Case Studies

Enhancing Women’s Dignity Project

TRUSTAFRICA
For two years, between 2009 and 2011, TrustAfrica, with support from the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, has implemented a Millennium Development Goal 3 (MDG3) project entitled Enhancing Women’s Dignity. The project covered seven countries in francophone sub-Saharan Africa: Burkina Faso, Burundi, Cameroon, Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Mali, Niger, and Senegal. The Enhancing Women’s Dignity project aimed at building capacity to reduce violence against women, and increase women’s political participation. The following are seven case studies of compelling projects that were carried out by grantee partners in each of the target countries.

TrustAfrica is an independent foundation that strives to secure the conditions for democratic governance and equitable development throughout the continent. Led by Africans, the organization convenes dialogues, awards grants, provides technical assistance, and conducts public advocacy to advance these goals. The institution’s theory of change holds that greater citizen engagement in political and economic governance enables societies to become more stable, more prosperous and more equitable. In working to strengthen the mechanisms for participation, TrustAfrica operates from a firm belief in democratic principles, a deep commitment to social justice and a clear understanding of the need for economic vitality.
On Wednesday after my science class, my friends and I were on our way to recess and had stopped in the hallway to wait for another friend to join us. We started talking and laughing about a joke a classmate had told in class. Our science teacher was walking in our direction but we were so engrossed in conversation we didn’t see him. He said we were blocking the way and shoved me aside roughly to pass. When he was passing he looked at me with malice and spat out the word ‘Bitch’. I was taken aback. And realizing that this was just wrong, I shouted an insult back at him. My friends all applauded but he looked like he was about to strangle me. The next thing I know he’s grabbing me by the arm and steering me towards the headmistress’ office. I told him to get his hands off me but he only gripped tighter, calling me all manner of names and telling me that he’d have me expelled.

When the headmistress called us into her office, he went on to start saying how disrespectful and insolent I was and lied and said I’d been insulting him for a long time and that I should be expelled immediately. When it was my turn to speak I told the truth, exactly as it happened in the hallway, I even admitted that I had insulted him back and that I know it was wrong and apologized but that he should not have called me all the things he called me. She asked me to tell her the insults he’d directed at me and when I started he got up, and in front of the headmistress slapped me hard, this time called me a ‘lying bitch’ and walked out of the office. I started crying. The headmistress told me not to worry, gave me tissue and let me cry. She told me that they would take care of this as the teacher obviously had a problem. And that he should have never told me those horrible things or used any form of violence on me. Fanta.

Men to Men

The majority of sexual violence cases are perpetrated by men, yet very few programs on sexual violence actually target men. Some programs and organizations have made it a point to include men in their sensitization programs but even these are not created for men nor do they put men at the heart of the fight against sexual violence.

During the course of its Enhancing Women’s Dignity Project, TrustAfrica provided funding to the African Women’s Development and Communication Network (FEMNET) for its Men-to-Men project. The initiative focuses on creating a network of male women’s rights defenders who are actively combatting sexual violence with a specific focus on sexual harassment in schools. The project has also impacted other serious sexual violence issues such as early marriages and domestic abuse.

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Fanta*

Men Fighting for and with Women

The Men to Men project aims to raise male awareness in promoting equality for human rights and the fight against gender-based violence. Its two key objectives are;

• To make teachers stop harassing students and;
• Create safe spaces of refuge where harassed students can receive assistance and share stories

“We have to touch men in order to reduce violence against women. Violence against women has an impact on children as well. As a traditional communicator, if a program can correct this practice and we can help it to succeed, we will.” Kouyate - a Griot specializing in the use of traditional celebrations such as weddings and baptisms as spaces to mobilize people against harmful practices such as harassment and early marriage.
Taking Concrete Steps

The Men-to-Men project primarily focuses on sexual harassment in the school system. Harassment of students by teachers is one of the major forms of sexual violence in Malian schools today, particularly in secondary schools and universities.

Since the project began there have been significant changes and shifts in attitudes in the perception people have towards sexual harassment and how they deal with incidences of sexual harassment.

