

## Portrait of Irène EANGA

As I was stepping across the threshold of MONUSCO HQ one day, in Kinshasa, I saw her holding a paint brush in one hand and a pot in the other hand. Then I wondered inwardly “wow, when was it authorized to do painting on MONUSCO’s wall” When I took a second look, I realized she was a painter for buildings. She turned around and offered me her most beautiful smile. I got nearer to her and I listened to her. What a special woman! Let me tell you, she must be among the few women who get men to work. “Don’t stay idle, looking at me – you should rather bring more of the blue paint,” instructing her colleague. An uncompromising character, believe me.

Irène joined MONUC in 2006, more particularly the Management and Services Office (BMS), as a casual worker or IC which stands for Individual Contract, initially as an electrician for two months only. Utex 2 was then undergoing renovation and she was assigned some building-related tasks. She

confessed that it was quite demanding in terms of physical energy; and as she became pregnant for the first time, her supervisor deemed necessary to reassign her to paintings on building. Later on, after she resumed work from maternity leave, she became deeply involved in painting up to now

To the questions how she likes her job, if it was not too difficult for her, she said: “is there a single job that is not difficult? All we need to do is to love what we are doing. I personally love painting, I started practicing it without any previous training, later on, I took some courses at a center which helped me to do the mixture of colors, to be aware of the risks of chemical substance exposures, how to protect oneself and what those products are made up of.”

Irène’s intent was to complete her university education in law; unfortunately, she stopped two years because she got married; and she believed it was not possible to combine studies and household. “I am



Irène Eanga, MONUSCO female painter applying a new coat of paint on the gates of the Mission’s HQ compound in Kinshasa  
Photo MONUSCO/John Bompengo

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now regretting when I see women working and continuing studying, delivering children and proceeding with their career. In my previous situation, I also had to help my family. So, after learning electricity, I found a job in this area.” Irène uses her own example to encourage her two daughters and any other girl living in her neighborhood “to love studies and to go as far as possible.” She acknowledges “there is no stupid job, but there are jobs that can bring more added values to a person in terms of dignity.” Clear-headed, she surprisingly told me this saying from her own beliefs: “the first husband for a wife is her wallet.” She may be right! To substantiate this she came up with this illustration as a proof: “at the end of the month, after catering to my children’s needs, I buy anything I like for pleasure. Thanks to painting, I can make ends meet, I can send my children to school, I can assist my friends, my family... I am coping financially”. MONUSCO Gender section should keep an eye on this lady, in their advocacy for women’s empowerment. What a good example!

Reverting to Irène’s job, I asked her if, as a woman among several male staff, she happens to feel lonely. “No, she replies, my colleagues always support me. They are proud whenever I am congratulated by passers-by, amazed by what I do. This happens a lot. Mr. Swing, Mr. Meece and more recently, Mr. Kobler have all congratulated me, during their respective tenures.” Her colleague Alain Twabele confided to me that Irène is a pride for them “I have never seen a staff in BMS unit working like her. Even when in advanced pregnancy, she climbs the ladder and works. What is most striking about Irène, when she hears somebody backbiting against another; she gets upset and asks the person if he/she is perfect.” Irène confided to me she likes working with men because there is no stories about jealousy or rivalry when working with them. Arent’ you trying to cook slander!

Her close relatives were surprised when she opted for studying electricity for they already recorded a similar case with her senior sister who is now an Engineer in construction. Unlike her family, her husband was not surprised at all as he fell in love with her in MONUSCO doing the same job. He was even impressed with her work. That is what attracted him to me.” So, we are all going to become painters... And what about the children?, “They are very happy. One of my daughters told me she will be a painter.” We will then loop the loop

Why do you have a keen interest in men-dedicated jobs? I enquired. “When we were younger, we used to see men doing these jobs – we therefore believed there were men-dedicated jobs. I just wanted to be an exception that is why I decided that in my life time, I would do jobs reportedly dedicated to men. I am able to do every job relating to construction.” I wanted to know if this has never had any impact on her physical health as a woman, because physical force is needed to lift up heavy loads? “Women can do whatever men do. It depends very much on her frame of mind. Yes, I acknowledge that my physical force cannot compare to men’s but when I start working, I feel like a man, I am the only woman among twenty two men. So, I must behave like a man – if I had to climb a ladder, I must do it” In spite of that, I kept on asking if male staff ever show some compassion towards her on the ground that some tasks should be performed by men? “Our supervisor assigns tasks to male and female staff equally, irrespective of sexes.



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He knows that I am able. Based on my own experience, I would encourage women to do all the most difficult jobs, I am respected everywhere I work, I can see my future prospects broadening, I therefore urge women to rise and do the same.” Wait, just a little joke Irène! What about us; who should stand on our tiptoes to make 1m55, versus your 1m75....

Matovu Kigemuzi James Yiga, her chief supervisor says he is satisfied with her. She heeds instructions given her and never disappoint clients. She is respectful of her supervisors as well as her colleagues. She has a very developed team spirit and is very well organized.



Irène Eanga, in her formal dress  
Photo MONUSCO/John Bompengo

About her daily activities: Irène takes good care of her children every morning, she leaves them with a female servant to take them to school. In the meantime, she gets ready to go to work. “I do now wear any make-up in the morning for I do not know where I could be working during the day: in a room or outdoors painting a wall, on top of a ladder, on a roof or helping colleagues carpenters, doing construction work or working with the electricians... I look at her with astonishingly as I can hardly plug a cord extension. Isn't she afraid of being electrocuted! “I am not afraid of the electrical power. I find it quite normal because I learnt it” I am aware, though I learnt it that it is somehow dangerous! Are you obliged to wear the blue aprons 360/365 days, “you are a woman, you naturally like to look beautiful, what do you do to keep yourself beautiful” \*Cabellos (hair wigs)?” Can you guess what could be her response? It is true it is ugly...” No, No, No, maybe you don't know her! Response: “I am happy to put my apron all year long. This is the dress that helps me buy the fashions like the “cabellos.” Are you sure this woman is not the product of: Polytechnics? Can judge by yourself; how many good ideas from the head of staff member. Manpower is not what it used to be!

“Irène, can you give me assurance, should the opportunity presents itself, if you were going to shift to another job?” All she knows, she is not going to remain a painter for the whole life until she retires. She is looking to save money with a bank, to set up business on painting. Is this quite rational or just an

ambition ... Can you remember what I was I telling you, this woman is extraordinary, she may have had this from birth, school does not teach all that: with feet firm on the ground and the head amidst stars. No sorry, such a school does not exist!

Her hobbies: mainly taking care of her children. Returning home from work, she cooks for them their most delicious food: beans with meat and assists them in doing their school assignments. Oh yes, she never likes to do things partially.

Irène is Congolese, from Equateur province. When I ask her about her country, the Democratic Republic of Congo, she says she is shocked to see that the situation has not changed much, especially in the East and she says she is sad to hear that the armed groups continue to be active. "Women's plight is horrible but they must stay strong and keep their dignity. As long as they live, they must keep their hope high. To men who are used to hurting women, let me remind them: "they came to life through those women. Hurting a woman is tantamount to hurting one's own mother» What are waiting for to initiate a Nobel Prize?

I hope you have understood why this portrait is longer the previous ones. Because I usually meet with interesting people in respect of their career, behavior in the working environment who are arguably role models but in this case, what do you expect me to say...she is amazing...she is just extraordinary!

\*Cabellos: artificial wigs