

Building for the Future: Women's Role in Conflict Resolution and Reconstruction

Eulalie Nibizi

President, Burundi Teachers' Union, Bujumbura, Burundi

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Overview of Women's Status in Burundi

Traditionally, Burundian women were not involved in public issues; their place was in the household. So, girls' and boys' education were separated. Girls were intended for social or reproductive functions as spouses and mothers, and boys were destined to public affairs as leaders. Before the war, women's roles in public and political affairs were not recognized and during the conflict, women were convinced that men were prudent beings and would find solutions to everything. However, even when women were concerned with economic and social matters, they were kept out of the political debates. Women were not sufficiently represented in political parties or institutions. Only men were represented in these arenas. This did not seem to concern many Burundians. There were a few women's associations. However, networking was very poor between men and women's associations. Most women's associations focused on women's rights and economic issues.

Women's Role in Peace Reconstruction

Things changed suddenly with the political crisis and war in October 1993. Women suffered greatly. They faced collective human atrocities: death, humiliation, kidnapping, collective rape, and so on. When women realized men's ability to commit atrocities, they decided to take responsibility to preserve life. Even though they encountered many difficulties, women tried to protect, hide, and rescue neighbors or exiled families. They defied the fighters' animosity and began repairing what men had destroyed. It was not easy at all.

During the war, men were also killed or exiled. The majority of women went to stay in refugee camps where they suffered a lot. Alone, women were not able to face all the challenges. For example, it was hard for women to convince their spouses to agree with initiatives to collaborate with other women of different ethnic or political backgrounds in the conflict. Women were disappointed by men's opposition, and couples separated because men did not allow their spouses to help the enemy. However, rural women became models in reconciliation and peace building. They decided to work in collaboration with existing associations. The early women's associations were informal and focused on providing first aid services to wounded and suffering women and children. They provided basic needs such as clothes, food, health assistance, and shelter. Because their houses and reserves were destroyed, they tried to provide comfort using their modest means.

Burundian women are very poor. They depend on traditional agriculture and do not save money. However, they decided to organize economic activities in groups, including agricultural and commercial activities. It is easier to talk about peace when you share economic and social interests. Economic initiatives began in the ruined areas where women started raising money and gathering medicines and clothes for the needy. The first women's network was called the Collective of Women's Associations and Non-Governmental Organizations in Burundi (CAFOB). It was created in 1994, and it coordinated many actions. As a result, women's initiatives grew all over the country.

At that time, the whole country was unstable. Burundians were separated by ethnic and political affiliations in both cities and villages. Families were dispersed. People fled to the bush, refugee camps, or moved in with other families. Some places were dangerous and one could be killed. Members of CAFOB discovered that women and children were the main victims. They decided to approach former neighbors in order to analyze the causes of the trouble and explore ways of bringing reconciliation. They encouraged the separated groups to start development projects and help each other. From that moment, it became easier to help and educate women.

Sometimes international non-profit organizations like Search for Common Ground helped associated groups with training and social rescue. Because of the solidarity between women, they have been able to help men change their minds about the conflict. In villages and refugee camps, many people began to collaborate. Some women's groups began to build houses for widowers, as well as for separated and older women. Over time, women's associations have become stronger and have diversified their programs. In addition to providing humanitarian assistance, they work to promote women's literacy and encourage women's participation. They also focused on gender issues, conflict resolution, HIV/AIDS, and law amendment advocacy.

When the peace process began, only men negotiated. The men involved were chosen according to their political affiliation, and not because of their contribution to the society. Women's participation was minimized because there were no women leaders of political parties. By putting pressure on the moderator, the civil society and women's associations were authorized to participate as observers. Women played an important role in the Arusha Peace Accord process. They sent women lawyers who became delegates and activists. They listened to what men were discussing. They were involved in lobbying and advocacy movements around politicians, official women delegates, and international observers. A special effort was oriented toward women in the Burundian diaspora. Delegations of women were regularly sent to the Great Lakes Region, South Africa, and Europe, where many refugee families were established. Similarly, women from the diaspora came to participate in the reconciliation efforts in Burundi and got involved in security matters and the evolution of the peace negotiation. These exchanges facilitated women's involvement in the reestablishment of peace.

When peace agreements were signed in Arusha in August 2000, women had received 30 percent of the seats in Burundian public institutions. It took a long time to get that level of participation during the transition period. Women managed to introduce women's participation in constitutional laws and laws on political parties. But they did not succeed in influencing local administration laws. That remains a challenge. In the transition period, many capacity-building workshops were organized to prepare women for leadership. Rural women were educated about their rights and how to promote them. They are encouraged to vote and postulate for political positions. Women finally understood that their place is not in the house, but everywhere in the world.

Women's Position in the New Institutions

Now we begin a new phase of hope within democratic institutions in Burundi. Women hold important positions in the new government. Over 30 percent of political positions, which had previously been reserved only for men, are now held by women. Women hold the following positions:

- Vice-President
- President of the National Assembly
- Two Vice-Presidents of the Senate
- 17 seats out of 49 in the Senate (34.6%)
- 37 seats out of 118 in the Assembly (30.5%)
- 17 out of 20 positions in the Government (35%)

- 4 out of 17 Governors in local administration (23%) – Note that one of the four women governors had previously been a governor for five months in 1993.
- Communal Administrators (12%)
- Communal Counselors (5.7%)
- Deputy Councilwomen (33%)

Challenges and Perspectives

These new opportunities are proof of women's political maturity. However, the various opportunities pose a big challenge for women's associations and leadership. There is an urgent need to strengthen the capacity of the newly elected women. Many of them have only basic education and insufficient training to face their new responsibilities. Others are very new politicians and are involved in politics only because of the conflict of the country. Generally, they do not have much experience in politics. However, they all need to perform their leadership roles in such a way that they become models of good governance. The main capacity building needs include girls and women's education, preventing violence against women—especially rape, fighting against poverty, and promoting conflict resolution and good governance.

For the Burundian people, and women especially, the most important challenge is fighting poverty. In fact, war has destroyed the country's infrastructure, which has resulted in limited development opportunities. Burundi is one of the three poorest countries in the world. Women have no property or income to guarantee repayment of bank loans when they need credit. The credit interest rates are very high and not affordable to women. Women associations and the new leaders have to help their sisters find an honest and quick way to resolve their economic problems such as by giving them micro-credit opportunities. Women's initiatives need sufficient support to ensure growth and development. We need not only national efforts, but also international support to overcome these challenges.

Unfortunately, we have a lot of refugees who cannot go back to their villages due to fear of the lack of security in certain areas. Consequently, women's associations have to influence politicians to reestablish security, and reassure all Burundians that they are safe. As evidence of their activism and growing voice in Burundi, it is important to note that, this week, through the CAFOB network, Burundian women will participate in the women's global march for the elimination of poverty and the eradication of violence.

In the last twelve years, women have gained influence in Burundi. Due to the fact that male leadership was failing because of corruption, a lack of motivation, and an absence of good governance, many women emerged as leaders through democratic elections and national consensus. Trade unions, sports unions, and other civil society organizations show that women's position in society is changing in a good way in Burundi. Funding is the only problem, and we are afraid that women could fail to continue the struggle for human rights and the reestablishment of peace if they do not receive the necessary support.