In one case, a teacher in one of the secondary schools in Bamako sent a girl to go fetch another one of his students at night, as he could not show up himself at the girls’ house. Understanding that this was inappropriate and doubting the intention of the teacher, the girl refused to go. The teacher thus decided that he would no longer allow this girl to attend his classes since she had refused to help him harass another girl. The young girl in question complained to the school administration that then took action and sent someone to watch whether or not she would be let in the classroom. This was successful and she was allowed to resume class. A few months ago, chances are that the girl would have not complained, and even if she had, the administration would have dismissed her. This is no longer the case.

These small changes have great significance along the way of changing how people perceive and deal with harassment.

The follow-up to the above case showed that the school administration went ahead and called the teacher’s union, who then advised the girl to report the incident to the police. The school administration took a formal and public stand that behavior like this would not be tolerated, and the teacher’s union sided with the girl. ‘All of this work has been done through counting on volunteers. Male and female students have set up committees in different schools that organize discussions among themselves and call on to the project’s steering committee to support them.’ Amadou SAMAKE, Men to Men Program Coordinator, FEMNET

Before the program, these would have been considered banal incidents that did not heed any ink. Teachers would have ganged up against the girl and blamed her. This was the first time there was such a unified voice against the issue. A milestone in the fight towards perception change.

Organization’s Profile:

FEMNET was established in 1988 “to share experiences, information and strategies among African women’s non-governmental organizations (NGOs) through advocacy, training and communications so as to advance African women’s development, equality and other human rights. FEMNET aims to strengthen the role and contribution of African NGOs focusing on women’s development, equality and other human rights. It also aims to provide a channel through which these NGOs can reach one another and share experiences, information and strategies so as to improve their work on African women’s development, equality and other human rights.”

FEMNET/Mali, the focal point for the regional office, was established in 2004. FEMNET/Mali works to share information, experiences, ideas and strategies with Malian women’s groups. The organization’s main objectives are to:

• Create a network of women
• Create organizational synergy for women’s organizations in Mali
• Train in leadership and advocacy
• Inform
• Raise awareness
Women represent 50.14% of the population in Niger, and in rural areas, they are responsible for all the household work, and a great part of the field work. They work about 16 hours a day, and contribute to over 60% of the economies of their communities. In addition to this situation, their freedom and rights, even to basic social services such as maternal and child healthcare, remain very limited and disregarded by decision-makers. It is considered that if more women are represented in decision-making positions at the local and national levels, this situation could change, and women would be better taken care of, especially in terms of their human rights. Several changes that have started in Niger would be better taken care of, especially in terms of their human rights.

In March 2011, the UN Secretary-General applauded the successful staging of presidential elections in Niger, and noted that they constitute a great step forward in instituting a long lasting culture of democracy in the country. These successful elections represent a great opportunity for women. Instituting a long lasting democracy will require taking account of the needs and rights of the majority of the population, and giving access to more decision-making positions to women.

From previous studies, the Association Nigérienne pour le Progrès et la Défense des Droits de la Femme (ANPDDF) found that women in Niger were not able to vote due to the fact that they did not have basic legal documents such as birth certificates. As a first step for assisting the women in 10 provinces (kiota; Fabédjé; N’gonga; Fakara; Fairmey; kankandi; Guillaje; koygolo; Harkanaisou, and Falmey ey Fakara) in acquiring voter registration cards, ANPDDF worked closely with the Niger Ministry of Women’s Affairs, local authorities, religious leaders and traditional birth attendants to deliver supplementary birth certificates to 10,114 women across the aforementioned ten localities.
Violence Free Universities

It is sad to note that a shocking majority of sexual violence cases are perpetrated not by strangers, but by people that the victim knows personally. It is even more unfortunate that places that should be safe such as homes, schools and places of work are now more than ever danger zones for sexual violence.

