Championing child protection, mental health and psychosocial support in the DRC

Angelique Gatsinzi (United Kingdom) has made considerable contributions to defending the rights of children and young people. She is a UN Volunteer Child Protection Officer with the UN Children’s Fund (UNICEF) in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). The 37-year-old has reshaped UNICEF’s approach in the country to meet the challenges faced by adolescent girls, such as gender-based violence, child marriage and barriers to education.

Upon joining UNICEF’s Child Protection team in 2019, Angelique dedicated herself to strengthening child protection systems, with a particular emphasis on reinforcing the social service workforce.

A pivotal initiative under her leadership was the training and accreditation of former street
children who turned into peer educators as para-social workers. These were deployed to main "street children" hotspots in Kinshasa, providing crucial psychosocial support, facilitating family mediation and directing children to essential services.

Furthermore, in late 2022, Angelique actively participated in the organization of the DRC Girls Forum, held in Kinshasa, which brought together 100 girls from the DRC and 12 other African countries. She masterminded the event's name and slogan, "Connect. Exchange. Empower," and took charge of all logistics, travel arrangements and venue contracts.

As the child safeguarding focal point, Angelique identified more than half of the guest speakers, including the MC, Deborah Mutund, one of the new faces and rising star of the pan-African audiovisual landscape. She coached five girls to voice their personal experiences, including harrowing stories of child marriage. The success of this forum has spurred a replication in Lubumbashi, where Angelique will continue to lend her expertise.

One of the girls coached by the Angelique is Nadège, a 17-year-old girl from Mbujimayi in Kasai Oriental. At the age of 14, family financial difficulties following the death of her father led her paternal uncles to marry her off by force, putting an abrupt end to her educational aspirations.

Her husband abandoned her during the pregnancy, which further aggravated her situation and left her with no financial means. This, in turn, resulted in a tragic stillbirth due to inadequate prenatal care.

Despite these difficulties, Nadège found a lifeline in a project supported by UNICEF's child protection programme, which offered counseling to help her overcome her emotional trauma and life skills training.

Thanks to her new skills, she is now working as a washerwoman and hairdresser, which enables her to meet her immediate needs and those of her mother. Today, Nadège courageously shares her experiences on platforms such as the DRC Girls' Forum, strengthening her determination to fight the problem of child marriage and giving hope to many girls in similar situations.

‘The most rewarding experience I have had since joining UNICEF has been the multiple opportunities to exchange and spend time with children and adolescents who have benefited from child protection interventions. --Angelique Gatsinzi, UN Volunteer Child Protection Officer with UNICEF, DRC

Angelique continues to innovate; she is now developing girl-friendly mental health and psychosocial support services. Working in collaboration with girls, she is co-creating safe spaces tailored to their needs, with the first set to open in August-September 2023.

They are currently 58 UN volunteers serving with UNICEF in the DRC, including 33 women
Angelique Gatsinzi, international UN Volunteer with UNICEF (in the blue shirt on the stage), during a child safeguarding and ‘breaking the ice’ session on the eve of the DRC Girl’s Forum, fostering a safe and interactive environment. ©UNICEF/ 0B4A7709, 2023

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