of Congo, gender inequality between men and women in the reconstruction of post-conflict society, politically, economically, socially and culturally, is justified by purely gendered traditional values, which attributes to women an inferior status compared with men as a result of patriarchal stereotypes, even though there are legal texts guaranteeing their equality. The absence of some women in public administration is also accentuated in the province of South Kivu due to the problem of reconciling work and domestic responsibilities. The legacy of the region’s extremely unequal past, based on the political exploitation of sexual identities inherited from aggressive (and common) colonisation, still has repercussions today in the countries of the Great Lakes sub-region. Admittedly, the reasons for this manipulation of inequalities may have changed, but whether they are now administrative, political or national, inequalities are still sometimes mentioned during when people are recruited. At a provincial and national level, women continue to be sidelined because they are not, it seems, direct players in the management of public affairs. In this sense, they are not capable of occupying decision-making positions, as they are considered to be inferior or in need of protection.

In Uvira in particular, traditional customs, religions, stereotypes and prejudices have hindered the inclusion of women in the arena of peace. Added to this is the lack of knowledge on the subjugation of women, which relegates them to second place in relation to men. This has an impact on the status of women who, despite laudable efforts, have managed to occupy a place of choice in local decision-making bodies.

Women's struggles in the peacebuilding process

Since 1998, after the start of a rebellion led by Laurent Désiré Kabila, women have been immersed in the law enforcement and security services and even in Mai-Mai resistance groups and movements in eastern DR Congo. Women joined the Mulelist movement or Mulelist rebellion (Bisimwa, 2019). This situation was observed in 1996, during the so-called war of liberation, and nowadays women are to be found in the Mai-Mai movements, armed groups and state armed forces. It should also be pointed out that the women and girls who joined Mai-Mai movements were known as «Merida», a special category of armed forces. The Merida were women who broke down the barriers erected by the Mai-Mai self-defence movement, whose mystical-religious beliefs did not allow women to join their movement because of their menstrual period. The women had agreed to get tattoos to conform to the standards of the movement.

The main reason why women and girls joined armed groups, law enforcement and security services was to combat the violence and rape they had suffered in their villages, the abduction and theft of cattle and the flight of their husbands, or in short, to put an end to the insecurity they experienced. In the context of this study, other women have not taken up arms or joined armed groups, but they have started to become activists in associations and pressure groups in order to see whether they can enter the peace arena, join political and administrative structures and play a part in local governance (Shukuru, 2019). The literature demonstrates and insists on the invisibility, discrimination and exclusion of women in the peacebuilding process. Despite the fact that women are excluded from peace negotiation tables, some of them try to participate or get involved in peacebuilding processes. What the literature has not yet said enough about in this field is that there are some women who actively participate in peace dialogues, political structures and inclusion in structures at customary level.

In this field, local peace committees have been set up, the majority of them women, who are taking action to help rebuild post-conflict society. Inter-ethnic committees have been set up to help overcome the barriers erected by the mono-sexist administrative apparatus, i.e. mainly men, the largely

male patriarchy and religion. It has to be said that these committees have helped women and other gender groups to develop the potential or capacity to act (empowerment) and the power to confront all the barriers erected by socio-cultural constructs. The creation of these peace committees has helped to build women's capacity, which in turn has enabled them to overcome all the obstacles.

The Uvira region is a society where patriarchy is part of the social tissue and where women are not free to speak in public, especially in the councils of elders. This has been reinforced not only by traditional norms and customs, but also by religious guidelines. In this case, then, it should be emphasised that there are women who participate in a cultural or discreet way in the peacebuilding process; they are not extremely visible, but they do and play these roles in a non-public environment.

State of the art and positioning of research

The east of the Democratic Republic of Congo is a region marked by a multi-dimensional war with multifactorial aetiology. Since the 1990s, this part of the country has been the stronghold of rebellions (AFDL, RCD, CNDP, M-23 I and II). These insurrectionary movements have been accompanied by the dynamics of inter-ethnic conflicts and the activism of local and foreign armed groups with tribal-ethnic connotations (Andrews, 2016; Berghezen, 2013; ADEPAE, ARAL & RIO, 2011). The factors at the root of politico-ethnic violence are structural (Battory & Vircoulon, 2019; Spittaels & Meynen, 2007). They are rooted in colonial and post-colonial history and the coveting of natural resources by neighbouring countries. This has given rise to the development of the political economy of war (Jacquemot, 2009; Van Acker & Vlassenroot, 2001; Berghezen & Zeebroek, 2011; Nasibu, 2004). This involves several internal and external state and non-state actors. Rebel mobilization is caused by competition for these resources.

