

New gender justice film highlights sexual violence in Eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo

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The Women's Initiatives for Gender Justice, together with six Congolese partners and WITNESS, are launching today the gender justice advocacy video ***Our Voices Matter – Congolese Women Demand Justice and Accountability***. The film, which was also privately screened for the Minister of Justice and Human Rights, Ms Wivine Mumba Matipa, is publicly launched today at an event attended by representatives of the Congolese Government, the UN, the diplomatic missions and the media at Grand Hôtel in Kinshasa.

Our Voices Matter features women and girls victims/survivors of rape and sexual violence from North Kivu, South Kivu and Province Orientale, who have come forward to tell their stories. Through their testimonies, this 25-minute advocacy video highlights the multiplicity of perpetrators operating in Eastern DRC, the lack of accountability for these crimes, and the medical services, psychosocial assistance and livelihood support urgently needed by victims/survivors.

'This video is one more call to bring the attention to the fact that women continue to pay a high price for the persistent insecurity in the East of the DRC' said Ms Stella Yanda, Executive Secretary of *Initiatives ALPHA*, Women's Initiatives' key partner in South Kivu and one of the producers of the film. 'We strongly hope that the voices of the survivors giving their testimonies in this film will convince decision-makers in the DRC, including the Government, to stop violence against women by working in an efficient and sustainable way on the roots causes of the insecurity in the East of the country'.

Since 1996, several armed groups, including local and foreign militia groups, armies from neighbouring countries, and the DRC national army, have been operating in the resource-rich Eastern provinces of the country. Women and girls are paying a particularly high price in the context of this instability - thousands have been subjected to rape and other forms of sexual and gender-based violence, committed by all parties taking part in the hostilities.

The Women's Initiatives for Gender Justice has been working in Eastern DRC since 2006, and currently has 120 direct partners and members in the Eastern provinces of the country, as well as three focal points.

'Since the beginning of our activities in Eastern DRC in 2006, we have engaged with our partners in the documentation of gender-based crimes, direct assistance and support to victims/survivors, analysis and critique of the March 2009 Goma Peace Agreements, and close monitoring of the security situation and political dynamics,' Ms Vanina Serra, Programme Officer of the Women's Initiatives for Gender Justice, said. 'The testimonies in *Our Voices Matter* echo the hundreds of experiences we have recorded through our documentation and victim/survivor support programmes, which we have developed together with our partners in the region' she added.

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‘Accountability for those committing gender-based crimes is rare,’ said Ms Serra. ‘While existing laws in the DRC criminalize rape and sexual violence, perpetrators are usually not prosecuted and, when they are, sentences may not be implemented. For those who are imprisoned, escapes are common’ she said. ‘As one of the women in *Our Voices Matter* describes, even important initiatives such as the mobile gender courts that have tried military personnel for rape can be undermined when sentences are not enforced and compensation is not provided. The testimonies in this video are a strong call to the recently formed Government to fully and urgently implement the National Strategy to End Violence Against Women and to provide victims/survivors with the necessary medical, psychosocial and economic assistance.’

The film *Our Voices Matter* is part of a larger initiative between Women’s Initiatives for Gender Justice and WITNESS to produce six gender justice advocacy videos highlighting sexual and gender-based violence and other gender issues in armed conflicts, fragile states and post-conflict environments, where the Women’s Initiatives and its partners have established programs and networks.

Since the beginning of this joint initiative in 2010, more than 30 of Women’s Initiatives’ partners from the CAR, the DRC, Uganda, Kenya and Kyrgyzstan, all of them women’s human rights and peace advocates, have participated in a series of video advocacy trainings and subsequently were able to film, conduct interviews and co-edit the videos. As part of this initiative, in 2011, six of Women’s Initiatives for Gender Justice’s Congolese partners conducted interviews with victims/survivors of sexual and gender-based crimes and, with the help of the Women’s Initiatives and WITNESS, developed their stories into the film being launched today.

The video will also be screened in the East of the country to communities and local decision-makers.

‘Everyone must be involved in the effort to stop sexual and gender-based crimes from happening and to provide victims/survivors with the necessary support’ said Claudine Bela Badeaza, Director of the *Centre d’éducation et recherche sur les droits des femmes*, and Women’s Initiatives’ focal point in Province Orientale. ‘Gender-based crimes are often trivialised. As is made clear by the testimonies in the video, these courageous women seeking accountability for rape and sexual violence are often not taken seriously and are ostracised by their communities’ she added. ‘It is time to stop these crimes from happening. It is time to recognise that our voices do matter’.

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