

Women's Protection in DRC

DRC has been affected by long-standing conflict since 1996, which has exacerbated the country's poverty crisis and has left millions of people displaced. Armed groups continue to cause insecurity and population displacement in eastern DRC with persons from North and South Kivu in particular being forced to flee their homes in search of protection and livelihoods. Women and children among displaced and host communities are the most exposed to life threatening forms of gender-based violence (GBV).

In line with conflict, the Covid-19 pandemic, the prevalence of cholera, and the Nyirangongo volcanic eruption on May 2021 and its subsequent earthquakes have contributed to the complexity of the humanitarian situation in DRC. Women's inequality in DRC persists in this broader context, with DRC ranking 150 out of 162 on the UN's 2020 Gender Inequality Index, as women are often restricted to traditional care-taking roles due to lack of access to education, discriminatory attitudes toward women, and a lack of economic rights such as land and inheritance rights.

At this stage 1.88 billion USD is required for humanitarian response plans in DRC for 2022 – less than 0.2% goes to GBV support and less than 1% of that goes to WROs.

In response to this, ActionAid DRC has been working since 1987 with women's community groups centering the women-led community-based protection approach, which builds upon ActionAid's feminist, human rights-based model of protection in emergencies. Disasters, humanitarian crises and conflicts have a disproportionate effect on women and girls. It is why in a humanitarian context, ActionAid works with women and their organisations living within the communities affected to mitigate the impact and ensure they lead the process of their own recovery and build resilience in the longer term. AA DRC therefore uses humanitarian crises as opportunities to support wider system change for a global humanitarian system more accountable to those most affected. Specifically, the approach aims to build women's individual and collective power, transform systems and structures, and strengthen access to rights, services and resources. Women are trained to be facilitators of a series of practical tools, which can be used to identify protection risks and solutions, as well as advocating for their rights at local and government levels through structuring and presenting their needs and concerns.

ActionAid's Feminist Approach to Protection in Emergencies

Guiding Principles:

Women-led

Providing space and equipping diverse women and girls to have a lead role and decision making in the humanitarian response.

Community-based

Applying a rights based approach where the community meaningfully participates and is recognised as an agent for change, not a passive beneficiary.

Transformative

Addressing root causes to affect long-term and lasting change.

Holistic

Recognising that wellbeing, safety and the realisation of rights require a range of programme options and service providers, and facilitating these linkages.

Non-linear

Responding across the humanitarian/development nexus, as and when the opportunity arises for preparedness, response and resilience building.

Intersectional

Analysing converging axes of oppression that compound vulnerability for women of diverse backgrounds (e.g race, class, disability, SOGI) and applying this information to ensure effective targeting and accessible services and support.

This is one approach that sits alongside other INGO protection programming in DRC, however it has not been the focus or the approach taken by the consortium in this project.

¹ [ActionAid \(2020\) Creating lasting impact: The power of women-led localised responses to Covid-19](#)

² [ActionAid \(2020\) Humanitarian Funding, Partnerships and Coordination in the COVID-19 crisis: Perspectives from local women-led organisations and women's rights organisations](#)

³ Research was undertaken in 2021 in North Kivu (in Goma and the villages of Shasha and Bweremana) and in South Kivu (Kabare Territory).

⁴ As part of a consortium of organisations in DRC, the Centre d'Etude et de Promotion en Interventions Socio-Economiques (CEPRISE), the Institut National Des Arts (INA), and the international non-governmental organisation ActionAid.

