

REPUBLIC OF RWANDA



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THE ROLE OF WOMEN IN RECONCILIATION AND PEACE BUILDING IN RWANDA: TEN YEARS AFTER GENOCIDE 1994-2004

Contributions, Challenges and Way Forward

Study Conducted
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FOREWORD

The National Unity and Reconciliation Commission (NURC) has great pleasure to present a study on **“The role of women in Reconciliation and Peace building in Rwanda ten years after genocide: 1994-2004; *Contributions, Challenges and Way Forward*.”** This study is not only important for NURC but also for other development actors involved in programmes and interventions that enhance gender equality and empower women to fully participate in national development processes as a pre-requisite for national transformation. It also provides useful information on women and peace in Rwanda.

The NURC has among its key functions the role of undertaking research on topical issues regarding national development processes and to analyse their impact on national unity and reconciliation. In the past, NURC has conducted opinion polls surveys on Gacaca, Democratisation and Decentralisation, Land Reform, the Rwandan Conflict its origin, development and exit strategies.

This study on the role of women in reconciliation and peace building in Rwanda will contribute to our critical analysis in understanding the unique potential Rwandan women have and the challenges they face in their endeavours to contribute to national reconciliation and peace building and enable the Commission to mainstream gender in its policies, programmes and future activities.

This study was commissioned by NURC, conducted by Mr. John Mutamba of the Ministry of Gender and Family Promotion, who was assisted by Ms Jeanne Izabiliza of Health Unlimited.

I take this opportunity to call upon our compatriots, friends and partners, to thoroughly examine the findings of this study. I have no doubt that this will stimulate debate and further research in this important area of women and peace, and how the gains of the last decade can be consolidated and sustained. The recommendations in the study will go a long way in providing information and insight on how to involve women more proactively in the peace building and reconciliation process which is considered vital in our country.

Fatuma Ndongiza
Executive Secretary

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ABBREVIATIONS

ASOFERWA	: Association de solidarité des Femmes Rwandaises
AVEGA	: Associations des Veuves du Génocide Agahozo
BCG	: Bacille de Calmette Guérin
CAP	: Campagne Action pour la Paix
CCM	: Centre for Conflict Management
CDF	: Common Development Fund
CEDAW	: Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women
CNF	: Conseil National des Femmes
CNUR	: Commission Nationale d'Unité et Réconciliation
CSO	: Civil Society Organizations
DFID	: Department For International Development
DG	: Directeur Général
DHS	: Demographic Household Survey
DRC	: Democratic Republic of Congo
DTC	: Diphtérie Tetanus Coqueluche
EER	: Eglise Episcopale au Rwanda
EPPR	: Education Permanente pour la Paix et Réconciliation
FAR	: Forces Armées Rwandaises
FBO	: Faith Based Organisations
FGG	: Focused Group Discussions
GBV	: Gender Based Violence
GDP	: Growth Domestic Product
GNU	: Government of Unity and Reconciliation
HIV/AIDS	: Human Immunodeficiency Virus/Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome
ICTR	: International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda
IRDP	: Institut de Recherche et de Dialogue pour la Paix
KIST	: Kigali Institute of Science and Technology
MIGEPROF	: Ministère du Genre et Promotion Familiale
MINECOFIN	: Ministry of Economic Planning and Finance
MINEDUC	: Ministry of Education, Science, Technology and Scientific Research
MP	: Member of Parliament
MRND	: Mouvement Révolutionnaire National pour le Développement
NEC	: National Electoral Commission
NGO	: Non-Governmental Organizations
NURC	: National Unity and Reconciliation Commission
ONAPO	: Office National pour la Population
PRSP	: Poverty Reduction Strategy Program
RIAM	: Rwanda Institute of Administration and Management
RDF	: Rwanda Defence Forces
RIEPA	: Rwanda Investment and Export Promotion Agency
RPA	: Rwandese Patriotic Army
RPF	: Rwandese Patriotic Front
RSA	: Republic of South Africa
SWAA	: Society of Women in Africa living with Aids
ULK	: Université Libre de Kigali
UNECA	: United Nations Economic Commission for Africa
UNIFEM	: United Nations Development Fund for Women
UNFPA	: United Nations Fund for Population Agency
USA	: United States of America
USAID	: United States Agency for International Development
WIF	: Women Investment Fund

GLOSSARY

ENGLISH

- Gender balance: Equitable representation of women and men in all areas. Promoting gender balance requires explicit support of women's participation particularly in decision-making.
- Gender equality: Equal rights, responsibilities and opportunities for women and men, girls and boys. Equality does not mean that women and men will become the same but that women's and men's rights, responsibilities and opportunities will not depend on whether they were born male or female. Gender equality implies that the interests, needs and priorities of both women and men are given equal consideration.
- Gender mainstreaming: The process of systematically incorporating gender perspectives into areas of work and assessing the implications for women and men of any planned action, including legislation, policies or programmes. It is a strategy for making women's and men's concerns and experiences an integral dimension of the design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of policies and programmes in all political, economic and societal spheres so that women and men benefit equally and inequality is not perpetuated

KINYARWANDA (The native and national language of Rwanda)

- Abakorerabushake* : Volunteers
- Banyarwanda* : People of Rwanda
- Gahuzamiryango* : One who brings families together
- Gira abana* : May you have children
- Gira inka* : May you possess cows
- Imidugudu* : Grouped villages
- Interahamwe* : Those who attack together
- Kudashyira inda imbere* : Selflessness
- Ndabaga* : legendary female fighter in Rwandan history
- Nyampinga* : One who brings rest and solace to the weary
- Ubudehe* : community solidarity initiatives
- Uburere buruta ubuvuke* : Upbringing is more important than birth
- Umwami* : King
- Umwami wa Rubanda* : King of the people
- Umweko* : Loincloth
- Village Urugwiro* : Village of Hospitality: Seat of the current State House

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This pioneering and groundbreaking work on the role of women in peace building and reconciliation in Rwanda, ten years after genocide was carried out in the field, between September and October 2004. It constitutes an overview of the best practices and success stories, challenges and the way forward with regard to peace building and reconciliation processes, with the view of enabling the National Unity and Reconciliation Commission (NURC) identify the gender gaps in its Policy and Programmes and undertake appropriate corrective measures in collaboration with other actors.

Rwanda is a nation state that has had a long history of a relatively peaceful coexistence of its three major social groups of Batutsi, Bahutu and Batwa. The unity of Banyarwanda crystallised around one leader (*Umwami*), one language (*Kinyarwanda*) and one culture. The colonial and post colonial history was characterised by systems of governance that thrived on divisive policies which institutionalised problems of ethnicity with catastrophic consequences of a series of killings targeting mainly the Tutsi community and moderate Hutus. This culminated in the 1994 genocide characterized by cruelty, ruthlessness, intensity and speed unparalleled in modern history.

In its attempt to address the consequences of 1994 genocide and establish lasting peace, the government of Rwanda has put in place institutional and policy frameworks that are conducive to peace and reconciliation. The key player in this process is the National Unity and Reconciliation whose work is so challenging that its success will depend on partnership it builds with other institutions.

The survey was conducted with the view of answering the following questions:

- What has been the contribution of women in the last ten years? What has made this contribution possible?
- What obstacles hinder women from realising their full potential in peace building and reconciliation process?
- What strategies need to be undertaken to ensure that women's full participation in peace building and reconciliation is effective and sustainable?

The research findings indicate that women's contribution to peace and reconciliation has been considerable and in many cases unprecedented. At the grassroots level women's various initiatives to cope with the post genocide challenges have opened up windows of opportunity for rebuilding trust among families and reconciling former enemies.

Across the country there are living testimonies of success stories of women's role in peace and reconciliation in the area of security, justice and Gacaca courts, socio-economic initiatives, decision making organs, gender based violence and HIV/AIDS and good governance. The research found out that the existence of gendered perceptions about the capacity and potential of women in society remains a major barrier to women role in peace building and reconciliation.

Women's contribution to peace building and reconciliation is still hampered by constraints such as abject poverty, gender based violence, poor organisational capacity among women, limited motivation and facilitation of women initiatives. Peace and reconciliation programmes remain largely centralised and not adequately coordinated.

PART ONE: STUDY CONTEXT

1. BACKGROUND

Rwanda ranks among the 9 poorest countries in the world. It is a landlocked country, located at some 2,000 km from the Atlantic Ocean and at about 1,200 km from the Indian Ocean. Its surface is 26,338 sq. km of which 11% are covered with lakes and marshes, 6% with natural forests. The population is 8,128,553 inhabitants of whom 52.3% are women and 34% of the households are headed by women and the annual growth rate is 2.9%. The average population density is about 400 inhabitants per km. Rwanda is a republic that is governed under a multiparty presidential system in the year 2000 the Gross Domestic Product per capita (GDP) was estimated at US \$ 237 (about Rwf 123,240) per capita.¹ In Rwanda, more than 60% of the population live below the poverty line.

Prior to the coming of colonialists and white missionaries towards the end of the 19th century, the Rwandan society was organized as a monarchy ruled by a supreme king or *Umwami* and the society had its own institutions and culture which united people of different social categories, Hutu, Tutsi and Twa to live in harmony. The king who was identified as the cordon of cohesion performed the social functions and was considered as *Umwami wa rubanda* meaning the "King of the people". The monarch was considered as the owner of all lands, cows, supreme chief of armies, the king stood as guarantor for land fertility. The monarch emerged from a consensus between the different social groups. He was above the social groups because he represented the nation in which all Rwandans recognised themselves². "*Umwami nta bwoko yagiraga, yari Umwami wa Rubanda rwose*" meaning the king did not belong to any distinct social group, he was a king of all Banyarwanda". They had one common language *Kinyarwanda*, one culture with values that promoted harmony, stability and peace. This is illustrated by the fact that there is no history of killings and genocide between the social groups of *Banyarwanda*. Values such as patriotism, integrity, heroism, excellence, protection of those in need and who seek protection from imminent danger, preservation of life and certain taboos like killing children and women were inscribed in the Rwandan culture. All these cultural values were eroded with the advent of western culture, colonial rule and the policies of post independence regimes.

The revolution of 1959 and the subsequent violence resulting in the killings of Batutsi and forcing thousands of others into exile set a precedent for eventual conflicts. When Rwanda got her independence in 1962, it was a country that was characterised by deep divisions as a result of the Belgian colonial legacy of divide and rule and marginalizing women in the social, economic and political fields. Girls' education was introduced 40 years later, cash crops production was in the hands of men, formal and salaried employment was almost exclusively for men and the obligation of paying taxes laid squarely on men. These examples deepened further the marginalization of women's status in terms of power structure, where women's subordination became more institutionalized.³

The post independence regimes pursued policies of discrimination in the context of the system of registration of persons in terms of ethnicity. Civic education and the education system, and employment denied the right of access or lack of it to some members of the Rwandan community and this deepened further the problems related to discrimination. This further deepened the cleavages and divisions that created the conditions for the genocide to be executed. Furthermore, since the beginning of the post – independence era in Rwanda, violence quickly became the backdrop for the country's social and political life. The advent of a single party system reinforced this culture of violence. The institutionalization of a single party system of governance reinforced the culture of violence and impunity. Throughout this

¹ MINECOFIN, Rwanda in figures, 2003.

² Sustaining peace in Rwanda: voice of the people, report by IRDP, see pg 20

³ Rwanda towards reconciliation, good governance and development: Uma Shankarjha and Surya Narayan Yabav, 2002

period, women's role remained marginal and insignificant thus their diminishing role in the promotion of peace.

In order to have a clear and realistic insight into the role of women in Rwanda have played in the peace building efforts, it is useful to look at the events of 1994 genocide and their aftermath. The war and genocide affected men and women differently. It is estimated that more than 250,000 Rwandan women and girls were victims of some form of sexual violence⁴. Most of the people who died, who never returned to Rwanda after fleeing, or who were imprisoned on charges of genocide were men. Thus, many war widows and other single women survived to care for families alone, to take in orphans, and to assume duties traditionally carried out in patriarchal Rwanda by men. The 1994 genocide and events after have had tremendous effects whose ramifications are felt in the country and outside its borders.

Another important milestone of the government of Rwanda is the promotion of gender equality and women's empowerment as a prerequisite for sustainable peace and development. This is echoed in the words of President Paul Kagame while officially opening a gender –training workshop for Parliamentarians in 1999.

*"The abrupt shift to monetary economy, formal education and modern technology played a key role in restructuring gender relations to the disadvantage of women. These imbalances are not only an obstacle to the country's development but constitute a form of social injustice. It is imperative to our lawmakers, policy makers and implementers to have an objective and correct analysis of the gender question in order to design appropriate corrective policies and programmes. The question of gender equality in our society needs a clear and critical evaluation in order to come up with concrete strategies to map the future development in which men and women are true partners and beneficiaries. My understanding of gender is that it is an issue of good governance, good economic management and respect of human rights"*⁵

The uniqueness of the Rwandan genocide unlike the genocides of Jews or Armenians was planned and executed by the Rwandan people against their fellow citizens, the main actors being the political, military and religious elite. Traditionally women as a social category generally did not go into active service in war nor did they participate in any form of war instead they were the most credible agents of peace, supporters and nurturers of life. In the Rwandan genocide, some women played an active role in planning and executing the genocide and as a result, some children got involved in the killing of fellow children, raping women, women killing their own children and husbands, men killing their own and children and relatives. Literature on conflict in other countries shows that during and immediately after the conflict there is an expansion of women's roles in the public arena that is often followed by a decrease in women's opportunities and a retraction of women's space for public action in the post conflict stages of reconstruction. However, in the case of Rwanda, women's participation in the public space has actually expanded in the last ten years.⁶ This grim picture of the country's situation in 1994 is vividly articulated in the speech by President Paul Kagame at the Commonwealth Club, San Francisco on March 7, 2003.

