



Gender Study in Kingantoko and Surrounding Area

by Charlotte Ndona Santu

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Susila Dharma International Association (SDIA) works to relieve human suffering and promote just and sustainable development by partnering with and supporting grassroots, participatory development and humanitarian initiatives; empowering individuals and communities to engage in positive human, social and economic change; and raising awareness of global issues and inter-dependence.

SDIA, a network of members and projects in more than 30 countries, is an affiliate organization of the World Subud Association. SDIA maintains consultative status with the United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) and the UN Children's Fund (UNICEF).

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Introduction

While the 2006 socio-metric study was taking place in Kingantoko and surrounding area, from May 9th to May 12th, Charlotte Ndona and the Susila Dharma DR Congo team undertook a Gender Study among the women of the seven villages covered by the socio-metric study.

Here we present the initial results of the Gender Study. For this research to be complete and to answer all the questions and expectations raised by the issue of gender, the study should continue in a more permanent way.

Though initially the Gender Study is centred on the interests of women, we should add that it cannot be implemented nor can it succeed without the involvement of women's life-companions, men. Men make up an important and major part of women's environment. Their absence would be an obstacle to the process of achieving gender equality. It is by walking side by side that men and women will implement the changes that are required to reduce poverty.

This study has four main parts:

- I. General findings
- II. Women's major problems in various areas of life
- III. Paths towards possible solutions
- IV. Conclusion

General Findings

The general findings in this chapter are working data. It is important to be familiar with this data in order to come to a good understanding of the women's problems that are described in the following chapter. The general findings enable one to grasp the various problems of the women within their socio-cultural, historical, and even spatial and chronological contexts. Knowledge and understanding of these findings





will help to consider solutions that will be mentioned in the third chapter more easily. This list is just statements of fact and it is not limited to these points.

In the Congolese legislation, there are almost no laws left that restrict women's freedom and rights. The last ones to go were in the Labour Code and were eliminated with the birth of Collective Enterprise Covenants, the Inter-professional Enterprise Covenants, the new Labour Code and the new Family Code.

However, in reality differences between the way men and women live still exist in the distribution of work and the amount of responsibility men and women carry, particularly within the family.

These differences in the lives of men and women are found in both urban and rural areas and originate in their cultures marked by customs, traditions, beliefs, and practices. Their whole existence is deeply influenced by the level of ignorance or knowledge, and this is linked to education and upbringing.

The percentage of women who have had full-time education is lower than that of men. In rural areas, women receive even less schooling than in urban areas.

The rate of illiteracy is higher among women than among men and rural women's illiteracy rates are much higher than those of urban women.

In our families and communities, women have a lower responsibility level than men. Because of this, women feel a need to be reassured by the highest possible male authority in their families and communities.

The rural women have an even lower responsibility level in their families and communities compared with

urban women. Generally speaking, roles and responsibilities are well distributed between men and women in families and communities.

The division of roles and responsibilities between men and women is generally well accepted by all, stays unchangeable and is not questioned or contested. These have become absolutely natural and are the basis for the established social order. It is therefore natural for men and women that things are the way they are and they remain that way; life is lived the way it has always been lived.

Each inclination or trend to do things differently is considered a transgression of the established social order and, therefore, invites sanctions and reprisals.

This state of affairs can be one of the major causes of pervasive poverty and misery, in rural areas especially. With the unquestioning acceptance and submission of women, men are the first guardians of the established social order and, without fail, they play their part well.

Women's Major Problems in Their Daily Lives in the Kingantoko Area

Women's major problems in daily life as described here have been found in the villages of the Kingantoko rural area. They are almost the same if extended to all rural areas (in the Kingantoko area, the Kasangulu Territory, the Lukaya District, the Lower-Congo Province, all the Provinces of the country, and the whole DRC).

