

## 6. Conform, Reform, or Transform? Congolesse Communities Confront Their Values

A stagnant economy and unstable political situation has all but crippled the education sector in the Democratic Republic of Congo. As is true in many countries, when parents cannot afford to send all children to school, often it is the boys rather than girls who go to school. In the Congo, the tough economic and social conditions are beginning to have an impact on

the schools. After several years of seeing the gender gap in gross enrolment rates

narrow, new challenges exist in retaining the current enrolment levels for both

girls and boys in the Democratic Republic of Congo.



*School inspectors and directors were trained in classroom monitoring to assess teachers' application of the gender-sensitive practices and techniques they had acquired.*

The post evaluation revealed a new sensitivity towards girls' education and an awareness of the human rights dimension of gender issues. Many leaving the workshop said they were a changed person. Women committed to speak out in public. Participants also expressed a renewed commitment to action.

Implemented by the Academy for Educational Development, SAGE has been working in five countries (Guinea, Mali, Ghana, El Salvador, and the Democratic Republic of Congo) to develop multisectoral partnerships in support of girls' education. SAGE

Congo has been developing partnerships with the religious and media sectors, schools, teachers, and PTAs to address girls' access, retention, and achievement in school. In order to address these issues, SAGE developed a comprehensive strategy:

- Teacher and PTA training for a friendlier school environment for girls;
- Community sensitization for greater support of girls' education;
- Income generating activities for reduction of parents' educational burden; and
- Information and communication strategies for greater coverage and experience sharing on efforts to promote girls' education.



*Participants discuss girls' education at the Lubumbashi workshop.*

### **A Consensus Building Workshop**

A consensus building workshop was held in February 2002, in the city of Lubumbashi in the Katanga Province, in order to mobilize parents and the community around equity issues. Modeled after a similar and successful experience undertaken in Mali in 2001 which drew on the Participatory Learning and Action (PLA) methodology, the objectives of the workshop were to:

- Raise awareness of other constraints (other than economic ones) which impact negatively on girls' attendance, retention, and achievement in school.

- Create a core of community actors (representatives from a cross-section of the community) who would be committed to the goal of improving girls' education in Lubumbashi.

The participants in the workshop included parents, school personnel (teachers, directors, and regional education officers), NGO personnel, religious leaders, representatives from the media, and provincial government officials (the Women and Family Ministry, and the Ministry of Education). Thirty-nine participants attended the workshop over a four-day period. It was designed to have participants critically examine their own positions on gender issues

and to identify strategies for the promotion of girls' education.

Four main themes were addressed by the Lubumbashi workshop and were the basis for exploring positions, vision, and developing strategies for change:



*In Congo, a “declaration of action” articulated a commitment to ensuring education for all and education of all girls.*

1. Education for all and schooling for girls;
2. Girls' daily workload in the home;
3. Women's participation in public; and
4. Language barriers among the three languages commonly spoken in Lubumbashi: French, Swahili, and colloquial Swahili. For some participants the struggle of language was cause for silence or timid participation while for others it severely limited their analytical contributions.

To begin, the SAGE consultants delineated three major positions:

- Those who conform to the present situation for girls and women and do not advocate change

(conformist position);

- Those who would promote individual change, but do not advocate changing the systems that keep the current realities in place (reformist position);

- Those who would transform the present system, to change the roles, status, and opportunities of girls and women (transformist position).

At the start of the workshop, 25% of women and 46% of men held a conformist position on issues of gender equity. By the end, *no one* expressed a conformist position. Rather, 30% of women and 30% of men

expressed a reformist position, and 70% of women and 70% of men expressed a transformist position.

To demonstrate their new resolve for change participants drafted a declaration of action articulating their commitment to ensuring Education for All and Education of all Girls.

These encounters and others used during the workshop's eleven sessions were designed to create a consensus of vision and action among the participants. Six different PLA tools were utilized during the workshop. The tools specifically developed for this consensus building workshop were used to

examine data and evoke analysis. Each session served to review the analysis and decide in favor of or against change and action.

The post evaluation revealed a new sensitivity towards girls' education and an awareness of the human rights dimension of gender issues. Many leaving the workshop said they were a changed person. Women committed to speak out in public. Participants also expressed a renewed commitment to action. Several participants said that they would equalize domestic chores between girls and boys within the household. Each pledged to disseminate workshop outcomes to parents,

communities and other interested groups and above all to seek out other opportunities for learning and development of the self.

## References

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