

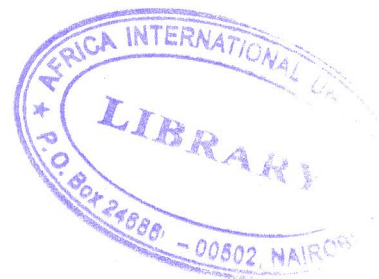
AFRICA INTERNATIONAL UNIVERSITY

RETHINKING WOMEN'S DIGNITY: A CASE STUDY OF
IRUMU COUNTY, IN ITURI PROVINCE, DRC

BY

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ABSTRACT

The most salient factor that reveals the lack of dignity experienced by women in DRC and that has attracted worldwide attention is the massive and destructive sexual violence¹ committed against women in eastern DRC during the armed conflict in the last two decades. Sexual violence has become a humanitarian disaster. It is true that this evil is associated with the wars occurring in this region. Every effort has been made towards the restoration of peace by ending these conflicts. Unfortunately, the national survey, previous research and personal observation have shown that war is not the only source of violence against women in DRC. Even without war, women are continually subjected to sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV)² in various forms due to the way they are seen and treated in society. In fact, the massive sexual violence women experience is simply a result of the lack of dignity accorded to women. Therefore ending conflicts will not automatically lead women to recover their dignity. That is why the researcher decided to dig more deeply and find out what makes women so often an object of mistreatment from the family circle to the entire society. Apart from war, what undermines the dignity of women in Irumu? What is their status and role in society? And what strategies would be appropriate and effective, not only to fight and eradicate sexual violence, but also to help Congolese women to regain their human dignity? These questions led this study.

The study falls under the field of Practical Theology which investigates how the truth of God's Word applies to real-life circumstances and problems, and moves from theory to practice. It is, 'what people actually live' – practical – as compared to 'what they are supposed to live' – theory. This study aims to connect theory and practice.

The researcher used the ethnographic method from the field of anthropology in order to obtain a holistic picture, portraying the daily experiences of women in Irumu that undermine their dignity. This method involved participant observation, interviews, and documents.

Findings from the study of different assumptions, values, traditions, and cultural patterns (from Bira, Hema and Nyali groups) which affect women's dignity in Irumu demonstrated clearly that discrimination against women starts from birth and continues throughout the entire life. This discrimination ends up reducing women to

¹Sexual violence is any attempt or penetration of any part of the body of the victim (sexual organ, the opening anal, or mouth) by any object, sexual organ or other part of the body (hand, feet) by the force, the threat of force, the coercion, against a person unable to give consent.

²SGBV refers to any act that is perpetrated against a person's will and is based on gender norms and unequal power relationships. It encompasses threats of violence and coercion. It can be physical, emotional, psychological, or sexual in nature, and can take the form of a denial of resources or access to services (<http://www.unhcr.org/sexual-and-gender-based-violence.html>). Sexual violence is one form of SGBV.