

An inclusive approach to
peacekeeping in the DRC



BY NADINE PUECHGUIRBAL

PEACEKEEPING

women and peacekeeping

in Democratic Republic of Congo: towards a common goal

The Office of Gender Affairs (OGA) in the United Nations Mission in the Democratic Republic of Congo (MONUC) started to operate in March 2002. As part of its core functions, the OGA is working to “ensure that gender is mainstreamed within design, implementation, promotion and monitoring of the mission’s policies and programmes” and “advise the mission on strategies to facilitate the involvement of local women, groups and networks in the peace process including reconstruction, reconciliation and rehabilitation and other processes leading to sustainable peace”.¹

Within the framework of its mandate, the OGA has worked to integrate a gender perspective into the peacekeeping mission, based on a twofold strategy. Drawing on Security Council Resolution

1325 (2000) and MONUC Resolution 1445 (2002)², the OGA adopted an internal strategy to monitor gender mainstreaming in MONUC’s programmes and activities, as well as an external strategy to act as an interface with civil society, including women’s groups, as well as UN agencies, international NGOs and the government.³

Working closely with the MONUC Political Affairs Division and the Military Observers, the OGA has aimed to ensure that they interact with different groups of civil society in their daily work. Gender-sensitive check-lists were introduced to assist political affairs officers and military observers in interviewing both men and women about security, political or military events, the local situation, and so on. This is due to the fact that women remain a largely untapped resource,



invisible because they are not recognised as a reliable source of information.⁴ This observation led the OGA to improve the gender training package that is delivered to peacekeepers by inviting representatives of civil society, mainly women's groups, to participate in the training sessions, thus facilitating exchanges between the mission and the population of its host country.

In addition to the work of the MONUC Political Affairs Division and Military Observers, it has also been critical to ensure a gender-sensitive approach to providing humanitarian assistance

and protecting women's human rights. Congolese women and girls have been sexually abused by different armed groups throughout the country. Several reports have emphasised the gravity of the situation, particularly in the East.⁵ The Olame Centre in Bukavu, a local NGO and member of the Coalition on Violence Against Women, is one place where rape victims can

find help and support. The centre provides counselling services, trauma healing as well as health and humanitarian assistance – provided resources are available. Many of the victims arrive at the centre almost naked, with serious psychosocial and health problems. Some had been used as sex slaves by the fighting forces and went into hiding in the

forest after running away. Often, the victims' children had been sexually abused too. OGA has highlighted the need to support and strengthen local initiatives such as the Olame Centre in order to help women victims of sexual violence. But beyond this immediate support, it is also of the highest importance to fight impunity and hold those responsible for the forced recruitment and gender-based violence accountable for these crimes, as recommended in the Report of the Secretary-General on women, peace and security.⁶

Women have also largely been ignored in the Disarmament, Demobilisation and Reintegration (DDR) programmes in several countries trying to come to terms with war. An area of concern for the OGA is the situation of the Congolese 'wives' who used to live with foreign soldiers and were left behind when the troops withdrew. MONUC human rights, humanitarian and child protection officers have reported that some 150 Congolese women and children were abandoned in the northern town of Gbadolite by Ugandan soldiers, and have been refused entry to Uganda. A local NGO, Action pour la Protection et l'Encadrement de l'Enfant, is providing some food for children, but in most cases, the women and their children are without means.

Women are not only victims: they are also agents of change in the post-conflict phase leading to the rehabilitation of the country. Congolese women have been involved in the different steps of the peace and political process, receiving support from UNIFEM, UNDP and international women's groups such as Femmes Afrique Solidarité. Following the signature of the Global and Inclusive Peace Agreement in Pretoria on 16 December 2002, different women's networks active at the grassroots level decided to join forces and advocate for the implementation of the agreement and the full participation of women in the political institutions. In January 2003, Congolese women from all political parties and affiliations organised a peaceful demonstration in Kinshasa to advocate for the peace process in the context of the Inter-Congolese Dialogue. Around 10 000 demonstrators took to the streets chanting slogans such as, "Women request 30% of seats in all transitional institutions in line with Resolution 1325". As part of its outreach activities, the OGA provided