⁵ [UNFPA \(2019\) GBV in the Democratic Republic of the Congo: Key Facts and Priorities of humanitarian actors](#)

⁶ [Global Fund for Women \(2015\) Women's Groups in the DRC are Demanding Justice](#)

⁷ [OCHA \(2022\) The 2022 Humanitarian Response Plan requires US\\$1.88 billion to support the most vulnerable](#)

Research Findings and Roundtable Discussion on Women Leader's Participation and Leadership

The IDS research findings and the ActionAid, CEPRISE and IDS roundtable discussion looked at the practices of women's participation and leadership in protection programming in the provinces of North and South Kivu in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and examined the various norms at multiple levels (global, national and local) that are used to prevent and respond to various forms of gender-based violence. The key discussion points included:

Longstanding inequalities and patriarchal customs have negatively affected gender norms and women's protection in DRC. Protection concerns, mainly gender-based violence, in the forms of sexual and domestic violence, have been exacerbated by the conflict, with the research findings showcasing increases in child marriage as well as kidnapping. These, despite an increased awareness of how protection concerns have manifested in DRC, have persisted to this day due to the strong link with patriarchal and harmful gender norms. Such norms are linked to customary traditions around women's roles within the family to stay at home, and the limited opportunities women have to access decision-making platforms, at community level and in other formal spaces. For example, in 2022 women only occupy 7.2% of positions at the highest level of decision-making in parliament and government⁸. These norms have perpetuated a culture of silence around gender-based violence in DRC.

Against this backdrop of entrenched patriarchal norms, recurring humanitarian crises and a 20-year-old conflict, there is a need to better understand the key factors at the community level which promote restraint and the de-escalation of violent environments, and the role women can play in such processes – customary notions on women's protection are not static and can be used by women to secure protection against violence. Aligned with ActionAid's feminist approach to protection⁹, the research found that women-led groups can strengthen the individual and collective protection of women. As they mobilise efforts, women's groups provide opportunities for women to build individual capacities and collectively discuss threats they face. By doing so, they are able to serve as forums to discuss protection strategies that can best be informed and led by women's protection needs at the community level. Women are able to understand and present their rights within Congolese law and conduct collective advocacy in different social spheres - for example at the

family level, but also when speaking to state authorities, the police and at times the military and armed actors - in this way they are able to contribute to wider social transformations, expanding women's access to protection structures, advocating for changes to discriminatory gender norms and tackling the backlash faced by women who take on leadership roles.

Approaches that are built on un-evidenced conceptions and strategies that are largely external to the contexts in which they are implemented are often short-lived, inefficient, or can expose women to further risks – such as any unintended backlash when women take on leadership roles, both domestically or in the community. It is essential, therefore, for protection approaches to build on the protection strategies that are used and deployed by women in their daily lives and local forms of knowledge, especially that held by women, and to prioritise strategies that have proved successful in such contexts. This requires a transformative and holistic approach to protection that frames women as agents of change within the context they live in – understanding and focusing on the contextual structural factors more broadly, such as combining protection concerns in line with ongoing social norms, and therefore tackling other issues such as economic empowerment, poverty or other forms of vulnerability around inheritance and displacement which affect the rights of women and girls living in conflict.

Alliance-building amongst existing networks and women-led organisations is vital in this regard. Holistic protection approaches which work with the community as allies to women leaders is a first step in transforming gender norms. Supporting women-led organisations' core and internal capabilities, beyond their role simply as beneficiaries or service providers will also support INGOs and donors to develop risk-sharing strategies that ensure protection strategies mitigate against forms of backlash and social marginalisation. To do this, protection programming should be led and designed by women leaders, who are best placed to examine and assess the risks, threats and also capacities to mitigate against them. This is the most meaningful way to ensure effective financing, coordination and the role of WROs as key actors in protecting their human rights, leading humanitarian action and strengthening their economic resilience through their community protection strategies.

⁸ [UN Women \(2022\)](#)

⁹ [ActionAid International \(2022\) Safety with Dignity](#)

Key Policy Recommendations

The government of DRC and the international community working in DRC should continue to collaborate with local organisations, particularly women-led and women's-rights organisations (WROs) who are already responding and active in the country. These organisations are best positioned to assist communities during conflict, and/or mitigate against indirect risks caused by conflict. WROs have an understanding of how the 20-year conflict in DRC has led to long-term challenges around humanitarian access and entrenched harmful gender norms, which have affected women and girls in DRC, specifically those internally displaced, which the research highlighted are particularly vulnerable to protection risks.

