

GENDER STUDY IN KINGANTOKO AND SURROUNDING AREA

INTRODUCTION

Concurrently to the socio-metric study that took place in Kingantoko and its surrounding area between May 9th and 12th, 2006, Charlotte Ndona and the SD team undertook a Gender study among the women of all the 7 villages covered by the former study.

We present here the major results of that study that is only at its beginning. For it to become more comprehensive and answer to all the questions and expectations raised by Gender, it should certainly go on in time, in a permanent way.

If the Gender study is essentially centred on and interests women at first, we can say at once that it cannot be implemented and succeed without the involvement of their lives' mates, men. Men are making up an important part of women's environment, even a major one. Their non-involvement would even constitute an obstacle to the Gender process. It is by walking side by side, men and women, that we'll have to implement the Gender study and make a success of it as a process or approach to fighting for reducing poverty.

This study includes three main parts:

- 1° General findings;
 - 2° Women's major problems in various areas of life;
 - 3° Tracks towards possible conceivable solutions.
- A conclusion naturally completes the study.

I - GENERAL FINDINGS

The topics appearing in this chapter, and that are called general findings, are in reality working data. It is very important to know them to be able in order to get a good understanding of the women's problems that are aired within the next chapter.

They enable one to grasp the various problems of the women within their socio-cultural, historical, and even spatial and temporal context. Their knowledge and understanding will help and make easier the search for tracks towards solutions that will be mentioned in the third chapter.

In the Congolese legislation, there is no more or almost no law left restricting women's freedom and rights. The last ones were in the Labour Code and fell with the birth of Collective Enterprise Covenants, the Inter-professional Enterprise Covenants, the new Labour Code and the new Family Code.

But in reality, there still exist separations or better said differences between men and women in the way of life, work repartition and level of responsibility, particularly within the family.

These gaps of life or differences of life between men and women are to be found as well in urban places as in rural parts. These differences of life between men and women come from their culture, or cultures (urban and rural), more or less marked by customs, traditions, beliefs, practices, the whole being fermented by the level of ignorance or knowledge, on a case to case basis, linked to education and upbringing.

Globally speaking, women are less educated than men. The percentage of women having had a full-time education is lower than the men's. Moreover, in rural areas, women are even less educated than in urban areas.

The illiteracy rate is higher with women than with men. The rural women's illiteracy rate is much higher than the urban ones'.

In our families and communities, women have got a responsibility level lower than the men's. This has generated for the women a need for feeling reassured by the highest possible responsibility level of the men in their families as well as in the communities.

The rural women have got an even lower responsibility level in their families as well as in the communities compared with those living in towns and cities. Generally speaking, roles as well as tasks or work are very well distributed between men and women in families as well as in communities.

The division between men and women of roles, tasks and work is generally well accepted by all, stays immutable and bears no contestation, nor any question. This has become absolutely natural, and is the basis of the established social order. It is therefore a second nature for men as well as for women that things are and stay as they are, are lived and stay lived as they are.

Each inclination or trend to do them or to live them differently is considered as a transgression of the established social order, and therefore liable to sanctions and reprisals, if necessary.

Mainly in rural areas, this state of things may be one of the major causes of the staying poverty and misery. With the obedient acceptance and submission of women, men are the first guardians of this established social order and play this part infallibly well.

N.B. This list is just a statement of facts; it is not limited to them.

II - WOMEN'S MAJOR PROBLEMS IN THEIR DAILY LIFE IN THE KINGANTOKO AREA

Women's major problems in their daily life as have been described here have been found in the towns of the Kingantoko area, which means an essentially rural area. Therefore, they are almost the same and valid by extension 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

a) In all these villages, women use to live separate from men. The opportunities to be together (men and women) are scarce and of a very short duration. Even during these events, women do not get a first rank part. They are more spectators than actors.

- Even in topics that would directly affect them, that are the men who are discussing them, decide the orientations to follow and make the decisions to the greatest satisfaction of women.

