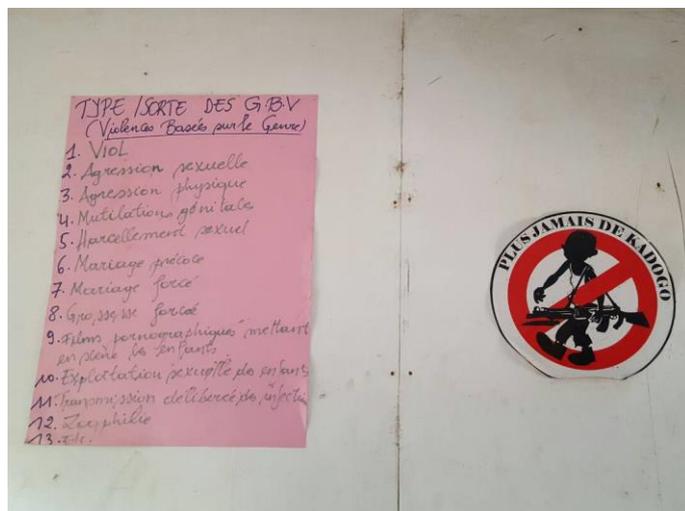


## UNITED IN THE FIGHT AGAINST SEXUAL VIOLENCE IN NORTH KIVU

### The widespread use of sexual violence in North-Kivu



*Listening house of Nyabiondo, Masisi Territory, North Kivu Province (Photo credit: OCHA/Elodie Sabau)*

The Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) is not only famous for its amazing multifaceted diversity and incredible richness. It is also tragically known for the widespread use of rape and other forms of sexual violence observed nationwide, notably as a weapon of war. In this country ravaged by over twenty years of conflict, [UNWomen](#) estimates that **over 1 million women have been raped**. Up until now, most of them are victims of armed groups or militia. As part of a recent assessment and monitoring mission, the [DRC Humanitarian Fund](#) visited a project implemented by the international NGO [Hope in Action](#) in Masisi and Walikale territories, North Kivu. The purpose of this USD 600,000 project launched in June 2015 is to prevent and respond to sexual violence through community resilience. During this field mission, the DRC Humanitarian Fund met with survivors of sexual violence as well as men and women who do their best to support them and prevent further sexual violence.

### A safe haven for survivors

We started the visit in Nyabiondo, Masisi Territory, where we met Anne and Colette who are both counsellors to survivors of sexual violence at the counselling centre. Anne and Colette told us how their adventure started in 2013 when Hope in Action trained them to become counsellors as part of a previous project. When asked why they decided to volunteer at the counselling centre, they both expressed their desire “to be involved in the fight to curb the prevalence of sexual violence within [their] community”. Since 2015, every day of the week, except Sundays, the three friends voluntarily take turns from 08:00 am to 03:00 pm to support and lend their compassionate ears to survivors.

In Masisi and Walikale territories, most survivors are assaulted while they work in the fields or fetch water. Some of them immediately seek assistance at the counselling centre or at the health center where they receive a post exposure prophylaxis (PEP) kit. If taken within 72 hours following the assault, the kit prevents them from developing sexually transmitted diseases which they may have contracted as a result of the assault.

In April 2016, Hope in Action started to support income-generating activities to improve the resilience of survivors. The NGO helps them rent a field, provides them with seeds to grow and cultivate their own crops as a source of profit and for their own consumption. Income generated by the sale of their crops helps them feed their families, send their children to school and start their own business.

Since April 2016, 120 women have benefited from these activities supported by Hope in Action and



*Anne and Colette at the listening house in Nyabiondo, Masisi Territory, North Kivu Province (Photo credit: OCHA/Elodie Sabau)*

funded by the DRC Humanitarian Fund. We spoke with ten of these beneficiaries. 63-year-old Nana is the oldest survivor we met. On the day of our visit, she walked 15 km to come talk to us about her experience as a survivor and beneficiary. “I received financial assistance from Hope in Action to help me start selling charcoal at the local market. Now, thanks to the profit I make, I eat three meals per day and can meet my basic needs as well as those of my family,” rejoiced Nana. Then, 39-year old Renée told us how she was given the opportunity to cultivate a field and sell the harvest at the market. “Thanks to this activity, I own and cultivate my own field and sell vegetables at the local market. Now, I can feed myself and my children and send them to school”, explained Zoena.

