



Mama Radio **decreases** security incidents in DR Congo

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DONATE

It is common practice in Bukavu, Democratic Republic of the Congo that women set up small stands besides the roads where on their mats they sell fruits and vegetables. On the streets there is a lot of traffic and commotion, kids running around and perhaps even trying to steal what they can get their hands on.

Written by Nava Maria Verboom & Djinda Gueye

The police has been trying to regulate this somewhat 'illegal' street-selling because it creates even more commotion and traffic. In their attempt to clean the streets they use quite violent methods. They harass the women, scream at them, grab them, or crush the goods they are selling to get them off the side of the road.

There was a woman who was selling tomatoes. A police officer stomped on her tomatoes and aggressively grabbed her to get her off of the street. This attracted a lot of attention from passerby's and the other women selling on the street. Some people in the crowd immediately called Mama Radio to report on what they were witnessing, knowing that this is exactly what the station stands for.

A journalist from Mama Radio was sent to the location. He had to go undercover as the police generally are even more violent towards journalists, scared of how they will be represented to the bigger public. In many cases as soon as a police man notices the presence of a journalist or a photographer, they may punch him, ruin his equipment or even beat him till death. Still being undercover the journalist asked people around the scene for general information about how often this happens and if he could get in contact with the woman who was harassed to get more background information.

The chief of police heard the testimony on air and contacted Mama Radio to find out more details such as who the 'guilty' police officer was to have him apologize on air.

Often police men in DR Congo are young, poorly trained, and have little knowledge about human rights, let alone women's rights. This tends to translate into a culture of violence when it comes to solving problems. Only the police men higher up advocate for more peaceful solutions. They are aware of the power of the media and want to work together with them and listen to public opinion.

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The same chief of police later participated in a round table with different stakeholders on Mama Radio. The chief of police read out loud his personal phone number on air and repeated that he should be contacted if police are witnessed brutalizing women or other people. He did not only show the population of Bukavu a different, non-violent, face of the police, but also sent out a warning to other misbehaving police officers.

Because of the multi-stakeholder approach of Mama Radio they have not had any security incidents since the 12 months of their existence. This is remarkable for an environment like DR Congo.

One doubt is that police departments are subject to restructuring and officers move to different positions. They are lucky now to have a chief of police who is committed to women's rights and who is open to the public opinion. It is possible however that the next officer who takes his place will not have the same perspective.

Who is Mama Radio?

Mama Radio is quite a popular station in the area, and known to discuss violations of women's rights. The radio station shares the view that facts and events affect men and women, girls and boys differently. With a gender-sensitive and participatory community approach, Mama Radio is an alternative space for citizen participation. It was a response to the need expressed by women and communities. The latter longed for an inclusive, thematic and gender-sensitive communication tool for social justice, peace and sustainable development.

Since nearly two decades back, the East of the Democratic Republic of the Congo has become scene of the recurring armed violence by both foreign and local armed groups, and hereby the quasi-permanent insecurity that women have been suffering. Free Press Unlimited supports Mama Radio financially and with the production of radio programs.

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