Women and girls pay the price for the tragedy of predatory activities. They are raped, mutilated, murdered and massacred. Their bodies are used as battlefields and weapons of war (Baaz & Stern, 2011; RFDA, RFDP & AI, 2004). They are victims of economic and sexual exploitation and of total insecurity

in mining areas controlled by armed groups. Their rights severely harmed because of the culture of impunity and the gratification of torturers by political positions (Sheria, 2015; ACCORD, 2009). This structural violence takes place within decentralised and deconcentrated territorial entities. In this context, researchers encourage the paradigm of the victimisation of women in the suffering of war. They are seen as passive victims. This research is often commissioned by non-governmental development organisations and United Nations agencies. They help to convey an image of women as essentially victims, justifying an approach of victimisation of women and girls that is often reduced to sexual violence (Amnesty International, 2004; RFDA, RFDP & IA, 2004; Baaz & Stern, 2011). These studies emphasise that armed groups impede the peacebuilding process.

There is little research on women's participation in national and local peace talks in South Kivu province. Existing literature indicates that women's participation in the peace negotiation process is low. They remain largely excluded from these political processes. Peace talks are less inclusive. Women face not only socio-cultural, political and economic barriers, but also the persistence of a male culture, i.e. the patriarchal system. Wars and armed groups are perceived as an exclusively male affair. Women are excluded from local governance because of customary norms and the patriarchal organisation of political power from below. As women are not pioneers of armed groups, they are excluded from negotiating tables and their gender-specific needs are largely ignored (Odimba, Namegabe & Baseke, 2012). Starting with talks held in South Africa, by way of example, women represented 16% in Sun city and 13% in Pretoria when the Inclusive Global Agreement was signed in 2002. During this process, women's organisations (the *Rien sans les femmes* movement, women's forums and community protection committees) developed a number of strategies to participate in and carry out conflict transformation activities on the ground. They participate in civil society, but their efforts and tactics remain largely invisible and ignored in national and local literature. In the decentralised territorial entities, there is a proliferation of local conflicts, including land conflicts, armed group conflicts (Vlassenroot & Raeymaekers, 2004), and tribal conflict (Kitoka Moke, 2022), while women have limited access to the process of resolving local tensions. Those who assert their participation are perceived as 'outsiders'.

Methodological framework

This research was carried out in the town of Uvira and territory bearing the same name in the eastern part of the Democratic Republic of Congo, in the province of South Kivu. This part of the country has been plagued by war and armed conflict for more than two decades now. The empirical data for this study were collected in three chiefdoms in the Uvira territory, including the Lemera *groupement* (lower administrative category in a chiefdom) in the Bafuliiru chiefdom, the Kabindula *groupement* in the Bavira chiefdom and the Luburizi *groupement* in the Plaine de la Ruzizi chiefdom. In the town of Uvira, we gathered data in the mayor's office only because the town's three decentralized *communes* are not functional.

These data come from focus group discussions and observations of the activities carried out by these local peace committees, the «community protection committee» and the «women's forum», which have been working for a long time to consolidate peace at local level. The majority of these structures are made up of women from different tribes, religions, origins, professions and social classes. As part of this study, we met eight mixed local committees. These committees were formed on the initiative of women and men from different classes, ethnic groups, races and professions, having undergone certain training with non-governmental organisations. They are interested in promoting gender and peace and also focus on the socio-economic aspect, where we had the privilege of holding focus group discussions with these committees. The important thing here is that in each committee, there is diversity of thought among the women on the issue of peacebuilding, because they do not share the same religious convictions, do not have the

same levels of education and also do not have the same professions. This diversity of status among them leads them to have a different view of the issue of gender and women in conflict resolution. Each focus group was made up of eight to twelve people. We also conducted sixteen semi-directive interviews with the women in charge of these committees, the female heads of the gender department, commonly known as «Mama genre» in the gender, family and children offices of these administrative entities, and the heads of groupements and four civil society actors. We were also introduced by these committees to certain administrative authorities and local players who are in favour of integrating the gender approach into the peacebuilding and local governance process.