‘It was during exams. I stayed late to help my classmate study a chapter she didn’t understand very well. She had to leave earlier because of the dark clouds that were forming and be able to find a bus and get home. Since I lived next to the university I was the one who then had to put the chairs back at their places and erase the board. I forgot to ask the cleaning woman who’d been there an hour ago for the keys to lock the classroom. As I got out to look for her I saw a man coming. As he got closer I recognized him to be my economics professor. I finished packing my things and was about to head out when he came into the classroom. I greeted him and started making my way towards the door, but he wasn’t moving from the doorway. When I explained that I was on my way out to look for the keys he smiled at me and told me he had a spare copy. I was relieved. That was until I saw the look in his eye as he locked the door behind him.’ Hawa*

Universities have become very fertile ground for sexual predators especially considering the still prevalent taboos around sexuality in those spaces. However, despite this, very little is known about gender-based violence in universities, hindering the development of targeted and effective programs addressing this.

A recent study has shown that girls are the most afflicted by gender-based violence accounting for over 85% of the reported cases.

Most of the studies that have been done on gender-based violence in schools have focused on primary and secondary schools with very little attention paid to the higher education systems. The lack of data from these institutions and the need to push stakeholders in the higher education system has led TrustAfrica to fund the Center for Research and Intervention in Gender and Development (CRIGED) in Burkina Faso, to initiate a study on sexual violence in three selected universities in Burkina.

The study focused on answering three questions:

• Identifying the different forms of gender based violence that occur in universities and the actors that are implicated,
• Determining the prevalence of gender-based violence and finally;
• Understanding the perception that people currently have of gender based violence within the universities.

More than 65% of physical violence cases had girls as victims contradicting popular belief that girls only accounted for 30% of the cases and that boys accounted for 46%.

The ministry showed an encouraging step towards tackling this issue by allowing the studies to take place and the results have been phenomenal, further demonstrating the need for this gap to be addressed.
Key Recommendations

The key recommendations from this study are:

- To raise awareness in order to re-establish a moral order against gender-based violence.
- To sanction perpetrators of violence.
- To ensure that the institutional gaps that allow such behaviour is addressed such as the poor living and learning conditions in the dormitories and classrooms. Something as simple and crucial as the implementation of the ‘reglement intérieur’ would help to reduce incidents of gender-based violence.

More than 1/3 of all the students in universities reported being victims of gender-based violence. Verbal and psychological abuse are the most common with sexual and physical abuse being prevalent.

A major challenge being faced is that most people still perceive women to intentionally put themselves into risky situations, therefore making themselves easy prey. This led us to ask ourselves: if ‘perception’ constitutes fact and if so, how best do we address this? Are girls compromising themselves due to economic challenges or their desire for good grades?

The project has helped to:

- Break a taboo in the university setting by bringing several actors to talk about gender-based violence
- Develop a better understanding and contribute to knowledge creation on a phenomenon that greatly affects the performance of students in universities
- Provide data to the school authorities and government officials on the issue
- Gather relevant proposals from civil society on ways to prevent gender-based violence and how to best support victims
- Open the debate on gender-based violence in universities with actors outside the schools, such as journalists and women’s rights organizations
- Develop a project based on the results of the study aimed at combatting gender-based violence in universities

Organization’s Profile

The Center for Research and Intervention in Gender and Development (CRIGED) was created to provide support to different institutions (government, international, civil society organizations) for efficient gender mainstreaming in development programs and policies. The organization is headquartered in Ouagadougou, and is an independent technical and scientific center for knowledge production and dissemination as well as capacity building in the field of gender and development. The organization’s mission is to promote and defend women’s rights through technical assistance for organizations working in that field, and promote equity and social justice in development programs. CRIGED has chapters in Ethiopia, Kenya, Uganda, and Zimbabwe, and it operates mainly in the following areas:

- Research
- Training and counseling on gender mainstreaming
- Assistance to civil society organizations and other institutions on gender and development
- Advocacy to end violence against women (mainly forced marriage and domestic violence)
- Promoting women’s political participation at national and local levels
- Promoting women’s leadership
- Promoting gender budgeting at the national and local levels
- Follow-up on the implementation of gender mainstreaming in the Paris Declaration
- Monitoring and evaluation of the impact of development policies on gender inequalities

CRIGED uses the following implementation strategies:
- Lobbying and political dialogue
- Capacity building of key actors
- Implication of men in all activities
- Training of civil society organizations in gender mainstreaming
- Networking at the national, regional, and international levels
- Partnership with the media
- Partnership with universities and other research centers
- Partnership with religious and traditional entities
The Law Should Also Protect Women

If a person physically assaults another, it doesn’t matter who that person is, they should be locked up."