WROs have an understanding of the wider contexts of pervasive gender-based violence in DRC and can help to identify entry points for transforming discriminatory norms, attitudes and practices – with the need to shift from simply responding to GBV, to include work that prevents GBV and allows WROs and WLOs to meaningfully prepare for and lead future humanitarian responses. To do this our recommendations look to:

To the Government of DRC:

- 1. Increase the representation and decision-making power of a diverse group of women and WROs** at the community, territorial and provincial level. Health zones with territorial or commune levels must be reconstituted to ensure effective women representation in grassroots decision-making spaces. This can be done by the creation of new women's groups or through collaboration with existing women's protection groups in DRC. These groups can identify barriers to women's participation in public and political life such as those facing indigenous women, women with disabilities, women IDPs, rural women, and women from ethnic, cultural or religious minority groups.
- 2. Invest in and fund awareness-raising initiatives** that focus on women's rights, shifting power, gender roles and norms to challenge discriminatory social norms. These activities can take place in dedicated safe spaces for women and girls, and as a part of wider community initiatives that work with men and boys. There is a need to shift from only responding to GBV, and to ensure protection work includes prevention of GBV.
3. Implement the **legal frameworks** that exist within **DRC on Women's Protection**, such as the Democratic Republic of the Congo's Law Relative to Sexual Violence (2006) and to fully meet the indicators and activities of the Women Peace and Security National Action Plan (2019-2022).
4. Take practical measures to enhance the **effectiveness and accountability** of the security and justice providers. To do this:

- Increase the funding modalities for the security and judicial structures.
- Strengthen the professionalism of the security forces to improve criminal justice, by enhancing the accountability mechanisms, and ensuring increased oversight of activities.
- Strengthen the role of legal and judicial institutions in control of security institutions and improve the management and administration of the judiciary.
- Increase mechanisms to report and file concerns by holding consultations with women and girls in communities to understand the barriers preventing women's access to these systems.

To humanitarian actors (such as INGOs working in DRC):

1. Ensure that **gender-conflict analysis** is undertaken in all humanitarian programming in DRC, to allow for adequate response and support for awareness raising initiatives on discriminatory gender norms that negatively impact women and girls. Gendered emergency response plans in the region should be in place at the onset of any response, and be updated regularly as the programme response evolves.
2. Ensure **risk analysis** is included in all protection approaches, which examines the risks, threats, vulnerabilities and capacities of any protection programming, and how to mitigate them by working in collaboration with women leaders in these contexts.
- 3. Promote alliance building between women-led and women's-rights groups' partners** to enable sharing collective strategies for community resilience building. This will also support in collective information sharing and mitigation strategies against security concerns.
4. **Support the documentation of WROs and WLOs' stories of change**, to support their own institutional capacity building. These can be used as examples to apply for funding directly, or for advocacy purposes.

To Donors and International Governments:

1. Ensure adequate funding and programme support is provided for GBV prevention and response as an essential element of in-country programming work.
2. Provide flexible funding streams directly to WROs and WLOs. Local women's groups are often only funded as service providers, without funding for their own training, core costs or sustainability in the long-run.

Changing the world
with **women and girls**
act:onaid



This brief was written by Niki Ignatiou, in collaboration with Jeremy Allouche, Irene Hamuli, Cecile Kasoki, Gauthier Marchais, Camille Maubert, Penelope Neves, Anna Parke, Ellie Shillito, and Saani Yakubi.

November 2022

 @ActionAidUK  @ActionAidUK  ActionAidUK www.actionaid.org.uk

ActionAid is a charitable company limited by guarantee and registered in England and Wales (Company number 01295174). England and Wales charity number 274467, Scottish charity number SC045476. Registered office 33–39 Bowling Green Lane, London EC1R 0BJ.