"Most survivors of the genocide in Rwanda had not one but two brushes with death and most saw first-degree relatives killed and many sustained dreadful wounds themselves. When the Government of National Unity took over in 1994, Rwanda was in utter anarchy. There was total displacement of the population. Over 3 million people had sought refugee in neighbouring countries, and many more were internally displaced. There were countless numbers of orphans, widows and widowers, thousands of handicapped people and generally a very vulnerable

⁴ AVEGA Agahozo, 1999, Etude sur les violences faites aux femmes au Rwanda

⁵ Paul KAGAME 1999 official speech.

⁶ http://www.xs4all.nl/conflict/1/pbp/4/2_intro.htm

population. A cloud of insecurity loomed over Rwanda, as the former soldiers and the militia reorganised themselves, intent on continuing their genocidal campaign with the support of the then Zaire, now Democratic Republic of Congo.

Law and order had completely broken down. Large-scale atrocities were still going on in parts of the country. All national law enforcement agencies and judicial institutions had ceased to exist and the system of administration of justice had come to a complete standstill. Social and economic infrastructure was in a state of collapse. Neither schools nor hospitals were functioning. The civil service had been decimated or its membership had fled into exile.

Genocide and its aftermath in our country demand an understanding of the context as well as the facts that have shaped our society in a long history that spans centuries".⁷

The nature and mode of execution of the 1994 genocide left the Rwandan cultural and moral fabric torn into shambles. Values and taboos that were held sacrosanct in the Rwandan society were defiled and trampled upon by those who were supposed to protect them. In a country where 90% are Christians and the church not only exerts a spiritual influence on the majority of the population like nowhere else and it also constitutes an indisputable socio-economic force. Here lies the big challenge of reconstructing peace and reconciliation in the Rwandan context and calls for unique solutions.

The 1994 genocide that claimed more than one million innocent lives and destroyed the country's socio-economic and political infrastructure had some unique features which among other things make the process of healing the country extremely difficult. The speed and ferocity with which the genocide was executed left the country almost entirely destroyed. With over a million people dead and unburied, and close to three million people driven into exile, the economy in shambles and no functioning state institutions, it left hundreds of thousands of orphans and widows, and 150,000 suspects of genocide awaiting trials. The population was highly traumatized and deeply divided where hatred and mistrust reigned high. "The war and genocide shattered the dense local friendship networking and community solidarity that had traditionally existed.....former solace and support for women and neighbours and former friends turned into enemies".⁸

The 1994 genocide had terrible consequences on the people of Rwanda and the society as a whole. Besides the loss of one million people in a period of three months, a destroyed economy, millions fleeing into exile with many of them being taken as hostages by the ex-FAR (former Rwandan government forces) and the *Interahamwe* (militia who participated in the genocide), and over 120,000 persons detained in jails with very poor legal infrastructure and limited human resources, the Rwandan genocide shattered the dense local friendship networks and community solidarity that had traditionally provided solace and support for women. Particularly dispensing speedy and fair trials to the thousands of suspects of 1994 genocide and rendering justice to the families of survivors will contribute to break the culture of impunity.

There are thousands of women who are victims of rape, trauma, physical injuries, and above all social trust has dissolved. Abject poverty is still high and it is affecting mainly women from the rural areas. High rates of HIV/Aids where more than 250,000 women were raped, sixty six percent of women who were raped tested positive⁹ and other infectious diseases coupled with limited health facilities remain high. This situation had an impact not only on the mental health of women but also their physical well-being. Most of the survivors of the genocide the majority of who happen to be women experience serious economic deprivation. The level of mistrust among the families of those who survived the genocide and those whose relatives are suspected to have committed genocide is still high and deep rooted.

⁷ Speech of H.E Paul Kagame at the Commonwealth Club, San Francisco, Marc 7, 2003.

⁸ Catherine Newbury, *Aftermath: Women and Women organizations in Post-genocide Rwanda*, 1999.

⁹ AVEGA AGAHOZO. 1999: " Etudes sur les violences faites aux femmes au Rwanda"

Policy & institutional framework for post-genocide peace building & reconciliation

Despite the above tragic unprecedented destruction of lives, values of humanity, and property, the government of Rwanda has in the last ten years embarked upon a determined path of social transformation aimed at reversing the negative trends highlighted above and rebuilding a united, reconciled and peaceful Rwanda.¹⁰

The government of Rwanda organized high profile national consultative meetings in the Office of the President (*Village Urugwiro*) between May 1998 and March 1999 involving key stakeholders from all walks of life. During of these meetings, the problems of Rwanda were discussed at length and various policies and organs were proposed to be put in place to provide solutions to the challenges identified. The key issues that were identified as the being central to the country recovery and reconstruction and building sustainable peace were national unity and reconciliation, good governance, justice and poverty reduction. The government has put in place a number of policies and institutions aimed at guiding the country's future path to sustainable development. Rwanda's future development roadmap known as Vision 2020 is premised on the following major aspirations:

- Reconstruction of the nation and its social capital;
- Harmonious functioning of an efficient, uniting and mobilizing state;
- Transformation of the Rwandan society, the building of the social capital on the basis of positive cultural values, of the technological know-how and the balance between the economic rationality and the social logic;
- Peace, internal and external security and the regional stability that enables the economic and social integration of the country in the region and worldwide.¹¹

One of the main outcomes of the Village *Urugwiro* deliberations was the establishment of a national organ charged with ensuring unity and reconciliation among the people of Rwanda. The organ was set up in conformity with the Arusha Peace Accord of 1993 and was established as a National Commission by Parliamentary Law No. 03/99 as amended and completed by Law No. 35/2002 of 14/11/2002. This Commission is charged with some of the following functions:

- Organise and oversee national public debates aimed at promoting national unity and reconciliation of Rwandan people;
- Conceive and disseminate ideas and initiatives aimed at promoting peace among Rwandan people, and encourage a culture of unity and reconciliation;
- Prepare and coordinate Rwanda's programs of promoting unity and reconciliation;
- Monitor closely whether government organs respect and observe policies of national unity and reconciliation;
- Monitor whether political parties, leaders and the population do respect and observe policies of national unity and reconciliation practices.

The last phase of the transition period saw the government of Rwanda put in place structures and mechanisms that had the objective of guiding the country's safe passage from the transition period. The most important milestone of this phase was the successful elaboration and adoption of a new national constitution. The participatory manner in which this constitution was designed creates a sense of ownership among the different sections of the people of Rwanda. The constitution gives special focus to the principals of national unity and gender equality mainly due to the political will of the top leadership of the country.

¹⁰ Vision 2020, Government of Rwanda, MINECOFIN, published in 2002

¹¹ *ibid*

That is why rebuilding lasting peace and reconciliation among Rwandans is not a matter of choice but of survival yet must not ignore the critical role women play in this endeavour. It is in this context that the government of Rwanda implements international instruments such as CEDAW (Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women) and the Beijing Platform for Action by focusing on strategic actions targeting to intervene critical domains that have been identified. Furthermore, the government took an important step of creating the Ministry of Gender and Women in Development (MIGEPROF) in order to develop actions that will foster equity and eliminate gender inequalities in the development process of Rwanda. It is in this regard that gender features now very strategically in all fora.

This political will is further translated into the Rwandan constitution that was promulgated in 2003 which in its articles 9, 10 and 11 and more specifically in article 9.4 - *"building a state governed by the rule of law, a pluralistic democratic government, equality of all Rwandans and between women and men reflected by ensuring that women are granted at least thirty percent of posts in decision making organs;"*. Article 11 further reiterates, *"All Rwandans are born and remain free and equal in rights and duties. Discrimination of whatever kind based on, inter alia, ethnic origin, tribe, clan, colour, sex, region, social origin, religion or faith, opinion, economic status, culture, language, social status, physical or mental disability or any other form of discrimination is prohibited and punishable by law."*

Peace building during the post genocide period

This period can be divided into three main phases and each phase corresponds with specific peace building approaches and milestones.

Phase I: 1994-1999

This phase focused mainly on resettling internally displaced persons and the 1959 old case-returning refugees. The government of Rwanda with the support of the international community led the main initiatives in this regard. At this point in time, it was worth recognizing the critical role played by the community particularly women either individually or collectively in their associations. Women contributed in the rehabilitation and reconstruction process for Rwanda by participating in the construction of houses in the newly established settlements locally known as *imidugudu*. For the first time in Rwanda's history women started performing non-traditional tasks as house construction.

The setting up of a government national unity bringing together, the RPF and other political parties that did not take part in the 1994 genocide. This in itself was an action aimed at establishing among Rwandans of different backgrounds and political dispensation a sense of unity.

Right from the start of the reconstruction programmes the Government of National Unity (GNU) put in place a national mechanism to ensure that women play an active role in post genocide and construction process. Besides the emergency programmes the ministry in charge of Family and Women's Affairs was established and among its priority programmes was the birth of women committees or structures that ran from cell up to national level. The overall objective of these committees was to provide Rwandese women with a forum through which their views, interests issues of national reconstruction would be expressed with the intention of shaping the country's recovery and reconstruction processes.

The Government of National Unity began a process that led 10 years later to reaffirm the important role of women in the prevention and resolution of conflicts and in peace-building, and their equal participation and full involvement in all efforts for the maintenance and promotion of peace and security, and the need to increase their role in decision-making with regard to conflict prevention and resolution.¹²

¹² UN Security Council Resolution 1325 of October 31, 2000

It is worth highlighting one of the greatest contributions of women in addressing the issue of hundreds of thousands of orphans and other non-accompanied children. Mainly families' especially headed households did this. It is estimated that between 400,000 and 500,000 children were fostered or adopted in families.

In the newly settled parts of the provinces such as Umutara, Kibungo many women paved the way even where foot dragging and reluctance to join the new settlements characterized men's behaviour.

The process of resettling refugees and the 1994 refugees was embarked upon in almost all parts of the country particularly in the eastern sector such as Kibungo and the central Provinces of Gitarama and Kigali – Rural. One of the greatest problems women faced at this point in time was to get access and ownership rights to their deceased spouses' property. It is in this context that the process of drafting the inheritance and succession law started. In its efforts to stabilize the whole country and ensure lasting peace, the Government of National Unity (GNU) encouraged the return of millions of Rwandan refugees that were held as hostages in the eastern part of the ex Zaire currently the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC).

Women in decision-making

Historically, women's participation in politics and decision-making in Rwanda has been insignificant, specifically in high echelons although in the pre-colonial period, women in Rwanda played an important role in the country's governance through the institution of the queen mother.

After the destructive genocide of 1994, there was a great need to mobilize and guide the population to reconstruct its own lives as well as their communities and country. Rwandese women in different positions of leadership played critical roles in mobilizing fellow women to live together and to find common solutions to their own problems and those of their country. Examples of Unity club, forum of Rwandan Women Parliamentarians.

The Government of Rwanda demonstrated its will to give women the trust and responsibility of rebuilding the nation by appointing them to all positions of leadership and responsibility in society. For example, women are serving in the executive, legislative and judiciary arms of the government.

- In the last ten years women have stood as exemplary leaders at policy level as well as community level. The mere presence of women in cabinet, parliament, judiciary, and all spheres of life served as role models and also helped to develop confidence among women and this opened up women's role in decision making.
- Women worked together to forge solidarity, and unity among themselves as the first step forward mobilization of other women for example the Unity Club as a forum of top women leaders and spouses of top leaders in government aimed at creating unity among themselves; and then be able to preach the message of unity and reconciliation among the communities.
- They conducted concrete activities such as helping orphans, fostering them, supporting victims of famine and flood and always championing unity as their goal.

The forum of Rwandese women leaders' caucus also started as a caucus that brings women from different backgrounds together. They were able to lobby together and influence enacting of laws that protect and promote the rights of women. For example the inheritance law, the law on the rights of the child, the rights of women at the place of work, etc.

Besides, the caucus of women parliamentarians were able to advocate for women rights and gender equality and also mobilized grassroots women to contribute to the making of the constitution so that the issues of gender equality takes centre stage and at the same time monitor the budget and ensure that the budget addresses the needs of women and men.

Women leadership was demonstrated by the setting up women structures, which came to be known at late stage as National women councils. National women councils provided platform to enable women gain visibility and be able to contribute to national debate and influence policy development and democratic processes of the country. For example mobilize fellow women to participate in *Gacaca* courts, decentralization, poverty reduction processes, fighting HIV/AIDS pandemic and dealing with the consequences of the 1994 genocide.

Research shows that women can influence peace and reconciliation if they are empowered to participate and taking major decisions at community, local, national and international levels. The government of Rwanda has in the last ten years put in place several measures to ensure that women are given to fully participate in decision making in different organs.

The government has put in place a legal framework facilitating national women councils to provide a forum through which women exchange views on national issues and the overall development of the country. Through these councils, women have been able to make input into national policies and programmes. These include Vision 2020, PRSP, the decentralization policy, the national Land Bill, the land policy, the Succession law, the traditional participatory system of justice (*Gacaca* courts) and many other areas of critical importance to peace building including the new constitution.

- It is worth noting that the decentralization favours the representation of women at the various administrative levels: a department in charge of gender issues has been set up at the district and provincial level; likewise, women's representatives become automatic members of the consultative committees at the level of the *secteur* and *cellule*.
- The Constitution of Rwanda stipulates a minimum representation of women at decision-making bodies of at least 30%;
- Sensitisation campaigns have been organized to encourage the high participation of women in decision making bodies;
- Private universities offer evening classes attended by a significant number of women, thereby enabling them to acquire the training that will enable them to compete for decision-making posts;
- An association for the promotion of the Rwandan women participation in decision-making organs, the Rwanda Women Leaders Caucus was created in July 2002.¹³

It is worth noting that the President of the Supreme Court of Rwanda is a woman and the minister of justice is also a woman, as well as the executive secretary of the *Gacaca* courts. Of the 12 judges in the Supreme Court, 5 are women or a representation of 41.7%. Further, at the local administration level, under the decentralization arrangement, women occupy 26% of the posts on the executive councils of each province.

Although tangible improvements in terms of women empowerment have been registered since 1994, their participation in the various domains of national development is still low. Challenges remain in the areas of limited experience and capacity, as well as overcoming the mentality of negative attitude towards women's role in politics and decision-making. This is further compounded by the gender-based division of labour where women are still over-burdened with a lot of responsibilities and very high expectations from society.