- Women only participate a little to the discussions with men, except if that concerns topics directly related to their intimacy; otherwise, there is properly speaking no matter about which women may organize a debate without men.

- So, men are practically left to themselves to direct life in their families and in the communities.

b) The roles, domestic tasks and works are exclusively the women's business: drawing water, looking for food and cooking it, washing up for the whole family, dishwashing, cleaning the house, taking care of the children under 10 years, prepare the children who have to go to school in the morning.

- The roles, tasks and works of the fields are almost exclusively the women's business: weeding, clearing the ground, ploughing, sowing, keeping up the fields, harvesting, bringing the products to the village, selling, etc.

- The maid's traditional education is exclusively her mother's business as soon as she reaches puberty. Unfortunately, she does not tackle education to life with her daughter, because sex is still a taboo matter between mother and daughter.

- Life education is mainly directed towards domestic tasks, field works and social relations in the village community.
- So, woman is the sole responsible of the success or the failure of the maid's education. And more, she answers for it to the man, the head of the family.
- The roles, tasks and works of cleaning up the place of living and its immediate environment are the woman's business.
- The roles, tasks and works of providing health care to the whole family are the woman's business in case of illness: administering the cure, looking after the sick person, etc...Man's part is limited to looking for money when it is necessary.
- Most of the roles, tasks and works given to the woman are more of execution than decision or direction. Very receptive, docile and submitted to the established social order, she is feeling much more secure in her subordinate execution position than in the main decision and direction position. Otherwise, she would cease to be a woman, to become one of those who are rebelling against the community.
- Even when the situation in the family becomes very bad because of the man, a woman may not take the initiative and get a divorce or a separation. Only a man may repudiate his wife for any reason.
- A kind of imperfect and unstable balance is ruling the way of living between a woman and a man, her partner and life-mate in the rural and all-traditional society.

2. Women and drinking water

« Water is life » is true for everybody, and everywhere. But the problem of drinking water supply is the exclusive woman's problem in rural areas, and particularly in Kingantoko and its surroundings.

1. The problem of drinking water supply by women is more complex than is known, and has got implications and consequences unsuspected at first look.
 2. The springs are almost all in hills or valleys with steep slopes, at distances exceeding ,5 km; one single trip to the spring while bearing a 20 or 30 litres can on one's head is not enough to cover the needs of the cooking and the drinks of the whole family. Several trips are necessary.
 3. To be able to make several trips before 10h.00AM, women get up at 4h30-5h00AM to make the first trip to the spring. Children 10 years and more old are associated to this chore of supplying drinking water, especially the girls; sometimes, a mother carries her under 3 years old child on her back, and her 20 or 30 litres can on her head to supply the house over more than 3 km of very steeply paths.
 4. When women go to do the washing up or dishwashing, they have got to go down to the spring only for that; they waste enormous time queuing. This waiting sometimes creates quarrels between the women.
 5. Spring water that is used for every purpose is not absolutely drinkable as the springs have never been arranged nor protected. It is a source of water-related diseases and genital infections to women.
 6. Body hygiene is not satisfactory at all, especially with women, because they take their bath at the spring and climb back the slope with their full load. When they arrive at the village, they are covered with sweat that dries on the body and gives a bad smell.
 7. The long distances are harmful to the health of the women and children assigned to the chore of supplying water for the house and all related works.
- They told us of some consequences already felt in their health because of this situation.

3. Women and domestic heating

In the Kingantoko area, as in all the rural parts, heating is another real problem. It is done in the families by burning wood. Firewood gathering is done by day after the works of the fields at 3 or 4 km from the villages.

Women go to the fields in the morning after having brought water home. After the works of the fields, at the beginning of the afternoon, they have to gather vegetables, fruits or des tubercles, and firewood to bring back home.

The heap of vegetables or tubercles placed on top of the bundle of firewood represents a load of 20 to 30 kg that they carry on their heads over more or less 4 km of track till the village.

Sometimes, firewood is sold to provide for other needs of the family, especially when a woman is herself the head of a family.

