

# CULTURE AND WOMEN'S LEADERSHIP

## *The Burundian Culture – An Experience*

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I wish to thank UNESCO for choosing to explore ways in which culture can contribute to women's empowerment in the current context of turmoil in the Great Lakes Region. It is indeed a topic that has so far not attracted the attention it deserves.

The question asked is how can culture contribute to women's empowerment? We are requested to illustrate / analyze different aspects of African culture that support women's empowerment, with focus on contemporary forms of culture.

I am grateful for this opportunity to share with all of you my experience and thoughts on the subject. I am particularly interested in the topic of culture in relation to women's empowerment, because of the great challenge it represents in the current context of crisis and instability in the region, and because it carries at the same time the untapped potential of contributing to the empowerment of women.

In drafting this paper, I tried to put myself in the shoes – *or the lack of them* – of every woman in war-torn parts of the Great Lakes region, particularly in the rural areas, and asked myself the following questions:

- How can the internationally agreed upon instruments guarantee the protection of women when the very institutions that are supposed to implement them and guaranty women's security and safety are themselves often in a state of crisis?
- How can women claim their rights when all around them, baby girls are raped and killed mercilessly; schoolboys and girls are abducted and enrolled in armies; and young girls taken as "wives" to comfort combatants?
- Can the legalistic approach help women as they face life-threatening challenges daily?

In other words, is there anything women can hold onto when everything else is shaking and scrambling around them, or has already fallen apart? What can they hold on to in order to protect and rebuild their lives, and still be standing when it is all over?

### **Can culture help?**

In attempting to answer the above questions, I looked into the life of my own mother as I tried to draw lessons from her life and elements of our culture that sustained

her through the most challenging times, and contributed to her empowerment, and that of her children, including myself.

Several reasons led me to choose my mother's life for such an exercise. First of all, hers is a life that I know very well, since not much seems to have been written about women of Great Lakes region. Second, like the majority of women in the region today, she had limited education and had mainly been shaped by our traditional culture. Finally, her life was marked by a succession of deep crisis at family and national levels, at a time when she could not have access to or enjoy the benefits of an appropriate legal framework to promote and protect her rights, as again is the case for most women in the region today.

My mother was born in the twenties. Her father and all her brothers died when she was still quite young. She was left with her mother and younger sisters and, without much preparation, found herself entrusted with the responsibilities of a first-born child in caring for her family. She was led into an early marriage that ended up being abusive. She later met and joined my father, leaving her first two children under the care of my grand mother. They had 3 girls and 3 boys together, including myself. When my father was abruptly assassinated, the responsibility of raising the 6 children fell upon her. She did it almost single handedly, in a very hostile political environment. By then, the larger family structure had been destroyed. She struggled to take my father's killers to court and followed through the politically sensitive case with all the risks that it entailed. It was not easy. Frustration was the order of the day. I remember a time when even the electricity meter at home was uprooted! Eventually, she was forced out of our house in the city to the ancestral land, in the rural area. Some of the ancestral land that she depended upon to sustain her family was forcefully taken away. She would tirelessly walk up and down the hills, from one court to the next, in an effort to claim back our ancestral land, which she did, again single handedly!

The help and support that she hoped for from friends and relatives often did not come. She was however not discouraged. She transformed herself from the lady she was in the city, into a successful farmer. And with limited education and almost no help, she managed to raise and get all her 3 boys and 3 girls in school, all through sheer resilience and hard work. She learnt new agricultural practices from listening to success stories from around the world and tried and adapted them. Later, the community followed her example. This won her a couple of national agricultural prizes.

In our home area, she was actively involved in community life. To many women in the surrounding areas, she was the family planning councilor, the village nurse, the agricultural extension worker, the legal advisor, and so on. She was known as an advocate of the truth and for speaking out for the vulnerable in her community, irrespective of their ethnic background. I witnessed on many occasions people, old and young, great and small, coming to her for advice.

Although she did not hold any official position, she did manage to positively influence people around her, and thus shape her environment. She was a leader in her

own right. The adversity that she had faced throughout her life seemed to have strengthened her and turned to her advantage. By the end of her life in 1990, she was an empowered and much respected woman in the community and in the country.

Looking back through her life, although it was a succession of crisis and challenges, one can say that it was a success story. Not only was she able to overcome the various challenges that came her way, she was also able to play a leadership role at a time when the legal and political frameworks were clearly not on her side.