It is true that multiple women's and men's committees are involved in promoting peace, but these four were selected on the basis of socio-historical conditions and their actions in favour of peace and local governance. The actions of these committees are more visible in their communities as a result of the events they organise and the solutions they provide in the fight against insecurity.

These interviews were conducted with the committees and the individuals who agreed to provide us with all the necessary information on the socio-historical context of these committees, the personal trajectories of these women and how these committees have influenced the balance of power in the peacebuilding process.

Roles and operation of local peace committees

These structures play a very important role in the peacebuilding process in the town and territory of Uvira. These committees are seen as functional substitutes for community protection structures in the fight against violence. These structures function as consultative bodies in the development and monitoring of local programmes in local areas, in the fight against abuse, but also as a means of taking account of gender-specific needs in the event of a meeting or local security council.

In one interview, the respondent shows that the way these structures operate has changed the situation and influenced the gender balance of power insofar as the local authorities now feel indebted to the presence of certain categories represented by these peace committees. It is important to note that these local peace committees have become a reference model for resolving community conflicts. In certain conflict situations, notably family conflicts, gender-based violence and conflicts between herders and farmers, before going to the police as the authorised service, the people concerned are asked to go first to the local peace committee to try to resolve the conflict and restore peace, as is the case in Lemera and Luburizi.

It should be pointed out that these committees play a regulatory and transformative role within Uvirian society. They take concrete action just to keep society in balance:

1. These committees raise awareness about conflict resolution and social cohesion
2. Advocacy on women's rights through advocacy notes
3. Mediation and conflict resolution
4. Raising awareness among the wives of ex-combatants (demobilised) in the middle and high plateaux of Uvira, Fizi and Mwenga

The socio-historical conditions for the creation of these local peace committees occurred when gender equality was not respected in rural areas, but also when women could not intervene or take an interest in peacebuilding issues, and even less in conflict resolution, because the political and administrative environment of their entities was so masculine. Conflict resolution was, and still is, considered to be a men's issue, which took place and continues to take place in spaces where women and other groups are not allowed to be present. Now, with the creation of these local women's committees and the efforts they have made, these committees are taking part in the arena of talks and giving their views at local level.

Women who found the courage to join these local committees were frowned upon not only by society, but also by the political and administrative authorities and local leaders. Over time, the work done by these local women's committees has changed this trend, and they are now seen as women who contribute to peace by informing and training all sections of society on certain issues. In Lemera, for example, these women members of the local peace committees are known as «*Mukazi wa sheria*» or «women of the law», i.e. women who have mastered the concepts of human rights and in particular women's rights.

Deconstructing the normative discourse of gender equality

The creation of these local peace structures was seen as a way of saving society. Long before, women could not dare to participate or speak on behalf of their ethnic group because it did not have this recognition. A respondent

said that it is true that the discourse of victimisation of women was conveyed by certain associative movements and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) following the horrors of war experienced for more than two decades. The same respondent said that, in her opinion, this kind of talk keeps women in a bad position and keeps them weak. It is denigrating discourse that continues to diminish the power of women in peacebuilding.

Another respondent shows how these local peace committees have given a different image of women, whether in customary or urban entities, not that of a victimised, incapable, marginalised or excluded woman, but one who is capable, competent and a peacebuilder. The peace committees have become a space that has enabled their members to get out of the informal circle where they were hiding and to be seen within society through the actions they have taken. When women were too marginalised, the creation of these committees made it easier to review certain practices that were unfavourable to them. In the Lemera group, women were not allowed to attend one of the meetings run by the village elders.

It is important to point out that these women's paths or trajectories in the peacebuilding process are not to be overlooked; they have spent many years trying to attract the attention of the local authorities in particular and that of society in general. These structures have helped women to develop self-confidence, especially those women who are involved in peace structures at local level. The actions carried out (awareness-raising, advocacy, etc.) by these local peace committees have had an impact not only on the women who are members of the structures but also on women outside the structures in terms of their perception of the image of women, who for a long time were seen as something to be protected, a victim, a second-class category. In view of the contribution made by these local peace committees, it has to be said that the prejudices and stereotypes to which these women were subjected at the start of their mission no longer apply, since it is the members of society who encourage and push them in view of the actions carried out.

