THE STRUGGLE OF CONGOLESE WOMEN IN ACADEMIA: AFRICAN CONTEXT AND PERCEPTIONS

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ABSTRACT

The academic sector in the Democratic Republic of Congo is dominated by men, although women have been struggling to make their way. The researchers tried to find out whether there are signs of women's advancement in the academic world, the factors hindering their progress and their implications, and how to combat retrograde practices against women in academia.

The results have shown that the representation of women in academia has significantly increased; mainly at the University of Kinshasa where it has increased from 21.0% in 2015 to 29.9% in 2025.But beside all these there are factors hindering women advancement such as gender stereotypes, harassment, family and/or societal pressure, lack of support from other women, abuse of authority related to grades or internships, and violence that impact negatively on women's progress.

Possible solutions to combat these factors consist of women's empowerment, fair recruitment criteria, use of international and national legal instruments, taking our responsibilities as a university community, and encouragement of collective action.

KEYWORDS: - Women, struggle, academia, progress, violence, challenges.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

As the month of March is dedicated to women, it is appropriate to take a look at women and their struggle, and the legal instruments for the protection of the rights of women and girls.

With regard to women in general, and Congolese women in particular, it can be said, without fear of being contradicted, that the situation of women has made very significant progress.

Indeed, the progress made by women in their fight against prejudice, in their fight against injustice, in their fight against all forms of violence, speaks for itself. Congolese women have repeatedly proven that intelligence, competence, initiative, and the ability to assume and to assume themselves are no longer the sole prerogative of men. In our Congolese society and at all levels of the political, social and administrative life of our country, Congolese women continue to make history and to make people talk about them. There is no longer a taboo area for it: no function is inaccessible to it!

However, despite all these advances, the reality is that many women and girls continue to experience violence. In the university environment, this violence takes various forms: sexual harassment, which is often trivialized; abuse of power related to grades or internships; psychological and verbal violence, etc. Married or single, she is the object of discourteous remarks, inconsiderate gestures, trivial gibberish, etc.

One of the biggest challenges is the lack of awareness by the victims themselves of the laws that are supposed to protect them from all these forms of violence. This raises the following questions:
- What are the signs of progress in the struggle of women in the university environment?
- What are the factors hindering the development of women in academia and how are they perceived by them?
- What are the implications for women's advancement?
- What are the mechanisms to be put in place to combat retrograde practices towards women in academia?

2.0 ASSUMPTIONS

In view of what has been said above, one would be tempted to affirm that there are no palpable signs of progress resulting from the struggle of women; whereas the obstacles to women's development in academia remain gender stereotypes, societal pressure, lack of support and family pressure; whereas these factors contribute to the low representation of women in academic institutions; and the mechanisms to be put in place to combat these practices are the empowerment of women, the use of good recruitment criteria in the labour market, the popularization and application of legal instruments and collective action.

3.0 LITERATURE REVIEW
3.1. Violence in the university environment

A study conducted by Sylvain BIJIMINA LUADIA (2007) on violence against female students at the University of Kinshasa in order to verify whether, despite their high level of education, the students and staff of this university also engage in retrograde practices that are not respectful of the human person, in this case the student, gave the following results:

The most common form of violence suffered by these victims remains psychological abuse (83.7%), followed by physical violence (39%) and sexual abuse (32%). While physical violence was committed, for the most part, by students among themselves, psychological violence, on the other hand, was more perpetrated by assistants/supervisors, students, professors and also by the students themselves. On the whole, the main perpetrators of this violence in the university environment (assistants, supervisors and professors) occupy a higher hierarchical position compared to their victims who, often in a position of weakness, are forced in one way or another to succumb to the traps of rapists.

The survey showed that more than half of the respondents are unaware of the existence of the law on sexual violence in the DRC, passed by the transitional parliament and promulgated by the head of state on 20 July 2006. She also indicated that very few victims of violence at the University of Kinshasa have called the police, while the majority of them have resigned themselves and many others have resolved to settle amicably to cover up the case for fear of being indexed by society and for the preservation of their own dignity.

To put an end to this violence, the respondents recommended the application of severe sanctions against the perpetrators, the regulation of the clothing of female students, information, education and communication as well as prayer.