Social and cultural context

The gender-based discriminations and subsequent inequalities have been exacerbated by changes in the economic and social structures that were ushered in by the advent of colonial rule. The abrupt shift from subsistence to a monetary economy based on paid employment and a formal education system,

¹³ Republic of Rwanda: A Beijing (1994-2004) conference ten-year evaluation report, 2004

weakened women's position relative to that of men. In particular, it weakened their bargaining position on matters concerning their access to, and control over resources and the degree of their level of participation in the development process.

The 1994 genocide left behind unprecedented distortions in social relations and exacerbated the already existing gender imbalances and inequalities. However, one of the most far-reaching effects of genocide and war is a change in gender roles. This is illustrated by the fact that women head today 34% of households in Rwanda, a relatively new trend in the Rwandan society. The post-genocide period has been also characterized by women performing non-traditional roles such as decision-making, managing financial resources, building households and roads, despite their shortcoming of having minimum capacities to take on the roles.

Education and literacy

The socially constructed gender roles are economically and politically structured in such a way that women are disadvantaged in all areas compared to men. Rwandan women and girls have limited access to education compared to men and boys.

The 2001 Households Living Conditions Survey and the Core Welfare Indicators Questionnaire estimated the literacy rates at 47.8% for women compared to 58.1% for men. Only 5.8% of women benefit from apprenticeship training against 9.1% of men. 2.6% of women benefit from vocational training against 7.3% of men. Furthermore, 25% of women have never attended school or any literacy centre against 17% of men.

Although there is no gender difference in enrolment rates at primary school, various studies have highlighted higher repetition, dropout and low performance rates for girls compared to boys. Girl's dropout rate is estimated at 15.2% compared to 7.9% for boys. Girls received only 23.5% of the scholarship for the National University, 26.6% for the Kigali Institute of Science and Technology (KIST) and 21.3% for ISAE¹⁴. Because of gender stereotypes, proportion of girls in Science and Technology is still low compared to men¹⁵.

Health and HIV/AIDS

Good or sound health is a major component of peace. Statistics available reveal the critical health concerns in Rwanda which are more precarious for women compared to men. The results of the Demographic and Health Survey (2000) show that the under-five mortality is 196 per 1000 births, and that the maternal mortality rate is 1,071 per 100,000 live births for the period 1995-2000. Compared to other African countries, this is one of the highest rates. It is twice as high as for Uganda and Tanzania and almost 4.8 times the rate in Namibia (225 per 100,000 in 1992) and in particular is nearly 43 times more than in industrialized countries. These DHS results indicate the considerable progress that must be attained to improve maternal health in Rwanda.

According to the same survey, 43% of Rwandan children living with their mother show evidence of stunted growth (chronic malnutrition demonstrated by inadequate length or height for the age); the corresponding figure for those not living with their mother is 47%. 7% of children suffer from acute malnutrition or emaciation (compared to 4% in 1992). One child in four (24% compared to 29% in 1992) is underweight, and 5% (compared to 6% in 1992) are severely underweight. This extremely high maternal mortality rate can be explained among other by the limited access to the health services. Only 31% of births take place in health centres.

¹⁴ MINEDUC Administrative data, 2001

¹⁵ MIGEPROFE. The national Gender Policy. Kigali, 2003

Contraceptive prevalence is very low, with only 6.7% of women in this age group (12-49 years). The principal reasons given for the low usage are being single or not married (68.8%), and the insufficient number of children (12.0%). The percentage of mothers who had received the anti-tetanus vaccination in a given year is averaged at 70.7%; the average rates of (completed) vaccination coverage are as follows: BCG 95.2%, measles 72.5% polio 60.5% and DTC 60.8%.

As it is well recognized worldwide HIV/AIDS is a multifaceted pandemic i.e. the causes and consequences are multidimensional and inter-related. The prevalence of the pandemic in Rwanda has risen dramatically during the mid 1990s, due to war and genocide, and women are more affected than men. The 2000 Demographic and Health Survey estimates the Aids prevalence at 11.2% nationally and 10.8% in rural areas, compared to a rate of 1.3% in rural areas in 1986. HIV/Aids prevalence among women is estimated at 11.3% against 10.8% for men. Yet, women support most of the burden as principal care providers.¹⁶

Thousands of women contracted the HIV/AIDS virus as a result of the rape and sexual violence they suffered during the 1994 genocide where rape was used as a weapon of destruction. Continued sexual violence against women, adolescents and girl children worsen further the already precarious situation. The lack of access to information, high economic dependency and high cost of medicines particularly anti-retroviral drugs increase women's vulnerability to the HIV/AIDS pandemic.

Human rights and Gender-based violence

In addition to the women marginalisation from economic opportunities, certain legal measures in Rwanda are discriminatory against women and others do not exist yet while some are known but not understood. However, discriminatory laws against women have been identified and elaboration of the new constitution has created an opportunity to remove them.

Gender based violence is still a serious problem in Rwanda. Cases of rape of girls and women, assault and defilement are on the increase with the age of the victim getting lower over the years. Most acts of violence against women take place in the home, which sometime makes it difficult for the law enforcement personnel to intervene. Although there has been no research done, sexual harassment at work places can be a major tool of oppression and discrimination against women.

Another factor that is of concern is the consequences of the aftermath of the violence committed to women during the genocide. Study carried out by the Association of the Widows of the Genocide (AVEGA)¹⁷ reveals different forms of violence perpetuated against women during the genocide.

¹⁶ MINECOFIN: A profile of Poverty in Rwanda. February 2003

¹⁷ Study on "Violence against women during the 1994 genocide" AVEGA

2. JUSTIFICATION

“Sustainable and durable peace requires the participation of women and girls as well as the integration of gender perspective in all reconstruction processes”.
Women, Peace and Security. United Nations 2002.

There are thousands of women who are victims of rape, trauma, physical injuries, and above all social trust has dissolved. Abject poverty is still high and it is affecting mainly women from the rural areas. Increasing rates of HIV/Aids where more than 250,000 women are victims, 66% of women who were raped tested positive and other infectious diseases coupled with limited health facilities further deteriorate their situation¹⁸. This situation had an impact not only on the mental health of women but also on their physical well-being. Most survivors of the genocide, the majority of whom happen to be women, experience serious economic deprivation. The level of mistrust among the families of those who survived the genocide and those whose relatives are suspected to have committed genocide remains a big challenge to overcome.

In a patriarchal society like Rwanda, women's roles are secondary, yet “women are traditionally peacemakers because they give birth and raise children. Besides the demographic structure of Rwanda's population after the 1994 where women contribute 52% of the population and 35% of the households are women headed¹⁹. However, women in Rwanda have been portrayed as the primary victims of violence and conflict and more specifically as the main victims of the 1994 genocide. It is imperative to examine the role of women as agents of peace in the peace building process.

This study examines to what extent the contribution of women has been in the peace building and reconciliation processes in Rwanda. Further, the study explores ways and means by which this contribution can be strengthened particularly through the interventions focused towards national unity. Although, the government policy on promotion of gender equality is explicit in the need to involve women, in practice, the national gender policy remains to be translated into actions as indicated in the policy report²⁰. “Some Rwandans believe that in their victimization and endurance, women bore the brunt of the genocide and therefore deserve a significant and official role in the nation's recovery.”²¹

Specifically, the study will examine the contribution of women in this process is not given sufficient visibility so that their potential can be reinforced and their best practices used as lessons in the development process that Rwanda has undertaken in the last ten years. These lessons can be modelled elsewhere to maximize impact on peace building processes.

Furthermore, the study will identify elements that are lacking between the various players who contribute towards national unity. Knowing that women are a category that is contributing more towards this process yet their efforts are not recognized, the study will also propose how to establish sustainable linkages between policy makers and institutions such as the National Unity and Reconciliation Commission and other stakeholders like women's groups, associations, NGOs, civil society as well as the country leadership so that the role of women in peace building and reconciliation can be well accounted not only in the policy documents but in their well being. It is high time women's contribution and

Why focus on women?

Why women in peace building and reconciliation process?

¹⁸ AVEGA AGAHOZO. 1999: “ Etudes sur les violences faites aux femmes au Rwanda”

¹⁹ 2002 Population Census in Rwanda

²⁰ UNIFEM Assessment Report 2001

²¹ An Official AVEGA who spoke on conditions of anonymity, October 2004

There are strong reasons why women in Rwanda should be in the peace process:

- The war and genocide had disproportionately strong impact on women, as rape and genocide survivors, widows, and heads of households and care takers of orphans. That is the position of women as victims and participants in the genocide and their unique post conflict needs.²²
- Their long experiences in their role as peacemakers, women in the family as mothers, wives and sisters where they prefer problem solving through open communication, honest discussions of differences and dialogue among all concerned parties. They are used to resolving disputes through the best means of ensuring that at least some of the concerns of all conflicting parties are met – a win/win situation – a family model which seeks fairness and reconciliation rather than victory and retribution.

Further, as bearers of life, women can offer a special perspective and experience which will help to overcome prevailing life-destroying methods of dealing with human problems and conflicts. Since military conflicts and diplomacy, which have traditionally been exclusively orchestrated by men, have failed to be a reliable system to safeguard peace, the inclusion of women in all stages of the peace process becomes imperative.²³

- The Government of Rwanda is strongly committed to the promotion of gender equality in all aspects of national development including the critical area of peace
- and reconciliation "The Rwandan government made women's inclusion a hallmark of its post-genocide recovery and reconstruction program"²⁴
- This assessment of women's contribution to peace and reconciliation is timely as Rwanda looks forward to the next decade after the genocide. New direction and impetus on the functioning of the National Unity and Reconciliation commission should be equally important is the fact that the international community, countries in the sub region particularly where conflicts are rife or have came out of conflict, this study will provide best practices and models from which to draw lessons.
- The findings from this study will inform policy formulation of the National Unity and Reconciliation Commission; so as to ensure a strong focus interventions aimed at strengthening women's participation and contribution in peace building and reconciliation processes.
- The data from this study will go a long way in increasing the visibility of women's role in peace building and reconciliation as well as highlighting the key issues affecting women that need stronger advocacy in the future.

3. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The purpose of the study is to find out the extent to which women have contributed to the peace building and reconciliation process and find out the constraints encountered so as to be able to come up with strategies on how women can play a more active role in the reconciliation process. The results from this study will further inform policy makers on the design of the peace building framework.

²² The Journal of Humanitarian Assistance 2000. "Rwanda's women: The key to reconstruction". USA

²³ UNECA/African center for women. Women and the peace process: Perspectives from Africa. October, 1996

²⁴ Elizabeth Powley, Women Waging Peace

Specific objectives

1. To find out the contribution of women have made to the peace building and reconciliation process in Rwanda ten years after genocide in terms of best practices and success stories.
2. To highlight the constraints that women in Rwanda have encountered in this process ten years after genocide.
3. To chart out strategies of intervention to enhance women's role in peace building and reconciliation efforts in Rwanda and highlight specific their advocacy needs in relation to peace building and reconciliation.
4. To propose recommendations on how women can play a more active role in reconciliation and more specifically the extent to which the integration of gender in the National Unity and Reconciliation Commission can be enhanced.

4. METHODOLOGY

The nature and scope of study is mainly about process, qualitative change, perceptions and these are parameters which are not quantitatively measurable. The method that was used to collect data was qualitative which comprised of gathering people's views and experiences on the subject of peace and reconciliation.

Data collection techniques:

1. Consultation of documents on peace and reconciliation, different textbooks, research reports, journals, reports.
2. Interviewing people using qualitative approach.
In depth interviews were used throughout the survey: Interviews were conducted in a flexible manner to allow free expression of respondents' views. Conferences and workshops were used to met and select cross section of respondents. Viewing documentary video films permitted the researcher to obtain vivid information within a short period.
3. Use of case studies: after conducting interviews for about two weeks, it was found that no substantial information was coming out of the majority of the respondents and as a result, the researcher decided to use the case study technique as a way of obtaining detailed and coherent information on different sub-themes that will bring out best practices and success stories in the area of peace and reconciliation.

Further, with interviews of key respondents at policy levels, programme implementation as well as at grassroots level were conducted. In depth, interviews were conducted to get insights on the actual contribution of women to peace building and reconciliation and know reasons for such contributions as well as the obstacles women still face in achieving the objectives of promoting peace and reconciliation. These interviews also generated data on other issues such as the future strategies to be pursued to ensure that women's potential in peace promotion are articulated.

Sampling and stratification

For reasons of representation, information was collected from different categories of the population of the Rwandan society both in the urban and rural setups. The different categories of people interviewed included the following:

- The top leadership of the country in the executive, legislature and judiciary. These included ministers, secretary generals, parliamentarians, executive secretaries of commissions.
- Religious leaders of different denominations such as bishops, priests, the Mufti of the Islamic faith and presidents of congregations. Leaders of civil society organizations were also interviewed.
- Individuals, eminent personalities, researchers, opinion leaders and civic leaders in the community at national and local levels, representatives of international development partners, representatives of youth and women's organizations.

There was a deliberate move or effort to interview opinion leaders who have a potential role in unity and reconciliation and more specifically on the role of women in the peace building and reconciliation process. The objective was to get insight into their experience and appreciation of best practices and success stories of women.

Research sites

The study was carried out in the city of Kigali, the provinces of Kigali-Ngali, Kibungo, Gitarama, Butare, Ruhengeri and Byumba.

Selection criteria

The criteria of selecting Ruhengeri province were mainly based on its recent historical precedents of wars and large-scale population displacement. The 1990 to 1994 and the insurgency of 1997-1999 severely affected this area. Numerous women-led community-based and reconciliation initiatives to restore peace during and after the conflict were identified. It is the home to large number of former political and military leaders of the former Habyarimana regime, it is the bread basket of Rwanda and it is representative of the Northern region with unique social, cultural, historical and touristic characteristics.

Butare province is the representative of the Southern region and is a leading province in the number of genocide victims. It was seriously affected by ethnic polarization with large-scale inter-marriages between Bahutu and Batutsi. Traditionally, it was the seat of the ancient Rwandan kingdoms and also the National University, the centre of conflict management and the National Museum. It is also unique for the launching and implementing of the community solidarity initiatives (*ubudehe*).

