

THE ROLE AND IMPACT OF GRADUATE WOMEN IN PROMOTING GENDER EQUALITY AND WOMEN'S RIGHTS IN BURUNDI

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Women's challenges in Burundi

Burundian women have been subjected to the oppression of patriarchy with a corollary of other discriminatory acts such as cultural injustice on the girl child, brutalities, subordination and other oppressive realities and manifestations of the trammels of tradition on women. Different commitments in improving the women's conditions were recorded especially through the Beijing Platform of Action 1995 and the Convention for the Elimination of All sorts of Discrimination Against Women.

Despite all these efforts to promote the advancement of women, Burundian women continue to face enormous challenges to the enjoyment of their human rights. They are profoundly affected by the continent's deteriorating macroeconomic situation, deepening poverty and recurrent conflicts and wars.

These oppressive realities were sharpened by the decade long war which claimed civilians as the majority of their victims, and of these most are women and children.

During war, women are targeted, raped and used as sex slaves, human shields and bearers of stolen property. Those who are not abducted found their way to refugee camps or were displaced and endured much hardship. Paradoxically, conflict often undermines the traditional patriarchal cultural values that women have been subjected to, which allows them to take on more productive roles in societies during the conflict.

Rather than alleviating their plight, the cessation of hostilities further worsened women's situation. Some have lost everything, including husbands or breadwinners and are living in abject poverty with families depending on them to provide sustenance. Teenage girls are either pregnant, or have become destitute, traumatized and socially isolated. Many households become female-headed - a function that women are denied until they are widowed.

The HIV/AIDS pandemic exacerbates this situation, as women have to bear most of the health, economic and social consequences of the epidemic. Still worse, recent findings from the UNAIDS state that HIV/AIDS is taking on alarming proportions in the Great Lakes Region of Africa ; women representing 58% of the people infected in the region, and countless other women are taking care of sick family members and orphan children, receiving no recognition or compensation for their work.

Still worrisome, sexual violence remains pervasive in Burundi, increasingly intertwined with situations of conflict and the precarious economic situation.

However despite all these challenges facing women and girls in Burundi, some heroic wise women have stood for peace -the basic human need without which no one can lead a normal life. Women in Burundi have risen above the fighting and instability to become a force for change, advocating for peaceful resolution to conflict especially in grassroots communities.

Although women are the most adversely affected by conflict, they are often overlooked; their input and needs are rarely taken into account, during the formal democratization process.

Moreover, as the Security Council made clear in its resolution 1325, adopted almost five years ago, the issue of women, peace and security has to be addressed on several fronts. While women are often the first victims of armed conflicts, they must always be recognized as a key to the solution.

Women's education as the ultimate solution

Although the discussion above may be somewhat discouraging, we believe in the power of education and in the potential of women to challenge both the status quo to gender relations and to promote sustainable peace in the Great Lakes Region of Africa. Education is one of the most powerful tools we have for empowering girls and women for changing cultures of violence and patriarchy.

It is worth recalling here that the right to education is recognized in many national, regional and international laws to which our nation has adhered.

Mention should be made of the following:

- The Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) where the signatories agreed to “Recognize the right of the child to education” including primary education compulsory and available free to all, “secondary education available and accessible to every child“, and “higher education accessible to all on the basis of capacity”¹.
- The International Covenant an Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESOR) which recognizes “ the right of everyone to education, “ stating that “ education shall be directed to the full development of the human personality and sense of its dignity”²

¹ Article 28 of the CRC

² Article 13 of the ICESOR

- The convention on the Elimination of all forms of discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) prohibits discrimination in education: “ States parties shall take all appropriate measures to eliminate discrimination against women in order to ensure to them equal rights with men in the field of education”³
- The Beijing Platform for Action, a statement of intentions on the part of government representatives, in 1995 recognized education as a basic human right and an essential tool for achieving more equal relations between women and men.

What is more, the third Millennium Development Goals (MDG 3)⁴ also recognizes the ultimate importance of education in the present millennium as the best tool to achieve gender equality and eliminate gender disparity. Education is therefore one of the most powerful tools we have for empowering girls and women and for changing dominant cultures of violence and patriarchy. It is worth mentioning here that there is no possible enjoyment of women’s rights if their right to education is constantly violated.

Obstacles to education prevent women from exercising other human rights:

Political participation: If girls are excluded from education, then they are likely to be marginalized and excluded from active participation in peace movements or other political activities. Illiterate women may be unable to understand the process and /or what the political parties stand for. Illiterate women are far less likely to be candidates for office or to be active in political parties; especially at higher levels. Illiteracy will prevent them from reading and understanding complex issues, cause lack of confidence, self-esteem and exclusion, and will also act as barriers to women’s participation in public life.

Health care: Illiterate women may be less able to learn about where to access health care and to prevent themselves against the scourge of HIV/AIDS.

Employment: Illiterate women may be unable to apply for skilled jobs; they cannot read information about potential opportunities or fill out a job application.

It is needless to list all the inconveniences that illiteracy causes to women and how it hampers the full enjoyment of their rights .Beyond the issues that the World Bank and others make about the economic rewards of educating girls, education is a human right, a woman’s right and a child right. *Access to education for all girls and women’s education in general has to be a peace-building priority.*

³ Article 10 of the CEDAW

⁴ For further information on the MDGs see : <http://www.un.org/millennium/summit.htm>

A lot of commitments have been made by our government; the best illustration of this being the Education for All ⁵ initiatives and country action plans. However, the full implementation of the promise remains distant and the scaling up problematic.