3.2. Image of women in marriage and in the family in sub-Saharan Africa

Thank God AksantiCirhibuka (2021), in his study on *Gender and Political Life in the DRC. The emergence of female leadership, which is struggling with the logic of 'male domination'*, notes that

If Congolese women have always worked, they have done so within the framework of their feminine identity and their related responsibilities. From this point of view, the woman is first and foremost a nurturer, the one who watches over the well-being of the family in one way or another. Well integrated into this feminine function within traditional society, it is noticeable that today, in the different regions of the DRC, more and more women are struggling to gain their autonomy, at the political, social, economic and even cultural levels. To this end, the issue of gender relations and relations between men and women

becomes a fundamental element in the choice for the sustainable development of the country. A good number of reports from Congolese national as well as international organizations underline the fact that Congolese women still suffer all kinds of discrimination at all levels. Certain legal provisions, in particular in the Family Code, limit the freedom of action of married women.

In a document prepared for the consultation meeting on the status of women in the Great Lakes region, held from 30 May to 1 June 2005, the Ministry of Women and Family Affairs of the Democratic Republic of the Congo had referred to these different types of discrimination, which have their roots both in the persistence of traditional customs and practices unfavourable to women and in the general deterioration of conditions life due to war (Congolese Ministry of Family, Women and Children 2005:16).

Women academics are therefore not spared from these types of discrimination decried by Cirhibuka and the DRC's Ministry of Women and Family.

3.3. Integration of women into the labour market
IlungaKalomboFifi and SemMbimbi Pascal (2021) have observed that,

Faced with the current situation in the labour market, the professional integration of women has become a real problem, both nationally and locally. In the last five years, higher and university institutions have produced women graduates in Lubumbashi but very few of them (less than 10%) have been integrated into professional life. In order to understand the causes linked to this low integration rate, a survey coupled with an analysis of existing theories on women's professional integration was favoured. The main results reveal that the professional integration of women university graduates is determined by several factors. These are the courses followed at university (technical courses increase the chances of finding a job more than social courses), the social position of the husband as well as that of the parents are factors influencing professional integration according to the women interviewed. This implies that skills and studies alone are no longer enough to get a job in the field of study, but also family and friend influences are not to be underestimated.

All these studies on violence against women, their image in the family and in marriage and their integration into professional life have helped to determine the methodology to be adopted for this work.

4.0 METHODOLOGY

The data collection was mainly based on qualitative techniques that made it possible to analyse the issue of obstacles to women's development in academia in an in-depth manner. This is how she used interviews and individual interviews with the respondents, as well as life stories with the women. This was preceded by a literature search, which was analysed in order to highlight the added value compared to other studies.

5.0 RESULTS

5.1. Some signs of women's progress in the university environment

The analysis of the few statistics at the University of Kinshasa between 2015 and 2025 shows that there has been enormous progress in terms of the representation of women at all levels.

Indeed, in 2015, the representation of women remained very low at UNIKIN. Out of about 23,000 students, the number of girls fluctuated around 5,000; while 43 female teachers were registered out of 890; 186 women scientists out of 1,261 and 475 women administrators out of 1,942 agents. No women sat on UNIKIN's management committee, which consisted of 4 members.

Today in 2025, the situation has improved so much. Statistics show that, out of about 30,000 students, the number of girls hovers around 9800; while 135 female teachers are registered out of 1,429; 470 women scientists out of 2,801 and 668 women administrators out of 2,72. On the UNIKIN management committee composed of 5 members, there is 1 woman.

The following table summarises in terms of percentages the progress made by women in terms of representation in all strata at the University of Kinshasa.

CATEGORY	HEADCOUNT IN 2015			WORKFORCE IN 2025		
	TOT.	FEMALES	%	TOT.	FEMALES	%
Members of the Management Committee	4	0	0	5	1	20
Academic Staff	890	43	4,8	1.429	135	9,4
Scientific Staff	1.261	186	14,7	2.801	470	16,7
Administrative, technical and manual staff	1.942	475	24,4	2.728	668	24,4
Students	23.000	5.000	21,7	30.000	9.800	32,6
TOTAL GENERAL	27.097	5.074	21,0	36.963	11.074	29,9

A reading of this table indicates that, from 2015 to 2025, the representation of women on the management committee has increased from 0 to 20%; that of academic staff has increased from 4.8% to 9.4%; among scientific staff, it has risen from 14.7% to 16.7%; the representation of

women among administrative, technical and manual staff remained the same, at 24.4%; and among the student population, it increased from about 21.0 to about 32.6 percent. In total, the representation of women at the University of Kinshasa has increased from 21.0% in 2015 to 29.9% in 2025.

5.2. Factors hindering women's development in academia

Many factors contribute to keeping the woman in the starting situation. We can mention a few of them here without the list being exhaustive.