The province of Kibungo is representative of Eastern region and has large number of old case refugees but is unique for land sharing initiatives with challenges and opportunities for reconciliation accompanied by women associations' initiatives. It has the largest population of people living in regrouped settlements (*imidugudu*) and has resettled many people from the Diaspora namely Uganda, Tanzania and Burundi but also had many migrants from other provinces.

Kigali Ngali province has a diversity of cultural characteristics (borders five provinces and Burundi) and has vibrant women associations involved in reconciliation and is particularly known for having been affected severely by the genocide of 1994 especially in the Bugesera region. It is also known for having both urban and rural setups.

Gitarama represents the central region of Rwanda, with vibrant women associations assisting a large number of genocide victims, especially those who were victims of rape. It is particularly known for having a history of political upheavals, such as the 1959 revolution.

Byumba is a region, which suffered the effects of the civil war (1990-1994). It has dynamic associations of women, largely widows and other vulnerable groups, who practice modern livestock farming. It provides a unique model of effective collaboration between national, local leadership civil society and community initiatives.

The city of Kigali is representative of the urban environment and given its diverse nature of its population set-up with high-level policy makers, arrangements were made to include as many stakeholders as possible. It is the centre of information because the databank on various issues is situated in Kigali.

The case study method was used to capture details of achievements, obstacles and the future plans around the following components:

- Security
- Peace and reconciliation
- Good governance
- Justice and Gacaca
- Socio-economic empowerment programmes
- Gender-based violence

Ethical issues

The study population participation in the research exercise was voluntary. In order to meet this requirement, the research assistants and consultants used well-prepared introduction procedures before soliciting data, explaining who they were, and the objectives of the study. They then negotiated the consent of the respondent before data collection. Confidentiality and anonymity was assured.

Scope and limitation of study

The study covered a period of two months. This could not allow capturing ten years in a vast area of research such as peace building and reconciliation which means that some details cannot be reflected in this study. The research team identified the following constraints during the course of the study:

- The relatively short time allocated to the study did not allow exhaustive exploration of issues related to peace building and reconciliation. It was only possible to look at outstanding initiatives that are geographically scattered. Within the time allocated, it was also cumbersome to identify the right resource persons to be interviewed at the convenient time.
- No similar study had been conducted before so it was challenging to access relevant secondary information. The National Unity and Reconciliation Commission did not possess specific data on the role of women in peace building and reconciliation. Furthermore, the commission did not have baseline data on which to base the appraisal of women's performance in the area of study.
- The area of peace building and reconciliation is very broad and given the limited means of transport coupled with huge bureaucratic procedures caused a delay of two weeks before field work could start and it was difficult to delimit the study.
- There were a lot of best practices in peace building and reconciliation scattered geographically and thematically hence there was a problem of selecting the relevant case studies to focus on.
- The limited number of respondents who participated during the study was not statistically representative; hence, the findings may not necessarily be generalisable. However, the wide coverage and rich information provide important lessons and insights into areas for future research in the role of women in peace building and reconciliation in Rwanda.

2. CONCEPTUAL AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The Concept of Peace

There is no single definition of the concept peace. For some people, "Peace" has been understood as the absence of war, violence and hostilities but also the enjoyment of economic and social justice, equality and the entire range of human rights and fundamental freedoms within society. Peace is promoted by equality of the sexes, economic equality and the universal enjoyment of basic human rights and fundamental freedoms²⁵. For the purpose of this study, peace building will focus on the key elements below:

- Security
- Governance
- Legal rights and human rights
- Socio-economic empowerment
- Health and HIV/AIDS

For others, peace is viewed as a condition of tranquillity where there is no disagreement or disputes, where conflicts are banished, and people, individually and collectively, live in calm and serenity. A major shortcoming of this conception of peace is its failure to recognize conflict as a fact of life.

The Concept of Reconciliation

Reconciliation is a complex term and there is little agreement on its definition. It is both a goal – something to achieve and a process, a means to achieve this goal. The basic definition of reconciliation is a process through which a society moves from a divided past to a shared future²⁶.

It is a long-term process. It takes time. There is no quick fix to reconciliation. Its pace cannot be a problem but a solution. It has a specific process to achieve reconciliation in a specific context. There is no such thing as a perfect reconciliation model or method.

Basic principles that should underpin the design of every reconciliation process include:

- Begins early, it is most receptive to change and challenge.
- Sticks to the commitment and deals with hard issues, when they will get harder with time.
- Give it sufficient time, it cannot be rushed.

The concept of gender

The term gender refers to the socially constructed roles and responsibilities of women and men. It includes the expectations held about the characteristics, aptitudes and likely behaviours of both women and men (femininity and masculinity). These role and expectations are learned changeable over time, and variable within and between cultures.

Gender refers to the socially constructed rather than the physical or biological roles ascribed to women and men. Gender roles vary according to socio-economic, political and cultural contexts and are also affected by other factors such as age, race, class and ethnicity. Gender roles are learnt and are therefore, changeable. For example, many societies ascribe the role of homemaker and caregiver to women, while men are seen as breadwinners and protectors²⁷.

²⁵ Inger skheksbaej and Dan Smith , Gender, Peace and Conflict, 2001

²⁶ David Bloomfield, Teresa Barnes and Luc Huyse. 2003. Handbook series. Reconciliation after violent. Conflict International IDEA publications. Stockholm, Sweden

²⁷ Handbook on UN Multidimensional Peacekeeping operations

As opposed to biologically determined identities of men and women, gender is not the same as “sex” and gender differences are not the same as sex differences. “Many Rwandans perceive women to be better at forgiveness, reconciliation and post-conflict peace building than their male counterparts”²⁸. These perceptions are based predominantly on two notions. First, Rwandans believe that most of the consequences of war and violence fall to women and that they are therefore highly motivated to prevent conflict.

Promoting gender equality in itself is part and parcel of encouraging men and women to have equal opportunities in life. This fairness promotes peaceful co-existence. Promotion of gender equality is a precondition for tolerance and mutual respect.

For purpose of clarity, throughout this document the term “woman” will be referred to or defined as a social category (gender) and not in biological terms or sex. Defining women only by their biological roles is problematic and gives rise to gender inequalities and the oppression of women. On the other hand, deconstructing - from a women’s perspective - their biological and economic roles at both household and community levels and the manner with which these roles are influenced by armed conflict reveals issues which give women the moral authority to claim their place of honour as agents of reconciliation and peace²⁹.

Linking gender, peace and culture

In the Rwandan cultural context women are better placed to prevent violence or to mediate between individuals who have differed. This is exemplified through names given to women/girls such as *Nyampinga* – solace, *Gahuzamiryango*. Women traditionally intervened in preventing their sons or husbands from going to unjustifiable wars by laying a symbolic road block, a loin cloth (*Umweko*) at the entrance of the homestead. In the history of Rwanda, women have played some critical role in restoring peace. For example, the legendary *Ndabaga* disguised herself as a boy to rescue her country from enemies.

As the first agents of socialization, women are natural teachers for peace education to their children. In playing their roles as parents, service providers, teachers, they are ideal for instilling into their children such values: respect for others; the peaceful solution of conflicts and problems; sharing; partnerships; tolerance; a sense of justice; equity; and equality of the sexes, all of which are qualities of sustainable peace. Peace education should be extended to the primary school level where women constitute the bulk of the teachers. Here, they have the responsibility to influence attitudes towards peace at the very foundation of formal education which is likely to have a lasting effect in shaping the personality of the future adult.³⁰

²⁸ Bazivamo Christophe’s speech, Kigali, 2003

²⁹ African Women for Conflict Resolution and Peace Strategy Workshop, Kampala, Uganda 19-21 September, 1994. Strategies for peace proceedings

³⁰ ECA REPORT: Women’s Role in the Peace Process, An African Perspective, ECA/OAU/AH.EGM/WLFP/96/2

PART TWO: STUDY FINDINGS

Overview

The presentation of findings in this chapter is organised thematically following the systematic analysis of the research themes as addressed by research through focussed group discussions (FGDs), in-depth interviews, as well as from the observation schedules.

General perceptions and views from respondents

Since the main objectives of this study was to bring to light what women have contributed to peace building and reconciliation, the challenges they have encountered and the strategies to strengthen their roles in the process. At the same time, analysing the reasons behind the successes and challenges with the view of charting out the way forward, interviews centred around the following questions:

1. What has been the contribution of women in Peace Building and Reconciliation?
2. What were the reasons behind the success above?
3. What challenges were encountered?
4. What should be done to address the above challenges?

Most of the people interviewed expressed a strong belief that in the last ten years Rwandans have made a lot of progress in the area of peace building and reconciliation. They also believe that women's contribution to the peace building process is proportionately much higher, particularly at the grassroots level than that of men

Peace and reconciliation have been possible mainly due to the role played by the top leadership of the country. The leadership of the country was guided by the vision of long term peace, stability and development. The Mufti of the Islamic Faith in Rwanda explained the significance of leadership in the following words:

"Leaders of this country cast a strong light in a dark space and women followed it".

This is greatly reflected in the country's history in which leaders have had a strong influence on the ordinary person.

All the respondents from all walks of life irrespective of age, class, and gender, social testify that women have played a very big role in peace building and reconciliation. They attribute this to several factors but the major one is that in that of Rwandese culture. They all bring out strongly that in the Rwandese traditional society a woman is par excellence the embodiment of peace.

According to Archbishop Emmanuel Kolini of the Anglican Church:

"A woman is the epitome of peace. It is from her that peace flows and radiates to other members of the family."

This is echoed by all the respondents who cite different but complementary reasons all pointing to the role of women as life nurturers and givers, being mediators between different families. The reasons that are put forward by different respondents emphasize the importance of the way in which women are prepared from early childhood to ensure the togetherness of families. They are prepared or socialized to look beyond their own interests and serve and suffer for the general good of the community.

One old woman said that *"a woman does not belong to any particular family or tribe. She has no boundaries (Nyampinga) and therefore she is there to unite families because she is neutral"*.

Another respondent added that women tend to be committed wholly to a given cause whether good or bad. She added that women never do things half way and this why those who were manipulated to participate in the genocide were very ruthless and those who had the courage to protect their neighbours did it with extreme self sacrifice.

The researcher observed the sincerity with which women are working to re-establish trust and understanding among people of the different communities through concrete initiatives they are undertaking to be a strong evidence of women being the strong pillars of peace. Looking at the number of peace prizes Rwandese women have won in the last ten years and the numerous initiatives of peace in the community women have undertaken, the respondents' views are plausible.

The other strong view that comes out of the interviews is that women throughout the country have been instrumental in rebuilding unity and reconciliation among Rwandese because is the vision of the women leaders and the latter has guided women to promote peace and reconciliation. Women in leadership formed caucuses and alliances to serve as models for other women to emulate these alliances include among others Unity Club, Pro-Femmes Twese Hamwe , and Rwandan Women Parliamentary Caucus.

According to Mufti Swale Habimana *"The country's leader provided light in the darkness and women leaders led their sisters to where light was shining"*

This statement highlights the role the post-genocide government of national unity put as first priority as and restoring and guarding unity among the people of Rwanda.

"The role the country leadership played in forging unity and reconciliation by not allowing the country not to go into revenge and anarchy served as a living example to other Rwandese" a respondent said.

Besides the leadership, the respondents also concurred strongly that the conciliatory approach used by women at a very critical phase when there was a lot of resentment and grief can be explained in terms of the Rwandese culture. Women's own initiatives to rebuild trust and harmony within their communities spontaneously developed mothers had to take their rightful positions as one respondent added.

At such a critical moment when the country was just on the brink of disintegration called for the courage, strong sense of patriotism. All respondents were of the view that in the Rwandese culture, there are values that characterise the leadership and the general population in terms of the reconciliation and peace building process observed over time. All respondents were of the opinion that the values within Rwandan culture provide a strong basis for sustainable peace and reconciliation where women are the custodians and transmitters of these values to the young generation through a process of socialisation.

Across the different provinces and among women from diverse backgrounds, respondents revealed a strong tendency towards women's involvement in peace building and reconciliation processes. Many associations and individuals started as early as 1994 to forge unity and reconciliation even before the National Unity and Reconciliation Commission was established.

It was generally explained that people of all walks of life particularly women had suffered enough and were fed up with the prospect of going back to another conflict. This is captured in the following words:

"Women were determined to fight anything that would threaten to take them back into bloodshed. We are tired of losing children, husbands and relatives" Mukamusoni Matilda, a peasant farmer in Ruhengeri province said with a firm tone.

Specific findings on thematic areas of the study

This section highlights the major contributions and constraints that women have made and encountered in the last ten years in the search for peace and reconciliation. The following information captures the main findings in what respondents reported as the key contribution of women in the post genocide period in Rwanda.

Women spearheading socio-economic initiatives

Women became a driving force of the socio-economic development of the country after the 1994 genocide. A vast network of women groups such as NGOs, associations and cooperatives at the grassroots level played a pivotal role in empowerment initiatives. Socio-economic development is used as an entry point to peace building and reconciliation.

Since 1994, women participated in income generating activities that contributed to building their socio-economic empowerment which in turn paved the way forward to sustainable development. Such initiatives were carried out by several women groups such as associations, cooperatives, NGOs, CSOs, and any other community based organisations.

It is worth noting that socio-economic empowerment of women in post genocide Rwanda, has brought tangible changes in community perceptions towards women. Most specifically it has redefined new roles and responsibilities that women now assume, contribute to building lasting peace and restore reconciliation.

After the 1994 there was a massive return of old case Rwandese from neighbouring countries and beyond. There was a period of resettling these refugees and sometimes sharing and with new case returnees. There was no province where this occurred on larger scale than in the Eastern province of Kibungo. The tensions between people who found themselves as neighbours and the restoration of trust and harmony was gradually established through women talking to their counterparts and they in turn persuading their husbands to be more tolerant. Women were again the first to overcome this by farming associations, groups and sharing the basic items such as salt and water. Gradually men also started talking to each other³¹.

