





# Acknowledgements

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This report is the result of surveys and interviews conducted with women and men leaders and founders of civil society organisations in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). This report was produced as part of the implementation of the Women's Leadership Development Program of the international non-governmental organisation (NGO) Well Grounded. We are grateful for the opportunity to conduct this study with women.

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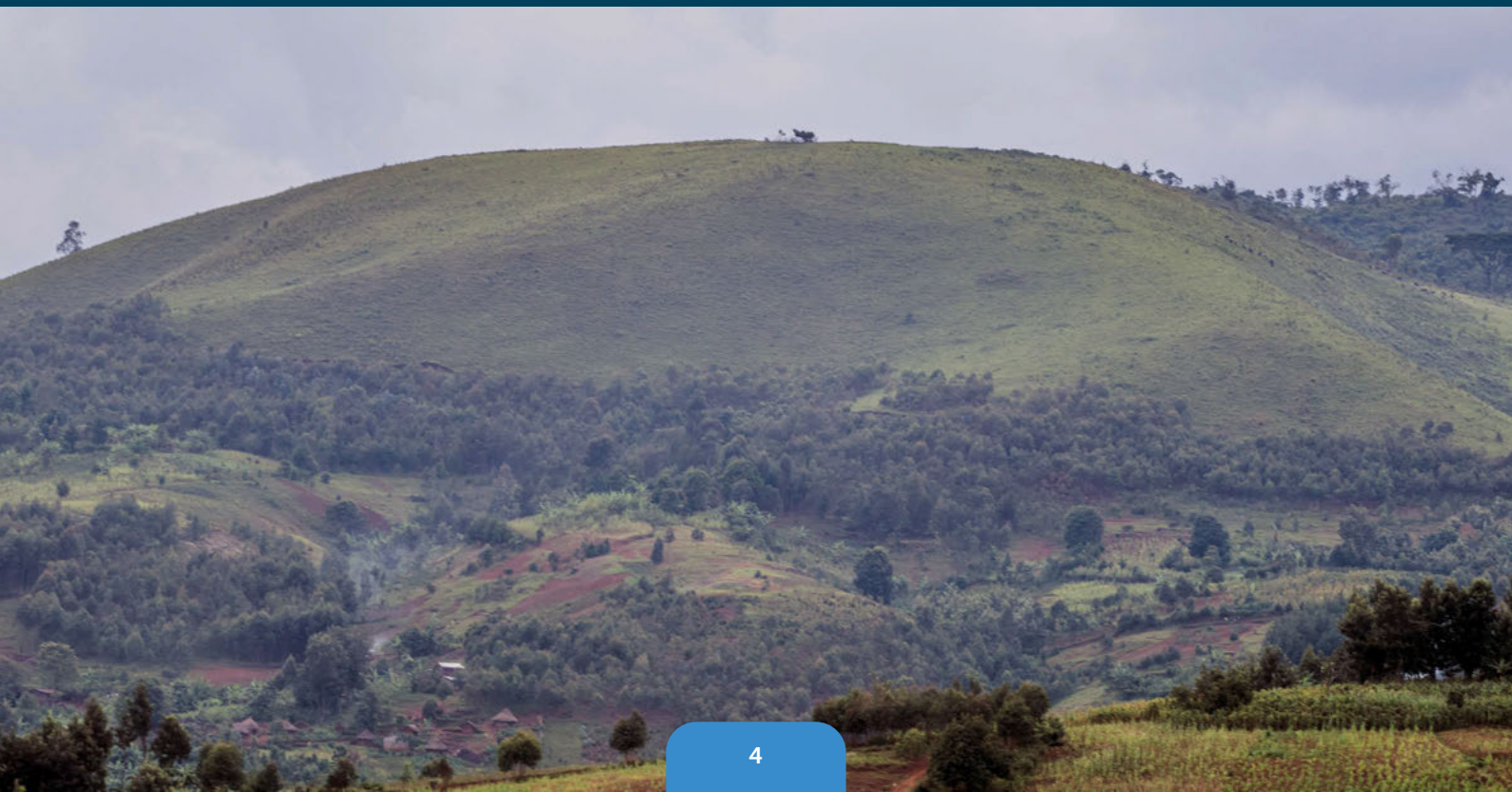
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# Acronyms

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<b>FAO:</b>	United Nations Agriculture Organisation
<b>NGO:</b>	Non-Governmental Organisation
<b>INGO:</b>	International Non-Governmental Organisation
<b>CSO:</b>	Civil Society Organisation
<b>PSH:</b>	Person with a Disability
<b>DRC:</b>	Democratic Republic of Congo
<b>CS:</b>	Civil Society
<b>HIV:</b>	Human Immunodeficiency Virus

“In my family, women are the ones who do everything in the socialisation process; this revolted me. Afterwards, there is a social reproduction for all generations, it is the woman who does everything at home. Women put limits on themselves, they want to satisfy men. Having become aware of this, I decided to study law to defend the rights of women.”



# Summary

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Women in the DRC are involved in civil society through their organisations. They are active on issues of conservation and preservation of nature, women's access to land, reduction of domestic violence, illegal logging, climate change, environment, etc. The results of this study give an overview of the place of women in civil society and the difficulties they face. These difficulties can be summarised as follows:



The perception that women do not have the same opportunities as men in the DRC is very prevalent among the Congolese civil society women we consulted.

Structural inequalities, supported by the persistence of gender stereotypes in the deep-rooted patriarchal culture, create many obstacles to women's leadership development in civil society organisations. These obstacles can be external, such as social, familial or economic constraints on girls and women, but also internal.

External obstacles include social practices and cultural norms that constitute barriers to women's access to decision-making bodies in civil society and that generate an under-representation of women compared to men in governing bodies: for example, the fact that family life weighs more on women culturally and psychologically, and that they have few spaces, which accommodate their family responsibilities. As a result, women who manage to access the leadership bodies often find themselves in the minority compared to men and feel that their opinions are less listened to than those of men during meetings.

This inequality of opportunity can also be explained by the inequalities between girls and boys, and between women and men in terms of education, schooling, training and information, which means that women are often less qualified or perceived as less qualified than men, which also hinders their acquisition of professional experience. They are also less economically independent and have less access to financial systems than men.

Among the internal obstacles, linked to cultural conditioning, there is a lack of confidence and self-esteem within women, which is an obstacle to asserting themselves in civil society and participating in decision-making bodies.

The women who feel influential in Congolese civil society have had the opportunity to pursue higher education and some have benefited from leadership training. Their professional experience, in particular the work they have done with communities, has helped them to grow in power and strengthen their self-esteem in order to take their place in civil society.

Gender stereotypes separate women and leadership. Thus, in the social construction of communities, men are perceived as active, as having the spirit of leadership and exercising leadership in civil society as well as at all levels of society, contrary to women who are associated with roles of support, assistance and care.

Culturally embedded beliefs reinforce social practices that hinder women's leadership development in civil society.

Women are key players in the development of civil society. The emergence of women leaders in civil society depends very much on women themselves, but it also depends on overcoming cultural representations and their repercussions on the economic, social and political situation of women. Civil society is a space where women can assert themselves and develop their leadership capacities.