5.2.1. Gender stereotypes

There are many stereotypes of women in general that can extend to women in academia. Although they vary according to the environment, they reveal certain permanences. The clichés of women relate to:
- the instrumentalization or objectification of women: it serves to satisfy the sexual needs of men and give them offspring;
- her social status in relation to man: she is the man's inferior, she is his partner, she is his friend;
- her ontological defects: she is naïve, she is loquacious, she is weak, she is treacherous, she is authoritarian, she is a flower, she is a devil, she is cunning, she is belligerent;
- her negative practices: she is a gossip peddler, she is a spendthrift, which pushes the husband to hide her salary; she is a prostitute and has an excess of libido; etc.

5.2.2. Harassment

In the context of Congolese economic precariousness and the scarcity of the job market, there are many women workers who sometimes give in to sexual harassment by a superior or a colleague to secure their place. Manifesting itself through a composite set of elements (advances, unwelcome attentions, imposed physical contact, comments whose purpose is to sexually provoke the employee,...), sexual harassment spreads in full view of everyone and with impunity in NGOs, private companies, public administrations, is rampant in the political sphere as well as in the world of the media, in police stations, in education,... perpetrated most often by employers, superiors, but also by colleagues, customers, etc.

Often having male department managers, women are often victims of attacks by the latter who take advantage of their hierarchical position to arrogate to themselves the right to use the bodies of their employees.

The few women who have the courage to refuse to be sexually harassed pay the price, which is usually unfair evaluations, poor references, deterioration of employment records, denial of

promotion or training, loss of earnings, financial insecurity, dismissal, having to leave one's job, and even denial of employment opportunities, etc.

5.2.3. Family and/or societal pressure

Very often, we hear women tell that marriage comes first, that they have to choose between a man and a career. While men are encouraged and praised for their decision to pursue university studies and even careers in it, women are asked about their choices: What about marriage? As we get older, isn't it time to have children? Did the husband give his consent? How will the responsibility for motherhood be assumed? If it's not a man's job? Etc.

5.2.4. Lack of support

Having already found it very difficult to compete for high-level positions, women also have to fight against society's judgment and worse against the lack of support and encouragement from their peers, as well as other women and their family members.

5.2.5. Abuse of authority related to grades or internships

Students enrolled at the end of their studies are more at risk of being sexually misconduct by their thesis or thesis supervisor, because of the relationship of dependency that exists between them and the proximity of the supervisory relationship.

Indeed, it often happens that these students also find themselves working and financially dependent on their supervisor. Dependency often aggravates the situation to the extent that it is likely to promote tolerance for misconduct, impede whistle blowing and amplify power inequality in the relationship.

As such, university teachers should be particularly vigilant about their relationships with female students, especially if they have a supervisory relationship with the student, in order to avoid committing an abuse of power.

Intimate relationships between professors and students remain an important taboo and it is desirable to open discussions on this subject, especially in the African context. Since the total ban on this type of relationship is difficult, universities must be sensitive to the issues surrounding them and have an interest in defining these relationships to ensure that everyone is respected. To do this, it would be necessary to establish benchmarks and rules to better frame relationships where a power relationship is at stake in order to prevent possible abuses.

5.2.6. Violence

It is important to distinguish here four forms of violence suffered by women in the university environment: psychological, physical, sexual and verbal violence. The following results were obtained from 14 members of the academic staff, 47 members of the scientific staff, 67 members of the administrative, technical and manual staff, and 980 female students, i.e. 10% of the female population of the University of Kinshasa.

5.2.6.1. Psychological violence

Psychological violence can be defined as vexatious conduct manifested either by repeated behaviour, words, acts or gestures that are hostile or unwanted, that violates the dignity or psychological or physical integrity of a member of the university community and that results in a harmful work or study environment for that member. They arouse anger, frustration, humiliation and resentment because of the moral and social devaluation of the victim to which the victim becomes subject. Psychological violence is the most serious because its consequences are long-lasting, they are not easily erased.

The following table presents the situation of psychological violence suffered by women in the university environment.

Authors / Victims	Line managers	Colleagues	Subordinate	Total
Academic Staff	9	5	0	14
Scientific body	32	15	0	47
Administrative, technical and manual staff	48	14	5	67
Students	688	257	35	980
Total	**777**	**291**	**40**	**1.108**

A reading of this table indicates that 777 women out of 1,108 interviewed at the University of Kinshasa, i.e. 70.1%, say they suffer psychological violence from their superiors; 291 others, or 26.2%, say they suffer from it at the hands of colleagues; and 40 of them, or 3.6%, cite their subordinates as perpetrators.