**“I now eat three meals per day and can meet the basic needs of my family”**

### **Men and women united against sexual violence**



*Community members who promote good fatherhood in Nyabiondo, Masisi Territory, North Kivu Province (Photo credit: OCHA/Elodie Sabau)*

villages. We met with a group of such active men who told us about their experience in the promotion of good fatherhood. Le Grand and Jackson, two 30-year old fathers and husbands, told us how the training changed their perception of their role as husbands and fathers. They both admitted that prior to the training, they ruled over their household with an iron fist without leaving any room for discussion with their spouse and children. “The training really contributed to opening our minds and understanding the importance and benefits of considering ourselves as part of a family that functions best as a collaborative team rather than as a dictatorship”, explained Le Grand. “I noticed a positive change in my husband’s behavior towards me, notably during our sexual intercourse. Before the training, he never used to ask for my consent,” admitted 25-year old Adeline.

**“I noticed a positive change in my husband’s behavior towards me, notably during sexual intercourse”**

Then we drove to the neighboring village of Loashi, Masisi Territory, to meet Espérance and visit the health center where she works as the head nurse. Hope in Action provides crucial support to the center. Among other things, the NGO provides antiretroviral medicine, post-exposure prophylaxis (PEP) kits, maternity and baby kits, a mill to process the survivors’ crops and US\$ 50 dollars each month for the sound functioning of the center. Three women and seven community leaders actively inform the population of the free healthcare provided to survivors of sexual violence at the health center thanks to the DRC Humanitarian Fund. Since the beginning of

Anne and Colette regret that some survivors do not seek assistance out of fear of stigmatization and rejection by their husbands if they find out about their ordeal. “In some cases, we hear of a sexual assault and visit the survivor if the security situation allows it. Then we do the utmost to convince her to come with us to seek medical assistance at the health center”, explained Colette.

Everywhere in DRC, one of the main obstacles to the fight against sexual violence is precisely the taboo that surrounds it and the way many men see survivors as responsible for their plight rather than as victims. As such, Hope in Action places the active involvement of men at the center of its strategy to raise awareness and prevent further acts of sexual violence. The NGO offers trainings that help men change their perception of sexual violence and survivors. Those most motivated by the trainings even decide to become community relays and conduct awareness-raising activities notably through radio programs in Nyabiondo and neighboring



*Espérance, head nurse at the Loashi Health Center, Masisi Territory, North Kivu Province (Photo credit: OCHA/Elodie Sabau)*

the project, a total of 620 survivors of sexual violence received medical assistance through Hope in Action in several villages of Masisi and Walikale territories.



*Mill funded by the DRC Humanitarian Fund in Loashi, Masisi Territory, North Kivu Province (Photo credit: OCHA/Elodie Sabau)*

At the end of our interview with Espérance, we went to visit Delphine and Magali who both volunteer at the counselling centre near the health center as counsellors to survivors of sexual violence. “We wanted to serve our community and provide assistance to the survivors. One of them is close to me. Her ordeal shook me to the core and incited me to become a counsellor”, Delphine admitted. Since the creation of the listening house in May 2015, 213 girls and women have come to seek assistance. Hope in Action provides them with trainings on sexual-gender based violence and the appropriate support to provide to survivors.

### **Growing hope**

Before leaving Loashi, the beneficiaries enthusiastically led us to the mill where they process their crops to be sold as part of the income-generating activities initiated by Hope in Action. Profits are equally distributed among the beneficiaries. As such, each survivor receives 50,000 Congolese francs (the equivalent of around USD 30) per month to help start her own business to become financially self-sufficient and more resilient.

Finally, on our way back to Goma, we visited the Friends of Youth in Bihambwe, Masisi Territory. We discussed with the different active community relays who work on issues such as good fatherhood, positive masculinity as well as the fight against sexual gender-based violence, rape, and early/forced marriage. They go from one village to another to raise awareness on these issues and incite more men to join their efforts to curb the prevalence of sexual violence through

community resilience. “As husbands and fathers, we are delighted to actively contribute to open minds and change stereotypes that negatively impact the entire community”, Michel explained.

While the project is ending, the beneficiaries we met were confident in their capacity to face the future. Those who benefited from income generating activities will pursue these latter as they no longer necessitate significant financial investment. Volunteers are strongly determined to keep helping survivors of sexual violence while raising awareness among their community. « These activities funded by the DRC Humanitarian Fund greatly contribute to strengthening the resilience of beneficiaries through cross-cutting community gender-based approaches. Women who were long marginalized and survivors of sexual violence are smiling again due to their extraordinary courage and response mechanisms adapted for sound social cohesion. Moreover, we are delighted to note a real change in men’s mentality. An increasing number of men no longer consider the role of women as limited to work in the house and in the fields. They rather see women as true partners who can play the same role as men within their community », concluded Anthony Musafiri, Coordinator for Hope in Action in North Kivu.



*Franklin (DRC Humanitarian Fund) meets with community relays in Bihambwe, Masisi Territory, North Kivu Province (Photo credit: OCHA/Elodie Sabau)*

\*Names have been changed for the safety of survivors.

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