# Introduction

**In African patriarchal societies, particularly in the Congo Basin, the place of women is seen as secondary. It is a reality rooted in the family circle, traditional circles, culture and state and government institutions that govern the place of women in society.**

In the DRC, a large number of legal instruments<sup>1</sup> as well as a national gender policy are in place to reduce gender inequalities. Despite these various national, regional and international texts and commitments, the treatment of the gender issue still suffers from a certain neglect. «Despite the adoption of the parity law, disparities are still deeply rooted in mentalities and the representation of women in decision-making bodies within the Government and the National Assembly remains low. Women's representation is 3% in rural areas» (FAO, 2020<sup>2</sup>).

For example, in rural areas of the DRC, women, who by virtue of their social role in providing for the family, are the first to be affected by the natural resource crisis caused by climate change and the damage of the extractive industry. However, they are barely involved in the governance of these resources or in local policy decisions. The laws and the means of information by which these laws are made known are used minimally. In general, the issue of women's participation in decision-making seems to be a marginal priority.

This situation is exacerbated by the low presence of women in positions of responsibility within civil society organisations and by the lack of visibility of women-led NGOs and by the fact that their leadership is still not recognised by men due to socio-cultural barriers.



“Inequality between men and women in decision-making bodies in natural resource management. An injustice also towards indigenous peoples and other forest communities.”

<sup>1</sup> The Constitution of 18 February, 2006 (Articles 14 and 15); Law No. 06/018 of 20 July, 2006 amending and supplementing the Decree of 30 January, 1940 on the Congolese Criminal Code, known as the ‘Sexual Violence Act’; Law No. 08/005 of 10 June, 2008 on the public financing of political parties (see Article 3 paragraph 5 on the consideration of parity in the establishment of electoral lists and Article 6 paragraph 6 where the subsidy paid by the State to a political party must contribute to the eligibility of women under conditions of equality with men); the Organic Law of 21 March, 2013 on the creation, organisation and functioning of the National Commission for the Defence of Human Rights, one of whose duties is to ensure respect for the rights of women and children (Article 6 paragraph 4); the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) on 17 October, 1986 and the Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples’ Rights on the Rights of Women on 09 June, 2008; National Fund for the Promotion of Women and the Protection of Children (FONAFEN) (see decree n° 09/37 of October 10, 2009 on the creation, organization and functioning of a public establishment called «National Fund for the Promotion of Women and the Protection of Children»)

<sup>2</sup> FAO, DRC gender profile in the agriculture sectors, 2020

Throughout society in the DRC, women are considered to be vulnerable groups and are generally excluded from the decision-making sphere, both at family and community levels. Women and girls are often reduced to reproductive functions and domestic work, and are victims of inequality.

The lack of integration of women in decision-making spheres, although worrying, receives little attention from politicians.

Women also suffer from inequalities in the acquisition of skills: they have less access than men to schooling, secondary education and qualifying work experience.

The persistence of stereotypes and beliefs about women's leadership contributes to their relative absence from decision-making positions in civil society.

Finally, all this is linked to a socio-cultural conditioning that leads women to self-deprecate, to undervalue their skills and their potential.

Well Grounded, a non-governmental organisation specialising in supporting civil society committed to social and environmental justice in the Congo Basin, has designed a women's leadership development program, which aims to stimulate the affirmation and participation of women in decision-making spaces that concern them, in civil society and at the community level, particularly in the governance of natural resources.

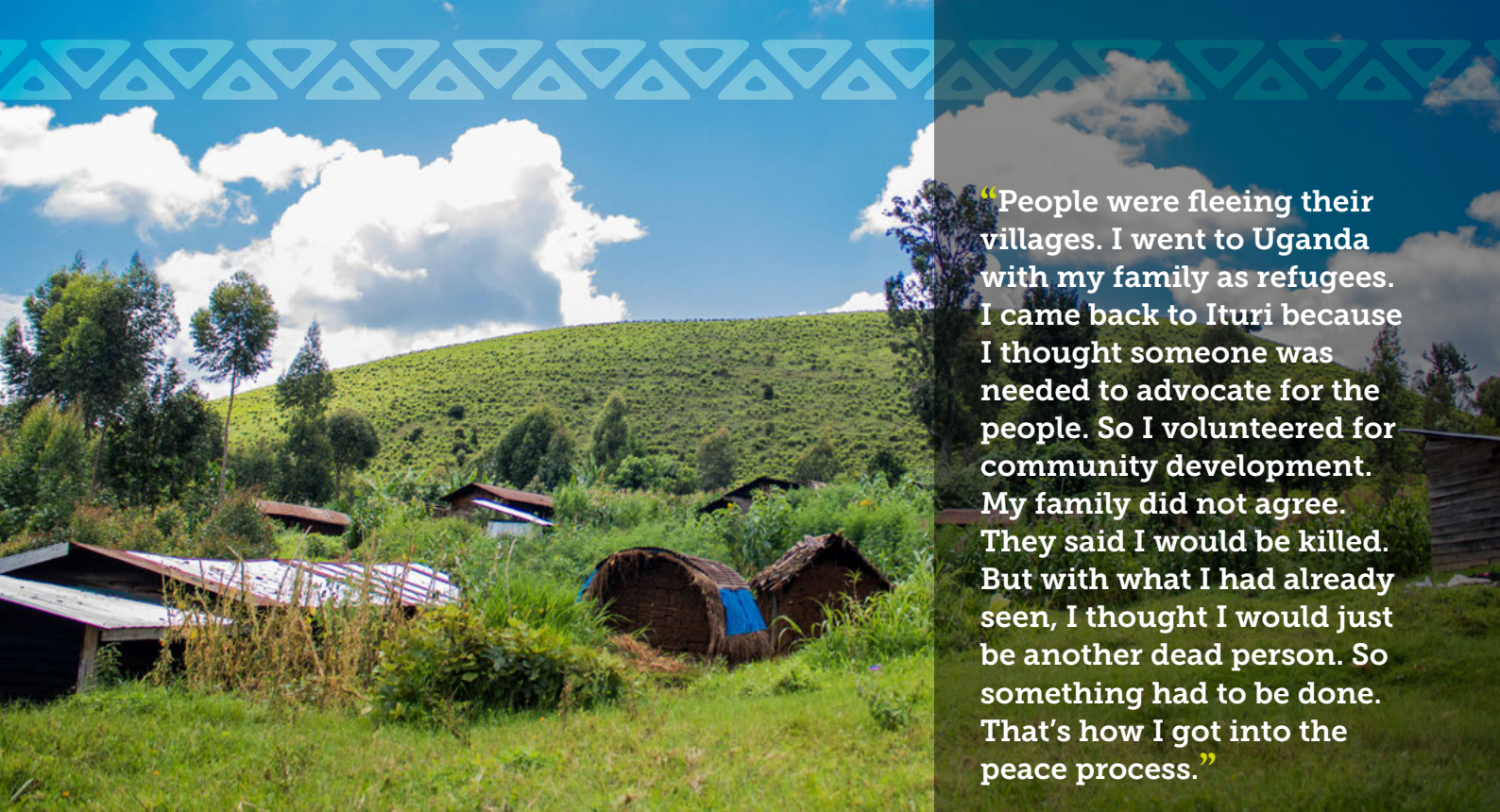
Well Grounded decided to carry out this study on the place and role of women in civil society in order to understand more precisely the reality of women in civil society in the DRC, and to understand the difficulties and challenges for women involved in civil society, the current situation, and what they can achieve by strengthening their leadership or power to act.

