



Violence Against Women Democratic Republic of the Congo Policy Brief

Introduction

Before COVID-19 overtook the headlines, the year 2020 was set to be a critical moment for women's rights and gender equality –with an unprecedented number of political milestones and anniversaries– marking an era of accelerated progress for holistic gender equality and bolder action to deliver on commitments for all women, particularly those affected by conflict.^{1,2}

On 9th March 2020 –what should have been the first day of the 64th session of the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women (CSW)– Women for Women International launched '**Unheard. Unseen. A Global Agenda for Action**'.³ This advocacy agenda provided analysis on the key challenges that were halting progress for marginalized women in fragile and conflict-affected states and identifies five priority action areas and related recommendations where urgent action is needed by global leaders. One of these action areas focuses on ending violence against women (VAW) and calls for increased funding and delivery of a survivor-centered approach to all forms of violence against women affected by conflict.

Two days after the launch of 'Unheard. Unseen.', the World Health Organization officially declared COVID-19 a pandemic.

As the world grappled with this new crisis, many of the priorities and recommendations set out within this Agenda for Action became even more critical, relevant, and urgent, especially as the secondary effects of the pandemic exacerbated gender-based violence around the world and threatened years of progress.⁴

In 2021, violence against women continued to be one of the most pervasive human rights violations.⁵ Globally, 1 in 3 women has experienced physical and/or sexual violence at some point in their lives, and that rate is much higher in conflict and post-conflict settings.⁶ In the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), VAW is often a part of social norms; 51% of women face physical and/or sexual violence in the hands of their partner or husband, with 37% of women reporting such violence within the past 12 months.⁷ The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated inequalities that disproportionately affect marginalized and vulnerable women, including increased rates of VAW. In 2020 alone 243 million women and girls aged 15-49 facing violence from an intimate partner.⁸

In addition to intimate partner violence (IPV), VAW can take many forms and includes physical, sexual, and psychological abuse, threats, coercion, taking away someone's right to make decisions, and economic deprivation – both inside and outside of the home.

These forms of violence are intimately linked with women's overall wellbeing, including physical health, mental health, financial security, and capacity to participate in their community and society.

Women for Women International gathered qualitative and quantitative data from 2019 to 2021 to learn about VAW in communities where we work in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), inform our programming and elevate relevant policy recommendations that will support actors across the development, humanitarian, and peacebuilding triple nexus to end violence for all women, everywhere, and especially in crises.



Violence against women and its complex, long-lasting and multi-dimensional consequences undermine the achievement of women's rights and the successful delivery of the SDGs and WPS agenda.

(Cited from Women for Women International's "Unheard. Unseen. - A Global Agenda for Action")

Methodology

Since 2004, Women for Women International has reached over 103,000 women and over 16,700 male leaders, community members, and male family members of women in its core Stronger Women, Stronger Nations (SWSN) program in North and South Kivu, DRC. These briefs were developed following multiple qualitative and quantitative survey activities including:

- In-depth interviews and focus group discussions in 2019 with 10 male and female community leaders and 59 community members in Kamanyola and Luciga communities;
- Phone-based surveys with 40 program participants and graduates in April 2020 across 10 communities in South Kivu; and
- A series of nine couples' dialogue sessions between 93 couples in Bwirembe and Luberizi conducted between July-October 2021.

There is substantial evidence showing that violence against women generally increases during conflict, economic crises, and increased militarization in communities. Women for Women International contributes to this body of evidence with context-specific data over a unique three-year period on the themes of:

- Acceptability and prevalence of:
 - Economic and financial control
 - Physical violence against women
 - Rape, including marital rape
 - Community intervention
- Compliance with laws versus traditional local customs
- Community resources and support available to women experiencing VAW

Recommendations Summary

1) Humanitarian, development, and peacebuilding sector stakeholders should increase and enhance coordination, localization, and partnerships to end GBV and support survivors in fragile and conflict-affected settings.

Coordination

- A) Governments and international organizations must incorporate and prioritize funding for GBV risk mitigation across all the triple nexus' response strategies.
- B) International community should continue its support to the health system during and post-conflict, prioritizing women's health care and referral systems for GBV.
- C) Sectors engaged in crisis and humanitarian response must prioritize violence prevention and recovery - acknowledging the increased risk of many types of violence affecting women and vulnerable groups during times of crisis - by categorizing protection and response services as lifesaving, essential, and non-negotiable as part of aid and security responses.
- D) Governments and agencies must strengthen the ability of non-specialist mental health and psycho-social support actors to deliver psychological first aid as part of the current humanitarian response.
- E) UN agencies, governments and international organizations must ensure accountability to existing global frameworks of protection is a cross-sectoral mandate to support implementation of GBV prevention and social norms change strategies so that even the most marginalized communities are aware of their rights to protection and redress.