Resettlement initiatives

In an effort to reconstruct the economy that was shattered by the war and genocide of 1994, women contributed significantly in resettlement initiatives that were promoted by the government of Rwanda. The genocide has almost completely destroyed the agricultural base of the country with a large number of men killed or fled the country in prison. Women across the country revived numerous agricultural activities.

They provided food to their families either under food for work programme or simply producing food from their own plots.

Women have contributed a lot in terms of participation in repatriation of refugees' right from 1997. Documentary films' sharing the massive repatriation of refugees shows proportionately large numbers of women and children.

"Looking at thousands of people returning from Congo and Tanzania, one's attention is attracted by the large number of women. This was a significant step in restoring peace through return of refugees who had been held as hostages in neighbouring countries by predominantly defeated

³¹ Ruhinda who was at the time in charge of settlement in Kibungo province

genocidal forces. It was like so to speak responding to the olive branch extended by the government of National Unity of Rwanda”, one official from the ministry of internal affairs said.

Women participated massively in the national programme of *Imidugudu* settlement where women provided labour and for the first time in the history of Rwanda, they went right on top of the roof to build houses. Some proved to be capable of doing a relatively new job. This was out of sheer determination and need for survival.

Throughout the entire territory of Rwanda women were seen on building sites working side by side with men or sometimes women alone trying to cope with difficult challenge of constructing houses. This broke the myth that if a woman constructs a house, it leaks said one female respondent in Butare.

“We are now proud that every widow now has a house of her own, a toilet and a kitchen,” said a member of Duhozanye association in Save District in Butare Province.

ASOFERWA, a Rwandan NGO advancing women's economic empowerment, was heavily involved in the resettlement programme (*Imidugudu*) aimed at resettling displaced people, widows, old and new case load returnees (1959 & 1994). This organisation is famously known for having built a resettlement site called *The Nelson Mandela Village* in Ntarama (Nyamata in the Bugesera region, Kigali Ngali province), a region that suffered tremendous atrocities related to the genocide of 1994 and this resettlement site is an integrated village model that has social services such as water, electricity, health centre, primary school, market, etc.

“The Nelson Mandela Village resettlement is best known for having built a primary school where pupils from all surrounding villages and resettlements attend school, some are genocide orphans while others are children of genocide suspects who are in prisons. Because some of these pupils are coming from vulnerable families, ASOFERWA is paying school fees to enable them attend school”³².

Income generating activities

In post-genocide Rwanda, income-generating activities in rural areas for the most part were dominated by women groups. In an era where Rwanda as a country was trying to rebuild herself in the aftermath the genocide that left the entire country destroyed, women were affected equally. Thousands of income generating activities were initiated either by women groups themselves such as the associations, cooperatives, NGOs and CSOs or by the government with the support of donors.

In this study, it would seem an insurmountable task to make inventory all the income generating activities that women were involved in after 1994 simply because it is beyond the scope of this study. However, it is important to note that most respondents were of the view that peace building and reconciliation efforts should be practical and beneficial to the society and not theoretical or ideological.

“The time for peace and reconciliation theory is over; people need to be involved in these efforts in a practical way that is how communities will mend again the brokenness caused by the genocide”, many respondents said.

One of the striking examples on how peace building and reconciliation efforts were clearly demonstrated in an income generating activity is the “Cows of Peace” project in Byumba province. This project was initiated in 2001 by the government of Rwandan and USAID to support vulnerable groups to acquire improved breeds of cows in order to increase incomes and livelihoods. One of the associations supported by this project is *Giramata* association translated as “may you have milk” in Byumba municipality and is

³² Interview with Beatrice Mukangenzi, a member of ASOFERWA, operating in Kinigi district, Ruhengeri province.

made of 31 members, 19 of them being women. What is so unique about this association is its membership made of widows of genocide; wives of imprisoned men suspected of having committed genocide and even demobilized soldiers.

Christine Mukahumure, a member of Giramata association is a widow who has been able to pay school fees for one child at secondary school in the western Province of Kibuye and seven other children at primary school in Byumba province as a result of acquiring a cow. Christine was the very first beneficiary of the "Cows of Peace" project in Byumba and she named her heifer as "*Umugeni Mwiza*" meaning "the best bride".

*"I was the first beneficiary of the project in our association. After receiving the cow, I realised that one neighbouring family was in abject poverty. Their children were sick and malnourished and the whole family was living in a makeshift structure (blindé). I started giving them 4 litres of milk on a daily basis free of charge but I found it to be costly and uneconomical. My cow produced a calf which could not be passed on so I decided to sell it off and build a zero-grazing structure to them in order to enable get ready for the next acquisition of heifers. Subsequently, this family acquired a cow and as of today, they have built an iron-roofed house and can afford paying school fees for their children who look healthy. I can sleep **peacefully** because I know that these people have something to eat, drink milk and can sell some to be able to buy items they could not afford before",* said Christine Mukahumure.

Examples of activities such as the above have brought people from isolation and enabled them to come together and share ideas and have brought collective benefits to the community in the area. Cows have also created a healthy community environment. Since every community member is a potential beneficiary direct or indirect, every body feels responsible for the security of the cow. Neighbours meet in the evening to talk and keep company in the home where the cow is kept (*Gutaramira inka*). Culturally, this is a forum for sharing and building trust and solidarity and by far contributes to peace building and reconciliation.

These cows have enhanced the status of women in their respective associations. Before the inception of this activity, there used to be sceptics that women could not be able to manage cows since traditionally managing cows was considered as a demanding occupation only suitable for men yet cows were a valuable asset in Rwandan traditional culture.

"Women have proved to manage these cows better than men because we have noticed that those cows look healthier and are more productive than those managed by men", reported the local veterinary assistant.

Cows have stabilized family relations whereby conflicts in the families have been minimized. With the introduction of the new law of property that the government enforced in 1999, women can now own cows. Traditionally, cows played a role in the resolution of conflicts and in post-genocide Rwanda; these cows are now used as instruments to promote peace and reconciliation among communities that were affected by the genocide.

"In our community, it was commonly believed that people who hailed from Byumba (Abakiga) were of poor standards of cleanliness and therefore could not properly manage the cattle business, while those who hailed from Buganza region (Abanyabuganza) were more accustomed to cattle rearing were perceived to be lazy people. However the acquisition of these improved cows in Byumba has changed these misconceptions. These improved cows have been distributed to individual households in the communities irrespective of whether the beneficiaries are Bahutu, Batutsi or Batwa", said Josée Uwaliya, president of Giramata Association.

Cows are bringing another dimension of peace building and reconciliation because such activities enable communities to foster a strong sense of mutual support. Some members of Giramata Association have undertaken initiatives of feeding prisoners in the provincial prison of Byumba with milk and food.

"We have volunteered to take milk to prisoners as a way of preparing them to change positively before they are released from prison" Christine Mukahumure confided

This is a very significant gesture as milk is a precious food item in the Rwandan culture. The most important lesson from this case is that women have contributed significantly to peace building and reconciliation process through socio-economic initiatives.

Women contribution to restoration and maintenance of security

Immediately after the 1994 genocide, one of the immediate challenges was to restore and maintain security. The massive repatriation of refugees was followed by an insurgency waged by *Interahamwe* and *ex-FAR* combatants particularly in the Northwestern Provinces of Ruhengeri, Gisenyi and some parts of Gitarama and Kibuye provinces.

During a focused group discussion, a woman who sought anonymity made the following revelations on how they initially contributed to the insurgency in Ruhengeri province.

"When we returned from Zaire in 1997, some men remained in the forests with the plan of preparing an attack on Rwanda. Our mission as women was to grow crops to ensure food supplies to the combatants. We were also assigned the role of gathering all necessary information to be used by rebels".

When the war of insurgency broke out women, they provided information on government troops movement and deployment so that infiltrators would know where and when to attack. Women also provided hiding places for infiltrators. They also sang songs of boosting the fighters' morale and at times provided 'spiritual power' where they served as spiritual mobilisers (*abahubiri*) who purportedly imparted 'special power' to increase chances of winning battles.

As long as women participated in this insurgency, the war effort continued unabated. It was realised that women were the backbone of this rebellion; therefore, efforts to end would not succeed without persuading women to stop their support to the rebels who had either propaganda or force in the first place to displace thousands of women and children. It was until women realised that the displacement caused untold sufferings, including deaths on the battle field, diseases, starvation to their children, they started considering the option of heeding the call of the leader to return to safety in the zones controlled by the government.

Women started slowly switching their support from rebels to the government side which gave them guarantees of protection, in the event their sons and husbands were to return peacefully. When women got convinced that this position was to ensure their own security and that of their children they helped in the early ending of the insurgency. Women started a campaign of convincing their husbands and relatives to disassociate themselves from the insurgency and return peacefully to their families. What women did here is considered by many as an act of heroism because it involved risks of their own lives. Women used different tactics to convince rebels to live the insurgency and became free again. One of the methods used was to collaborate with the government troops and negotiating the peaceful surrender on conditions that cooperated.

"A rebel commander who was previously a school headmaster in one district of Ruhengeri province was persuaded by his wife after many unsuccessful attempts to abandon the rebellion.

Finally, he surrendered with a strong force of 4,000 fighters on a single day”, a high-ranking RDF officer revealed.

It is interesting to understand the important role women continued to play in matters of security to ensure the complete return of security to the areas that were hit by the insurgency. A local district mayor of Ruhengeri town stated:

Besides the great contribution made by women in the restoration of security in Ruhengeri, they continued being involved in the vigilance and passing of information to security personnel regarding strangers whom they spotted in their area,

One woman in Ruhengeri province added that,

“While men conducted their vigils (amarondo) at night, women conducted theirs during the daytime.”

Traditionally, it is believed that it is the duty of men to restore and maintain security however in the last ten years, these trends have changed and this has further increased the self-confidence among women that they can do what men can also do.

This is part of the new responsibilities women have come to assume after the 1994 genocide they have come to fully accept the responsibility and role of rebuilding their country. It is worth noting that what has been highlighted above is not an isolated event. In other parts of the country such as Cyangugu and Gitarama women worked tirelessly to ensure security.

“Women continued to pass information to their husbands and relatives who are still living outside the country urging them to return peacefully and also contribute the foiling of the 2001 rebel incursion from DRC.”, a woman leader of women association

NDABAGA association – women’s search for peace during and after the armed conflict confided.

This is a newly formed association of women ex-combatants in the former rebel army of RPA and some members of the ex-FAR.

“Women fighters who joined RPA had a vision of joining hands with their brothers to liberate the country and ensure peace and stability for all Rwandans”, confided one Kanani Esperance, a member of Ndabaga Association.

Women who were demobilised or who served in different capacities with the RPA decided to join hands in their association with the intention of:

“Continuing playing our role of ensuring peace and reconciliation by serving as good examples wherever our members are situated in the whole country is our goal” said Apophia Batamuliza – president of Ndabaga Association.

The coming together of former female members of RPA and ex-FAR was a very important step in women’ search for lasting peace and reconciliation in Rwanda.

“We had a duty to show our sisters and other Rwandese that we are capable of contributing to unity and reconciliation” said one senior member of Ndabaga association.

“Our strategy is for us to have our association operate in all parts of the country, initiate different income generating activities for our members and their neighbours. When people share opportunities, they build reconciliation among themselves.”, added Apophia Batumuliza.

The members of Ndabaga have a vision of selling this example to other countries in the sub-region that have wars and conflicts. The facility with which women formed associations addressing different problems is an important mechanism of women contributing to peace and reconciliation through action.

Women’s voices in decision making

Community based organizations such as the newly constituted women councils have played also an important role in process. Within the committee of ten, there is somebody in charge of legal rights. They organized solidarity camps for women in general at national, provincial and district levels. Through these gatherings, they have been able to sensitize women on issues of child defilement and monitor cases of child defilement where they happen so that the offenders may be apprehended by law and accompany the victims to health centres for medical help and to courts of law but also to intervene where parents want to settle these cases outside the courts of law.

Right from 1996, with the support and orientation of the then Ministry of women affairs, women started coming together and electing grassroots representative committees. The aim of settling up these committees that later came to be known as national women councils was to create a forum where women could talk to each other share views on problems and find ways of coping with the innumerable challenges left by genocide.

“Gradually women started building trust among themselves attending Ingando (solidarity camps) and sharing experiences. Initially whenever Ingando wanted start, Hutu and Tutsi women would be highly suspicious and full of fear for each other but by the end of them, they would be full of love of surround for departing from each other”³³.

“It was the women councils that dared holding elections at cell, sector and District level even before men could dare carry out elections”, said Munyaneza Charles.

Thereafter the Ministry of Local Government started organizing elections. Even before the establishment of the national commission on Unity and Reconciliation, women in their respective organizations made initiatives to promote peace particularly between women returning from Diaspora and those that had lived in Rwanda before 1994.

The merging of women associations from outside the country and those that had lived in Rwanda was a big achievement. After long sessions of negotiations and “peace talks” between representatives of women associations from outside and those that had lived in Rwanda, a census was reached to give the women umbrella organization Pro-femmes *Twese Hamwe* with a focus on peace. It was agreed that all associations under Pro-femmes be guided by the principle of peace and given that a peace programme known as Action Campaign for Peace (CAP) was being introduced. This has been a major step forward of making peace a cross cutting theme for all member organizations of Pro-femmes. Immediately after the 1994 genocide Rwandan women were able to attend the fourth International conference on Women, which later came to be known by the Acronym of Beijing.

This was at a very critical moment in Rwanda’s history when women movement was deeply divided. Finally, women of Rwanda scored victory when they had consensus of attending the conference as one group and agreed to hold a symbolic meeting in one tent called “The Tent of Peace’. This was a big

³³ Berthe Mukamsoni, Member of Parliament

example to other women particularly the Burundi delegation, which borrowed a leaf from us yet the genocide blood and women's were still fresh in our country³⁴.

It is important to note that women in leadership positions whether in government or civil society carried this vision to other women and this contributed to forging unity and peaceful co-existence. The mobilisation that was done within the women movement across the country did a lot to promote peace and reconciliation among Rwandese. This will be explored in detail in the following sections.