### Specifically, the objectives of the study were:

- To take stock of the place and influence of women in civil society in the DRC, in quantitative and qualitative terms.
- Understand how women perceive their role and influence in CS.
- Understand the levers and assets that favour the emergence of women in CS.
- Understand the potential barriers women face in carrying out their commitment and duties.



Considering the vastness of the DRC and given the limitations of its sampling, this study does not claim to have a high geographical or quantitative coverage. The response rate to our consultations was lower than expected. However, the qualitative findings of this study corroborate a number of testimonies that Well Grounded has already collected in its activities with Congolese women for leadership development since 2017.



“People were fleeing their villages. I went to Uganda with my family as refugees. I came back to Ituri because I thought someone was needed to advocate for the people. So I volunteered for community development. My family did not agree. They said I would be killed. But with what I had already seen, I thought I would just be another dead person. So something had to be done. That’s how I got into the peace process.”

# Methodology

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This study was done completely remotely and consisted of a literature review and a survey of men and women involved in civil society as well as international non-governmental organisations working with Congolese CSOs.

## 1.1 Collection tools

Collection tools<sup>3</sup> have been developed, namely:

- An individual questionnaire addressed to men and women involved in civil society, for both quantitative and qualitative data collection.
- An interview guide to collect qualitative data and to deepen the data collected through the individual questionnaire with a sample of women. This interview guide made it possible to gather more detailed information on the opinions and feelings of the women. The interviews lasted an average of 2 hours.
- A questionnaire addressed to international NGOs and donors present in the DRC, to collect their opinions and perceptions of the place of women in Congolese CSOs.

## 1.2 Sampling

Considering the size of the DRC, we must acknowledge that the sampling for this study is very limited in quantitative terms. We tried to have all provinces of the DRC represented in our sample, through the thematic networks of CSOs. However, it is clear that the participation rate was lower than expected. To compensate for this, we ensured a balanced representation of the major regions of the DRC where civil society is most active (Kinshasa province and neighbouring provinces, Eastern provinces).

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<sup>3</sup> See attached tools: questionnaires and interview guide



For the individual questionnaire, a sample of 268 people was selected, composed of men and women leaders in civil society in the DRC. The sample included 70% women and 30% men. Some targets were selected through existing online directories of CSOs in the DRC, and others through Well Grounded's networks and contact directories. 27 people responded to the questionnaire.

For the questionnaire sent to international NGOs and donors, 40 INGOs and donors that support gender equality issues were identified. 39 INGO and donor representatives responded.

For the individual interviews, 20 women were identified from among those sampled for the individual questionnaire. In the end, 15 women agreed to be interviewed for this study and each of them confirmed in advance by e-mail or telephone that they wanted to participate in the interviews.

### 1.3 Data collection technique and analysis

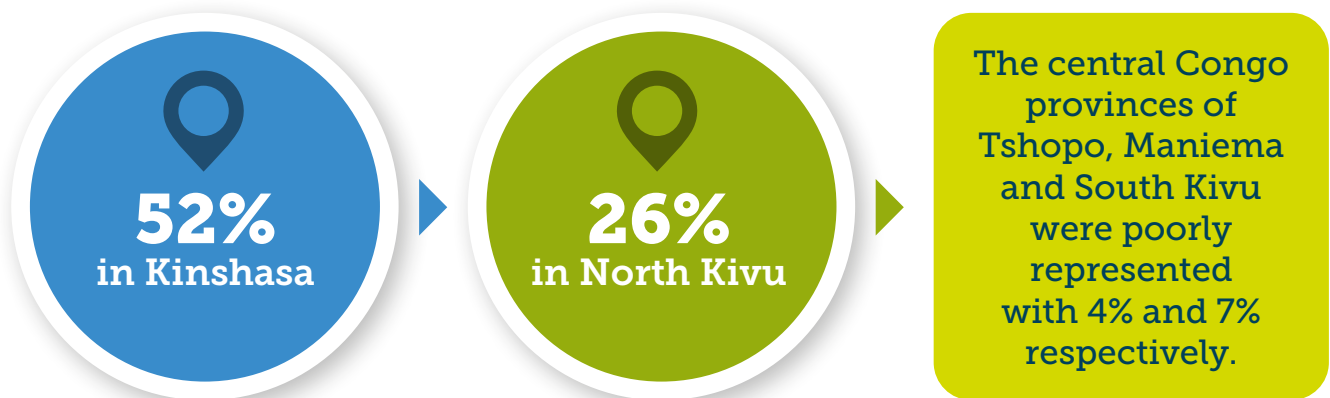
Restrictions arising from the coronavirus context did not allow for on-site data collection. The data collection was therefore done remotely:

- Via Survey Monkey for the administration and analysis of the questionnaires.
- Via WhatsApp or videoconference for in-depth interviews, allowing a direct exchange with the women.

### 1.4 Profile of the sample and their areas of intervention

The sample was composed of 70% women.

The percentage of respondents located in different provinces was as follows :



The average age of the women was between 35 and 49. They all studied and reached the level of Bachelor's degree (3 years additional studies post-secondary school), with 33.33% having reached the level of Masters degree (5 years additional studies post-secondary school).

The women are all active in development and work in various fields of activity. 40.74% are involved in the environmental field, 22.22% in the field of gender and equality between men and women and 14.81% in the field of human rights. The others are respectively involved in education (3.70%), agricultural development (11.11%), peace and security (7.41%). In addition, some of the women intervene specifically on women and youth empowerment, the peasant movement, domestic violence and political participation.



“I would do differently if I were to relive my experience. I would train more. I know I have weaknesses and I could do better.”

“If I had to relive my experience, I would change. When I first came to civil society, people told me a lot of things. I told myself that I was late getting up. I was late to act. The delay was due to lack of confidence, to underestimation.”

## 1.5 Limitations and difficulties

The data collection time was extended over a long period of time to allow for the maximal response.

Out of a sample of 268 people, 27 responses to the individual questionnaire were collected. CSO leaders are not yet accustomed to working online, an obstacle which was further exacerbated by the Covid-19 context.

For the in-depth interviews, some women were unable to respond as the study was conducted at a time that was not compatible with their availability. They were busy with their professional activities (end-of-year report, workshop and seminar, field mission, etc.).

Due to our small sample size, we could not extrapolate. However, despite this limitation, we were able to obtain some interesting results that are presented in this report.

## 1.6 Confidentiality

In order to preserve the anonymity of the people who contributed to this study, we ensured that no names appeared on the questionnaires. In addition, the confidentiality of the information shared by the people interviewed was respected by changing the interviewee's name to an interview number.