4. Women, economic activity, income and food

1. Agriculture is the main economic activity in the Kingantoko group of villages.
2. Agriculture is the main source of income, even though it is practiced on a small scale and with very traditional techniques. Women grow cereals, vegetables and other kinds of fruits and tubercles that they are selling to get a rather modest income supplemented by the sale of firewood and *chicuangues* that they make from manioc starch.
3. Agriculture is the main source of food for the family. Unfortunately, there is a real problem of quantity and quality for the feeding of the population. Growing children are showing a nutritional deficit.
4. As the activities of the fields are not producing enough food for the needs of the population, it has to get its supplies from Kinshasa to fulfil its alimentary needs.

5. Women, cleaning up, hygiene and health

1. The women of the Kingantoko Group of villages have no special public hygiene activities in the villages. They have their bath in the springs; the traditional type toilets need no special attention.

2. But, with the impending arrival of water to the villages, accompanied with showers and modern toilets, women will get the upkeep of the same showers and toilets in addition to their domestic chores, because it is a work that is exclusively reserved to women, even now in the towns and cities.

3. Body hygiene will certainly improve as well for women, men, children, the young and the elders, with the impending arrival of water in the villages.

4. Women are getting many health problems, here as well as in all rural parts. They have multiple and various causes: the exhausting daily rhythm of work from 5.00AM to nearly 8.00PM, time to go to bed, the quality of water used for body hygiene, the general ignorance of elementary rules for sanitation, as well as body and food hygiene.

A few typical examples of the health troubles endured by women:

- pregnant women being threatened with abortion, due to heavy and exhausting work.
- premature and spontaneous deliveries.
- miscarriages.
- various genital infections.
- girls menstruate prematurely.

5. Women age prematurely because of the precariousness of their conditions of life in these villages.

There is neither any health centre for primary care, nor any delivery ward for births and care of the mothers and new-born children.

6. In these villages, women are still taking that risk of giving birth at home under natural conditions, either when they are unable to pay for their delivery in Kasangulu or Kinshasa, or when birth takes place spontaneously at night, without being able to find a vehicle to carry the parturient to Kasangulu or Kinshasa.

6 Girls, precocious pregnancies, the unmarried mothers phenomenon, precocious and unwilling marriages, health

1. The rural girl, woman of to-morrow, is confronted with several phenomena and social facts that eventually turn into real health problems.
2. Precocious pregnancies are quite frequent in the villages during puberty; mostly because of ignorance due to the lack of sexual education.
3. Contraceptives like pills or condoms, and their use, are totally unknown in the villages.
4. It is no more infrequent to find 12 to 13 years old girls becoming pregnant and eventually become unmarried mothers.
5. Girls are often precociously married, and in most of the cases unwillingly.
6. In all these cases, which eventually turn into a drama to end into a health problem, sometimes even the girl's life is jeopardized.

7. Women, HIV/AIDS and health

Fortunately, there has not yet been any reported case of HIV/AIDS till now in the villages of the Kingantoko and area Group. But women are always exposed to contamination by HIV/AIDS, unaware of its contamination modes and protection measures.

1. Women in these villages know very little about HIV/AIDS, its contamination modes and protection measures
2. Traditions, customs, common practices and beliefs are still retaining polygamous marriages, inheriting one's brother's wife in case the latter deceases, unprotected sexual relations even with a casual partner, the assimilation of opportunistic diseases and HIV/AIDS to sorcery and bad luck, the location of these villages along national road n° 1 much frequented by truck drivers and other travellers, and lastly, the vicinity of the City of Kinshasa and the Kasangulu Town.

8. Women, girls, schooling and education

1. Illiteracy rate is very high with women in all these villages.
2. The schooling rate of young people is very low in these villages.
3. The girls, women of to-morrow, being to-day insufficiently educated, will not become educated women to-morrow; which might keep or even aggravate the illiteracy rate already very high with women.

9. Women, productive work and marriage stability

In all rural areas and traditional societies, domestic work and income generating work (economic activities) for the family, are the first criterion for selecting a wife.

