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Self-protection outside of community protection structures

 Democratic Republic of Congo

Case study on advocacy actions in the village of Mashuba, Kigoma grouping, Bafuliiru chiefdom, Uvira territory

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The women of the middle plateaus go to the market in Buzukye every Thursday, where they can sell the agricultural products harvested from the middle and high plateaus. At the market, some women from the middle plateaus supply those from the high plateaus with other products that are difficult to find in their area (soap, matches, etc.). This market is located in the Mitumba mountain range, between the middle and high plateaus of Uvira.

When drawing up the plan for the protection problems specifically affecting women, the Women's Forum set up in Mashuba identified the threat of rape, attack and injury and forced collection of agricultural products on both the outward and return journeys, as well as the danger of robbery by armed gangs. Throughout their journeys, women have reported the path becoming less and less secure, exposing them to falling victim to various attacks.

First defence mechanism put in place:

Faced with this situation, they firstly developed a self-protection mechanism that consisted of always waiting for each other so that they could leave as a group. However, this measure was not entirely effective, since it did not mitigate the threat of armed groups. In fact, there was a report of an ambush of a group of women coming back from the market, most of whom were gang raped.

Secondly, they decided to be accompanied by their husbands and young people (from their community self-protection group), who were sometimes armed. This still exposed them to danger, since these young people did not have the necessary power relations with the armed groups to significantly reduce the threat they posed. In fact, this self-protection measure actually increased the risks: one day there was an exchange of gunfire, causing a stampede during which a woman was injured and referred to a medical facility. Other people in the bush may also be put in danger.

Second defence mechanism envisaged:

Since the above mechanism did not result in genuine protection, the WF initiated an advocacy action with the local authorities and the elders' committee in order to find workable measures to protect women on market day.

The local authorities undertook to contact the commander of the 3304th military regiment for that purpose.

In response to this advocacy action, the regiment's commander decided to send a detachment consisting of a mobile group of soldiers to accompany the women through the riskiest places until they reach another group of soldiers, who then accompany the women to the market and stay in position there, before repeating the process in reverse on the return journey.

These flexible and situational local self-protection mechanisms involve risks for the women, but they have proved useful for protecting and helping members of the community in general, and women and children in particular.