5.2.6.2. Verbal abuse

These are the insults and other vexatious words uttered to women all day long in the university environment. Indeed, when you suffer physical violence, the pain can quickly disappear, but

insults do not disappear easily, as soon as you think about them they hurt even more. The following table shows the content.

Authors \\ Victims	Line managers	Colleagues	Subordinate	Total
Academic Staff	8	4	2	14
Scientific body	29	12	6	47
Administrative, technical and manual staff	44	12	11	67
Students	667	235	78	980
Total	**748**	**263**	**97**	**1.108**

It appears from this table that 748 women out of 1,108 interviewed at the University of Kinshasa, i.e. 67.5%, say they are subjected to verbal violence by hierarchical superiors; 263 of them, or 23.7%, say they suffer from it from colleagues; and 97 others, or 8.7%, cite the subordinates as the perpetrators.

5.2.6.3. Sexual violence
The table below shows the status of sexual violence against women in universities.

Authors \\ Victims	Line managers	Colleagues	Subordinate	Total
Academic Staff	12	2	0	14
Scientific body	42	5	0	47
Administrative, technical and manual staff	52	15	0	67
Students	916	57	7	980
Total	**1.022**	**79**	**7**	**1.108**

We can read through this table that 1,022 women out of 1,108 interviewed at the University of Kinshasa, or 92.2%, say they suffer sexual violence from hierarchical superiors; 79 of them, or 7.1%, say they suffer from it from colleagues; and 7 others, or 0.6%, cite the subordinates as the perpetrators.

5.2.6.4. Physical violence

Physical violence is that which threatens the physical integrity of the woman. The situation of physical violence is presented in the following table.

Authors / Victims	Line managers	Colleagues	Subordinate	Total
Academic Staff	4	8	2	14
Scientific body	28	11	8	47
Administrative, technical and manual staff	44	12	11	67
Students	660	295	25	980
Total	**736**	**326**	**46**	**1108**

This table indicates that 736 women out of 1,108 interviewed at the University of Kinshasa, or 66.4%, say they suffer physical violence from hierarchical superiors; 326 others, or 29.4%, say they suffer from it from colleagues; and 46 of them, or 4.1%, cite the subordinates as authors.

5.3. Woman's own perception of these factors

One of the specific characteristics of the factors that disfavor and hinder women's momentum in their fight for emergence in the university environment is the difficulty they have in clearly identifying them and recognizing them as such.

Indeed, because these factors can manifest themselves through a wide range of more or less subtle and insidious behaviours and are often trivialized by culture, victims are more likely to question their perceptions rather than recognize that they are experiencing unacceptable acts.

In addition, the university environment is a rich and stimulating environment that encourages exchanges, sharing and collaborative work, and campuses are therefore places likely to generate multiple opportunities for proximity that are inclined to promote the development of interpersonal relationships.

For example, the practice of *sexually transmitted marks* is sometimes hampered by the conception of the university among some learners and by a moral crisis among trainers. From a general point of view, while among a number of educators, professional ethics have disappeared, gradually giving way to a crisis of morals, among learners, the question is assessed differently depending on whether one is a victim or a willing active prey (Kamidi, 2015).

Another characteristic is the lack of knowledge by the victims themselves of the laws that are supposed to protect them against all forms of violence. Thus, they tend to bow their heads and accept these degrading factors as a fatality.

On the other hand, some of the women who have moved up in rank give the impression that they have not developed a clear vision of their mandate or mission. They demand an independence that they hesitate to use for lack of courage and fear of going off the beaten track. Worse still, after having tasted the pleasures of power, they tend to ignore those with whom they fought to obtain their various mandates, or even to refute commitments made before their accession to these positions of power. This causes other women to mistrust them.

5.4. Impact on women's advancement

The factors that disadvantage women's progress in universities have significant repercussions for them and those around them, in addition to contributing to a climate of resignation with the following consequences:

5.4.1. Psychological

Women experience trauma that causes acute stress, anxiety, fear and hyper vigilance. In addition, they may feel a sense of disgust with the situations they are experiencing.

Some of them may resort to overconsumption (work, television or video games, gambling, sports, food, alcohol, drugs, etc.) to try to cope with their trauma.

5.4.2. Social

Some women in academia experience some marginalization, whether in their family or professional environment. They can also be ostracized by their circle of friends. In addition, intimate relations can be more difficult or unpleasant for them in their current or future relationships.

5.4.3. Academics

For students, the effects also have an impact on their academic performance: difficulty concentrating and listening, absences, inability to submit assignments or take exams, etc. Some students may even consider leaving the university, because of their feeling of insecurity and the risk of running into their tormentors again on campus or frequent revivals. Others are considering the possibility of changing universities or ending their studies altogether.