It was found throughout the study that wherever there was a successful peace initiative, there was a leader behind particularly within the community itself. The closer and committed leader was, the bigger the impact of the initiative was. In one successful widow's association called *Duhozanye* in Save District in Butare province, members of the association attribute the achievements to their president Daphrose and the then burgomaster of the commune.

"They encouraged us, gave us advice and support in all ways", one member of the association emphasised.

Women's participation in justice and Gacaca

The lack of justice and not punishing those who violate human rights has been at the heart of repeated genocide from 1962 right through 1994. The justice system is undergoing restructuring including the introduction of participatory justice or Gacaca courts.

In creating a national institution to revive and formalize *Gacaca*, however, the GNU has promoted women's participation. In terms of representation, women are represented in all *Gacaca* courts. Currently the national representation of women in all these courts is 29 % and this is an important achievement given that women did not serve as *Gacaca* judges traditionally, as those judges were reserved for a community's wise and respected men (*inyangamugayo*).³⁵ In areas where women are presidents of *Gacaca* courts, such courts have been found to be performing better.³⁶

Gacaca courts have been in place for a short time but so far, women's outstanding contributions have been highlighted in different ways. These include high turn up and speaking the truth many people concurred.

Women have contributed to restructuring of justice through policy formulation. At the policy level participation of women is at the increase. Currently women head the ministry of justice, chief justice is a woman and the executive secretary of the Gacaca courts is a woman. At the implementation level the participation of women is significant.

Women stand-up against gender-based violence

Gender based violence (GBV) is an umbrella term for any harm that is perpetrated against a person's will as a result of power imbalances that exploit distinctions between males and females, among males and among females. Violence may be physical, sexual, psychological, economic or socio-cultural. Perpetrators may include family members, community members or those acting on behalf of cultural, religious, state

³⁴ Honorable Constance Rwaka, Member of Parliament, Kigali, Rwanda 2004

³⁵ Strengthening Governance: The role of women in Rwanda's Transition, 2003.

³⁶ Interview with Anastase Balinda, advisor on *Gacaca* courts, Department of *Gacaca* courts.

or intrastate institutions. Although not exclusive to women and girls, GBV principally affects them across all cultures.³⁷

In Rwanda, it is estimated that during the genocide, between 250,000 and 500,000 women were exposed to some form of GBV mainly rape. The government of Rwanda made a critical decision to classify rape in category one of genocide and other crimes against humanity. Women's views were taken into account and integrate in the law categorising use during genocide as a crime against humanity.

Because of the broad nature of this subject and given the limitations of this assignment, it is worth noting to highlight only one case study. Later in this study, we will discuss about the implications of GBV in Rwandan society, as it is today however it will require a more exhaustive study that covers all aspects related to violence.

The women were able to come together and break cycle of isolation, frustration and trauma. Through regular meetings they were able to meet and discuss their common problems / ordeals. As an example, SEVOTA initiated "*Samedi Conseil*" – Saturday Council – which was a forum where these women were exchanging their experiences and testimonies, that they gone through. They were able to come out publicly and acknowledge that they had been raped. This was culturally difficult to say about it helped other women to come forward and share their own problems.

Women have also been able to go to the ICTR in Arusha to testify against their former mayor/ Burgomaster Akayezu Jean who is now condemned to life imprisonment in Mali. They have formed small self-help groups and they have been engaged in productive activities.

Major factors inhibiting women's full participation in peace building and reconciliation

Through interviews with different segments within the population and observations, it was realised that women have indeed achieved or contributed a lot in peace building or reconciliation but a lot of challenges remain to be overcome for them to tap into their full potential in order to become agents of lasting peace and reconciliation.

The challenges identified may be grouped under different categories, which are attributed to women themselves and their environment. In broad terms, the challenges are highlighted below:

Poor coordination, networking and monitoring system of women's initiatives

Throughout the country, women have come together or acted individually to initiate activities that are either channels of peace and reconciliation or they contribute directly to the process of reconciling different sections of the Rwandan society. Most of these initiatives are started by women themselves who are handicapped in many areas. For these initiatives to grow and become sustainable, they need to be well nurtured, supported, coordinated and replicated. However, respondents interviewed whether at community or policy-making levels concurred that there is very little contact between institutions such as the National Unity and Reconciliation Commission, various government ministries, and leaders in general. This problem is compounded further by the lack of a clear policy on unity and reconciliation that defines the role of different actors and priority actions required to address the needs of different interest groups.

³⁷ Jeanne Ward, *If Not Now, When? Addressing Gender-based violence in Refugee, Internally Displaced, and Post-Conflict Settings. A Global Overview*. 2002

As a result, most women who were interviewed lamented that their efforts are frustrated by the inability of the leadership to recognize, encourage and give visibility to the best practices. Furthermore, most women associations in rural areas particularly the newly established ones, lack opportunities to network with better established and more experienced associations performing similar activities.

"It is true the commission tries to reach the community through volunteers known as 'Community Mobilisers' (abakorerabushake b'ubumwe n'ubwiyunge), ...but these are not enough, some form of material motivation, psychological support should be considered in order to ensure that peace and reconciliation are sustainable within the communities, local and national level", confirmed Djamali, a member of staff of NURC in Ruhengeri province too shares the above view.

Lack of education and limited skills among women

A majority of the illiterate members of the community, especially, women do not attend meetings and other gatherings within their respective cells and sectors, since they claim that they cannot follow what is communicated to them, and they lack the confidence to contribute their ideas³⁸. In addition, the lack of access to and control over resources is considered to be the main source of women's poverty. Consequently, women lack access to loans and to other means of investment.

Widespread poverty manifested by acute shortage of resources to sustain/promote their income generating activities

Poverty is ranked as one of the main challenges that face women. This is partly attributed to lack of adult males in the families to provide labour, lack of capacity to undertake and initiate income generating activities as well as the loss of productive animals such cows, goats, and other economic assets. The situation is even made worse by having a large number of dependants to cater for and some of the basic facilities they acquired after 1994 genocide have depreciated and are in need of urgent repair. For example some of the houses are in dire need of repair.

Insecurity and Gender based violence

Much as women do possess information about what happened during the genocide and they are willing to speak out the truth, it was found among a cross section of respondents women face intimidation and threat so that they do not tell the truth they know.

"It is true, one of the challenges facing women who would like to testify during Gacaca hearings face threats from some relatives of the suspects but measures are in there to deal with the situation" Balinda Anastase – advisor in Gacaca courts said.

It was reviewed that some of the survivors were being harassed, marginalized and intimidated by neighbours; suspects temporarily released from detention, they also refused to access their land. This is a major source of frustration and trauma to the families affected as they were already living in poverty and deprivation.

It was also found that women especially widows are intimidated by some neighbours who were recently released from detention under the presidential pardon order. Much as one of the public facing Gacaca courts, women tend to feel concerned in testifying. They have lost relatives or have husbands in prison or they are married to men from different socio-cultural identities. This phenomenon is of great concern

³⁸ Interview with Béatrice Mukangenzi, a member of ASOFERWA, operating in the Ruhengeri province. November 2nd, 2004

since it poses big threat to the smooth running of Gacaca courts. It is therefore imperative that some concrete measures be taken in order to overcome this menace.

Women are threatened by people who do not want them to speak the truth. According to one interviewee in Duhozanye association in Save district of Butare province who sought anonymity, was intimidated both physically and psychologically by her neighbour who whenever he gets drunk throws stones at her house and makes intimidating statements such as “prisons are not grave”, once you go there you can always return.

By insinuation, this man meant that her husband is dead and will never come back but he (the neighbour) can go back into prison and be released later. Other women are issued with death threats so that they don't speak the truth. This was mainly remarked by a representative from AVEGA *Agahozo* NGO.

Limited participation in decision-making, limited self-confidence

The challenge of women not being free to take up a stand that is contrary to what the husband or male relatives may have is an obstacle to women freely speaking the truth during the courts proceeding for fear of being chased or harassed because of their total dependence on men for economical survival.

“If I testify against his relatives, will I ever be allowed to step in his home afterwards?” One woman interviewed said.

Some women are reluctant to testify and participate in *Gacaca* courts because according to them they do not see any value being derived from these courts. A similar perception is equally found among some survivors of the genocide because they don't expect the *Gacaca* courts to address the critical issue of compensation for the victims.

Gender stereotypes

Lack of gender sensitivity among the judges in the course of cross examining women as witnesses particularly on issues affecting women private lives creates problems of trauma yet the capacity to handle such incidents is limited because the description of facts will make witnesses relive some horrible scenes that survivors lived through, which will lead to a resurgence of trauma.

Women are also victims of negative messages of detractors of *Gacaca* who clandestinely inject these messages in the community particularly among women and youths with the aim of making the *Gacaca* courts fail. Due to high illiteracy rates among women, lack of access to information and self-confidence, women have limited contribution in Gacaca courts.

Negative aspects of Rwandan culture

Many respondents interviewed expressed the concern that within the Rwandan culture, there are certain tendencies or traits that are not conducive to interpersonal communication and free and open debate particularly in the open sphere. However, it was found that women are better communicators than men but tend to be constrained by the skewed power relations with men and their relatively lack of access to information.

According to the Executive Secretary of Gacaca Jurisdictions department, Madame Domitille Mukantaganzwa,

“Women tend to speak out the truth more freely than men and anybody who speaks out the whole truth irrespective of the gender is considered to have the behaviour of women.”

Without embracing the culture of speaking the truth, communicating freely and debating of issues of common interest it will be difficult to achieve sustainable peace and reconciliation among Rwandans. This is particularly a big challenge, an effort to realise the objective of Gacaca courts and uprooting the ideology of genocide.

Degeneration of positive cultural values in Rwandan society

Throughout the research it is found that Rwandan culture was the bedrock of fundamental values that promoted peaceful coexistence among Rwandans both at family and community levels. Many respondents interviewed echoed the view that the gradual degeneration of Rwandan cultural values resulted in the breakdown of social cohesion and solidarity among different communities. One respondent who sought anonymity observed that:

“If Rwandan people had not lost their culture, this abomination of genocide could not have taken place. We have to revive our culture if real and lasting peace is to prevail in the country.”

Reviving the positive cultural values in Rwanda today is an uphill task but it can be achieved if women are involved fully since they have constructively played a key role as educators and mediators of society from time immemorial.

SUCCESS STORIES

GIRAMATA Association – The story of “Cows of Peace” in Byumba Province

The Province of Byumba is one of the provinces that experienced the severe effects caused by the 1990-1994 war waged by the RPF against the regime of former president Habyarimana. Among the problems left behind by the civil war and the genocide is the large number of orphans, widows, displaced people, lack of shelter, loss of animals, most of them were vandalized or stolen. As a result, the area experienced lack of animal proteins, food insecurity, lack of manure for the soils and diminishing land productivity.

This is the situation in which *Giramata* (translated as “may you have milk”) association composed 31 members of whom 19 are women and 12 men evolved in since its inception. But with the support from USAID and MINAGRI, Heifer Project International, a US-based NGO began a small-scale dairy program in Byumba with the aim of providing improved cattle breed to farmer groups such as *Giramata* association that impacted directly thousands of vulnerable families in the province of Byumba.

Christine Mukahumure is a widow who has been able to pay school fees for one child at secondary school in the western Province of Kibuye and seven other children at primary school in Byumba province. Christine was the very first beneficiary of the “Cows of Peace” program initiated in Byumba by HPI and she named her heifer as “*Umugeni Mwiza*” meaning the best bride. As a result of acquiring a cow, Christine was able to support a family that used to live in a “*blindé*” or makeshift temporary structure commonly used by displaced people during the civil war. This family had four dependants with malnourished children and Christine managed to provide them with 4 litres for milk on a daily basis freely but found it to be costly and uneconomical. She sold the first calf in order to build a zero-grazing structure to enable this family to be ready for the next acquisition of heifers that were to be distributed to new beneficiaries by Heifer Project International (HPI). As of today, this family has not only acquired a cow but has built for itself a house with corrugated iron sheets and can afford paying school fees for their children while improving their nutrition status as a result of dairy products consumption.

Today, Christine is a living example in her community of how an economic activity brought people from isolation and enabled them to work together and share ideas and activities. Some of the activities include managing the cows and marketing the products such as milk, ghee and manure. Neighbours are now able to sell their milk to the main collecting centre where it is taken to Kigali for sale. This has brought collective benefits to the community in the area. Consequently, there is improved food security in the homes that have received the cows and in the neighbourhood i.e. on average a cow produces between 10-20 litres of milk daily. The new phenomenon of women and men owning high yielding cows has brightened up peasants to new possibilities in life particularly women and other marginalized individuals. Decent living is no longer a privilege of city dwellers only.

“After the conflict, people never used to like each other so much and kept to themselves,” said Christine, who lost her husband in the 100-day genocide. *“In a not so far future, I shall install a biogas plant at home to light the house for my daughter when she does her homework once she goes to secondary school,”* Christine added. *“I want to become a veterinary doctor”*

“These days, I make between 250,000 and 300,000 francs a year from the sale of milk”, said Celestin Bujyakera, a 44-year old father of six who now has two cows yet two years ago, he was a notorious village drunkard selling banana beer.

"I repaid most of my debts, and I bought back land that was seized by creditors," Bujoyakera said. "Today neighbours consider me a progressive farmer, and I have regained my self-esteem... This is a tremendous change from the days when I lost money selling local brew"

"He no longer goes to drink, no longer sells the local brew. He is always at home with the family and looking after the cows," his wife, Philomene Tumukunde, said with a broad smile.

The "Cows of Peace" have created a healthy community environment. Since every community member is a potential beneficiary direct or indirect, every body feels responsible for the security of the cow. Neighbours meet in the evening to talk and keep company in the home where the cow is kept (*Gutaramira inka*). Culturally this is a forum for sharing ideas and building trust and solidarity. Throughout the province, a network of associations was created as a result of this programme to enable the beneficiaries who were predominantly women to provide self-employment, to generate substantial income, to improve soil productivity, and contribute to more exposure of women in society. As a result, these cows have enhanced the status of women in their respective associations. This is mainly due to the economic status they have acquired benefiting from this small-scale livestock programme and the ability to look after the animals and transfer the skills to other women. Before the project's inception, there was scepticism that women could not be able to manage the cows since traditionally managing cows was considered a demanding occupation only suitable for men because cows were a valuable asset in Rwandan traditional culture. Nevertheless it was observed by the local veterinary assistant that cows managed by women were healthier and more productive than those managed by men.

