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Spotlight interview with Solange Nzigire (UNTC - DR Congo)

"It is my own experience that drove me to fight for women in the informal economy, who are highly exposed to sexual violence"

Brussels, 24 November 2010 (ITUC OnLine): Like many other Congolese workers in the Goma region (North Kivu), Solange Nzigire, has been a victim of sexual violence. Her own tragic experience moved her to set up an association to help abandoned women and children. Within the UNTC, she is an active defender of women in the informal economy, who are often highly exposed to sexual violence.

You are president of ACAEFAD (Christian action for abandoned women and children and to promote development), which is affiliated to the UNTC. What are the objectives of this organisation?

ACAEFAD, set up in 2006 (following the eruption of the volcano and the second war), is affiliated to the UNTC. At the moment, we have 182 members, many are widowed or divorced women and teenage mothers; there are also 45 abandoned boys. We have taken them off the streets and have set up support activities, to train them in joinery, mechanics, handicrafts. There were more of us some years ago, but many have moved to other faraway regions.

These women do not have sufficient means to live on. Thanks to a microcredit cooperative, they are able to go into petty commerce, selling food, vegetables and other basic foodstuffs, or second-hand clothes. The problems we face are huge. Since the eruption of the volcano and the wars, the situation has been extremely difficult. The FDLR (Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Rwanda) are still in the bush. The mothers had sown and tended their crops but when harvesting time came, the FDLR had made off with their produce and the women had to flee the village and take refuge in a town with no resources. That's why they are trying to do some petty commerce to survive. Those who have stayed on have to pay to harvest the crops, and on returning from the fields they are often stripped of their produce and subjected to sexual violence. That's what happened to me and my mother.

What were the circumstances surrounding these acts of violence?

I was 22 years old. My mum had gone to Walikalé (north of Goma) to sell some small produce; she was robbed and raped. I found out what had happened to her; she needed help. I was preparing for my wedding, but I went there nonetheless. I managed to find my mum, but we then came across a group of soldiers. As I was the youngest, I was the first to be raped by four of them. In October 1995, I fell pregnant, but I couldn't say anything about it, I kept it hidden. I married in December 1995 without saying anything about the pregnancy. Seven months later, I gave birth to a baby boy. It created a lot of problems with my husband's family and my own family too. I had no choice but to tell the truth, and my husband left me. I fell ill, but thanks to God, I had not been infected with AIDS. I was also severely traumatised. Every time I thought about what had happened with those four men, I would pass out. People were saying I had epilepsy.

Two years after being abandoned, I found a second husband. But he did not want anything to do with the child born out of the rape. I had to deal with bringing him up on my own. I had to send him to live with my parents as my husband didn't want him at home. After having four children with my second husband, I was able to go back to school, as my husband was able to support me. But I failed one of my exams because I

had given birth to three more children, so I had to stay at home. I went back into petty commerce to support my husband so that he could take up his studies again. He was a teacher and it was very hard to make ends meet; I was the one who supported him when times were hard.

But when he passed his degree, he started to say that I didn't have the right level of education for him. When he managed to get a job with MONUC and had earned plenty of money, he remarried and had another child. I have now been left alone with our seven children, plus the eighth, my first son, who is living with my parents. I have to ask for alms from my husband's parents to help pay for the children's schooling, it's a lot of difficult palaver. Thanks to the support of my older brother, I was able to go back to my studies and I received my diploma this year. I would like to be able to do further studies in the area of development or logistics. It was my own experience that led me to set up this association.

What are the main problems faced by women victims of violence?

The three main problems are debt, health problems and marital abandonment. The insurgents rob the women that go to collect wood, vegetables, etc. They fall into debt as they are no longer able to pay back their microcredit. They catch diseases because of the rapes. And within the family, when the husband finds out about the rape, he banishes the wife from the house.

We have 70 cases of women who have been abandoned because they have suffered sexual violence. In ten cases, we managed to talk to the husbands and bring about a reconciliation.

In the region where I live, wherever there are mines, there are soldiers, and a lot of violence against women. One of the women from my neighbourhood went to Ngungu to exchange her goods with the diggers, in return for minerals. When she had got together five kilos, she was robbed and then raped. She committed suicide; she was 39 and had five children.

Do you have contact with women who have migrated from other countries in the region?

Yes, there are also women from Rwanda in the association, and three from Burundi. They go through the same as the Congolese women; there is no discrimination between us. You also help women suffering from violence within the family...

I know a girl who lived in her uncle's home. She fell pregnant and accused her uncle. She kept it quiet for a long time. It was only when she reached the labour room to give birth that she confided in us. We contacted the family. The uncle was arrested for a week and then released. He sold his car and, surprise, surprise, he won the case. Corruption is everywhere, there is total impunity!

Violence is present in all circles, in companies, in churches and even in schools. I know of a grade four teacher who raped a little girl aged eight, who was in grade three. He was thrown out of the school and arrested. After a few months, he paid a fine and was released.

ACAEFAD is affiliated to the UNTC. How does this trade union structure help you?

I started working at the age of 18 in petty commerce, with my mother. Today, I am a woman trade unionist and am very proud of the fact. The UNTC's cross-sectoral secretariat has never deserted us. I have benefitted from a great deal of trade union education and training in human rights, women's rights, trade union rights. But trade unions are still not giving the informal economy sufficient consideration. We have to fight hard to make our voice heard.

Interview by Natacha David

-Also read the interview with Dr Denis Mukwege, of the Panzi Hospital in Bukavu (DRC), specialised in the treatment of women victims of sexual violence: <http://www.ituc-csi.org/spotlight-interview-with-dr-denis.html?lang=en>

-Also read the ITUC press release on the international trade union presence at the World March of Women in Bukavu (DRC) in October: <http://www.ituc-csi.org/dr-congo-women-trade-unionists.html?lang=en>

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