Speaking of gender equality in peacebuilding also means speaking of local governance, and it is worth pointing out that the presence of these structures has facilitated the promotion of women from different social classes, ethnic

groups, professions and other strata of society to participate and become involved in the management of the administrative apparatus at local level. As a result of the training received by the peace committees, their members are now appointed as village, avenue and even neighbourhood chiefs. This is the case in the Luburizi group, where three women were appointed village chiefs following their performance in peacebuilding activities. There has been a change in the balance of power, with women taking an active part in state structures and transcending the fears and limitations they experienced before the creation of these committees.

The integration of the gender approach in the management of administrative entities, especially in decision-making bodies, albeit at the lowest level, is a sign of satisfaction within these local peace committees. Women and other categories have become heads of neighbourhoods, heads of avenues and others have become heads of cells commonly known as ten houses, which is already a portion of power at local governance level. It should be pointed out that the awareness-raising carried out by these local peace committees has had a positive influence on the way women and other sections of society think and act, and on their willingness to take responsibility for rebuilding their post-conflict society.

The struggle for gender equality in peacebuilding in a patriarchal society is a question of awareness on the part of these women and men who have agreed to work together to restore peace and security in local governance. It is important to point out that the majority of these women do not have a high level of education or intellectual baggage, but rather an average level of education that enables them to get involved in this bold issue. These women members of the local peace committees are more active and feel more interested in social inclusion, especially peacebuilding and local governance.

At the level of power relations, these committees have influenced notions of the social roles and status that each citizen must play within society for development and security. Women have begun to participate in peacebuilding activities, which were once considered the sole preserve of men. The political and administrative authorities have realised that rebuilding a post-conflict society requires the participation and involvement of everyone.

In a discussion with one of the group leaders, he pointed out that there is a lot of confusion about gender and women. According to him, this confusion has been sown by certain non-governmental organisations via their field workers, especially in their villages. The discourse of women as victims risks continuing to put women in a position of inferiority. It should be made clear here that we need to deconstruct this discourse on gender as it relates to women. Deconstructing the normative discourse is a way of eliminating any form of confusion between «gender and woman», which has long been advocated by feminist associations in search of funding for their activities, and this is why the emancipation of women has been frowned upon by these bodies. This is why we say that gender mainstreaming in the peace process does not just mean the presence of women, but rather understanding the social relations between the sexes as constructed by society's beliefs about men and women, and taking account of the needs and experiences of women and men in peacebuilding. In short, women are considered in this study as an analytical and historical category of gender studies.

Women's participation in peacebuilding

The presence of these local peace committees has created space and facilitated the participation of women in the peacebuilding process and in local governance. Gender equality has been observed in the peace arenas at local level and has changed the configuration of women's status in the administrative apparatus. The setting up of these committees was made possible by an awareness of the exclusion of women and other categories of men in post-conflict peacebuilding and local governance. These committees were set up with the aim of challenging the patrilineal system, which was locked in by men alone.

These structures have influenced the balance of power within the decentralised territorial entities, in this case the three chiefdoms (Bafulliru, Bavira and Ruzizi Plain) and the town of Uvira, which is a decentralised territorial entity, these are entities with legal personality that can be managed by local authorities. They have financial autonomy. Of course, when important decisions are taken in these administrative entities, the local authorities call on the women members of these local peace committees to take part

in the meetings and also to take their proposals into account, something that was almost impossible before these committees appeared. These local peace committees have made it possible and easier to integrate the gender dimension into local governance, with women and men becoming heads of neighbourhoods and avenues (villages in Luburizi, Lemera and Kabindula), something that seemed impossible. It should be remembered that this study is being carried out in customary entities where the cultural norms are patrilineal. These structures have upset the balance of power and enabled the gender dimension to be taken into account in the peacebuilding process and in local governance. The peace committees have facilitated the presence of women and men of various categories on local peace councils, and have enabled women to take part in peacebuilding events.

It should also be recognised that the participation of women via these peace committees in peacebuilding and local governance has developed or created communication networks between women of different tribes (ethnic groups), origins, social classes and religions in order to safeguard their participation in peacebuilding. This communication network enables the members of these local peace committees to convey and/or share the information they need to continue establishing gender equality in the peace arenas and in the management of administrative entities. This communication makes it possible to share experiences in order to ensure the continuity of their activities and avoid the dislocation of the peace committees.

