



**MMS Bulletin #155**

*Égalité des sexes : où en sommes-nous 25 ans après la conférence mondiale sur les femmes qui s'est tenue sous l'égide de l'ONU à Pékin ?*

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***A blockage to the health and development of young girls***

**Early and forced marriages in the plaine of Ruzizi**

De Dieudonné Lwaboshi Manegabe

*Child marriage is a violation of girls' fundamental human rights, including their right to choose whether they want get married, when with whom they wish to get married. Several African human rights instruments condemn the child marriage before they are 18 years old. These are: the African charter for the welfare and child rights (Article 21), the protocol of the African charter for people ant human rights related to the women's rights in Africa (article 6), African charter for the youth ( article 8), the constitution of the DR Congo as well as the law of child protection.*



*Women from Luvungi Village are talking about the causes and consequences of early marriages in their community. Photo: © Elodie Mulinga*

According to the Universal human rights convention, early marriage is defined as being a blockage to fundamental rights of a person, namely to his/her liberty and physical integrity. This means that every person has the right to choose freely his/her spouse.

Early marriage includes any legal, religious, traditional union involving a boy or a girl of less than 18 years, and every marriage concluded without any consent of the two spouses. This definition sides with the international convention of child rights and the African charter for the welfare and child rights, which defines a child as any human being of less than 18 years. As far as a person of less than 18 years is not able to give his consent, child marriage can be considered as a forced marriage.

### ***Source of early marriages***

In a general way, early marriages originate from:

**Inequality of sexes:** Women and girls have a lower status than men in the societies which practice early and forced marriage. Girls are married very young since they are considered to be a charge for the family and their welfare is not a priority..

**Poverty:** In the developing countries, a girl is often considered as a burden. Her marriage allows the parents to have few mouths to feed. It also enables them to get wealth and create strategic alliances with another family. In compared with poor countries, being a charge for the family, a girl is often considered as a source of richness. In fact, as soon as she reaches the age of puberty, her family, being poor and cowslip to her wedding in exchange with cows to enhance the economic power of the family.

**Some traditional practices:** In many countries, the honor of the family passes through the feminine virginity. Parents force their daughters into marriages before they are ready to have sexual relations, to avoid pregnancies which can hinder them from getting married.

**The lack of the birth certificate:** The lack of birth certificates contributes to the forced marriages of the young girls who are still under aged. In this case, the majority of parents only consider the size of the young girl to decide upon her marriage. Girls do not have any juridical identity, therefore, they cannot provide the proof of their young age, which would prove the inequality of an early marriage.

**The non application of laws:** Even when the early marriage is forbidden, a lot of families ignore and infringe the law. In some countries, this violation is spread and normalized while the sanctions are rarely taken.

**Urgent situation:** The precarious situation (Conflicts, natural disasters, humanitarian crises) increases the economic pressure which impact negatively to the families, forcing some of them that would never think about marrying their daughters very young.





A survey on early marriages in Nyakabere village, FITINA ANUSIAT. Photo: © Jimmy Katuruma

### ***Consequences of early marriages***

Early and forced marriages present serious consequences to the life of a girl and that of her community and her entire country:

**Sexual abuse and violence:** Early marriages often bring about sexual abuse and violence on the side of the husband, and the sexual relations are often forced.

**Risks for the health :** These are the risks related to not only the precocious pregnancies, which is the first cause of mortality for girls whose ages vary between 15 and 19 years, but also to the HIV because, even if a girl has got a chance to have a sexual education, she is rarely able to negotiate protected sexual relations.