The fact that a large number of gender-based violence perpetrators often escape or are exempted from justice sends the message that it is acceptable behaviour. This is a huge and fundamental challenge that prevents proper corrective action from being taken.

"Anne and I have been neighbours for a long time. In the fifteen years that I’ve known her, she has never once come and asked me for help. Her husband has been terrorizing her since they moved into that house. He beats her and on many occasions has locked her outside the house in the dark and in the rain! She came to me once to ask me for money, as all her money goes straight to her husband. She needed to buy sanitary pads. She told me that she even though she earned a monthly salary, it always went to her husband and sometimes she’d be too busy to give her money that she needed. She said she’d already asked him and didn’t want to anger him by asking again. I gave her some of what I had. Months later she came back to my house to ask me for more money, she said she’d just got her salary but needed to buy animal feed for their cows, and that her husband was away on business and she couldn’t touch her salary till he came back and gave her permission. I told her to stop being silly, that he would understand as the cows needed to eat, and even pointed out that he probably would be more angry if she let them starve. I didn’t realize that that advice would land her in hospital. He came back three days later, and how I knew was by the screams. I ran outside to see what was wrong as I’d never heard her sound so terrified before. Just as I looked over the fence I heard a noise that sent cold chills of dread down my spine. When I looked over I saw her on the ground outside with blood. So much blood. He looked like an animal, holding a panga. It took me a few seconds to fully absorb what was going on but when I finally did I was horrified to see that he’d cut off her left arm! I screamed and shouted for help and reported it to the police immediately. I got some other neighbours to come help me take her to hospital while the police took him in. Sad and disappointed does not begin to describe how I felt when I found out that after she’d been released from hospital, she’d gone straight to the police station and had that ‘man’ released. And what’s even worse, the police did! They said that they couldn’t hold him if his wife was unwilling to press charges. * Pauline*

Many activists and human rights defenders agree that criminalizing gender-based violence would help to deter perpetrators by sending a very strong signal that abuse is not to be tolerated and that there are penal consequence to abuse.

Burundi Moving Forward

The Burundian government had undertaken the task of reviewing its penal code with a view to better protect women against sexual harassment and violence as well as harmonize its laws with international agreements that the government has ratified.

With funding from TrustAfrica, the Association pour la Défense des Droits de la Femme (the Association for the Defense of Women’s Rights) (ADDF) started an advocacy project for the revision of the Burundian Code of Criminal Procedures to include provisions on gender-based violence, and to harmonize it with the new penal code.

"The key task has been to harmonize the code of procedures with the new penal code. This would ensure follow up of the penal code particularly in relation to the police. Luckily the process is well under way with the review of the penal code taking into account the suggestions of civil society organizations." Mireille Niyonzima – President, ADDF

The following three areas in the already existing legal process were identified to need further strengthening:

- Parliamentarians needed to really understand the implications for their constituencies in order to support the new code when it came for a vote.
- The police and the justice system that would be in charge of implementing the new code needed to have really internalized the code and understood gender-based violence to be able to adequately apply the law once it has been voted.
- The citizens who should be the primary beneficiaries of this new level of protection needed to understand their rights under the revised penal code and how best to take advantage of it.
Civil Society at the Forefront

For nine months, ADDF worked intensively with the government, National Assembly, the Senate and the police in reinforcing their understanding of gender-based violence.

The project has managed to:

- Mobilize the public and get them actively involved
- Empower survivors of gender based violence through leadership mobilization campaigns, and
- Initiate a mass-media campaign to inform people on the content of the penal code in regards to gender based violence.