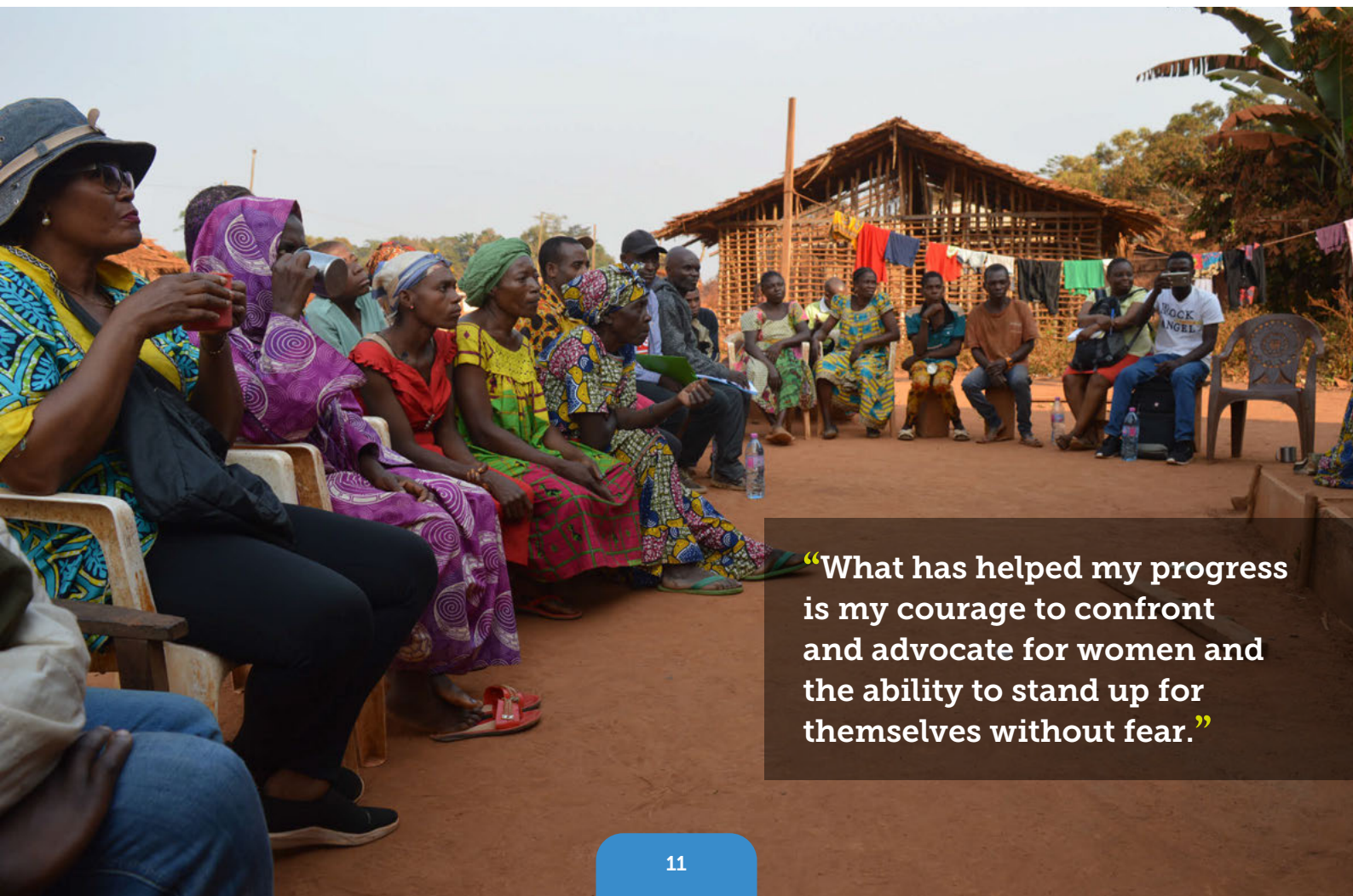


## 2. Women in civil society in the DRC

We present here a portrait of women involved in civil society in the DRC with whom we had the opportunity to conduct in-depth interviews on their background, their motivations, their commitments and their personal and professional feedback, which will be discussed in parts 3 and 4 below.

### 2.1 Sources of motivation and inspiration

The women involved are lawyers, jurists, economists or simply citizens impacted by the injustices and violence around them, all with differing motivations and backgrounds. Some women started out in politics before entering civil society. Among them, some have held leadership positions. Others have a path linked to their social environment, with a commitment to change born from their experience in their family or in their household. They started in their neighbourhoods and at a time when they could not stand by and watch what was happening around them. Still others were moved to action because of traumatic experiences they had undergone. The women have often witnessed situations that have revolted them, against which they have wanted to act. They were often motivated at a young age by the struggle for human rights, and, in particular, the struggle for gender equality. For all of these women, working in civil society is an opportunity to make their voices heard, to fight against the inequalities that affect them and to assert their leadership.



**“What has helped my progress is my courage to confront and advocate for women and the ability to stand up for themselves without fear.”**



The determined path of the women we met is marked by their experiences as women, often linked to situations of oppression or injustice that they have endured or witnessed, leading them to support their peers and other oppressed groups. They joined civil society at a very young age through their organizations, which they often created themselves.

The war in Eastern DRC, which resulted in violence of which women and children were the first victims, is a triggering event for many women leaders motivating them to engage in civil society. It is often traumatic experiences that have driven women, particularly in eastern DRC, to develop a strong resilience and a willingness to take action through engaging in civil society despite the cultural obstacles to women's autonomous action and the risks to their safety which exist in the DRC.

Life experience was noted in this study as the main source of inspiration for women. In addition, professional experience related to extracurricular activities that some of the women carried out when they were in high school or at university was also a factor. In the school environment, they have also been involved in movements fighting for women's rights and in awareness-raising groups on issues affecting women (HIV, PSH, etc.). Moreover, the civil war in the DRC had a strong impact on women and from then on many of them began to engage in the struggle for women's rights and the defence of equality. The conflict and post-conflict periods were difficult for them. Sexual violence, insecurity during the war and the difficulty of social and professional integration after the war led many women to join civil society so as to make their voices heard and claim their rights.

## 2.2 The place they occupy and the causes they support

According to the surveys conducted during this study, women feel that their representation in civil society is low: 70.37% of respondents believe that women are underrepresented in civil society. In addition, women working in CSOs in the DRC are particularly rare in decision-making positions in CSOs and are often confined to secretarial or other menial functions.

For this study, we wanted to conduct in-depth interviews with women who stand out as either founders and/or leaders of CSOs, or who exercise a certain leadership by being active members of civil society organisations. We also wanted to include women members of civil society platforms or networks, in which they hold various responsibilities.

In some women's civil society organisations, men are more present in the governing bodies and often hold the majority of advisory or technical positions. This shows a certain lack of women's leadership even in women's civil society organisations, according to the respondents.



**70.37%** of respondents believe that women are underrepresented in civil society.

In the panel of women interviewed, it was noted that when women hold the highest leadership positions in their organisations, it is often due to them being founders or co-founders of those organisations. Otherwise, women tend to assume that they are there for reasons of parity when it is required by donors, which is a symptom of the self-devaluation of women in the professional world as we will see later.

