

Village Chiefs Ease the Re-Entry Pains of Congolese Rape Survivors

Uvira, DRC-Congo: Traditional leaders can play a major role in helping survivors of rape in the Eastern Congo to reunite with their families and escape the stigmatization associated with sexual violence.

This is one of the key findings to emerge from the work of [SOS Femmes en Danger \(SOS FED\)](#), a Congolese organization which helps survivors of sexual violence in Fizi Territory. It represents one of the few bright spots in a year that has seen a sharp increase in attacks on women in Fizi by Rwandan rebels, government soldiers, and Mai Mai militia.



Women survivors of sexual violence at SOSFED's Mboko center in the Congo

SOS FED is supported by The Advocacy Project (AP) with funding from the [Institute for Foreign Cultural Relations in Germany](#).

SOS FED runs centers where women can spend three months recovering in the company of other women (photo). While highly effective, this approach can also create anxiety when the time comes for the women to reunite with their families. Many were rejected by their husbands immediately after they were attacked, such is the shame that attaches to rape in Congolese society.

During 2011, SOS FED stepped up efforts to ease the process of reintegration, by recruiting three officials to accompany the women home. Between them, they have logged many miles and visited over 15 villages on foot, bicycle or boat.

Between January and September, SOS FED helped 74 survivors to return. In a recent analysis, Walter James, AP's field officer in South Kivu, found that only two had been abandoned by their husbands. Even these two couples were reunited after an intervention by SOS FED and the village Mwami (traditional leader).

Mr James interviewed two Mwami and found them deeply committed to protecting abused women, partly because their own wives had been attacked by armed rebels. Mwacha Malisho Felix, a Mwami in Mboko village, told Mr James that he had helped 12 SOS FED survivors to return to his neighborhood and made "multiple" visits to their families. SOS FED hopes to draw on such enlightened leaders in training up to 9 village chiefs in 2012.



[I Fear Nothing](#): AP's video tribute to the women of South Kivu

In spite of this positive development, the use of military rape has increased sharply in Fizi this year. A series of mass rapes by government troops earlier in the year have gone largely unpunished. Most of the current rapes are being committed by the Mai Mai, an undisciplined militia that appears to be using violence against civilians to put pressure on the government. Mai Mai fighters killed five Congolese aid workers on October 14 and recently detained three SOS

FED workers for several days. AP has reported the later attack to the UN.

While women cannot prevent such violence, they can reduce their own exposure. Most of SOS FED's beneficiaries were attacked when they went out alone to cultivate or to search for water or fuel. As a result, the project has rented fields close to settlements where women can cultivate together. As well as providing security, this allows them to grow food for themselves and the SOS FED centers. No attacks have been reported and several women have continued communal farming after returning home. As Marceline Kongolo, the director of SOS FED enthused in an [AP video interview](#), "It's gone so well - the women are so pleased!"

In another activity which combines development with risk reduction, the project also purchased manioc mills for the centers. These reduce the cost of processing manioc - the staple food - and allow SOS FED to sell surplus manioc when the price is high.

Water offers another way to reduce the risk of rape while providing important health benefits. The women from Mboko had to travel long distances to find fresh, cheap water until the project installed [a new water well in Mboko](#) in August. Over 800 families now use the well. As well as cutting travel time, AP is also hoping the new well will lower the rate of cholera.

Finally, in yet another attempt to reduce risk, SOS FED is testing prototype stoves which burn agricultural waste instead of wood. If successful, this new fuel would cut out the need to visit forests, where many attacks take place.

Meanwhile, AP continues to exhibit the [six Ahadi quilts \(photo right\)](#), which were hand-embroidered at the SOS FED centers and [assembled by quilters in the US](#). The quilts will be exhibited next week at the [University of Massachusetts](#). AP is now market-testing spin-offs from the quilts, including greeting cards and purses.



The Second Ahadi Quilt

These activities have been supported and monitored throughout 2011 by Peace Fellows [Charlie Walker](#) and [Walter James](#). Both will be returning home soon after an active year that culminated with their coverage of the recent Congolese elections. AP owes them a huge debt of gratitude.

- Watch AP's video tribute to the women of Congo - "[I Fear Nothing](#)"
- Watch the AP videos on risk reduction: [water](#); [communal fields](#); [promoting the message](#); and [Ahadi quilts](#)
- Watch Charlie Walker's powerful videos on the [Ahadi quilters](#); and [water](#)
- Following the Ahadi quilts on their voyage through the [UN Human Rights Council](#), Geneva; [Berlin](#); and [Washington](#)
- Meet the weavers from the [Faithful Circle Quilting Guild](#), who helped to assemble the Ahadi quilts in the State of Maryland
- Donate to SOSFED through the [University of Massachusetts](#) fundraiser (December 8)
- To exhibit the Ahadi quilts contact our [Outreach Coordinator](#).