Cows have stabilized family relations whereby conflicts in the families have been minimized. With the introduction of the new law of inheriting property that the government enforced in 1999, women can now own cows. Cows are important in Rwandan culture. They are used to pay dowry, to express condolences, to compliment a new mother, to give newlyweds a start. In years past, the ultimate compliment of a woman's beauty was to tell her: *"Your eyes are as beautiful as those of a calf"*. Basically, in Rwanda's tradition cows played a role in the resolution of conflict and consequently, but in post-genocide Rwanda, these cows are now used as instruments to promote peace and reconciliation among communities whose relationships were affected by the genocide.

Some members of Giramata Association have undertaken initiatives of feeding prisoners in the provincial prisons with milk and food. Christine testifies that she volunteered to take milk to prisoners "as a way of preparing them to change positively before they are released from prison". This is a very significant initiative. Inmates were touched by this unique initiative because milk is a precious food item in the Rwandan culture. Furthermore, it has enabled women to provide for orphans, elderly and other vulnerable groups. Now she has been able to build a structure for cows and they were given a cow to look after.

The success of this programme was made possible by a strong political leadership and commitment at all levels. Since the inception of this project, all authorities were involved right from the minister of agriculture and livestock who endorsed and backed this project to the prefect of Byumba who played a critical to mobilize and incite the communities.

HPI project coordination also played a pivotal role to successfully reach the beneficiaries and encourage them to engage in this ambitious small-scale livestock programme but also monitor various activities which were to be implemented. This was a new activity and unusually hard to implement in this province. That is why all efforts were mobilized to make it successful but also the motivation and perseverance of the beneficiaries played an important role in this endeavour. A combination of provincial and district extension services with those that were provided by the project ensured that planting fodder crops and establishing zero grazing structures were among the preconditions of receiving the animals. Only those that were patient enough to wait until the arrival of the animals were able to receive and became role

models to others.³⁹ This behaviour typically exemplifies the role of culture – the value of patience and perseverance (*Umuco wo kwihangana no kwizera*) as one of the building stone of the foundation of any sustainable peace building initiative.

The cows have had a high potential of addressing basic needs of the community and hence improve social relations. Before the acquisition of these improved cows (Jersey breed), it was commonly believed that people who hailed from former *Rukiga* region now part of Byumba province (*Abakiga*) were “dirty and therefore could not look properly after cows” while those who hailed from what used to be *Buganza* region (*Abanyabuganza*) a pastoral region were believed to be lazy people. The reason behind this stereotype was that milking cows was a tedious task requiring a minimum of hygiene that the *Bakiga* did not have skills while cattle keeping and rearing was believed by the same people to be a task that encouraged laziness⁴⁰. Today this belief is gradually losing value since the cows have been distributed to all communities of Byumba (Hutu, Tutsi, and Twa) and this has fostered a sense of mutual respect and trust and helping to break the old stereotypes based on regional identity.

Economic empowerment cannot exist without the concept of acquiring and owning assets, and cows are invaluable assets in the Rwandan culture. Therefore, milk production provides the much-needed income that is necessary to enable the beneficiaries who are predominantly women to reach a tangible economic status in their communities. That is why if women’s economic power is enhanced and communities are able to solve their own problems and can survive and even prosper. This is fundamental to achieve sustainable peace in Rwanda.

Improved food security and nutritional health through the availability of milk and other dairy products such as cow ghee, cheese, are critical for peace from a culture point of view. Conflicts in this region that culminated to the magnitude of genocide have always been fuelled among other things due to the lack or incapacity to access resources such land, shelter, livestock coupled with ignorance, poverty and bad governance. The Rwandese people equate peace with prosperity, healthy children (*Abasangiye ubusa bitana ibisambo*) because there is a correlation between poor nutrition and conflicts in most developing countries including Rwanda.

³⁹ Interview with Dr. Tarsis Kagwisagye, former project coordinator, Heifer Project International, 29th October 2004.

⁴⁰ Interview with Josée Uwamaliya, Chairperson of Giramata association, Byumba, 30th October 2004

ASOFERWA – When women take a holistic approach to post-genocide challenges and the importance of visionary leadership by women

ASOFERWA stands for the “*Association de Solidarité des Femmes Rwandaises*” or the association for solidarity of Rwandese women. It was created in October 1994 by various women from the Diaspora and those who had survived the genocide and they sought to approach other women especially those who had been victims of rape, trauma, war and other atrocities and brought them together to find lasting solutions to their problems.

Since 1994, the association built the famous *Nelson Mandela Village*, an integrated resettlement site in Ntarama, Bugesera region in Kigali Ngali Province. This is one of the most genocide-affected regions in Rwanda also known for its pogroms in places of worship. Some of the achievements of ASOFERWA are training centres built and maintained in Runda (Gitarama province), Ntarama (Kigali-Ngali province) and Kabarondo (Kibungo province). Through these centres, ASOFERWA can provide counselling services to women who have been affected by the atrocities of genocide. Any activity to be implemented by ASOFERWA was dependent upon the provision and availability of these counselling services because the targeted beneficiaries had severely experienced hardships and other traumatic experiences that shattered their lives. Another achievement is the establishment of a primary school at Ntarama where pupils coming from families of survivors and suspected killers come together and enjoy the benefit of education while ASOFERWA seeks to provide school fees for those who are unable to pay.

It is worth mentioning that one of the major achievements of the association was to train and sensitise 1,100 juvenile inmates who are suspected to have participated in the genocide. These were teens aged below 18 years by the time of genocide and they were to be reintegrated in the community. The association prepared the targeted communities to receive and accept these youths so that they can live peacefully and rebuild the lives that were destroyed as a result of the genocide. Training was extended to the receiving families to enable them to adjust and reintegrate in the community. Some youths have been able to join vocational training schools while others rejoined primary and secondary schools. The famous “*One Family, One Child*” programme that was part of the “*Campagne Action pour la Paix*” – peace building campaign – succeeded because of a strong sensitisation orientation initiated by the association. This programme aimed to move unaccompanied children from structures such as orphanages, prisons, rebel movements into families. These families were trained to receive the juvenile inmates that were being severely released and consisted of survivors of the genocide some of whom had been severely affected by the belligerent actions of these youths.

“A young child named Kubwimana who was 7 years old in 1994 in Sake district of Kibungo province was integrated in a family of Mr. Munyambo, a survivor of the genocide whose child was killed by the same Kubwimana,” Béatrice Mukangenzi, a member of ASOFERWA observed. “This indeed is true reconciliation because Munyambo who received this young man had wholeheartedly forgiven him”.

ASOFERWA managed to acquire a guesthouse situated in Kinigi district of Ruhengeri province in 2000 through privatisation process where the government was selling state-owned property. The association bought this facility at a time when the whole region was recovering from the insurgency caused by infiltration of ex-FAR (former government armed forces) and *Interahamwe* (rebels who participated in the genocide) that caused internally displaced population movements. By buying and renovating this facility, the association created additional employment opportunities for the returning population of Kinigi district. As a result of this investment, the association has trained women in the neighbouring areas of the guesthouse to make handicrafts for the visiting tourists who come to visit the area because it is the home of mountain gorillas. It has also been able to initiate *Inkingi*, a microfinance institution that provides micro-credit services to low-income earners who do not have access to traditional banking systems. Currently, *Inkingi* is well established in different locations of the country targeting primarily rural women who are engaged in income generating activities.

In a society where women were not encouraged to speak in public – discussing with other women because traditionally the Rwandese society was highly patriarchal, access to information, ignorance and socialization hindered their exposure to public gatherings and women were accustomed to speak indirectly through another person preferably a man. ASOFERWA as one of the main women organizations had among its objectives to empower women economically through various activities as described in their achievement but the above mentioned obstacles continued to hinder the fulfilment of its objectives.

The 1994 genocide left many women in abject poverty because property and assets that they owned were destroyed, most of them lost their husbands and were left with huge numbers of dependants that they could not manage. Further, these women could not own the property left by their spouses because of the absence of a law on property. With the enacting of the new law on inheritance, women can now own property but still are faced with insurmountable tasks of managing them. However, the lack of knowledge of investment possibilities amongst the women groups is a common challenge, hence, the absence of income generating activities and entrepreneurship activities in the areas where ASOFERWA planned to implement its activities, contributing to the low incomes and chronic poverty within these areas. The need for exposure of the community members on the available investment opportunities and other potentials is critical for the fight against the chronic poverty.

The lack of education and management skills continues to remain a major impediment to the socio-economic empowerment of women who are assisted by ASOFERWA as the majority of the illiterate members of the community, especially, women do not attend meetings and other gatherings within their respective cells and sectors, claiming that they cannot follow what is communicated to them, and they lack the confidence to contribute their ideas⁴¹.

“Women in this region are not accustomed to speak in public for fear of being ridiculed or teased by their husbands or male folk”, said Béatrice, “This is also exacerbated by a high prevalence of polygamy in Ruhengeri province”, she added.

In addition, the lack of access to resources is the major source of women’s poverty. Equally important, the majority of women especially in rural areas continue to have limited access to loans and to other means of investment.

In the last 10 years of existence of ASOFERWA, strong commitment and leadership by some key members of the association paved the way to the success of what is witnessed today. This is exemplified by the prize that the association received from UNESCO on peace building efforts as known in French as *“Premier Prix UNESCO Mandanjeet Singh pour la tolérance et la non-violence”* in November 1996.

The success of any programme implemented by ASOFERWA depended on a close monitoring and evaluation through which the association tracked the number beneficiaries, knowing where they came from, their social status, etc. It is a systematic process, which is still applied in their methodologies today.

Many beneficiaries were engaged in activities that contributed to a better environment such as tree planting, engaged in radical terracing combating soil erosion and other related activities.

Given the right incentives and opportunities women have a great potential to participate in peace building and reconciliation process in an effective manner.

⁴¹ Interview with Béatrice Mukangenzi, a member of ASOFERWA, operating in the Ruhengeri province. November 2nd, 2004

***“UBUTWARI BWO KUBAHO”* (the courage of living) Association – The story of reconciliation between families of survivors and those of genocide suspects.**

UBUTWARI BWO KUBAHO association is found in the Sector of Runyinya of Nyakizu District in Butare Province. It is started way back in March 1995 with 370 members and currently has a membership of 1,850. The main objective of starting this association was to assist women who had survived the genocide. This group is composed of women who were left extremely vulnerable, traumatized by the 1994 genocide and needed a lot of support. They were very hostile towards the wives and families of men who are suspected of having committed genocide. There was a lot of animosity between the two groups of women. Survivors of genocide used to throw stones at their “enemies” (women whose husbands were suspected to have participated in genocide) as the latter were trying to take food to their husbands detained in the commune “*cachots*” or cells. They used to pour down the food rations meant for the detainees. The initiator of this reconciliation process is Father Jerome Masingo who worked very closely with the community as well as Sister Thea Kakuze.

It all started when a group of about 370 women and their children who had been left traumatized and uprooted by the effects of the 1994 war and genocide adopted a very hostile stance against the families of the genocide suspects. Whenever the wives of genocide suspects would be taking food to their imprisoned husbands, the survivors used to throw stones at them, insult them as well as throw away their food. The priest systematically talked to them and helped them identify their real problems in three categories: Physical, Moral, and Mental needs.

Slowly they began returning to normal life. The priest used a psychoanalyst to help the women recover from the traumatic experiences. They were facilitated to accept the fact their dear ones had passed away and will never come back. They also started focusing on the future of their children. Additionally, what helped them most was that the priest himself was a survivor of genocide who had according to him “grown up under the very discriminatory conditions that most survivors experienced. He developed a personal conviction of fighting injustice and of not wishing to see any one going through experience.

The process of trying to bring the women from the two categories which are the survivors of genocide and those whose husbands are in prison or whose husbands fled the country but are all suspects of the 1994 genocide.

Father Jerome found out that in the course of interacting with the women survivors, there are certain sensitive things they could not reveal to him as a man. For a long time her efforts to bring the two groups of women together were futile. On the one hand women whose husbands and relatives were killed during the genocide saw the other group as their source of misery in other words their real enemies to such an extent that even in church they could not mix or sit on one side of the church nor accept their hand shakes during the ceremonial ritual of wishing each other peace.

Sister Thea asked the women whose husbands or families were genocide suspects what they really wanted. Initially they could not tell her the truth. They simply told her that they also wanted to learn the word of God just as the counterparts were being taught. In reality they later confessed that while they wanted really was food assistance and other material items that their colleagues were getting.

With time, they also come to speak out the truth about their inner problems. One of them confessed that they were tired of being associated with their husbands who had committed the heinous crimes of destroying their neighbours. They admitted that their neighbours had not died of any accident but had been killed by their own husbands. This was initially hard to accept by other members of the group.

Following the confessions and asking for forgiveness, which looked genuine, the offended side started slowly but in a difficult way accepting the group they originally considered enemies source of their troubles. As time passed by, the two groups of women started having weekly meeting, working in small groups and trying to solve their own problems. As they worked together, the membership started increasing from 370 to 1850 currently.

The two women groups shared common vision and values. For example one of the groups had a common objective of living and enabling others to live. They shared the word of God and also developed a new vision that they share life as well. The life and experience of these women today started the long and painful journey of reconciliation about ten years ago.

Today they live and work together and they meet regularly in order to pray together and share experience on their lives and plan what to do together. The women testify that they live like sisters. They share common problems for example they share the duties of helping the widows who have lost all their children. They give some of their children to help their friends with domestic chores such as fetching water and collecting firewood as one of the roles of children in the traditional Rwandan society.