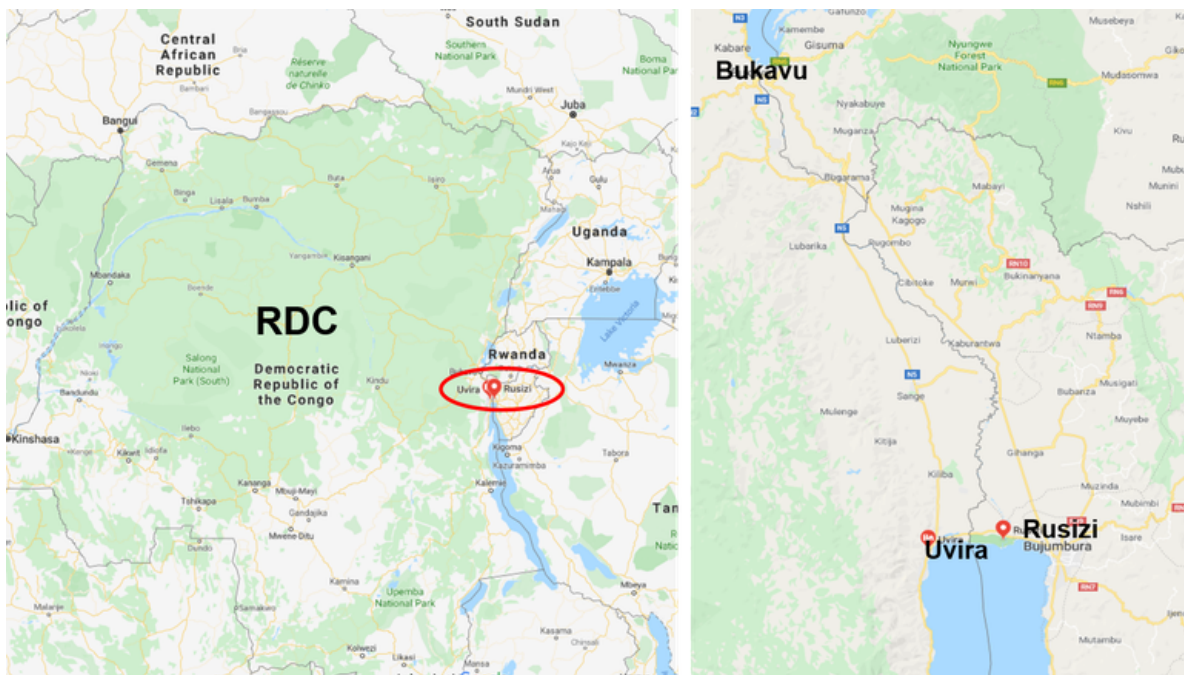
**The school dropout:** Once a girl is married, she is considered as an adult and is supported by her husband. Therefore, she no longer has right for school. The housework and the education of their children do not leave them any time. However, girls' education is the best instrument to fight against poverty. A literate girl gives birth to few children, sensitized on the importance of education, she takes care of her children and make sure they get a qualitative education and also fights against early marriage.

## ***The continuity of women's inferior status and poverty***

Early marriages keep the girls in their inferior status to that of a man and do not allow them to get out of the poverty. This is an unfair situation and a very great lost potential for the development of communities and countries.

## ***Early marriages in Uvira territory/RD Congo***

Uvira territory (DR Congo) is one of the territories of the country having villages where the early and forced marriages are registered in a great number by the humanitarian organization operating in the child protection. In this part of the country, and more often in the plaine of Ruzizi as well as the moyens plateau, young girls are imposed to the early marriages, a consequence of poverty, non application of laws and traditional practices which are the main cause of sex inequality, etc.



## ***Sources of early marriages in the plaine of Ruzizi, Uvira territory***

**Poverty:** Poverty is responsible of early marriages in the plaine of Ruzizi. The chiefs of households that find themselves jobless and in the impossibility of schooling all their children, they sacrifice female children to the development of male ones. Girls get married early and the dowry is kept for the progress of male children considered as responsible of the family.

**Gender inequality:** Female children in the plaine of Ruzizi, have an inferior status in compared to that of boys. This situation gives a lot chance to boyes in their development. They have an easy access to studies, parents accept to sell their shambas, provided that male children emerge to the detriment of girls.

**Traditional practices:** Given that the plaine of Ruzizi is purely a rural entity; the local populations usually rely on the traditional practices despite of the number of churches which present in the area. These practices which deny the appurtenance of a female child in the heirs, considering her as a strange, that will only be useful for another family, in which she will be married. This situation pushes a great number of girls to flee their families which do not recognize their values.

**The non application of laws:** The non application of laws in some regions of the plaine of Ruzizi, contributes to the augmentation of the rate of early marriages in this corner of the country. Laws are not used to punish actors who favor early marriages just because of the insecurity in the area. The only way which contribute actually to the reduction of early marriages in the plaine of Ruzizi, is the sensitization done by the organizations operating there.

## ***Consequences of early marriages in the plaine of Ruzizi***

**Violence and sexual abuse:** Early marriages in this part of the territory bring about sexual abuse from the husband. More often, girls that have been married early and forcedly, do not know the way husband are treated in the conjugal life. This situation forces them to do what they are not able to.