Organization’s profile:

ADDF is a Burundian civil society organization that was founded in 1996. Its members are women, girls, young men, and men who believe in defending women’s rights through dialogue, training, information sharing, and women’s economic independence. The organization’s programs are based on needs defined by women themselves, and are evaluated and improved based on beneficiaries assessments and recommendations. ADDF’s main projects currently revolve around dialogue, literacy, protection of school girls against violence, and a newsletter called “Mukanyezi Ugeze He” (Women Walking). The organization was instrumental in the adoption of the National Policy on Gender, the National Strategy to Fight GBV, and in the revision of the Burundian Penal Code with regards to GBV.

No More Ignorance

We cannot reduce poverty until women are well represented as active citizens in the political participation of their countries. And because women are natural born communicators, their involvement automatically increases access to information.

‘I grew up in a small village near Thies and got married to a man who was living in Dakar. He took me to live with him in the city. It was hard to settle and fit in because the life I’d always known was not of the city. He kept all our documents and I never thought much about it, after all what’s the use of a birth certificate when you’re an adult? When he ran away, leaving me in the city with our 6 month old baby, I started to realize just how vulnerable I knew was. You see I couldn’t send word to my parents or family as they did not have a phone and I did not know their address. I didn’t have enough money to travel back home, leave alone pay the rent for the small house he left me and his child in. The landlord was understanding but kicked me out when my rent was in arrears for 3 months. I was out on the street, with a small child to look after. I tried to find a job, but they told me I needed an Identification Card. I tried to get that card but they told me I needed to give them my birth certificate. When I explained that my husband had run away with all my documents, birth certificate included, they said that there was nothing they could do to help. I needed a birth certificate. I was left begging on the streets of Dakar for over a year, until help came to me. A young lady I asked for money from, did not give me money but took me and my child to a fast food and bought us something to eat. As we ate she asked what my story was. I was so surprised that someone was interested in me that I told her everything. She then made it her mission to help me get my papers in order so I could finally get a decent job. I consider myself one of the very lucky few to have met an angel.’

Fatou*

With support from TrustAfrica, the Groupe de Recherche sur les Femmes et les Lois au Sénégal (GREFELS) (a research group, part of the global network: Women Under Muslim Law), carried out a study in Paoskoto and Ngoundiane to address the prevalent challenges to women’s active political participation and access to information.

The study included village chiefs, women’s groups, school directors, local authorities, health professionals, civil society organizations and more. It allowed for a baseline assessment of the specific needs and expectations of women in order to design relevant and adapted training programs.
Together with the help of local organizations in each of the zones, a training workshop was developed, with each party taking on a leadership role in the organization and coordination of the workshop.

Incremental Changes Can Go a Long Way

GREFELS started its project with the knowledge that an increase by just a mere 10% of the number of women elected to local rural committees will go a long way in ensuring that a large number of women in the region can in fact vote and are aware of their voting rights.

The project focused its operations in Paoskoto - Kaoalck Region, Nioro department and Ngoundiane - Thiès Region, Thiénaba department.

“One of the most interesting parts of the project was that it has brought together women so they can share and learn from each other. It has allowed them to identify many of the factors that prevented women from actively participating in decision-making processes, such as their inability to read and write. Some of the women did not have birth certificates or ID cards, and those that did have them, for the most part did not keep them as they were kept by their husbands.” *Ndéye NDIAYE - training participant*

The project successfully raised the consciousness of the women involved about their role in shaping their socio-political and economic environment through being able to participate in identifying their leadership from the rural committee level to the presidential elections.

“My husband has always kept our marriage license as well as my identity card. I did not even know about the electoral card or how to get it so I could vote. Now I know.” *Ndéye NDIAYE - village chief's wife & workshop participant*

“We have to be ready for the 2012 presidential elections. If we want to have the power to influence these elections women have to at the very least have their ID and voters card.” *Hadhy NDIAYE - training participant*

Organization’s Profile:

GREFELS was founded in 1994 by a group of women activists engaged in the Women Living Under Muslim Laws network. The Women Living under Muslim Laws (WLUML) is an international solidarity network that provides information, support and collective space for women whose lives are shaped, conditioned and/or governed by laws and customs said to be derived from Islam. The Network’s aim is to strengthen women’s individual and collective struggles for equality and rights, especially in Muslim contexts through building bridges between these women and global feminist forces and sharing information and strategies that help women to take control of their lives. WLUML has an International Coordination Office (ICO) based in London which works on the WLUML core activities of networking, information exchange, and solidarity and alerts. The coordination offices are the focal points for networking in the regions and serve to implement and drive strategy at a regional level while making the connections between regional and global issues and concerns. The offices provide support to regional struggles and alerts, build new networking linkages and provide strategic support to regional participants. WLUML has two Coordination Offices: one located in Pakistan that serves Asia, and a second located in Senegal that serves Africa and the Middle East. GREFELS currently hosts the WLUML’s Regional Coordination Office for Africa and Middle East (RCO/AME), and its main objective is to conduct research and advocacy on women’s rights in Senegal. Members of GREFELS are women from Islam. The Network’s aim is to strengthen women’s individual and collective struggles for equality and rights, especially in Muslim contexts through building bridges between these women and global feminist forces and sharing information and strategies that help women to take control of their lives. WLUML has an International Coordination Office (ICO) based in London which works on the WLUML core activities of networking, information exchange, and solidarity and alerts. The coordination offices are the focal points for networking in the regions and serve to implement and drive strategy at a regional level while making the connections between regional and global issues and concerns. The offices provide support to regional struggles and alerts, build new networking linkages and provide strategic support to regional participants. WLUML has two Coordination Offices: one located in Pakistan that serves Asia, and a second located in Senegal that serves Africa and the Middle East. GREFELS currently hosts the WLUML’s Regional Coordination Office for Africa and Middle East (RCO/AME), and its main objective is to conduct research and advocacy on women’s rights in Senegal. Members of GREFELS are women

For Better or Worse?

There are still numerous cases of violence and downright abuse of women’s rights in every sphere in Cameroon. These include the denial of a woman’s right to inheritance, domestic violence and sexual harassment in schools and universities.

“When the pastor asked if I would marry my husband and stay with him forever, I said no, and he said ‘you are silent and don’t say anything in the church’. I had to marry him and he gave me a husband’s name and I was never the same again.” *Ndoumbe*

Women in Research and Action (WIRA) strongly believes that by promoting the presence of community advisors, counselors and leaders in local communities to both protect and advise victims of gender-based violence, the rate of violence will drastically reduce.

“It is clear to us that many victims of violence usually need immediate assistance within their communities before they can have the courage to seek for assistance at a higher level. We also realized that the advice and assistance given was inadequate because community leaders and family members did not have adequate knowledge on issues of violence against women. That is why we decided to empower some community leaders in order for them to provide better services to victims of violence against women and girls.” *Sume EPI-EYOH, President, WIRA*
Reducing the high rate of violence against women and supporting victims is what WIRA seeks to do. A campaign funded by TrustAfrica was developed to accomplish this, and was aimed at:

- Raising awareness of the population and other stakeholders such as decision makers in the community on violence against women as a human rights violation.
- Mobilizing community leaders to take on key roles in being the champions of this work moving forward.
- Preparing the tools that would serve for trainings as well as continuous reference documents for community leaders.

The trainings then built the skills of community leaders to provide immediate assistance to victims of violence in their various communities and act as the link between civil society organizations and the community.

“This project has introduced a new dimension into family life where husbands are aware of the repercussion in case they are violent to their wives. It has created community awareness in regards to brutality and violence against women. As counselors, it has enabled us to communicate and counsel broken homes in our communities and create peace in marriages in our community. They know that they will be prosecuted in a court of law.”

Sally VEGA - Soroptenist International

Despite the fact that the project is coming to an end, there are already tangible results and tools available to the communities. Thirty key people have been identified in the various communities to support the victims. These thirty have been recognized as leaders in the fight against gender-based violence in their communities.

“"It was very important to have associated many actors and power holders who are involved in dealing with violence against women. This demonstrates that in addition to the public power, there are sure, simple, effective, viable and original alternatives that civil society can undertake to reduce violence against women.”