Localization and Partnerships

- A) Prioritize partnerships with local women's rights organizations (WROs) providing services to survivors.
- B) Services delivered should include context-adapted sexual and reproductive health services, access to justice, mental health and psycho-social support, the creation of safe spaces, economic empowerment, and community sensitization and mobilization to challenge stigma and discrimination.

2) Donors must invest in integrated, survivor-centered, and localized approaches that:

A) Address root causes and community norms and support context-specific redress and support mechanisms:

An integrated and survivor-centered approach – which emphasizes women's economic power as well as norms change – is necessary to address root causes of violence against women and achieve tangible change in the daily lives of women. This holistic graduation model is one we have developed and led over the past 26 years to support women to heal, thrive, and take ownership of their futures, even within the most challenging conflict settings.

B) Emphasize and fund partnerships for practically accessible support resources for women including:

Community-based protection mechanisms, strengthened referrals systems and direct services for GBV survivors.

C) Support ongoing engagement with prospective allies and champions including:

Men, family members, and community members. Funding should support women advocates, male champions, formal and non-formal groups to broker community-level agreements with government and traditional power holders. In the DRC, existing efforts must be expanded by all implementers, practitioners, and decision-makers to further engage men as allies and young people as champions to end VAW.

D) Grow and strengthen community-based organizations, networks, and groups to develop strategies and priorities for preventing VAW and supporting survivors.

3) Recommendations for DRC-specific policies, implementation of laws, and redress mechanisms to end VAW

A) Awareness Raising and Sensitization.

Expand awareness campaigns/sensitizations through continued collaboration with local authorities, education of community leaders, and by raising awareness on channels which most directly reach youth such as radio, media, and journalism.

B) Address corruption as a barrier for survivors to utilize redress mechanisms.

If a woman goes to the traditional authorities to report her experience of violence, an authority will first request a bribe which is a disincentive for the woman to seek services or redress. Either bribery should be addressed, or alternative, non-traditional and non-carceral service and support mechanisms should be made available for GBV related crimes.

Context: The DRC and Violence Against Women

The DRC ratified the African Union's Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa, (the Maputo Protocol) in 2008. The Maputo Protocol is a human rights instrument that built upon an extensive global normative framework underpinning the effort to end VAW and advance gender equality.

Though the DRC adopted the Protocol, which includes a comprehensive plan of action across the spectrum of women's rights and empowerment, the DRC currently lacks a nationally adapted legal framework which translates the Protocol to practicable action to address the full spectrum of VAW.⁹

The DRC government developed a National Strategy against GBV in 2009, following the adoption of the Maputo Protocol. The government also established a National Agency for Eliminating Violence against Women and Adolescent and Very Young Girls (AVIFEM) and a National Fund for the Promotion for Women and the Protection of Children (FONAFEN).¹⁰

The DRC judicial system also has jurisdiction to act against workplace sexual harassment and female genital mutilation – which are both criminalized within Law 06/018.

Yet VAW remains endemic across the DRC. This is partly due to legislation that fails to address marital rape or criminalize domestic abuse¹¹ and due to discriminatory attitudes and customs, weak legal and judicial systems, a culture of silence of VAW survivors, and the impunity of perpetrators of VAW.¹²

Findings

ATTITUDES AND PERCEPTIONS: VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN

Interviewers and facilitators in the DRC focused their discussion with community members on attitudes about VAW, common forms of VAW (physical violence, marital rape and sexual violence, economic deprivation, and harmful traditional practices), ways to respond to incidents of violence, and resources available for survivors. While some leaders and members of the community acknowledged certain acts of VAW to be unacceptable, the majority admitted that VAW is still perceived as normal and common.

While many community leaders in the 2019 research findings stressed there have been some positive changes regarding VAW, their responses illustrated an overall trend of harmful community attitudes toward VAW that perpetuate its practice. This suggests that there is a gap between the perception of change and the actual transformation of attitudes and experiences of VAW.

