Oral Statement of Julienne Lusenge, SOFEPADI, to CEDAW Committee
For its Review of the Democratic Republic of Congo

Thank you, Madam President. I am Julienne Lusenge and I am speaking on behalf of SOFEPADI and 152 Congolese organizations.

Sexual violence is increasing in conflict-affected provinces and across the country. The perpetrators include armed groups, security services and civilians. Impunity persists, and when perpetrators are prosecuted, judges impose penalties that are too lenient compared to what the law calls for. In addition, victims receive no compensation. **The government should strengthen the existing measures, conduct thorough investigations and prosecute state and non-state perpetrators of this violence in order to end impunity.**

Sexual violence against Congolese women and girls happens not only in conflict, but is reflected in their daily lives. In a particularly heinous case, a 13-year-old schoolgirl was raped in May by young sons of politicians. These seven young men raped the young girl after drugging her and then spread images of the rape on social media, leaving her and her family traumatized. The case was brought to justice through the efforts of Congolese activists. In spite of the atrocious nature of the violence, a court only sentenced one of the seven perpetrators to five years and another to a fine of $10,000. All the others have been released. The case is on appeal but given the corrupt nature of the judiciary, we are afraid that the one convicted perpetrator will be released early and escape justice. I speak to you about this case because it demonstrates the impunity granted to perpetrators of crimes of sexual violence as well as the corruption and the barriers to access to justice that victims face. **We call on the government to pay utmost attention to this case and to ensure that the perpetrators of this rape are prosecuted and sentenced in order to send a clear message against impunity.**

In addition to this culture of impunity, the lack of basic infrastructure and services at the local level increases women and girls’ vulnerability to sexual violence, for example by forcing them to travel long distances to remote areas to look for water or wood. **We recommend that the government commit to providing the necessary infrastructure and basic services in the areas where they are lacking in order to prevent and combat sexual violence.**

With respect to domestic violence, victims' lawyers consistently report that the absence of specific criminal provisions against domestic violence and marital rape prevent victims from seeking justice. **We call on the government to enact laws criminalizing domestic violence and marital rape.**

With regard to women's political participation, **the government must ensure that women are meaningfully included in the electoral process. To do this, it must harmonize the electoral law with the objectives of the Gender Parity Act so that women can participate and have a fair chance to win elections.**