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World Relief's Efforts to Combat Sexual and Gender-Based Violence in Eastern DR Congo Recently Expanded with New Funding Received from the Trust Fund for Victims

World Relief aims to reach over 4,550 people with educational messaging and 300 women with direct assistance

BALTIMORE – World Relief has commenced a new partnership with the Trust Fund for Victims under the International Criminal Court to provide physical rehabilitation to survivors of sexual and gender-based violence in eastern Democratic Republic of Congo (DR Congo). This project aims to reach 300 women with direct assistance, and over 4,550 people with education and messaging, including family members, community leaders, local authorities and religious leaders. World Relief will work across twelve localities within North Kivu Province, an area rife with conflict and gross human rights violations. Since 2013, World Relief has been working with communities in Rutshuru Territory to spread awareness and education about the prevention of sexual and gender-based violence as well as care for survivors.

The DR Congo continues to be one of the world's worst places to be a woman, according to many peace and security index ratings. In a 2018 survey by UN Women, 35,000 cases of sexual and gender-based violence were recorded in DR Congo in that year. World Relief believes this estimate is low and assumes that many cases of women's and girl's rights abuses go unreported. In light of the turbulence caused by the current COVID-19 pandemic, this number has likely skyrocketed in North Kivu where women are still the first victims of conflicts and domestic abuse, and cultural norms often relegate them to second-class citizenry.

"We are committed to fighting sexual and gender-based violence in all its forms by addressing root causes and building just communities that protect the rights and dignity of all women and girls. We are also committed to restoration of victims at the physical, emotional, relational, and spiritual level," said **Scott Arbeiter, president of World Relief**. "We are especially grateful for this new partnership with the Trust Fund for Victims to help provide rehabilitation for survivors and education to local leaders."

Sexual and gender-based violence includes war rape, domestic violence, child marriage, female genital mutilation, threats of violence to coerce and manipulate, all rooted in gender inequality, harmful cultural norms and the abuse of power in a predominately patriarchal society. The consequences of sexual and gender-based violence are far more devastating beyond any single (or multiple) incident and often lead to life-long repercussions for women. Many continue to experience physical, mental and emotional trauma long after the incident. The effects that follow include rejection out of her household, community stigmatization, pregnancy and especially for young girls whose rape has led to a pregnancy, vaginal fistulas (an open wound) that can often lead to incontinence, heaping more shame and feelings of worthlessness.

Little justice is offered to women in a country where these acts of violence have reached epidemic proportions; perpetrators are too often not held accountable, and if tried, many can bribe their way into impunity. In coordination with local grassroots establishments who hold much influence, World Relief and the church will work together to support women impacted by sexual and gender-based violence. Through two main objectives, the aim of this larger partnership is to successfully reintegrate them back into their families and communities by providing them with the necessary skills to thrive. This project seeks to:

1. Provide physical rehabilitation to 300 women survivors and their children through individual counseling, Survivor Groups creation, building out a framework to train trauma care providers, training local leaders and volunteers on sexual and gender-based violence, as well as mobilizing them to educate their communities on sexual and gender-based violence sensitivity, care and prevention.
2. Reach 37 survivors with physical medical rehabilitation through the treatment of fistulas via non-charge surgeries in partnership with a local woman's hospital, and provide integration kits to these survivors to restart their livelihood activities.

World Relief and the Trust Fund for Victims have launched this project for an initial 12 months with plans to reassess a continued partnership in future years in North Kivu Province. Thanks to this funding, World Relief is able to expand its footprint deeper into other internal programming in Ituri Province by working with local churches to understand the relevance of gender equality and empowerment.

Heather Woodward, international director of finance and operations at World Relief, who has worked extensively on setting this project up between the TFV/ICC and World Relief, says, "World Relief is honored to participate in the mission of the Trust Fund for Victims 'to support and implement programs that address harms resulting from genocide, crimes of humanity, war crimes and aggression by providing physical, psychological, and material support to victims and their families.' By providing dignified care, seeking peace and restoration in communities through survivors groups and counseling, World Relief desires to show women and families who have been violated that they are worthy and loved by God, despite the injustices they have experienced. In partnership with the Trust Fund for Victims, World Relief will continue to champion gender equality and the rights of women and girls."

For more information about World Relief and how you can help, visit <https://worldrelief.org/>.

About World Relief

World Relief is a global Christian humanitarian organization that brings sustainable solutions to the world's greatest problems – disasters, extreme poverty, violence, oppression, and mass displacement. For over 75 years, we've partnered with churches and community leaders in the U.S. and abroad to bring hope, healing and transformation to the most vulnerable.

Learn more at worldrelief.org.