Data from the 2021 focus group discussions further demonstrated the need for change in attitudes toward women's rights and their access to resources. Though men and women differed in their perception of the scale of VAW normalization in the community, all participants recognized incidences of VAW within households, economic deprivation in marriages due to exclusion of women in financial decision-making and inheritance, and challenges in communication and burden-sharing between husbands and wives within households.

1. Physical Violence

Interviews conducted in 2019 show that the community members and leaders widely believe that husbands have the right to beat their wives in situations where they have arrived home late, burned food or have been perceived to be disobedient. Community leaders, health professionals, and male and female community members further expressed that, in response to such violence, they would encourage women to endure the beatings and be patient with their husbands.

A male traditional leader in Luciga expressed that "...if it is the woman who is wrong I can show her how to live with a husband and ask her to respect him because he is the head of the house."



He should first advise her and show her the problem. It is later that he can react in case he finds that the wife did not change... If he beats her, he is right as it is the woman's problem given that she failed to address the remarks and dares repeat what she was warned not to do. It is said that 'when meat is hard, you will need a knife.'

(Woman Leader, Luciga)

Community members and leaders also frequently cited drinking or drunkenness as causes or corollaries to wife-beatings, and some suggested that drinking was a unique case of beating women "without cause."



In our community...the husband being drunk can beat his wife for small things.

(Nurse, Luciga)

Despite the prevalence and normalization described by community members, there was some consensus among male and female community leaders around the unacceptability of wife beating. They indicated that it was not normal and that it is an offense to do so no matter the perceived fault or mistake of the woman.

“ I can tell him no matter what your wife did, you can't hit her because it's a violation of her rights. ”

(Woman Leader, Kamanyola)

Conversely, within both focus group discussions with male and female community members, most participants expressed that if a man beats his wife, she has done something to “deserve” it and should change her own behavior to avoid such violence. The prevalence of this view among both men and women in focus groups, and in both communities, signals the entrenchment of these norms and the acceptability of VAW in the community.

“ ...Most of women are beaten due to their impoliteness...she no longer respects her husband. I will also tell her that no matter the amount of money she would gain, or the position she would have in her community, her husband will always remain head of the family. ”

(Woman, Luciga)

Discouragingly, it was only a minority of community members in the focus group discussions that expressed the belief that there was no justification for physical violence against a woman.

“ I believe that no woman deserves being beaten because there is no law which allows it. ”

(Man, Luciga)

A COVID-19 rapid assessment conducted in April 2020 uncovered that the onset of COVID-19 and the subsequent lockdowns exacerbated the prevalence of husbands beating their wives. Because husbands were home during the phone surveys conducted for the assessment, women were limited in their ability to discuss the scale of domestic violence beyond acknowledging incidence. However, the data collected suggested that COVID-19 had increased food insecurity and household stress during lockdowns. During this stressful period, women also had no access to support or services outside the home due to lockdown measures.

“ Most of the time, when a man beats his wife, the wife is innocent. In most of the cases, she is beaten for no reason. ”

(Woman, Kamanyola)

2. Marital Rape

None of the community members interviewed denied that marital rape occurred in the community. But some shared that such relations were private between a husband and wife, and therefore they as a community member would not know whether marital rape was a common practice.

“**During the marriage preparation step, the godparents advise us never to tell people what goes on in our bedroom, it should be a secret between two people. If one of the two partners tells it, he commits a taboo; that’s why we can’t denounce it.**”

(Woman, Luciga)

Overall, community members acknowledged that marital rape did occur, but expressed varied opinions regarding whether it is acceptable for a man to force his wife to have sex against her will. Community leaders, police, and medical professionals explicitly described the act of a man forcing his wife to have sex as ‘rape’ or ‘violence’, representing the strongest denouncement of the act among the respondents.

“**When a man forces his wife to have sex, he rapes her, but I don’t know if men in our community do it.**”

(Nurse, Kamanyola)

The traditional leaders disagreed on the acceptability of a husband demanding sex from his wife when she does not want to participate.

One traditional leader said a wife has no right to refuse unless sick or menstruating, in accordance with the Bible which says that “...the woman cannot decide on her body it is the man; if the man is in need it is up to the woman to satisfy him.” Whereas the other traditional leader said this view was unacceptable and believed women have the right to refuse.

A nurse in Luciga highlighted the frequency of marital rape and indicated that it was “the majority” and that a man may beat his wife if she denies him sex. Men and women from both communities corroborated the frequency of marital rape during focus group discussions, with men tending to view it as acceptable more often than women who merely acknowledged it as a reality that they cope with to avoid further conflict or force.