Furthermore, education is not only a right; but a process by which the skills, attitudes and knowledge for active participation can be fostered and practiced. It is saddening to observe that it is during conflict and post-conflict situations when education may be of critical importance that it is also the most difficult to obtain.

In Burundi, there are still multiple and complex barriers to education for girls and women .These include family poverty and the need for child labour, son preference and privilege, early marriages and early pregnancies.

What's more, women's illiteracy in Burundi is glaring. Recent findings reveal that 67% of Burundians are illiterate and of these 70% are women. Barriers to initial access to education need to be addressed, as do the barriers to girls' attendance in school and their completion of a full course of study if we want to reach sustainable peace and development in Burundi. Since the war broke out and even in its aftermath the rate of drop –outs has ostensibly increased, girls totaling 65% of all school drop-outs.

Also worrisome is the fact that women academics are at a serious disadvantage vis-à-vis men. Not only are women in the minority but they are disproportionately found in lower ranks and in less secure posts. In Burundi in 2004-2005, women were about 25% of all full-time academics and had less opportunities to do research partly because of their multiple responsibilities including in the family and because they are not given that opportunity by the male officials.

It is saddening to note that there is no single gender studies programme in Burundi. It is worth recalling here that an unquestionable role of gender studies is to incorporate a gender-sensitive perspective into educational and research activities to influence policies. The achievements of these women's studies and gender research programs in the promotion of gender equality and the feedback to grassroots organizations could greatly benefit Burundian women in their fight for equality at all levels.

Burundian women changing the world by degrees

Although the gender imbalances between opportunities available to boys for education and those available to girls remains glaring, the best way to remove all these obstacles is to engage graduate women in the battle.

⁵ Education for all targets were identified as part of the Dakar Framework for Action at the World Education Forum in Dakar, 2000. EFA target 5 is "Eliminating gender disparities in primary and secondary education by 2005, and achieving gender equality in education by 2015..." For more information see: <http://www.unesco.org/education/efa/index.shtml>.

Graduate women need to form new partnerships and foster strong commitments to affect change in their communities. Graduate women are the best agents to improve the status of their sisters and daughters.

Since it was first established in 2003, the Burundi Association of University Women (BAUW) has endeavored to improve the situation of women and girls through education; to enable women to use their expertise to effect change at all levels of decision –making and to work for peace. We believe that education is an effective agent for change. Through education women are empowered to attain their own social and economic independence and to improve the lives of those around them from the family to the community at large.

We believe that if we are not involved in change it will happen anyway and in ways we probably do not like. Last August the BAUW was welcomed into the large family of university women – the International Federation of University Women (IFUW)⁶. We endeavor, at the lowest level with girls, and at the highest, in advocating for lifelong women’s learning through our partnership with other IFUW national affiliates. In collaboration with the Ministry of Education, BAUW has set up Go Girls’ clubs. Go Girls clubs started up from a deep felt need to reach out to young school girls facing challenges of daily living particularly as it applies to survival. It is worth mentioning here that Go Girls members are destitute girls most of whom are orphans of HIV/AIDS or war orphans. Go Girls clubs provide a forum where girls can be themselves, have mentors/role models, a shoulder to cry on, etc. With all this and more, they are preoccupied and busy discovering themselves and their true worth, improving their skills, looking inwards on what they have. This helps ultimately to build up their self esteem and give them ample opportunity to touch/affect lives positively – the real essence of being a woman! We now have four Go Girls Clubs that unite 240 school girls aged 13 -18 years.

Some concluding thoughts

The U.N Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security, adopted in October 2000, was a landmark resolution. For the first time, it affirmed the importance of a gender perspective in all issues of peace and security, and the necessity of women’s participation in peace building processes. The agreed Conclusions of the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women (UNCSW) held in March 2004 reiterated the importance of addressing the impact of conflict on women and girls in all areas of planning and intervention, and in promoting the participation of women in all stages and levels of peace building.

From the discussion above, we can see that there are particular impacts of conflict for girls and women that need to be recognized and acted on. Education is the ultimate solution for all women’s rights in the short and even long term. This is important not only because education is a right but also because it is an area where all the good attitudes and knowledge can be fostered. Given the trauma of wars and the

⁶ For more information see : <http://www.ifuw.org>

patriarchal system which weigh heavily on the girl's and women's shoulders, attention has to be given to working with them now.

However, there is a surprising lack of attention to the educational needs of women in order to fully participate in peace building processes, and furthermore, when it comes to this participation, it is women who play the active role. Education can prepare girls for their future activities as women but it can be an area in which girls can build peace now.

Meanwhile, it is sad to notice that Burundi has no women's studies Center. Research and course development about women and gender-related issues are not encouraged in Burundi. This constitutes another obstacle to the advancement of women's rights in the country. Local policies which do not result from observable data and research of women's needs will never bear fruits and the promotion of women's rights will remain on paper.

In conclusion, then, we would like to stress the importance of girls' education and on the important role played by women in the family which portrays their strength to bring in positive change. There is a lot to do but as graduate women we are excited by the opportunity to be AGENTS FOR CHANGE and want to have all of humanity recognize this. As Sembène Ousmane said, "WOMAN IS THE FUTURE FOR MAN!!"