Project Title: **EMPOWERING WOMEN VICTIMS OF SEXUAL EXPLOITATION IN DRC**

Summary

In October 2006, the Network Women Program of the Open Society Institute approved a grant of $28,140.00 to Association des Jeunes pour le Developpement Integre – Kalundu for a period of one year (Dec 1, 2006 – Dec 1, 2007).

The project goal is to build and strengthen the capacity and leadership potential of demobilized girl soldiers and other women affected by war in the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

Participants in the project included 25 women including: 15 former girl soldiers, 5 female victims of sexual violence and 5 female members of our Village Committee for Child Protection. These women were from different villages throughout Uvira and Fizi territories. During a 3-days workshop (Feb 1-3) these participants were trained in conducting in-village advocacy, monitoring women rights violations and managing Income Generating Activities (IGA).

As a result of their advocacy, from July – September three women have been released from arrest by local military commanders, and these women continue to be able to work for other women and the community in general in their villages.

This is an unprecedented achievement; it is the first time these illiterate women are able to advocate and take action against domination and against ongoing violation of their rights. By breaking the silence, by standing-up, they have broken the myth. They are showing that women have the same abilities that men do.

A follow-up mechanism has been initiated by the staff in collaboration with the team leader of the women. This will help to support these women and to deal with some challenges in their work: capacity to keep-up, resistance to intimidation, making sure the management of the IGA is effective, etc.

The advocacy work demands the full commitment of the women, this is the reason why Income Generating Activities (IGA) have been initiated in order to provide women advocates with means to overcome their financial needs and so allow for their sustainability. This is the way to create the possibility that this project can be a long term project. To this end, 6 cows, 48 goats and 2 sewing machines and kerosene have been central to the strategy to overcome to economic needs. Income generated by these activities and resources will support operational costs for advocacy and the office needs of the committee of women.

This first ever experience has yielded encouraging lessons:

- Victim women can be good advocates if they're empowered/enabled

- Working with grassroots committees of women is essential to seed the organizational culture of women and to strengthen their capacity
- Women are potential actors for resolving conflicts in their community, and may be incontrovertible in their role in any conflict resolution schema, despite socio-cultural considerations.

By enabling women to advocate for and by themselves, a tension may be created in the conservative Eastern DRC community, where cultural norms and attitudes are very discriminatory against women. But for this new world, where human rights violations have been "gendered", its make sense to encourage women to stand up and protect themselves by protecting their rights, while still retaining the necessity that this is a matter for the whole community.

Difficulties

Working in villages, where the power is in the hands of military and other militia groups, is not easy for the vulnerable groups who encounter safety and security concerns. However, we should develop some strategy and mechanism of protection for these women advocates.

Recommendations

- A special training on Safety and Security should be done in order to help these women advocates to overcome to safety and security issues.
- To extend the project and to involve other victims from other villages, in order to fully cover the entire Uvira region
- To initiate meetings and experience/knowledge with other women groups (such as development women committee) in order to share experience and knowledge on the advocacy of women.

Done in New York, December 15, 2007

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