Francoise BABA, Member, WIRA

**Organization’s Profile:**

WIRA was established as an association in Cameroon in 1999. The organization’s vision is to have a society where women’s human rights and equality between women and men are real. The main objectives of the association are:

- To promote the advancement of women,
- To promote and protect the rights of women and children,
- To raise awareness of women’s human rights and issues affecting them,
- To build the capacity of stakeholders on issues concerning the human rights of women,
- To research on women’s human rights issues.

WIRA is managed by a bureau of four members who meet every three months. The day-to-day activities of the association are run by the coordinator assisted by staff members. In the past, WIRA has worked on the following activities:

- Organization of a Tribune on Violence Against Women during which victims gave moving testimonies on acts of violence committed against them;
- Commemoration of 16 Days of Activism on Violence Against Women;
- Preparation of a Shadow Report 2008-2009 on CEDAW;
- Follow up of Concluding Comments of the CEDAW Committee following the presentation and examination of Cameroon’s 2 and 3 report on CEDAW 2009.

Its current work revolves around:

- Advocacy for the enactment of the Family Code and the Law on the Prevention of Violence Against Women;
- Training stakeholders on the Convention of the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women;
- Raising awareness on women’s human rights including economic, social and cultural rights;
- Improve on our legal aid services.
Breathe Life

‘For two hours, every two weeks, I am not a woman who has been raped. I am just a woman who can laugh out loud, play, dance, and love myself again.’

Every single day, approximately five new women enter the Health Education Action Leadership (HEAL) Africa Center to seek support. The Center is the only one of its kind and is located in Goma. It has 18 branches in North Kivu and 12 in Maniema with a total of 320 employees who run the community projects. For those that need medical attention, there is a hospital, and for all survivors of sexual violence, their psychological trauma and needs are addressed by counselors who follow each case. For those who need to get back on their feet, there are classes in sewing, reading and writing, and for those who need to learn to love life again, there is Breathe Life.

The war is officially over but the violence continues in Eastern DRC. About 45% of perpetrators are civilians emerging from a culture of violence that is prevalent in all spheres.

Breathe Life is a Heal Africa project funded by TrustAfrica, that brings joy back into the lives of survivors of sexual violence. It uses creative arts such as dance, music and theatre to pursue a more holistic healing process for survivors.

“The dancing and singing has really turned my life around. I would be very depressed and think a lot about the trauma and injustices I had gone through, replaying them in my head. I lived a life of worry. The last time my children saw me smile was 10 years ago. When my mother introduced me to the drums, I felt a feeling that had been long gone from my life. Joy. I have been dancing and living ever since.” Mawazu Kabandika, Rape Survivor

The idea of the project is powerful in its simplicity. It brings women together and through musical instruments they express and enjoy themselves.

The sessions are run by a group of young university students that are trained in theatre forums. A typical session usually begins with each person introducing themselves and being welcomed by the group, followed by enthusiastic singing and dancing. Through dance and play women can heal faster from the psychological, emotional and physical trauma of what they have been through. For one year, 48 sessions were conducted every week, an achievement beyond expectations.

Organization’s Profile :

Founded in 1996 by Congolese orthopedic surgeon Jo Lusi and his wife, Lyn, a prominent social activist, HEAL Africa works for the improvement of health conditions in Africa through training of doctors, health staff, and activists in several aspects of healing, including physical, spiritual, and community-based. HEAL Africa’s vision is to promote healthy communities. The organization’s beneficiaries are primarily the most vulnerable members of the communities in which they operate. Based in Goma, HEAL Africa has been one of the most prominent actors against sexual violence, and performs over 300 fistula repairs a year, with over 1400 successful surgeries since 2004. The organization also provides economic support to survivors of sexual violence, and is taking legal action on behalf of the victims. Since 2002, HEAL Africa works specifically in the North Kivu and Maniema regions to identity survivors of sexual violence and bring them post rape psychological and medical support, and mobilize communities to take legal actions against perpetrators instead of stigmatizing victims. The organization also works on victims’ social, familial, and economic reinsertion.