**Table: Functions of Congolese civil society women interviewed for this survey**

Leaders	<i>Coordinator</i>	5
	<i>Vice President</i>	1
	<i>Secretary General</i>	1
	<i>Partnership Officer</i>	1
	<b><i>Subtotal</i></b>	<b>8 (30%)</b>
Staff	<i>Programme Manager</i>	3
	<i>Project design</i>	1
	<i>Resource mobilization</i>	1
	<i>Communication Officer</i>	2
	<b><i>Subtotal</i></b>	<b>7 (26%)</b>
Field technicians	<i>Technician</i>	5
	<i>Animator</i>	3
	<i>Capacity building of osc</i>	1
	<i>Single member</i>	3
	<b><i>Subtotal</i></b>	<b>44%</b>
<b>Total</b>		<b>27</b>

*Source:* Survey, Well Grounded 2021

Conservation and preservation of nature, women’s access to land, reduction of domestic violence, illegal logging, climate change, environment, are issues in which women are very committed and have carried out advocacy actions that have achieved results.



“When I lived in Eastern Congo, in the village where I had joined my husband who is a doctor assigned to that village, I saw that the women were suffering. They are not happy. They are forced to be in the household, they cannot divorce because it is frowned upon, it is shameful. From then on, I tried to bring women together, I spoke to them so that they knew they didn’t have to do everything at home. Even if they are in associations, they are afraid to express themselves, for fear that their opinions will reach their husbands’ ears.”

<i>Areas of intervention of environmental CSOs consulted via the online questionnaire (27 responses, 18 women and 9 men)</i>	<i>Answers</i>	
Community law	74.07%	20
Climate change	55.56%	15
Nature conservation, biodiversity	48.15%	13
Land allocation, access to land, land rights	44.44%	12
Forestry income generating activity	33.33%	9
Community forest	29.63%	8
Reforestation	22.22%	6
Access and right to use water (fishing, etc.)	14.81%	4
Mining	7.41%	2
Recycling, waste management	3.70%	1
Major infrastructure	0.00%	0
Other: Agriculture, Farmer's Movement, Agricultural Feeder Road, Food Security, Shelter in Place of Travel and Return, Maternity and Child Care, Access to Education, Gender, Women's Empowerment, Youth Empowerment, Domestic Violence, Women's Democracy and Political Participation	22.22%	6
	<b>Total</b>	<b>27</b>



**40.74%** of the women surveyed are involved in environmental issues, specifically climate change, nature conservation, biodiversity, income-generating activities in the forest and land rights.



**22.22%** work in the area of gender equality, specifically, access to education, women and youth empowerment, gender-based violence and political participation.

However, there is little involvement of women in civil society areas related to mining and large infrastructure (such as claiming the rights of workers and local communities), recycling and waste management. These are areas of activity where women are less active. They are sectors generally marked by a strong male presence. However, women carry out indirect activities that mitigate the impact of these sectors on the environment and the preservation of community rights. These include reforestation, the fight for community rights and access to land.

## 2.3 The influence of women in Congolese civil society

From the perspective of this study, we define influence as the power and strength to direct or cause change.

Of the women surveyed, 63% feel powerful and influential because of leadership training they have participated in and because of their work with communities and their determination.

“I am influential because of my determination and the sense of leadership that I have embodied since I was young.”

“Self-confidence, determination and willpower have allowed me to make an impact.”



Schooling and professional training have enabled women to express themselves publicly and to carry out advocacy actions that affect women more (land rights, environment, climate change, gender-based violence, etc.).

The women interviewed in this survey have carried out several advocacy actions, the results of which have contributed to changes in favour of social and environmental justice and, in particular, to the improvement of women's rights. Among the advocacy actions carried out, the inclusion of women in the land law has led to the recognition of women's land rights. Advocacy for the revision of the family code has given women the right to inheritance and to the non-disclosure of the wife's salary to her husband. In addition, advocacy on environmental governance and women's representation in politics has helped to fight against pollution and to maintain government positions for women.

According to some respondents, women bring to civil society their strength in mobilising their members and, in some cases, their expertise in legal matters in conducting advocacy.

However, traditionally, civil society is still run by men with very little leadership provided by women.



**“I started in politics before entering civil society. I was a minister in charge of gender and that allowed me to understand the problems faced by women.”**

## 3. Being a woman civil society leader in the DRC: a journey of struggle

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**In this section we will address the factors that limit the effective participation of women in civil society in the DRC, as identified through interviews with the women concerned, but also through consultations with donors and INGOs and various women’s and mixed civil society organisations in the DRC.**

There are many contextual reasons for the under-representation of women in civil society in the DRC, particularly in the most significant decision-making positions. Overall, these reasons can be linked directly or indirectly to the social construction of gender and the place reserved for girls and women in Congolese society.

### **Women structurally excluded from decision-making spheres**

In civil society, decision-making spaces are difficult to access for women. Indeed, 78% of the women surveyed stated that they had difficulty accessing decision-making spaces.

Socio-cultural barriers to women’s leadership in civil society include retrograde customs that lock women into fixed social roles, embedded in a patriarchal system, and prevent women from becoming involved in the public sphere and in decision-making spheres, whether at the family, community or association level.

Cultural values play a fundamental role in social and power relations between men and women in communities and construct gender inequalities, especially with regard to participation in decision-making spaces.



In our consultations, the main reasons given for the under-representation and lack of access of women to decision-making positions were:

- lack of self-confidence and/or self-esteem
- lack of emotional management
- the uncertainty that their involvement will have an impact
- a lack of commitment from women due to cultural constraints
- lack of financial means
- sometimes their effacement in favour of their husbands who must remain hierarchically superior (in terms of type of position or even income) in the family
- Insecurity in some areas, especially rural areas
- limited access to information and technology.



Socio-cultural practices linked to the construction of gender, and their influence on the representations and mental patterns integrated by men and women, contribute strongly to keeping women out of the decision-making sphere.

According to INGOs, there are fewer women than men applying for decision-making positions.

One of the reasons for this is that culturally, men are still often preferred for senior positions, as it is men who predominantly hold these positions and tend to co-opt each other.

Another reason is the lack of balance in the sharing of tasks between men and women within the family, which leaves little time for women to aim for decision-making positions.

Although there are laws in the DRC that are supposed to promote parity, they are poorly enforced and have little effect on the prevalence of these discriminatory practices and are not sufficient to change the mentalities that perpetuate these practices. These parity laws alone, even if they were properly applied, would not be enough to remove the many cultural constraints linked to patriarchal culture, such as the very unequal distribution of domestic tasks and family responsibilities, which severely hampers the professional ambitions of women in the DRC.

Furthermore, our interviews revealed that women perceive that their opinions are acknowledged less than those of men during mixed meetings. This perception is correlated by the NGOs and donors who responded to the survey, who believe that in decision-making bodies, men are listened to more than women.

These practices, which are still very present and widespread, limit the involvement of women in civil society and their rise to positions of responsibility.



## Inequalities in skills acquisition

The lack of training for women, their often shorter schooling and their limited access to information are also obstacles to their involvement in civil society.

It is clear from our interviews that, due to inequalities in education and access to professional experience, there are not enough women in the DRC who are competent enough to take the lead in an organisation. Those who do are often from more privileged backgrounds that have allowed girls to study and assert themselves.

Indeed, a majority of women in the DRC have suffered from unequal access to schooling, particularly in rural areas and the most traditional environments where the education of boys is privileged. Girls are conditioned from a very young age to give priority to the objective of marriage and the creation and care of a family and, as a result, are very often dissuaded from pursuing secondary and higher education.