"Women are not only victims:
they are also agents of
change in the post-conflict
phase leading to the
rehabilitation of the country."

support to these women's groups to build their capacity and foster leadership that goes beyond their different political affiliations.⁷

Women have to lead an uphill battle to gain access to decision-making positions in the transitional government and be part of the country's reconstruction and the preparation of future elections. It is important that they remain vigilant with respect to the full implementation of the Sun City resolutions that were adopted as part of the Inter-Congolese Dialogue. For instance, as stated in the Sun City resolutions, the Humanitarian, Social and Cultural Commission puts special emphasis on emergency programmes in different social sectors, calling for special efforts with regard to the school enrolment of girls, the abrogation of laws and customs that are discriminatory towards women and the participation of 30% women in all decision-making bodies at the national level.⁸ One of the resolutions recommended by the Humanitarian, Social and Cultural Commission is to create an independent Observatoire National des Droits de l'Homme (National Human Rights Observatory) with the aim of strengthening the protection of women and children and fighting against all forms of gender-based violence.

In addition to those mechanisms, article 51 of the transitional constitution requests the government to attend to the elimination of all forms of discriminations against women and ensure that their rights are respected and promoted. The article further requests the government to take appropriate measures to ensure that women become involved in the economic, social and cultural fields and are represented within national, provincial and local institutions. Finally, article 51 calls on the government to take all necessary measures to fight against all forms of violence targeting women in both the public and private spheres. Drawing on elements contained in the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), article 51 provides Congolese women with a constitutional tool for the protection and promotion of their rights during the transitional period, thus paving the way for the preparation of the coming elections and the post-transitional phase. It remains to be seen whether these tools and mechanisms will be effectively applied and will assist the women in asserting their basic rights.

As renewed efforts for sustainable peace in the DRC are under way, the OGA will continue to assist the different groups of Congolese women in finding mechanisms to channel their concerns, and press for the implementation of the provisions agreed to in the peace negotiations. Congolese women must sustain their efforts, and pull their strengths together for a unified goal so that their expertise can benefit in the reconstruction of their country. As UNIFEM Executive Director Noleen Heyzer said during her visit in the DRC in May 2003, "Women have extensive experience in reconciliation within their communities, in the provision of basic services after war, and in rebuilding their families. But rarely are their perspectives and insights utilised in negotiation and peace building. Societies pay a huge price for ignoring the proven abilities of women to forge agreements."⁹

Nadine Puechguirbal was a Gender Affairs Officer at the OGA in MONUC until 1 May 2003. The views expressed herein are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the United Nations.

Endnotes

- 1 MONUC, Office of Gender Affairs, 'Activities report from the Office of Gender Affairs (OGA) in the United Nations Organization Mission in the Democratic Republic of Congo (MONUC)', Kinshasa, 10 January 2003.
- 2 In Resolution 1445 (2002), point 12, the Security Council calls on MONUC to "pay special attention in carrying out its mandate to all aspects relating to gender perspective, in accordance with resolution 1325".
- 3 OGA activities report, 2003.
- 4 See UNIFEM Independent Experts' Assessment on the Impact of Armed Conflict on Women and Women's Role in Peace-Building, 2002, p 9.
- 5 See for example, Human Rights Watch, 'The War within the War: Sexual Violence against Women and Girls in Eastern Congo', June 2000; MONUC Bukavu, Human Rights Section, 'Status Report: Sexual Violence in South Kivu', October 2002.
- 6 Report of the Secretary-General on Women, Peace and Security (16 October 2002), p III. International legal framework, recommendations, p 4.
- 7 The OGA disseminated Resolution 1325 (2000) and the Nairobi Declaration in the four official languages of the DRC.
- 8 The Sun City resolutions were adopted following the recommendations from five different commissions: Political and Legal Commission; Defence and Security Commission; Peace and Reconciliation Commission; Economic and Financial Commission; Humanitarian, Social and Cultural Commission.
- 9 UNIFEM Press Release, 'UNIFEM Director to meet with Government leaders in the Democratic Republic of Congo to urge for immediate protection of women and girls in the DRC', 19 May 2003.