The survivors of genocide also do assist their colleagues with carrying food to their husbands in prisons. When children who live on their own as a result of losing all their and relatives including their parents, go to school as some of them are secondary schools-age children, the women who remain behind cultivate their fields and plant crops for them and even clean their homes.

Children who come from these families of survivors and these whose husbands are in prison are growing up sharing values of living together in harmony and also share testimonies with other children about their experience of reconciliation and the negative and undesirable aspects of promoting hatred between neighbours.

Whereas it is commendable to highlight what the association had achieved, it is unfortunate to note that threats from neighbours who still harbour discriminatory and genocidal ideology continue to happen. Another impediment is the abject poverty level for some of the families that are striving to continue working together without promoting self-interests.

Whilst women fear that Gacaca Court trials might rekindle animosity or breed negative feelings, it is however crucial to excerpt that reconciliation works best when a leader who clearly understands the situation and is really committed to healing the opposing individuals in community plays a leading role of helping those that are in conflict. In this case of Runyinya sector of Nyakizu district, Father Jerome and Sister Thea who had similar experiences were able to see beyond the gender-based violence lenses or suffering and get a solution. Thus responsible leadership helps a community to overcome a conflict.

Speaking the truth leads to mutual healing and lasting forgiveness, repentance and reconciliation. Religions or spiritual approach to reconciliation are an effective approach. In a country like Rwanda, where more than 80 % of the population professes Christianity, the role of religious leaders is critically important.

Reconciliation works best when people are brought together, work together in associations on concrete activities, and are able to solve their day-to-day problems. Messages as peace building and reconciliation and building mutual trust work best where people are involved in some concrete action. In Rwanda's post-genocide era, reconciliation is more than a political slogan; it is becoming an unavoidable necessity in the daily life of the population and has multiple effects and potential of transforming a society that was once divided into a strong and peaceful.

Mrs. Adela Sefuku, Rwamagana Municipality - A unique story of repentance and forgiveness

Adela Sefuku is a resident of Rwamagana municipality in the eastern province of Kibungo and a widow of 1994 genocide whose husband a former pastor in the Seventh Day Adventist church was killed during the 1994 genocide. Three of her children were also killed. She lost three children. A group of *Interahamwe* attacked her home and threatened to kill her. One of the killers by the name of Kagabo was from the neighbourhood. Adela asked Kagabo to have mercy on her since there was no grudge between them. Instead of giving her mercy, Kagabo ruthlessly cut her on the head, on the back of her neck and on the thighs, legs, and got a long knife pushed it through the top of her head. She lost consciousness and fell into coma. Adela gives her spiritual experience in the following words:

"While I was in coma two men dressed in white appeared to me in a form of a dream. In the dream I saw many dead bodies and the two men told me that these are God's children whom He loves very much. They did not die because God hated them. You will one day meet these people in Heaven" the two men told Adela "but only on condition that she did not in anyway take revenge on those that killed her husband, children, relatives and friends and instead forgive them". Later on , Adela recovered her consciousness and she is alive today.

Like other Rwandan women, after the genocide Adela went through hardships and traumatizing experience. She had lost almost all, she started a ministry of preaching in prisons so that those who are imprisoned can repent the crimes committed and seek forgiveness as the Word of God expects to deal with sinners. It so happened that the government's policy in the drive to bring about justice and reconciliation. Encourages those who committed crimes related to genocide to publicly acknowledge responsibility and repent. In a local prison known as Ntsinda in the Eastern province of Kibungo, Adela used to preach. She preached to prisoners about repentance. Something unusual happened. A young prisoner by the name of Kagabo stood up as to ask a question, but instead confessed in the following words:

"After listening to the message I have decided to tell you the truth." You will forgive me I did something terribly bad to you. I am the one who cut you with a machete and I killed your husband and children."

Kagabo went ahead to confess before a gathering of prisoners and visitors. This was received well by Adela who made the following declaration

"You killed my husband whom I loved so much that it is impossible for a human being to forgive but I have forgiven you because God has enabled me. From now on, you will be my 'son' and you will be staying with me I will build a house for you where my last born was supposed to build his own house." This made many prisoners break into tears.

Thereafter, Adela used to carry food and other items to Kagabo when he was still in prison. When Kagabo was later released from the prison after confessing the crimes, he joined Adela at her residence after staying for one day in his real home. Adela received Kagabo with joy and genuine love. She has since then built a house for him in her own compound and set up a small chicken-rearing project for him. The relatives and neighbours to both Adela and Kagabo find this strange.

They were suspicious but now some are amazed while others are still against it. They thought she was simply crazy. Her surviving children who live in the U.S approve of this as well as members of her congregation.

Cases of similar to this are common in different parts of this country but only differ in magnitude. They are not generalisable so to speak but only testify that there is a great potential among women to forgive

and reconcile with their enemies. This is a great lesson and encouragement to others. More efforts to mobilize Banyarwanda on both sides of the spectrum are important and the role of religious organisations is critical for the process of reconciliation through repentance and forgiveness to be genuine and sustainable.

PART III: CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

CONCLUSION

Across the country, there is overwhelming evidence that women have been involved in initiatives that promote peace and reconciliation or contribute to the process despite the fact that most of their contributions remain unknown or invisible. The driving force behind the success of women's contribution to peace building and reconciliation process has been a combination of committed leadership at different levels and the willingness of the people. The grassroots women took their full responsibility to face the challenge of the post conflict period and put their efforts together to ensure the survival of their families and determined not to see their country slide back but instead move forward towards last peace and reconciliation. This yielded positive results because of the strong political commitment towards national and reconciliation, and the same time committed to gender equality and women's empowerment.

The research brought to light the fact that in all situations women were the first to think of forming associations in order to break isolation and mistrust between families and individuals. Thousands of associations that came to be born after 1994 emphasise women effort to put their hands together to find a way out of the huge challenges by the 1994 genocide. Despite the above initiatives, women's participation in peace building and reconciliation process continues to be hampered by a number of constraints created.

Women in Rwanda from all walks of life have been very instrumental in taking on the burden of caring and providing for hundred of thousands of orphans and vulnerable children, the sick, handicapped, those in prisons and undertaken reconciliation and peace within the families and communities. The volume and value of this contribution can never be estimated in monetary value and in terms of impact to Rwandan society. Most of these activities are unrecorded and not so publicly recognised. Women throughout the country have been heavily involved in providing mutual support at family and community level. Women grouping informally in thousands of associations, to start informal micro credit and mutual support associations to provide resources for household wellbeing; shelter, healthy for widows and other affected groups.

In order to attain sustainable peace and reconciliation, it is imperative to strengthen the linkages and interactions between the leadership at different levels and the community each contributing to the other and drawing on the values of peace that are embedded with the Rwandese culture. The leadership must also draw inspiration from the cultural values that enhance peace. The role of Rwandan culture is so strong in rebuilding peace that reviving the positive cultural values from other societies is extremely important and urgent. It was found that culture is a very critical element in peace building process. The Rwandan culture has within it strong values on peace and harmonious existence and even elements that bring people together when they have differences and conflict has erupted between them. This should go hand in hand with adopting externally generated values. Institutional linkages must be strengthened in order to ensure maximum returns in the community.

Women's contribution has been greatest where leadership was close to the community. The role of leadership either by women or men is critical as it gives orientation and encouragement or motivation. Women's role in peace building and reconciliation is highly linked to women's cultural roles of being mediators and helpers of those in need. This role is very critical in women participating in voluntary activity aimed at promoting reconciliation at community as well as household level. Women's voluntary contribution is at the heart of many achievements women have contributed to in the area of peace building.

Women's organisations at the level of government, civil society and their own organisations or women councils have played a critical role in mobilising women for peace and reconciliation by making it their own goal and by acting as role models and mobilising fellow women. These organisations have worked

with other women to influence country's politics such as participation in elections, constitution making, and legal reforms as participation in elections, constitution making, and justice and security.

In many situations women went out of their way to forgive their enemies as one pillar of reconciliation. This is a good model that can be emulated in other places and also serve as a lesson to men. The challenge that remains is to make this known widely. Reconciliation works best where people share common activity or resource and reconciliation takes place nationally. It takes place through mutual support and in line with people's common cultural realities.

Women have a strong potential for educating their children and imparting on them positive cultural values that enhance peace and reconciliation. In areas where women have come together and worked towards reconciliation; their children have spontaneously followed their examples women have a big role to provide basic education and up bringing for children to embrace the culture of peace. This forms the basis of women working towards and promoting sustainable peace.

Despite the substantial contribution women have made towards peace and reconciliation in the last decade, they still face a host of challenges that hinder their full contribution to the promotion of peace and reconciliation. Some of the outstanding challenges are linked to women's subordinate position to the Rwandan society or the negative consequences of the 1994 genocide or the weak institutional capacity to coordinate and harmonize different peace building initiatives. It has been observed that high rates of illiteracy and lack of education undermine women's confidence and capacity to participate to effectively participate in community and national programs. This is linked again to the historical gender-related imbalances in the colonial and post-colonial education systems.

Another challenge is linked to the persistence of poverty in rural areas with women as the main victims. This is compounded by the high incidence of female-headed households; scarcity of resources and the inability to address basic needs frustrates women's efforts to contribute towards peace and reconciliation.

Violence against women is still a threat to women's role contributing to peace building and reconciliation. This phenomenon affects women's security with regards to their role in participatory justice system *Gacaca* and their health. Since their very existence is threatened, their energy in the resolve to be agents of peace is greatly undermined.

While at the national level the role of women in decision making is becoming increasingly significant with 49% of the lower chamber of parliament comprising of women and having made important inroads in the judiciary and executive, at the local government level and within the private sector and other critical areas, the participation of women in decision making at local level is still weak.

Women's visibility in peace building programs remains limited mainly as the result of the negative gender stereotypes that still characterise the Rwandan society that is patriarchal in structure.

Throughout the study, it was noted that a big proportion of the people interviewed appreciated the role the national unity and reconciliation commission in supporting and facilitating women reconciliation's efforts. However, some respondents were of the view that the commission could do more if it worked directly with the communities through local initiatives at the grassroots level.

RECOMMENDATIONS

In the past ten years, women's contribution to peace building and reconciliation is quite significant despite the fact that it has not been hitherto acknowledged and documented. This is largely attributed to the traditional role of women as peacemakers and the post-genocide environment both social and political which was conducive to enhance women's involvement in the peace and reconciliation process. However, great hurdles remain to be overcome if women's role in this process is to be maximized.

Following are specific recommendations that would enhance the participation of women in the peace building and reconciliation process:

1. Given the critical role of the leadership in facilitating the reconciliation process, NURC should mobilize civil, religious and intellectual leaders to spearhead reconciliation initiatives at national and community levels.
2. The NURC should as a matter of priority develop a national policy on peace and reconciliation and ensure that it is highly engendered as provided for in the constitution, vision 2020 and the national gender policy.
3. Given the complexity and cross-cutting nature of peace, reconciliation and gender, the NURC should set up focal points in different departments and structures. These will include key government ministries and more particularly in all structures responsible for advancing gender equality.
4. The NURC should put in place a coordination mechanism and monitor reconciliation initiatives at community level. The NURC should make an inventory of the numerous best practices of women with reconciliation initiatives that have not been highlighted in this study with the view of disseminating them within and outside the country at the same time a system of supporting and motivating best performing women individuals and organizations that have contributed to peace and reconciliation processes and reward them and use their experiences to motivate and educate others because women's contribution to unity and reconciliation remains less visible and recognisable.
5. Lack of support and clear follow up should be addressed by establishing a strong monitoring and evaluation system that will permit the tracking of performance indicators and outcomes and enable the NURC realize the extent to which peace and reconciliation is being achieved and the persistent constraint that require special attention.
6. Women in leadership positions such as cabinet ministers, parliamentarians, private sector operators, civil society leaders, researchers and others should be encouraged and facilitated to work together in different fora and forge close working relationships with rural women in the areas of promoting peace and reconciliation through different initiatives.
7. The NURC should encourage women to identify economic opportunities aiming to alleviate poverty that is widespread among women and the society in general, by doing this; the commission will be able to contribute towards the achievements of lasting peace and reconciliation.
8. The NURC should put in place a system of working with women councils, women NGOs and other CBOs and FBOs to disseminate the message of reconciliation to the community in a practical approach such as functional adult literacy, other integrated community development initiatives.
9. The Ministries of Culture and that of Gender and Family, the NURC and related civil society organisations should work closely to use culture as an instrument of peace and reconciliation among Rwandans. Women should be targeted in a special manner as the main actors of transmitting cultural values that foster peaceful coexistence.
10. The NURC and the Ministry of Culture should facilitate provinces and districts to organise annual cultural festivals in music, drama, poetry, and dances centering on the values of peace and reconciliation deliberately encouraging women to participate in such events while highlighting

opportunities and challenges in promoting lasting peace and reconciliation from the community's point of view.

11. The NURC should be involved very practically on issues related to any form of insecurity particularly that which is caused by gender-based violence against women. The commission with the collaboration of other institutions such as the national police, the ministries of justice, internal affairs and gender, the courts and the civil society organisations to explore the extent to which peace building and reconciliation are affected and take collective concrete measures to address it.
12. Local authorities should be sensitised on gender as a tool of development. The NURC should facilitate these authorities to access resources and tools to enable these authorities to identify women as agents of peace and reconciliation in communities and building on experience they already have.
13. NURC should encourage and organise experience-sharing sessions where Rwandans, youth and elderly from different backgrounds are encouraged to talk openly and in a free atmosphere about their experiences related to the conflict and genocide ideology. This will add value to the current approach of sensitisation through historical facts of the country. This approach is compared to the open debate or dialogue, which is used as strategy to combat the HIV/AIDS pandemic.
14. In-depth research on the role of women in peace-building and reconciliation should be undertaken to provide more information that will guide future interventions and inform policy makers on major trends and issues that can lead to policy changes in the area of peace and reconciliation.
15. In order to strengthen the knowledge and analytical skills related to issues of peace building, conflict and reconciliation, the NURC should establish a national initiative that will train men and women in different categories who will in turn impart the knowledge they acquire to those living in rural areas. Trainees should include women especially those that have been involved in peace education initiatives on voluntary basis.

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