According to the donors and INGO representatives consulted, organisations founded and run by women may currently have weaknesses in terms of governance, which they attribute to a lack of skills: not many women in the DRC have the skills and experience required to run an organisation. This perception can be explained by several factors: for example, inequalities in access to education and training, as mentioned above, which hampers their ability to acquire skills through professional experience. Few learning spaces are adapted to family life, which is culturally and psychologically more burdensome for women, who are under social and cultural pressure to preserve their family responsibilities. Furthermore, according to some of our interviews, women can suffer discrimination in mixed organisations where they seek their first professional experiences, with men often reserving the most rewarding field assignments (in terms of pay and experience) for themselves while relegating women to subordinate or *back office* roles.



“I will make sure that I don't ignore certain aspects. For example, counseling is very important, and I should have trained myself and used that as a tool long before. When I realised how important this psychological aspect was, it was after I experienced a tragic event where a young woman ended her life. I always say to myself that if she had had psychological support, she would still be alive. Following this event, we decided to integrate psychological aspects into our accompaniment training.”

The social norms governing gender relations are, on the whole, very restrictive with regard to women's rights and their participation in community life. There is still a lot of discrimination against women in terms of social status, placing women under the control of their husbands, to whom they must report or ask for advice when participating in community life or making decisions. These attitudes reinforce gender inequalities and hinder women's leadership in civil society.

The issue of women's empowerment and integration, although of concern, receives little attention from civil society.

## The persistence of stereotypes and beliefs about women's leadership

Women who get involved in civil society are caught between two roles, that of a woman and that of a leader, often considered incompatible by Congolese society.

According to the dominant socio-cultural norms in the DRC, the roles assigned to women by society are mainly those of wife and mother, responsible for ensuring the survival and reproduction of the family. As a result, women are entwined in the construction and safeguarding of norms that refer them to a supposed destiny of femininity as per the patriarchal culture. Women must therefore stay at home to provide care, while men can pursue activities outside the home and develop a more ambitious professional career.

Leadership is thus generally attributed to men.

According to socio-cultural determinism, women are still often perceived as passive in nature and are therefore associated with emotion, flexibility, softness, cooperation and intuition. This same social construction proclaims that men are active executives and leaders. These stereotypes create the separation between women and leadership.



**"There is a serious problem of women's perception of their place in society, they seek men's opinions for decision making. As if their competences had to be validated by men."**

According to some of the women interviewed, for a woman's leadership to be recognized, she must systematically have the backing of a man, a kind of male «guarantee» that will give her credibility. This is why women-only organisations use male consultants to support them in their advocacy efforts with the authorities, for example.



**"For a decision to be taken seriously, it must be validated by a man."**

In the DRC, when women obtain positions of responsibility and access decision-making spaces previously reserved for men, they are faced with two types of stereotyped and antagonistic roles: that of the woman who is a mother, wife, sister, devoted to the care of the family, and that of the leader who is confident, ambitious and enterprising.

Women in civil society who find themselves in this position face the double burden of their role, sometimes resulting in discrimination, and a mental and emotional burden that is difficult to manage. As a result, many women give up opportunities to focus solely on their role as housewives.



**"Opportunities cannot be equal, because we are not considered on the basis of our abilities, but rather on the basis of the roles assigned to us by society. So we don't have access to the same opportunities."**

Women are forced to make this choice as a result of the patriarchal customs and traditions that create social norms that encourage the confinement of women to the domestic space, thereby restricting their freedom to pursue activities outside the home.

According to the women interviewed, achieving a more balanced representation of women and men leaders is essential, both for organisations and for society as a whole.

Women civil society leaders in the DRC have had to free themselves from certain norms and customs in order to devote themselves to their commitment.

However, this is more the case for women in urban areas, who are generally more involved in civil society, than for women in rural areas where traditions are more entrenched.

The lack of guidance and female *role models* was also mentioned as a factor in the under-representation of women in civil society. It is difficult for girls, young women and women to picture themselves in professions where women are neither represented in their environment nor in constructed representations such as, media, films, television series or stories.

Such representations, fears and prejudices rooted in women and men explain some of the obstacles that persist today for women's leadership in civil society in the DRC.

Indeed, according to some interviewees, the under-representation of women in civil society is partly explained by the fact that the over-representation of men in civil society makes women fearful of a «leadership war with men». But on the other hand, women leaders are seen by some as a threat to the male organisational order, and their actions may generate a certain amount of mistrust among men.



## Socio-cultural conditioning that promotes women's self-deprecation

As evidenced above, the lack of confidence and self-esteem of a significant proportion of Congolese women due to cultural conditioning that relegates them to the background and locks them into stereotyped roles from childhood, whether within the family or at school, leads them to undervalue their own skills and constitutes an obstacle to their professional development in civil society and activism.

Many women continue to see themselves as inferior to men, at least in some circumstances. Religious traditions and practices, which are very prevalent in the DRC, contribute to this by establishing the superiority of men over women, whether in the home, in the community or in other official and professional spaces. Some religious trends, such as certain so-called revivalist churches, provide a different vision by placing women on an equal footing with men, but this still remains marginal.



Of the **27 women** who participated in the survey, **22 responded** that they are able to provide leadership in female-dominated environments. This number highlights the fact that women have more difficulty providing leadership to men.

This lack of self-confidence and self-esteem leads them to devalue themselves and their skills. This reduces their possibilities of taking action and becoming involved in the development of civil society. However, according to the NGOs and donors consulted, who confirm that women tend to underestimate themselves, it turns out that once hired, employees have more faith in women than in men: for example, women are often found in financial management positions, because they are presumed to be more reliable when faced with the risk of mismanagement.

Many women also hold negative beliefs about other women who become leaders, minimising the merit of these women - for example, by believing that if some women have succeeded, it is because «the men were behind». This calls into question the possibility of «good» leadership or legitimate leadership of women, including the representation of women themselves.

In addition, a majority of women believe that they do not have the same opportunities as men in the professional world, and that society in general does not sufficiently consider their abilities outside of the roles assigned by social norms.

These different views of themselves and the way that they are perceived by society maintain a vicious circle that limits women's access to educational, economic and other opportunities, as well as their leadership development at all levels.