The contribution of local committees to peacebuilding

The local peace committees play a highly relevant role in that they participate in and contribute to peacebuilding through their actions in the field. Its members have succeeded in dismantling certain networks of criminals and kidnapers in the town and territory of Uvira. These committees have had time to train their members (women and men), who are now able to denounce any suspicious movement or any movement linking women and armed groups in the middle and high plateaux of Uvira. Before these committees were set up, several women were and/or were acting as a bridge between armed groups and members of their families. As a result of the awareness-raising carried out by these structures, it should be noted that

some women and young male leaders have disassociated themselves from the armed groups and networks of criminals.

These local peace committees have also developed another means by drafting advocacy notes to the responsible bodies, lobbying for the inclusion of all categories in the management of the administrative entity and, above all, in the consolidation of peace. Notwithstanding resistance to the acceptance of gender equality as an effective means of rebuilding post-conflict society, this lobby work has led to some women being invited to be part of the local security council and to take part in meetings on local development plans and programmes.

These local peace committees have become essential in conflict prevention and even in the resolution of gender-based violence and transhumance conflicts; before the authorised services intervene, these committees are called upon to do something about it. As a result, it has to be said, these committees have had to gain legitimacy within society and with the formal services. Over and above this, these structures are currently a major asset in the peacebuilding process at local level.

In our discussions with the women, a focus group participant said and confirmed that the creation of these committees has enabled them to make contact with the outside world (government departments). The activities carried out by these committees facilitate their communications with the authorities of the various public and private services. Beyond that, these committees have facilitated their emancipation and the acquisition of knowledge in certain areas, in particular law (raising awareness of women's rights), women's empowerment, women's leadership, and so on.

One of the women leaders of these committees told us that since she joined the community protection committee, she has been concerned about the problems in society that affect not only women but also men. She went on to say that most of the problems dealt with in the community, in Lemera, are male problems (theft, domestic violence, transhumance conflicts, etc.).

Conservative tendencies in relation to the gender approach

In addition to the legitimacy that these committees have gained from formal institutions, it should be pointed out here that the presence of women and some men on these committees is not well perceived by members of traditional and religious structures. There is a conservative tendency in these circles, which observes and protects so-called traditional values. For the latter, women who take part in the peacebuilding process deviate from the norms and values of society, and are therefore badly perceived by customary entities. For this trend, the role and place of women is not in the sphere where men are called upon to deal with community issues, but rather women must stay at home. As one female respondent said, women must follow the teachings of their faith and respect the norms of the culture to avoid dysfunction within society. For another male respondent, the presence of women in peacebuilding structures is a deviance that can be observed in some women's leaders, especially in rural areas.

For one of the civil society respondents, the gender dimension has been misinterpreted by certain women's movement structures, and this confusion is disrupting the lives of certain families, where women known as «leaders» have separated from their husbands, due to the misperception of the gender dimension in the local context.

The way in which they form committees with men shows and proves women's commitment to gender equality in the peace process and local governance. Women's emancipation and autonomy are not limited to training and seminars, but have become activities with concrete actions in these rural areas. These committees have enabled women and men, who had long been sidelined, to become players in the peace process and in the restoration of security.

The integration of the gender dimension into the peace process became possible thanks to the efforts of women, who thought of creating committees made up of women and men of different ethnicities, professions, religions, origins, intellectual capacity and social classes. Women in particular could not take part in local security councils in rural areas, given the local context. Today, they are contributing to peaceful cohabitation through their involvement in these peace committees.

As these committees are made up of women from different cultural backgrounds with different professional skills, they carry out all these activities on a voluntary basis. On the aspect of women's economic empowerment, these committees have made this meeting place a place for monthly contributions of a fixed amount, which enable them to make revolving credits to members. These loans give them the stability and financial autonomy to undertake their own income-generating activities. This enables them to respond directly to the primary needs of their households.

All the experience and knowledge they have acquired through their work on these committees comes up against the misperception of gender equality in a society marked by patriarchy. Some civil society actors are the defenders of traditional values and of customary norms who see gender equality not only as a threat to the patriarchal system but also as a deviation from traditional culture. For this conservative tendency, NGOs and women's associations only come to disrupt the social order and socio-cultural norms. The results of our surveys show that these women's committees operate mainly at local level. Although the women who work on them are frowned upon by conservatives, it should be pointed out that these committees work in the interests of society. From a personal point of view, these women have improved their status and social, economic and cultural living conditions.