“**I believe that when the man is prepared, the woman must also be prepared. A woman who wants to keep her couple must be ready every time, she must always be flexible.**”

(Teacher, Luciga)

Among the younger focus group participants, there were mixed opinions. Some young people said that it is the man’s right to have sex “whenever he needs it”, while others spoke of the importance of consent and a mutual understanding between a man and a woman.

The responses illustrate that marital rape is still common, or is common but not spoken about publicly, and that men were more likely to deem it acceptable due to their perceived ‘right’ to sex with their wives.

3. Rape

Community members and leaders overwhelmingly described the social stigma associated with reporting a rape. They expressed that the community may either question a woman about her own actions that may have caused the rape or question whether the act was truly non-consensual.

Among religious and traditional leaders, only one traditional leader indicated a supportive stance for women who are raped and affirmed that rather than questioning or mocking her, the community should “let the police act on this criminal.” On the other hand, a religious leader listed a series of questions the community may levy upon the woman to justify her claim, and another traditional leader stated that a woman’s behavior and clothing are to blame, or that women “let themselves be raped.”

Community leaders and nurses in both Kamanyola and Luciga expressed concerning views about the legitimacy of rape claims and placed the burden of avoiding rape on women themselves.

“It is due to the behavior but also the girl’s-woman-clothing. Especially in our community it is what causes rape cases. For example, a girl who dresses indecently, all boys will stare at her.”

(Nurse, Kamanyola)

Conversations in the focus groups also highlighted the stigmatization, or “mockery and criticism in the community” surrounding rape victims. Notably, more men than women spoke up against blaming women for rape and instead placed the blame with the rapist.

“I think that we cannot rape a woman because of her clothing, it is a bad heart of this (sic) rapists.”

(Local Council Member)

4. Economic Deprivation

“The man of the house must know and control the income of his wife,” said one male focus group discussion participant from Kamanyola. Not only are wives seen as men’s property, but their incomes are, too. This isn’t the only financial discrimination women face in the DRC. For instance, a woman is more likely to be denied credit, more likely to have her land property rights violated, must repay her husband’s family the dowry if she wishes to divorce, and is often unable to access the justice system for economic and financial matters.¹⁴

Most of the community members and community leaders acknowledged that men controlling their wives’ incomes was a normal practice, with some mixed views as to the acceptability of this practice. Most respondents –men and women in the community- indicated that it was normal and appropriate for a man to control his wife’s earnings. The reasons provided ranged from views that a woman and her finances were both the property of her husband to the reasoning that an independent woman who managed her own earnings would “denigrate” her husband.

“If they have opted for the universal community of property, what the woman has already belongs to her husband and it is normal that if the latter manages the money of his wife.”

(Young Woman, Luciga)

Not all community leaders weighed in on the topic of economic control. But among those that did, the male community leaders expressed that this should not be the norm while the female nurse expressed that it was normal for men to have some control over their wives' earnings, and that she was comfortable with such terms.



Men are different. The man who does not want to work, he is not well educated. He tends to resort to his wife's savings. But a man who is well educated is courageous and he manages by himself, he must give the woman some space for managing her income. He doesn't need to suffocate his wife for every detail on the money. It is unacceptable.

(Police Officer, Luciga)



CUSTOMS VERSUS LAWS

Though many fragile and conflict-affected states have laws, institutions and policies that seek to prevent GBV, protect women's rights, and foster their progress – these can be symbolic, lacking enforcement, and weakened by conflict. Further, marginalized women typically lack the means or information necessary to access such mechanisms, and their ability to do so is also mediated by families or customary institutions.¹⁵ At the global level, agendas and frameworks largely fail to prioritise needs of women in FCAS due to a systemic lack of representation from women's advocates and collectives.¹⁶ Analysed via the 'Social Transformative' approach used by the Netherlands government, the intersecting exclusions faced by marginalized women in FCAS are rooted in patriarchal power asymmetries that favor men and oppress women.¹⁷

These gendered inequalities of power are held in place by formal mechanisms (laws, policies, and resource allocations) and informal mechanisms (cultural norms and practices) that have a profound impact on women's individual and systemic access to opportunities, rights, and entitlements.¹⁸ Sometimes articulated as gender norms (values, beliefs, customs), these informal mechanisms are entrenched in culture, operating at the systemic, community, and individual levels.¹⁹ For example, nationwide statistics provided by the World Bank show that 60% of Congolese men, and 75% of Congolese women believe it is acceptable to beat a wife in certain situations. The findings from Kamanyola and Luciga outlined in this brief align with the national level statistics, with many community members expressing their perceived justifications for a man beating his wife.