As I pondered on her experiences in relation with the issues of women's leadership and empowerment in the current context of instability and turmoil in the Great Lakes region, I noted with interest a few factors that seemed to have been instrumental in her life. Some of them include the following:

1. *She had been reared with a mentality of survivor.* Somehow our cultural wisdom knew that difficult times would come, and that at some point, women – *as well as their family or the society at large* – would have to depend on their own strength and resilience for survival. My mother was no exception. Her sense of self-esteem and self worth had been encouraged and nurtured throughout by her immediate and extended family. She had been reared and prepared to confidently face adversity from a young age. She thus never saw herself as a victim but as a survivor, and was ready and able to stand up every time she fell. Her self-esteem and self worth were instrumental as she went through various crises, and in overcoming the biggest challenges.
2. *She played a leadership role through influence.* She never held any position of decision-making. However, throughout her life, she exercised leadership through influence, using family and social networks that she, her family and her husband, had developed over the years. Because she did not limit the exercise of such influence to her benefit alone, but used it to the benefit of the community as a whole and to improve the environment in which she lived, her leadership role was in turn recognized and respected by the community.
3. *Access to relevant information was crucial.* My mother had a deep knowledge and understanding of the cultural environment and the system under which she evolved. She knew what she was entitled to, as well as how and where to get it. She also knew the dynamics of influence and power in her own community and how to relate to them, at a time when the political environment was particularly hostile to her.

Self-esteem was certainly a key ingredient in her empowerment, as it is also a key factor in women's empowerment today. Unfortunately, women in the Great Lakes region are portrayed in a way that does not instill a sense of self-esteem and self worth. Most of the stories of women that are told are stories of helpless women, of desperate women, dying of hunger, disease and violence in a hopeless environment. There are mainly stories of victims rather than survivors. This is likely to affect negatively the way in

which women look at themselves, and limit their ability to overcome the challenges of our days. Success stories are not told. Yet there are, in the region, many stories of women who have overcome the most difficult challenges against all odds, including war. Such success stories could be compiled and used to promote good role models and to instill a sense of self worth; self esteem and hope among women and girls in the region.

Leadership is first and foremost influence. Misconceptions around leadership have limited its understanding to titles and formal positions of decision making, thus leaving many women out, especially at the grassroots level. A better understanding of leadership for what it actually is – *influence* - would enable us to recognize women's leadership and to see more clearly how it can be strengthened and promoted in our cultural context, in a manner that would involve women at every level, in every sphere of life, in shaping their environment and their future.

Finally, despite the progress made in improving the legal and political frameworks for the protection and promotion of women's human rights, including in the context of conflict (*CEDAW, Beijing Platform for Action, UN Resolution 1325*), the majority of women, in the region are not aware of their rights and do not have access to key information, in a manner that is simple, practical and relevant to their situation. This is particularly the case in the rural and most remote areas where many women live and where such information is needed the most.

## **Conclusion**

### *1. Women's leadership role:*

Our culture leaves room to women's exercise of influence in the community. The dynamics of women's influence and leadership in our cultural context need to be studied, better understood and used to promote respect of women's human rights. In this regards, women's influence/leadership capacity could be used to foster change within the society, on the basis of and in line with human rights standards. With their influence / leadership capacity recognized and enhanced, women at all levels could be excellent actors in securing more space, more respect, more freedom, more openness and more choices for themselves and for other women. This is particularly important in the framework of the decentralization processes that have or are being initiated in a number of countries in the region.

### *2. Women's self esteem:*

Our culture recognizes and promotes women's self esteem, even though their resilience and self worth were traditionally meant to benefit primarily their families and communities. With the current context of insecurity, massive displacement and disintegration of family networks, there is a need to identify and document women's success stories in the Great Lakes region that could contribute to rebuilding women's self esteem and hope. The media, especially women in the media, could be educated and encouraged to make use of such success stories and to portray women's issues in a more sensitive manner.

3. *Women's access to information:*

Women in the region, most of whom are illiterate, are often not able to access and/or relate to key information on their rights. In order to enable women to take charge of their lives, it is essential that information on their rights, including key provisions and instruments, and the related mechanisms and processes, be simplified and made available to women in their own languages, and in a manner that is simple, practical and relevant to their situation and the cultural context in which they live. They would then be able to relate to it and use it more effectively to promote their rights and influence the environment in which they live.

Thank you for your kind attention.

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