1. The rural women's way of life

In all these villages, the women live separately from the men. The opportunities for men and women to be together are scarce and of short duration. Even during these occasions, women do not get a starring role. They are more spectators than actors. On topics that will directly affect women, it is the men who discuss them, decide the direction that will be followed and make the decisions for the women. Women participate minimally in discussions with men, except if it concerns topics directly related to intimacy. There are no other matters that women may organize to discuss without men. For all practical purposes men direct the lives of their families and communities without input from women.

The following roles and domestic tasks are exclusively women's business: drawing water, looking for

food and cooking it, washing up for the whole family, dishwashing, cleaning the house, taking care of children under the age of ten, preparing the children to go to school in the morning.

The roles, tasks and work in the fields that are almost exclusively women's business are weeding, clearing the ground, ploughing, sowing, maintaining the fields, harvesting, bringing the produce to the village to sell.

As soon as a woman reaches puberty, her traditional education is exclusively taught to her by her mother. Unfortunately, the mother does not fully cover life education with her daughter, because sex is still a taboo subject between mother and daughter.

Life education is mainly directed towards domestic tasks, field work and social relations in the village community.

The mother or woman caretaker has sole responsibility for the success or failure of the girl's education, and she is answerable for this to the male head of the family.

The roles and responsibilities of cleaning the home and its immediate environment are the woman's business.

In case of illness, responsibility of providing health care to the family belongs to the woman: administering medicine, looking after the sick person, etc. The man's role is limited to looking for money needed to buy medicine.

The roles and responsibilities given to women are more a matter of implementing decision determined by others. Very receptive, docile and submissive to the established social order, women feel much more secure in their subordinate executive position than in the decision making position. If she became one of those who rebel against the community order, she would cease to be a woman.

Even when the situation in the family becomes very bad because of the man, a woman is not permitted to take the initiative and get a divorce or a separation. Only a man may repudiate his wife for whatever reason.

A kind of imperfect and unstable balance rules the relationship between a woman and a man, her partner and life-mate, in this rural and traditional society.

2. Women and drinking water

"Water is life." This is true for everybody and everywhere. But the problem of supplying drinking water is exclusively a woman's problem in rural areas, and particularly in area covered by the Study. The women's

problem of supplying drinking water is complex and has implications and consequences unsuspected at first.

The springs are almost all in hills or valleys with steep slopes, at distances of over 1.5 kilometres. A single trip to the spring, returning with a 20-30-litre can carried on one's head, is not enough to cover of the needs of a family for cooking and drinking. Several trips are necessary.

To be able to make several trips to the spring before 10 am, women get up at 4:30-5:00 in the morning to make the first trip. Children, especially the girls, ten years and older are assigned to the chore of supplying drinking water. Sometimes a mother will carry a toddler on her back and a 20 or 30-litre can on her head traveling over more than three kilometres on steep paths.

When women need to do the washing or dishwashing, they go down to the spring just for that and they



waste enormous time queuing. This need to wait sometimes creates quarrels between the women.

Spring water is used for everything but it is not always drinkable because the springs have never been managed nor protected. This is a source of water-related diseases as well as genital infections in women.

Body hygiene is unsatisfactory, especially for women, because they bathe at the spring and then climb back the slope with their heavy load. When they arrive at the village, they are covered with sweat that dries on the body and smells bad.

These long distances are harmful to the health of the women and children who are assigned to the chore of supplying water for the family. The women told us of the impact on their health due to this situation.

3. Women and domestic heating

In rural areas heating is another real problem. Homes are heated by burning wood. Firewood is gathered during the day after working the fields three or four kilometres from the villages. Women go to the fields in the morning after fetching the water home. Early in the afternoon, after working in the fields, they gather vegetables, fruit or tubers, and firewood to bring back home. The heaps of vegetables or tubers are placed on top of the bundle of firewood. They carry a load of 20 to 30 kilos on their heads over approximately four kilometres to the village. Sometimes, firewood is sold to provide for the needs of other families, especially when a woman is the head of a family.