While the DRC constitution generally condemns VAW, and most community members interviewed were aware of this fact, interviewees expressed that traditions and community leaders still play a major role in determining men's behavior and societal opinions. Additionally, some men expressed discomfort with terms like 'equity' being included in VAW preventative legal frameworks, stating that "women are confused and think that there is equality even in terms of sex."

Many community members also felt that there was a greater negative consequence to violating traditions and norms whereas “the law does nothing.”

“ We follow custom. We notice that if we follow the law we will damage our way of life. ”

(Young Woman, Luciga)

Young people shared differing viewpoints on their affinity for national laws versus customs. Some young people preferred customs due to social consequences of not following them, while others preferred a balance between both. Notably, men in one focus group shared that laws or community programs promoting gender equality do not and should not apply within the household where they felt that wives should be submissive to husbands and that men should always be head of the household.

“ But today, women are confused and think that there is equality even in terms of sex. At work yes because she has the right to work, to do other jobs but equality is not in the home and that’s how they misunderstood the word gender parity, they badly defined parity and the men became the victims. ”

(Man, Kamanyola)

Yet other men preferred the clarity of laws and perceived some customs as outdated and fading, though men who indicated this preference for national laws still upheld gender unequal norms through their harmful attitudes towards VAW.

When asked about national laws and traditional customs, most women leaders preferred national laws although they shared that many customs are still widely practiced within their communities. Women felt that laws were more equitable because “the laws...award rights to everybody because traditions were conceived with the aim to ill-treat women.” There seemed to be a widespread acknowledgment by women leaders and community members that laws were more concerned with their equality and rights than the customs which were perceived as upholding a patriarchal construct.

“ I believe that the law is good because it privileges everyone, there is not a boy and a girl, all are the same, whereas for the custom it gives importance to a man that it is the only person who exist. ”

(Man, Kamanyola)

This cultural domain is particularly resistant to change and progress on formal policies or laws does not automatically shift it.²⁰ Positively, some women leaders shared that change is occurring, albeit slowly. They cited trainings with local leaders that have already expanded sensitization, including to the king (mwani). While they acknowledge that there is no major change yet, they hope that in the future, “maybe with time” there will be closer compliance with laws over customs.

Any attempts to reduce VAW must include a long-term commitment to catalyse transformational change in the power relations—especially cultural norms and practices—that reinforce women’s unequal status and limited access to rights and resources.

COMMUNITY RESOURCES AND SUPPORT

Cultural norms and practices also play an important role in determining which VAW prevention and support services are most effective in each community's unique context – and that's when those services are available at all.

Community members described both a lack of available community resources and the stigma associated with reaching out to the few support services that do exist. Several women explained that reporting issues outside the family leads to societal scrutiny, as VAW is considered a private matter that should be discussed only within the household.

In the DRC, prolonged confinement during COVID-19 contributed to an increased prevalence of VAW. UNICEF's report on the impact of COVID-19 in DRC communities exposed that the sexual violence helpline in Kinshasa, DRC's capital city, received 20 times more domestic abuse calls from women than men during the national state of emergency in 2020. The World Economic Forum reported that domestic abuse helplines had collapsed even as calls spiked during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Nurses expressed that the lack of resources targeting VAW is due to a lack of community interest. For instance, rape victims are unlikely to share their story as "...there will be no follow up and nobody will care about her situation." Nurses were aware of some people, resources, and/or organizations to support women but the overwhelming feeling was that these were insufficient for supporting survivors within the community.

“ I don't believe that these organizations exist, we have many problems in the village, and nobody cares. ”

(Nurse, Luciga)

Some members of the community highlighted religious leaders as community resources for women, but the religious leader interviewed described his role as primarily advisory or preventative.

In fact, one religious leader noted that he would discourage a woman from seeking support from the police and would encourage the couple to resolve the matter internally.

“ I intervene if there are couples who come to the parish. I listen to them then I advise them ...In general, I intervene on the altar in the church while preaching in the preventive way, I prepare them before the wedding. ”

(Religious Leader)

Community members identified the primary support for women being provided by a woman's family, community members, or through church groups. Some community members in Kamanyola described aid organizations in the area that were providing support to women, such as the Panzi Foundation and the International Rescue Committee, as well as a local women's collective (Collectif des femmes de Kamanyola) and the local police.