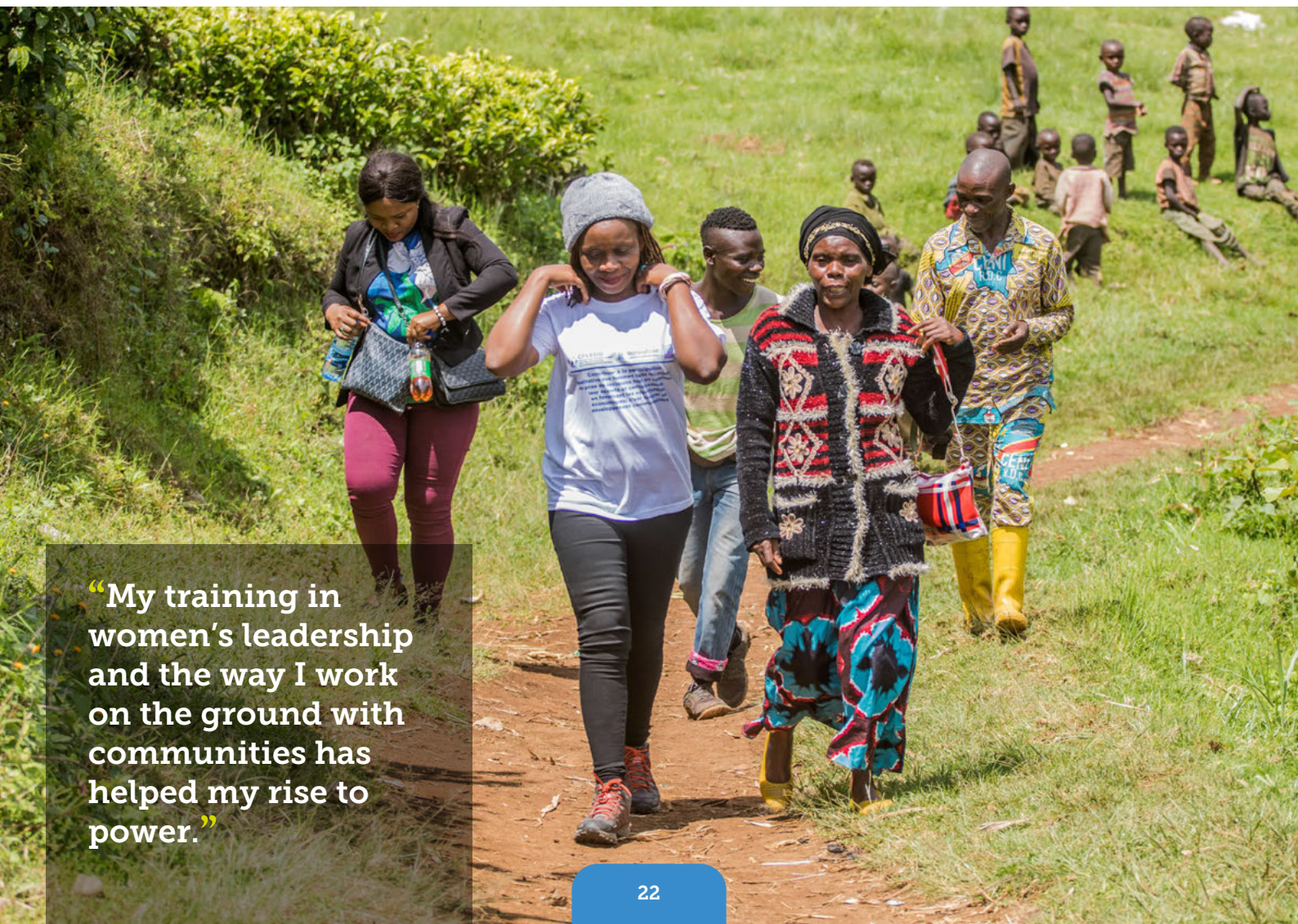
“I would change my external interaction strategy. We must not be locked in at the local level. That was a big handicap in our actions at the beginning. I would do things differently. I would fight to have more women in the decision-making spheres so that our voice is heard.”

## 4. Levers to be used to improve the position and influence of women in Congolese civil society

In this part we will try to highlight the conditions that favour the emergence of women within Civil Society in the DRC. The intention here is to identify possible levers, i.e. actions to undertake or conditions to create, that can enable positive change, at a wider scale, aimed towards a greater involvement of women within CS in the DRC.

### Create awareness of the problem so as to create a supportive environment

The first condition required for the emergence of women's leadership in Congolese civil society is, of course, a broad awareness of the problems posed by current inequalities, both by men and women, within civil society and the public authorities.



“My training in women's leadership and the way I work on the ground with communities has helped my rise to power.”

## Mobilising allies

Many of the women active in civil society interviewed said that they had gained experience and power in leading development actions at the same time as men.

Despite their low representation in civil society, 59.26% of the women surveyed receive support from some men to carry out their advocacy actions or, where needed, for technical and organisational support. Some men also help women in their efforts to find solutions to their problems in associations. They participate and defend women when their rights are violated. Thus, women sometimes need to rely on men to make their voices heard, due to cultural resistance to giving credibility to a woman or women alone.



**59.26%** of the women surveyed receive support from some men to carry out their advocacy actions or, where needed, for technical and organisational support.

However, women have been able to find their place in civil society with men, by working with many of them to reduce their fear of speaking in public, to overcome shyness and dependence (issues related to the socio-cultural conditioning of women in the DRC), to give priority to training and knowledge and in devoting time to participate in the development of activities within civil society.

Cultivating intergenerational sisterhood is essential: women need to support each other so as to gain responsibilities and experiences, rather than acting as rivals as they are often conditioned to do in the patriarchal cultural context. Female solidarity can be a powerful response to discrimination and to situations where men co-opt each other into the highest positions where they remain in the majority.

This is why the women we interviewed are now committed to advising and accompanying younger generations of committed women, having themselves sometimes appreciated the support of other women who had already made their mark in civil society and who helped them to make their way and assert themselves.

The women we met represent female models or *role models*, a representation which would be useful to promote so as to encourage younger women to follow their example.

## Achieving critical mass for women's voices to be heard

The involvement of young women in civil society in the DRC could be promoted in order to further strengthen women's participation in civil society thereby giving them a greater voice.

Women are present in civil society in the DRC, even if they are not sufficient in number and even if they are under-represented in positions of responsibility when compared to men. They participate and speak out most often through social networking media and national radio. Some women in the associations have already received awards and recognition in the media. These acknowledgements of their actions have been awarded to them both in Europe and Africa (including the DRC) at agricultural fairs and international conferences on gender, climate, violence against women, etc.



The proportion of women in an organisation plays a role in women's confidence in leadership: 81.48% of female respondents feel more comfortable assuming leadership in female-dominated environments.



**“Economic disparity, community poverty, lack of social and economic justice, human rights violations were the main sources of my motivation”**

This is consistent with the **critical mass theory**, which states that women’s interests are better served when their numbers reach a minimum threshold, which is around 30%. Women are then better able to overcome obstacles and build solidarity, and the greater presence of women encourages others to participate more. In addition, a higher number of women allow other women to take on different roles and move up the hierarchy within the group. However, the idea of a critical mass is only a tool and not a goal in itself: the goal of parity remains 50%.<sup>4</sup>

Finally, a visible increase in the number of women playing valued roles in civil society could also have an exponential effect in addressing the need, mentioned above, for more *role models*: i.e. female *role models* who will encourage more and more young girls to picture themselves in leading roles in civil society.

## **De-gender and promote the essential qualities of leadership**

During our interviews, we asked women leaders within civil society in the DRC what they considered to be the main qualities of a leader.

Most of them told us that there is still a widespread belief in the DRC that men have more leadership qualities, or even the exclusive qualities required to exercise leadership as it is traditionally represented: authority, influence, combativeness, control of emotions, taste for power, self-assertion... The essentialist assignment of human qualities termed masculine or feminine, still very prevalent in the DRC as elsewhere in the world, continues to hinder women in their personal and professional emancipation, especially in civil society.

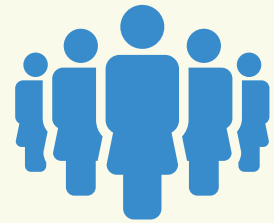
These beliefs and gender stereotypes explain some of the obstacles faced by women in their professional and activist careers, hindering their leadership development.



However, the qualities they cite as essential for good leadership are not particularly gendered.