So, a lazy woman, even when she manages to find a husband, is unable to keep her marriage stable.

1. In the villages of the Kingantoko area, whenever a woman is not able to supply drinking water to her family, work in the fields, gather vegetables and cereals for feeding her family, cut firewood for her house and/or for selling, in a regular basis, her marriage will be seriously menaced with a divorce and will never be stable.
2. Not being known as a hard worker reduces for a woman her opportunities to wed.

10. Female childhood, youth, and rural exodus

1. Already while still a child, she starts participating since she is 10 to the chore of drawing drinking water, going and washing at the spring and helping her mother to do some domestic works.

2. These children are not sent to school later. As they become girls, they fall into idleness; helped by their ignorance, they discover active sexuality around 12 to 13 years, to become soon pregnant and end as unmarried mothers.
3. After having their first child, they generally leave the villages to find better living conditions in Kinshasa City or in the Town of Kasangulu.

11. Women, human resources and available specialized trades

The human resources of the villages in the Kingantoko area are the people practising one of the available specialized trades; among them one cannot find a woman, not even a female nurse or a seamstress. That means that the women of the villages in the Kingantoko area know no specialized trade. The women's professionalization rate is zero in the villages of the Kingantoko area.

12. A woman, head of a family

Through staying single, a divorce or becoming a widow, a woman can find herself the head of her family. Within the rural traditional society, this state of a woman head of a family is not easy to live when she has got children (usually 7 to 8 children). Very few cases were observed in the villages in the Kingantoko area

III - PATHS TO POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS

Women's problems or better, Gender problems, are complex and diverse as a whole, insofar as they touch all the fields of life. Nevertheless, they are seen with their own specificities depending on circumstances of places, times and even cultural contexts, which also means that any possible solution must be appropriate, suitable and even integrated to the local reality.

In the specific framework of the Kingantoko area, Gender problems must be tackled and solved within a global process of the fight for reducing poverty, the UN goals for the millennium, and particularly the development of the concerned region.

Four solutions are conceivable and at first look possible, from what we think:

- 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 Gender structures in the villages.
- 4° To finalize plans and programs of information, training and transformation (of the environment, the conditions of living of rural traditional women).

In the framework of this study, here are the first results of the consultations of Charlotte Ndonga and her SD/DRC team with the women of the villages of the Kingantoko area on Saturday, May 27th, 2006.

1- Drinking water:

The women are supporting the principle of pay supply, in order to allow the upkeep of the pump house and the distribution network

The amount they can bear to pay without defaulting is 1 \$US per month and per family.

1 \$/m³ per house represents 2.38 \$ per month per family; the women explicitly told that this amount would exceed their capacity of 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 gets its own toilets and showers, according to one of the two following propositions:

- cabins for toilets and shower in each piece of land, with septic tanks common to 5 to 10 families;
- or
- collective sanitary blocks for 5 to 10 families, in which each family will have a cubicle for the toilets and one for the showers, with a common septic tank.

NB: The women of the villages of the Kingantoko area are wondering how one could offer them nice modern toilets while 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 nice toilets and showers, for a real and sustainable viability.

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

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

- 1. Respecting men to women parity in the number of the committee members.
- 2. Having a representation proportional to the populations of all the villages in the committee, while respecting men to women parity.
- 3. Local authorities must not belong to the committee and shall not appoint its members on their own initiative.
- 4. The appointment of the committee members will be done by consensus.

CONCLUSION

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

The Gender process must be understood and considered as a process of emancipation, then as an approach to family poverty reduction through woman.

Gender is a novelty and a new school to all. Rural woman's emancipation stands on three main bases : information, training and transformation.

The traditional rural woman needs to be:

- 1° Informed: enough to trigger her mind processes.
- 2° Trained: to strengthen her capacities and give her the necessary abilities.
- 3° Transformed: in her mental and social structure.

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

Thus, Gender will be able to benefit first the traditional rural woman, then her family, her whole community, and at last the whole mankind.

Kinshasa, May 31st, 2006.

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