4. Women, economic activity, income and food

Agriculture is the main economic activity in the Kingantoko group of villages. Even though it is practiced on a small scale using traditional techniques, agriculture is the main source of income. Women grow grain, vegetables and other kinds of fruit and tubers that they sell for a modest income. This is supplemented by the sale of firewood and chicungues that they make from manioc starch.

Agriculture is the main source of food for the family. Unfortunately, there is a real problem with both quantity and quality needed to feed the population. Growing children show a nutritional deficit. Since fieldwork is not producing enough food for the needs of the population, people have to get supplies from Kinshasa to meet their need for food.



5. Women, cleaning, hygiene and health

The women in the villages have no public hygiene facilities in the villages. They have their bath at the spring; the traditional type toilets need no special building.

With the arrival of water to the villages, accompanied by showers and modern toilets, women will take on the upkeep of those showers and toilets in addition to their existing domestic chores. Even in towns and cities, this work is assigned to women exclusively.

Bodily hygiene will improve for women, as for all village members. Rural women suffer from many health problems. These have various causes: the exhausting daily rhythm of work from 5:00 am to nearly 8:00 pm, when they go to bed; the quality of the water used for hygiene; general ignorance of basic rules of sanitation, and proper hygiene for both the body and food.

Typical examples of health troubles faced by women:

- * pregnant women risking spontaneous abortion due to heavy and exhausting work
- * premature and spontaneous deliveries, miscarriages

- * genital infections
- * early menstruation

Women age prematurely due to the precarious conditions of life in these villages. There are no health centres for primary care, or any delivery ward for birthing and care of the mothers and babies.

In these villages, women still risk giving birth at home under natural conditions, either when they are unable to pay for their clinic delivery in Kasangulu or Kinshasa, or when the birth takes place spontaneously at night, when they can't find a vehicle to bring them to town.

6. Girls, early pregnancies, unmarried mothers, early or forced marriages, health

The rural girl is confronted with several phenomena and social facts that eventually develop into real health problems. Early pregnancies are quite frequent in the villages during puberty, mostly due to the lack of sexual education. Contraceptives are totally unknown in the villages. It is common to find girls of twelve or thirteen becoming pregnant and single mothers.

Girls are often married early, and in most of the cases unwillingly. Many of these cases eventually turn into a drama that ends in health problems and sometimes even threaten the girl's life.

7. Women, HIV/AIDS and health

Fortunately, there has not been any reported case of HIV/AIDS in the villages of the region but women are still exposed to infection by HIV/AIDS.

Women in these villages know very little about HIV/AIDS, its modes of transmission or protective measures. The risk of infection by HIV/AIDS is increased by traditions, customs, common practices and beliefs that still support polygamous marriages, the inheritance one's brother's wife in case the latter dies, and unprotected sexual relations with casual partners. HIV/AIDS and transmitted diseases are often attributed to sorcery and bad luck. These villages are located along the main national highway which is frequented by truck drivers and travellers and the villages are near the town centres of Kinshasa and Kasangulu.

8. Women, girls, schooling and education

Illiteracy rate is very high with women in all the villages. The school attendance of children in these villages is very low.



Woman at a health clinic

Because girls today are being insufficiently educated, this fact may perpetuate or even aggravate the illiteracy rate, which is already very high among women.

9. Women, productive work and marriage stability

In all rural areas and traditional societies, domestic work and income generating activities for the family are the first criteria for selecting a wife. An unproductive woman, even when she manages to find a husband, is unable to keep her marriage stable.

In the villages when a woman is not able to supply drinking water, to work in the fields, gather vegetables and cereals to feed her family, or cut firewood for her house or for sale, her marriage will be threatened with a divorce and will never be stable.

A woman's opportunities to marry are reduced if she is not considered a hard worker.

10. Female childhood, youth, and rural exodus

When she is ten, a girl starts participating in the chores of fetching drinking water, doing the washing at the spring, and helping her mother to do some of the domestic work. These girls are not sent to school later and, as they become adolescents, they fall into idleness. They become sexually active at around 12 to 13 and soon many become pregnant and unmarried mothers.