**Girls 'illiteracy:** Given that education is a tool of development, married girls from the plaine of Ruzizi, do not have access to studies. They find themselves with family burdens, obligations and are under authority of their husbands. This contributes to the increase of illiterate girls in the plaine of Ruzizi, and this situation impacts negatively to their socio-economic lives.

**The continuity of women's inferior status:** Once married, girls find themselves in inferior status comparatively to their husbands and remain under dictation of the latter. This situation makes the forcedly married girls to not progress in their socio-economic lives.

**Risks for the health:** Girls that have been forced to get married are often victims of precocious pregnancies in the plaine of Ruzizi. This contributes positively to the rate of young married girls' mortality whose ages vary between 15 and 19 years. The death of these mums causes automatically the death of orphaned children. A part from the death, girls that get married early, are exposed to different diseases of food shortage in the plaine of Ruzizi. Concerning the children, the main victims those whose ages vary between 0 to 5 years. Among the diseases on which married girls and their children are faced, the Kwashiorkor takes a great dimension.







A survey based on early marriages in Runingu village. This is a 15-year-old girl who got married forcedly by a boy from her village. Three months later with a pregnancy, her husband abandoned her for South Africa. Photo: © Moriba Katoto

## ***Prevention, treatment and rehabilitation of victims of early marriages in the plaine of Ruzizi***

Referring to our experience in the area, the best way to prevent early marriages in the plaine of Ruzizi, is to raise intensively awareness on this problem and mobilize both, the victims, their parents, local leaders and authorities to positively contribute to the eradication of this scourge which constitute a gangrene to the development of girls in this corner of the country.

As far as the support of victims is concerned, it's better to regularly collaborate with health structures found in the area as the first proposition and/or create a socio-sanitary structure in charge of treating and managing the cases of survivors.

According to me and on the basis of our experience in the area, the rehabilitation of victims can be done on two levels: First, bring the victims ton their rights, inviting the state to punish the actors and use the lows which focus on this prejudice in this area. Secondly, this is more preferable. It consists in grouping the victims according to their respective villages to train them in technical skills such as tailoring, hair dressing, knitting, cooking, etc. In this way, they will feel happy when they start producing and become self-reliant in their households and respective villages.

## ***How to reach the victims***

To better reach the victims, it should be wise to work hands in hands with the organizations which intervene in that area and whose objective is to fight against child marriage. These organizations will be able to supply and avail all the data concerning the necessary details on early marriages. Together with these organizations, some new orientations and recommendations can be defined to contribute to the progress of activities in the area.

## ***Conclusion***

This work has been produced on the basis of the experience that we have in the area. It contains three main points which summarize the best all the essential elements on the early marriages in the plaine of Ruzizi. The first point, which is the review of literature on early marriages, represents the general idea of the work. It demonstrates and explains the source and consequences of early marriages in a general way. The second point concerns the early marriages in the plaine of Ruzizi, Uvira territory in the DR Congo and demonstrates by explaining specifically, the causes and sources of the early marriages as well as their consequences toward young girls in the plaine of Ruzizi. The third and last point, which

concerns the prevention, treatment and rehabilitation of the victims, suggests the ways to combat early marriages in the plaine of Ruzizi. This part of the work indicates also how the victims (survivors) can be reached.



**Dieudonné Lwaboshi Manegabe** holds a BA degree in English and African Culture from ISP-UVIRA (Uvira Teachers Training College). After his studies; he worked in the NGO TUMANINI AFRICA DR Congo, as a Child Protection Officer for three years. Then, he was recruited in FEMME EN ACTION POUR LE PROGRES SOCIAL “ FAPROS” , an NGO which operates for the advocacy and promotion of women and children’s rights, specifically early and forced marriages in the Plaine of Rizizi, Uvira territory in the DR Congo. He served there as a Project Manager. After FAPROS, he is now working for the NGO GROUPE MILIMA. He serves as a Field Officer in an SGBV project in the plaine of Ruzizi. Email

## Kontakt

### Deutschschweiz

Medicus Mundi Schweiz  
Murbacherstrasse 34  
CH-4056 Basel  
Tel. +41 61 383 18 10  
info@medicusmundi.ch

### Suisse romande

Medicus Mundi Suisse  
Rue de Varembe I  
CH-1202 Genève  
Tél. +41 22 920 08 08  
contact@medicusmundi.ch

### Coordonnées bancaires

Basler Kantonalbank, Aeschen, 4002 Basel  
Medicus Mundi Schweiz, 4056 Basel  
IBAN: CH40 0077 0016 0516 9903 5  
BIC: BKBBCHBBXXX