5.4.4. Equipment

In addition to the psychological, social and academic consequences, some of the repercussions of degrading factors towards women in the university environment also affect their financial situation. Indeed, physical distance from the place where one feels denigrated is sometimes desired by people, thus leading them to move. Affected students must sometimes suspend or interrupt their studies, while paying the costs related to this interruption, as the semester started is generally non-refundable.

Trauma sometimes disrupts the psychological state of victims to the point of losing or suspending their jobs. In addition to these undesirable material consequences, there are also the costs incurred by certain medical treatments or therapies undertaken by the victims.

5.5. Possible solutions

5.5.1. Women's empowerment

Empowering women is about providing them with the tools to enable them to exercise power and control over their own lives. This requires investing in the promotion of gender equality and women's empowerment, whether in the workplace, in the community, and most importantly, in education.

5.5.2. Recruitment criteria

It is becoming imperative that hiring teams strive to let go of gender stereotypes and biased language when referring to female candidates. In addition, male scientists need to treat their peers equally and disengage from sexist comments and denigrating behavior, universities need to conduct internal studies to understand where they stand in terms of gender equality. Women can only be successfully and equally integrated into the currently male-dominated academic spheres through the commitment of men, women and all decision-making parties.

5.5.3. Use of legal instruments

Legal instruments exist at the national and international levels to protect the rights of women and girls, which can be effectively mobilized to combat violence in the university environment and allow them to be integrated on an equal footing with their peers.

First of all, it is important to point out that there are laws and conventions that establish a framework for the protection of women's rights:

- **At the international level**, the *Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women* (CEDAW) is a pillar. Ratified by many countries, including the DRC, it requires states to take measures to guarantee equality and protect women from all forms of violence.

- **At the continental level**, there is the *Maputo Protocol*, which is a key tool in Africa for the promotion of women's rights, with a particular focus on education, health and protection against gender-based violence.
- **At the national level**, the Constitution of the Democratic Republic of Congo guarantees gender equality and the protection of fundamental rights, but there are also specific laws, such as the one on the fight against sexual violence and those aimed at the protection of children.

These instruments are essential, but their effectiveness depends on their rigorous implementation and ownership by society.

5.5.4. Taking our responsibilities as a university community

It is the duty of all, teachers, administrators, and students, to ensure that these legal instruments are known, understood, and used. The means to achieve this are:

- **Train and inform**: Conduct regular briefings on women's rights, whistle blowing mechanisms, and available legal remedies.
- **Establish listening structures**: Universities should have committees or offices dedicated to addressing sexual violence, where victims can find confidential support.
- **Punish aggressors**: It is imperative that the penalties provided for by law are applied without exception. Impunity must not be tolerated.

5.5.5. Encouragement of collective action

Finally, it should be stressed that change requires collective mobilization. Thus, students must know that their rights are not a favour, but a legal obligation that must all be defended. And colleagues and members of the administration must remember that silence or inaction in the face of this violence makes us complicit.

6.0 CONCLUSION

This work on the struggle of women in the university environment has endeavoured to present the signs of progress made by women, the factors hindering their development, their impact on their advancement and the mechanisms to be put in place to combat the regressive practices of which they are victims.

The qualitative analysis of the data showed that women have made enormous progress at all levels in the university environment; that the factors that continue to hinder their development are and remain gender stereotypes, harassment, family and/or societal pressure, lack of support, abuse of power related to grades or internships as well as psychological and verbal violence; whereas these factors contribute to the low representation of women in academic institutions;

and that the mechanisms to be put in place to combat these practices are the empowerment of women, the use of good recruitment criteria in the labour market, the popularization and application of legal instruments, the assumption of our responsibilities as an academic community and collective action.

The law is a powerful tool, but it will only come to life if we commit to implementing it. Together, let's make our universities spaces where every woman and girl feels protected, respected, and valued.

It is a question of reminding Congolese women that whatever their intelligence, their rank and the position they hold in society, they must always bear in mind that they are above all a mother, wife and educator: these are the noble and exhilarating attributes.

Since the skills of Congolese women are no longer in doubt, she is right to call for the operationalization of parity at all costs. They are:
- to mature the reflection and seek to understand and apprehend the notion of feminism;
- to determine the issues related to the place given to women in the African and Congolese political and social context in particular;
- to draw the attention of the public authorities to the issue of women at the time of the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals;
- raise awareness among the actors involved in the position and defence of gender equations and in particular the issue of women;
- contribute to the greater involvement of women in the future and future of their societies;
- to propose perspectives in political practice aimed at improving the status of women.

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