According to the respondents, the most important qualities that a leader should have are

- The ability to mobilise, unite and support others.
- The ability to understand global issues and connect them to everyday reality.
- A sense of initiative.
- Open-mindedness.
- Team spirit.
- Organisational skills.
- Ease of communication.



These qualities, considered necessary for good leadership, are not specifically feminine or masculine, and the women leaders we met embody these qualities on a daily basis. These are the qualities of a modern and inclusive leadership, allowing for the «soft» qualities (related in particular to emotional intelligence, listening) which are the indispensable qualities of leadership of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, regardless of gender.

From the exchanges we had in the framework of this study, but also in the framework of the work carried out by Well Grounded in the Congo Basin, it is apparent that it is important to remove the myth of so-called «feminine» or «masculine» leadership, and to promote the development and the valorisation of these relational qualities for the present women and men leaders and the leaders of the future.



«Belonging to civil society is like a school for women and allows them to find their place in politics, with development partners and in the business world. They are trained and have a broad vision of the problems facing the population. (Political participation of women in the DRC, survey of Congolese women politicians in Kinshasa, 2019).

## Forcing the application of existing laws

In the DRC, women and other human rights actors can build on the existing legal framework to change the gender relationship. For example, the application of the law on parity in civil society could contribute to boosting women's leadership in civil society in the DRC. These laws and regulations favouring women exist but are still poorly enforced, so there is an important lever required to carry out advocacy activities for their enforcement.

## Strengthening skills

One of the lessons learned through this study is that long schooling, training and capacity building are important for women and girls to be able to compete for leadership positions. Girls must be able to access higher education if they are to reach decision-making levels.

Aiming at continuous training would also help to add value to civil society actions so that women can feel comfortable, take part in exchanges and claim their place.

Many women feel that they are not really equipped, that they need a lot of capacity building. Some interviewees complained that many women give up when they fail and that they lack vision and ideas.

Socio-cultural factors, education, training, access to information and women's self-perception severely limit their participation and potential role in civil society.

It should also be noted that according to the NGOs and donors interviewed, the most resilient CSOs are those active in community outreach, including many women-led organisations. Despite the Coronavirus health crisis, they remained active and continued to work even without funding.

However, it is regrettable that women's organisations have not adapted sufficiently to the new forms of remote work that have progressed rapidly since the Covid crisis. In particular, while the donors consulted affirm that support to CSOs will continue, they specify that it will be through new ways of working and exchanging. Thus, distance/remote work and online exchanges will be favoured. This will create new challenges with the use of and access to technology (e.g. internet and computer access, electricity supply, etc.).

It is therefore also important to strengthen the level of women's access to digital knowledge and knowledge management that can enable knowledge sharing between different generations.

## Deconstructing stereotypes and removing psychological barriers for women to take their rightful place

In our interviews, we asked women in civil society whether they had feelings of pride or regret about certain parts of their experience in civil society. This provides useful advice for the younger generation of women or for women of all ages who would like to become more involved or to have a more rewarding experience within civil society.



When asked what they would like to do differently, if they had the opportunity to redo their journey, the women interviewed responded by saying that they would like to improve the following main elements:



- They would start working on self-esteem and self-confidence from the beginning.
- They would include more women on their journey within CS so as to increase the impact of women's voices.
- They would increase training, including continuous training, so as to acquire more knowledge and understanding of their area of focus and their role in CS.
- They would include a consideration of the psychological aspects of operating within civil society as a woman and how it might affect or support women.

Some of the testimonies quoted above are representative of the inferiority complexes often carried by women, who feel the need to train more and more and to acquire more knowledge and know-how in order to assert themselves in decision-making positions and to defend their place and leadership. This begs for psychological support initiatives or coaching that would allow women, from the beginning of their commitment, to identify their internalised obstacles and to find the resources or tools to overcome them.



«My first concern is to raise the status of women so that they feel able to take on any role. I myself have suffered from confidence problems.»

Gaining confidence through self-esteem, learning to speak in public and to defend one's ideas, are skills to be cultivated in order to take one's place in civil society.

In addition, appropriate strategies must be put in place to make it easier for women to find their place within civil society, and to strengthen the acceptance and impact of their participation. This can be done by supporting the development of their external interaction strategy.

Secondly, building their leadership capacity, including a personal development approach, would greatly enhance their confidence and therefore impact positively on their place within civil society.

Finally, conducting reflection workshops at national and local levels could enrich reflections on women's engagement in civil society. For example, discussions around egalitarian education from early childhood and the promotion of positive masculinity in the education of boys, can inspire the decision of many parents to implement such practices in their homes as has been the case in the workshops facilitated by Well Grounded as part of its women's leadership development programmes.

Finally, one of the *sine qua non* lessons learned for women's leadership in civil society in the DRC, which our respondents wanted to pass on to new generations of women wishing to get involved, is to have patience and acceptance of failures, and not to give up when faced with challenges.



“The suffering of women in my community, the willingness of women and girls to learn about their rights, the serious violations and sexual violence have driven me to work to change the situation.”

# Conclusion

**Social and cultural norms are an obstacle to the development of women's leadership in civil society in the DRC. Women are involved in civil society organisations and their participation in civil society in the DRC is significant. But they still have little place in decision-making spheres, where they continue to be marginalised.**

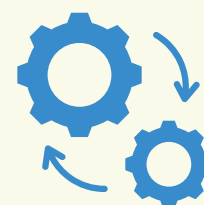
The under-representation of women in Congolese civil society is linked to a cultural context, and to issues of training, education and economic autonomy that are less accessible to women. Furthermore, the social norms that structure gender relations in their communities influence women's self-perception: the communities to which they belong are not very favourable to their participation in civil society organisations in general.

Many efforts still need to be made to place women in a better position of leadership and decision-making responsibility. The obstacles that limit women's participation in decision-making spheres are linked, on the one hand, to internal factors (social and cultural barriers, self-perception, poor access to training and information), and, on the other hand, to external factors, linked to the functioning of civil society, which gives more opportunities to men, to policies that are not particularly favourable to women, as well as to the rules of economic and social life in general.



The conclusions to be drawn from this study are that the levers to be activated are essentially in support of:

- education, training and support, both thematically and technically, so as to master digital tools, and psychologically so as to improve women's self-esteem, assertiveness and determination in the face of external and internal obstacles, as well as the ability to learn from their failures in order to move forward;
- deconstructing the stereotypes and limiting beliefs that hinder women's emancipation, both within family and friends and within organisations and networks;
- the promotion of equal opportunities between men and women at all levels of society and to advocate for the effective implementation of the legal framework;
- of the deconstruction of what masculinity is and the promotion of so-called 'positive masculinity'.



Women are indispensable actors within civil society in the DRC. However, the emergence and development of their leadership alongside men will depend on the evolution of cultural, economic, political and social factors in order to create a favourable environment for women's leadership.

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# About Well Grounded

## ➤ Our vision

A credible, collaborative, inclusive and effective African civil society that can advocate for social and environmental justice while empowering communities to determine their own future.

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## ➤ Our mission

Support African CSOs to develop the power and skills to positively influence natural resource governance and empower communities to determine their own future.

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## ➤ Our values

Respect, Inclusion, Sovereignty and Adaptation are the values that guide the way we work internally and with others.

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