After the birth of their first child, these girls generally leave the villages to find better living conditions in Kinshasa City or in Kasangulu.

11. Women and specialized trades

In the villages there are men practising specialized trades, but there are no women who are tradespeople, not even female nurses or seamstresses. The women of the villages are completely unskilled as workers except in the case of work related to caring for their families.

12. A woman, head of a family

By staying single, divorcing, or becoming a widow, a woman can find herself the head of her family. Within the rural traditional society being a female head of a family is not an easy life, especially as a woman is likely to have as many as seven or eight children. Very few cases of woman-headed households were observed in the villages studied.

Paths to Possible Solutions

Women's problems, as related to relations between genders, are complex and multifaceted because they touch all aspects of life. Any solutions must be appropriate and suitable to the specific conditions of the place, the time, and the cultural context. They must be integrated into the local reality.

In the specific framework of the Kingantoko area, gender issues must be tackled and solved within a global process of fighting to reduce poverty, the UN Millennium Development Goals and regional development.

From the initial perspective of the researchers, four solutions are possible:

1. To supply drinking water and electricity to the villages
2. To set up structures and infrastructures for health, education and sanitization
3. To set up [alternative] gender structures in the villages
4. To establish information, training and transformation programs (of the environment, the conditions of living of rural traditional women).

The recommendations of Charlotte Ndonga and her Susila Dharma DR Congo team after the consultation with the village women on Saturday, May 27th, 2006.

1. Drinking water:

The women support the principle of pay supply as a way to maintain the pump house and the distribution network. The amount they can pay without defaulting is \$US 1 per month per family. 1 \$/m³ per house represents \$2.38 per month per family; the women explicitly said that this amount would exceed their ability to payment.

NB: \$1 per month is the average price we are paying for the water of the REGIDESO in Kinshasa.

2. Toilets:

To guarantee family privacy and particularly the cleanliness of the toilets and showers, it is better that each family get its own toilet and shower, as per one of the two following propositions:



- a. Cabins for toilet and shower on each piece of land, with common septic tanks for five to ten families; or
- b. Collective sanitary blocks with a common septic tank for five to ten families, in which each family has a cubicle for toilet and one for shower.

NB: *The women wonder how anyone could offer them modern toilets when they are living in thatched cabins. They request that modern, long-lasting houses be built for them on credit so that they will get water and electricity in modern houses with a nice toilet and shower for sustainable viability.*

3. Setting up a Water Management Committee for the villages:

A water management committee will be set up according to the following guidelines:

- a. Respect should be paid to creating a balance between the number of men and women on the committee.
- b. Representation should be proportional to the populations of all the villages on the committee, while respecting men to women parity.
- c. Local authorities must not sit on the committee and should not appoint committee members on their own initiative.
- d. The appointment of the committee members should be done by consensus.

Conclusion

The African woman is living in an environment that has been very much conditioned by customs, traditions and beliefs.

The gender study process must be understood and considered as a process of emancipation, and as a strategy towards reducing family poverty through women.

Gender is a new way of considering the society and a new school for all. Rural women's emancipation stands on three main bases: information, training, and transformation.

The traditional rural woman needs to be:

1. **Informed: sufficiently to engage her mind processes.**



2. **Trained: to strengthen her capacity and give her the necessary abilities.**

3. **Transformed: in her mental and social perception of her roles and responsibilities**

Emancipation involves transforming the environment of her life (structures and infrastructures) and the conditions of her life: habitat, water, electricity, sanitation, education, health, vocational training, access to the media, etc...

Thus, the study of gender will be able to benefit first the traditional rural woman, then her family, her whole community, and at last all of humanity.

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On behalf of Susila Dharma / D.R.C.

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Chairlady of SD RD-Congo

Photographs by Kumari Beck, Rosanna Hille, and Viktor Boehm