In contrast to Kamanyola, women in Luciga were not aware of any formal organizations or resources for a woman who is experiencing physical violence. Although, if a husband was stealing his wife's profits or denied her access to land, these women suggested that a woman could speak with family, traditional leaders, or the court system.

Although community members could identify resources available to women and survivors, young people in both communities said that seeking support or talking about VAW outside of the family is not viewed favorably and women who speak against their husbands may face social consequences.



It is okay to go there but the majority do not go there because they find it shameful.

(Young Woman, Kamanyola)

Further, a few young people thought creating a formal structure to support women beaten by their husbands was a bad idea and one that would create divisions within a household or elevating women as equals to their husbands.



It is to create conflicts and promote them. And it can create pride in women. Counseling association as well as an educational and coercive institution can help.

(Young Man, Luciga)



It's bad, the couple can take advantage of this pretending to fight to benefit from these resources.

(Young Man, Luciga)

During the couples' discussions conducted by Women for Women International in 2021, 87% of women and 62% of men participating affirmed that most women in Bwirembe and Luberizi prefer not to seek support or services from local authorities because the authorities seek bribes or money before they will listen to the women. In addition to this barrier, 92% of women and 48% of men in the focus groups stated that women who experience violence and do report it do not ultimately receive any support from the local authorities.

Women's average level of satisfaction with respect to the responsiveness and receptivity of authorities to their complaints was 1.5 on a scale from 1 to 5. In contrast, authorities rated themselves at 4 on the same scale.

Women's distrust in the authorities and their motives contribute to a culture of silence because women largely feel that the authorities do not care or will be unresponsive. Women believe that they will not receive support or justice for the rape or abuse that they experience.

Participants were also asked about legal support and alternative avenues for GBV redress. 82% of participants noted that poverty and lack of means to pay for legal costs were a barrier to accessing legal support. Women thus preferred to refer their complaints to family mediation or civil society structures, such as legal clinics.

Even if a woman overcomes barriers to seek external support and speak up about abuse or rape, participants noted that families often intervene to prevent women from making formal complaints against her husband or her father.

The community responses and couples dialogues indicate the dual challenge of first a lack of resources and investment in supporting women and survivors, and then the social stigma preventing women from accessing any existing resources and requesting formal support mechanisms. Any effort to reduce VAW in the DRC would need to address both of these challenges.

Hopes for the Future

Despite findings that illustrate widespread prevalence and acceptability of violence against women, some community members and leaders in Kamanyola and Luciga still shared their hope and suggestions to end VAW and advance women's rights in the future.

Religious and traditional leaders expressed that they felt things have changed in the community, despite their confirmation of the continued acceptability and normalization of certain forms of VAW. They cited other gains that women have made in society that gave them hope for change in the future.

“Today women are chiefs of district, women plead and defend their rights at the police office if other women are imprisoned. The woman speaks in public and gives her point of view.”

(Traditional Leader, Kamanyola)

Other leaders called for the continued follow-up on commitments toward ending VAW and for continued community trainings and sensitizations in coordination with local authorities, to advance women's rights and end VAW. Community members shared in the 2021 focus group discussions that radio broadcasts hosted by the male leaders in Luberizi were effective in helping the community to understand the problem of domestic and economic violence in households. This success was attributed to the interactive nature of the radio talk shows in contrast to the VAW prevention messages used in the past which often took the form of a flat public service announcement.

“There is a change in the community because in the past a woman was considered as an object, but today we have understood that she is a person of values.”

(Traditional Leader, Luciga)

The couples participating in the 2021 dialogues formulated their own commitments to transforming social norms by enacting equality in their household. Couples jointly committed to increased collaboration in household and family decisions, and husbands committed to including wives in managing family finances and supporting them in household chores and shifting mindsets in the community. Encouragingly, follow-up visits conducted by Women for Women International's Men's Engagement Program team confirmed that 72% of those same couples had achieved or were actively implementing these commitments six months after the commitments were made.

VAW is a deep-rooted and complex threat to women in FCAS. The recommendations set forth in this policy brief address the action needed by actors at all levels in ending VAW, and emphasizes the need for coordinated, holistic programming and context-specific, community-driven protection and support services. As the DRC plans a COVID-19 recovery plan and faces economic austerity measures, it will be critical to re-prioritize the implementation of national gender equality frameworks and address the harmful social norms that perpetuate violence against women.

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