They come up against a barrier: how to overcome customs and traditions in a society where patriarchal norms are at an all-time high?

Bibliographical references

- Andrews W. 2016. *Rebellions et contre rebellions en RDC 2002-2012*, Cahiers du Retex, coll. Recherche, Paris, CDEF.
- ACCORD. 2009. *Pour l'effectivité de la loi: un audit sur les pratiques judiciaires en matière de violence sexuelle en RDC*, Nairobi-Kenya.
- ADEPAE, ARAL et RIO 2011. *Au-delà des « groupes armés » conflits locaux et connexions sous-régionales. L'exemple de Fizi et Uvira (Sud-Kivu, RDC)*, Série des Grands Lacs, Life and Peace ;
- Amnesty International. 2004. *Mettre fin à la violence contre les femmes : un combat pour aujourd'hui*, Document public, Londres.
- Baaz M.E. et Stern M. 2011. *La Complexité de la violence. Analyse critique des violences sexuelles en République démocratique du Congo (RDC)*, Nordiska Afrika Institute.
- Bisimwa B.K. 2019. La participation des femmes et filles dans la résistance locale Maï-Maï en territoire d'Uvira (1997-2017) CERUKI-Bukavu.
- Battery J. et Vircoulon T. 2019. *La province du Sud-Kivu un champ de bataille multidimensionnel méconnu*, notes de l'IFRI.
- Bereni L. 2012. *Introduction aux études sur le genre*, Paris, 2e édition, De Boeck.
- Berghezen G. 2006. *Trafics d'armes : enquête de terrain au Kivu (RDC)*, Bruxelles, GRIP.
- Bergherzen G. et Zeebroek X. 2011. *Armes légères à l'est du Congo : enquête sur la perception de l'insécurité*, Ed. GRIP, Bruxelles, GRIP.
- Jacquemot P. 2009. *Ressources minières, armés et violences dans les Kivu (RDC)* In Herodote, La Découverte, 2009, n°154, pp.38-62, 26p. <https://www.cairn.info/revue-herodote-2009-3-page-38.htm>,
- Ballington J. 2011. *Promouvoir les rôles des femmes pour renforcer les partis politiques*, NDI, INDAF.
- Kitoka Moke M. 2022. *Identité territoriale et prolifération des groupes armés à Fizi*, RAID, Monange, Yaoundé.
- Maria Martin de Almagro. 2016. *Parcours croisés d'une internationalisation du militantisme féminin au Burundi et au Liberia*, Ed, Recherche féministes, Vol 29, N°2.
- Nasibu C.B. (2004), *Qui arm les Maï-Maï ? Enquête sur une situation originale*, GRIP, Bruxelles, GRIP,
- Odimba C., Namegabe P-R. et Baseke J. 2012. *La participation des femmes dans les processus de paix et la prise de décision politique en République démocratique du Congo*, International Alert, juillet 2012.
- RFDA, RFDP et IA. 2004. *Le corps des femmes comme champ de bataille durant la guerre en République démocratique du Congo. Violences sexuelles contre les femmes et les filles au Sud-Kivu (1996-2003)*.

- Sheria J. 2015. « Femmes du Sud-Kivu, Victimes et Actrices en situation de conflit et post-conflit » In Herodote La découverte, n°158, 2015, pp.182-199.
<https://www.cairn.info/revue-herodote-2015-3-page-182.htm>
- Spittaels S. et Meynen N. 2007. *Cartographie des intérêts dans les zones de conflit : le cas du Katanga*, IPIS .
- Shukuru Shemitalo, L. 2019. L'implication des femmes dans la résolution du conflit ethnique dans la plaine de la Ruzizi,
<https://www.galda-verlag.de/product-tag/la-resolution-du-conflit-ethnique/>
- Van Acker F. et Vlassenroot K. 2001. « Les Mai-Mai et les fonctions de la violence milicienne dans l'est du Congo » In *Politique africaine*, Ed. Karthala, n°84, pp.103-116.
<https://www.cairn.info/revue-politique-africaine-2001-4-page-103.htm>
- Vlassenroot K. & Raeymaekers T. 2004. *Conflit et transformation sociale à l'Est de la RD Congo*, Conflit Research Group,
- Yatala Constantain. 2012. *L'Infra-constitutionalité matérielle du principe de la parité Homme-Femme en Droit Congolais*, SD-SL.

