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Women's involvement in peacebuilding activities and reconciliation in Burundi is the focus of this article. Although the social fabric of the society was destroyed during the civil war, women continued to play a key role as peacebuilders, peacekeepers and peacemakers. Much thanks to their efforts the country reached its current level of reconciliation and stability.

Women in post-civil war Burundi

Agents of change, drivers of progress and pillars of reconciliation

Triphonie Habonimana

The following article focuses on the role of women in sustaining peace and reconciliation after a long period of conflict in Burundi. They play a pivotal role in sustaining peace and development and are a strategic constituency to build on, in order to move forward towards effective reconciliation. A short introduction will explain the process of transitional justice in the country. I will then show why women may be said to be key pillars of reconciliation. A short conclusion will summarise the ideas developed. The thoughts and ideas developed are the viewpoints of the author.

Since independence from Belgium in 1962, a series of military and non-democratic regimes dominated the country. The conflict raged internally and caused a lot of psycho-social, physical, economic and political suffering among Burundians. The country experienced serious socio-political unrest associated with the exclusion of some major groups of the Burundian population, including women, and the social fabric was destroyed. An unknown number of Burundians was killed, some fled to neighbouring countries, while others became internally displaced and many joined the rebel groups. After the signing of the Arusha Peace Agreement in 2000, where parties to the conflict agreed to establish a non-judicial Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), Burundians breathed a sigh of relief and hoped for a better future.

According to the peace agreement, the TRC would be empowered to hear victims' complaints, to summon accused persons to appear, and to decide what reparations to allocate. However, the final destination – the TRC-led reconciliation process – remains out of reach. Thirteen years after the signing of the peace agreement, Burundians are still waiting for the TRC to be set up.

During the periods of conflict, women experienced a difficult and long period of struggle. They were dehumanised, humiliated and ill-treated. Being subjected to domestic and sexual violence, raped, exposed to HIV/AIDS and then traumatised, they lost their dignity and hope and could not aspire to a better future.

Women and conflict in Burundi

The conflict in Burundi was costly. Thousands of people were killed, others fled to neighbouring countries and many others became internally displaced. Infrastructures were destroyed, women and girls were raped and many of them became widows and orphans. The social fabric that used to characterise the Burundian society was completely destroyed.

In spite of their hardship, women continued to play a key role as peacebuilders, peacekeepers and peacemakers in their communities. They assisted orphans and displaced persons and continued to spread messages of peace. Supported by international organisations, they worked around the country to preach peaceful coexistence both at community and national level, because they were tired of conflict.

At the community level, many women initiated reconciliation through dialogue and trainings. They also played the role of conflict mediators wherever the conflict arose in their neighbourhoods. Although the situation in the country was insecure, some rural women who were internally displaced continued to go to the fields to ensure agricultural production and to provide for the daily needs of their children and husbands who survived.

At the national level, women's organisations in collaboration with the Ministry of Gender organised different activities aimed at building peace across the country. In addition, a national seminar was held that led to the creation of a women's network for peace and nonviolence, March for Peace. National campaigns for peace were organised in order to continue to show that women are peace actors and that they are tired of conflict.

Reconciliation as a healing process

There is no single and agreed upon definition of reconciliation. Some people may think that reconciliation happens once, but as it is commonly said, "reconciliation is a process". Reconciliation has many challenges and hurdles all along

its way, and Burundi is in this process. It is not an easy goal to achieve, nor is progress easily realised. It has to be an inclusive process, because it needs to involve both victims and perpetrators, otherwise it may fail. Reconciliation can never be imposed; it is a product of an individual's self-reflection and his or her decision to move forward.

It is obvious from what has been observed in the Burundian context that reconciliation must be supported by various activities in the community. Most of these activities are initiated by women, and often the activities aim at economic reintegration, trauma healing and social cohesion.

After a violent conflict, it is necessary to deal with the past. This helps citizens to go through what happened, discuss its aftermath and then decide which strategies and actions to take in order to move forward with hope for a better future. Reconciliation is a long process where people try to regain their social network and seek to return to the same position and place as before the conflict. Many people do not know which route to take, but the most important thing for any society is to arrive at the final destination: effective reconciliation.

In rural areas, women face many challenges, including cultural barriers and the fact that they often do not know, or choose to ignore, their rights. Though they were excluded from the peace negotiations and the conflict resolution process, they are now key drivers in the reconciliation process. They have also affirmed their position as community leaders. Their motivation to manage or resolve conflict is high. For this, the society gives them a space and values their viewpoints. Though they are not yet many in number, there are now women who have been elected by both men and women to be "Chief of hills". This is a great step forward, as historically women were not allowed to speak in front of men and were under no circumstances allowed to be leaders. In addition, in rural areas, women are now associated with the governance of their communities. They are now decision takers and makers.

In general, at the grassroots level, women have decided to be agents for the promotion of community reconciliation. They are conscious of the necessity to reach reconciliation, especially in a country like Burundi where the conflict lasted for more than a decade. The more they see the consequences of the conflict, the more they invest in reconciliation activities.

Women's participation in the peace agreement

The Arusha Peace Agreement was the result of a long negotiation process that started in mid-June 1998. According to the parties, "since Independence and throughout the different regimes, there have been a number of constant phenomena which have given rise to the conflict that has persisted up to the present time: massive and deliberation killings widespread violence and exclusion have taken place during this period".[1] Representatives from seventeen political parties, the armed movements, the government of Burundi and the National Assembly were involved in the talks. However, the parties themselves excluded some groups, among them women, from the talks, although they were a key component of the community. Thus they underestimated their contributions.

Already by the time, some women began to mobilise and they organised themselves in different associations. They then started to claim their rights to be included in the negotiations. Strategic meetings were conducted with the message to negotiators, mediators, and diplomats to invite women to the negotiations. Not until February 2000, six months before the negotiations were to begin, did women gain the status of observers. They then succeeded to lobby for their inclusion and for a gender dimension in the agreement. As a matter of fact, a minimum of 30 per cent representation of women was guaranteed in the constitution. They organised in community associations in order to help victims of war and conducted different actions for peace, thus playing a crucial role in building peace in the country.

Women and peacebuilding

As said in the proverb, "actions speak louder than words", peacebuilding and reconciliation necessitate action on the ground. After the 1993 crisis, Burundi entered a new phase of development in 2005. In fact, national actions were taken in the peace process. Though there was one rebel movement that was fighting until 2008, the president signed a law in January 2005 to initiate a new national army including integrating all other armed groups from divergent Burundian ethnic groups. The constitution was approved by voters in a referendum, which marked the first time for Burundians to vote since 1994.

Hence, from 2005, some refugees began to come back to the country and women became very much involved in the implementation of the Arusha Peace Agreement. They took part in security sector reform, reintegration of war affected persons, the organisation of democratic elections in 2005, and the processes of peacebuilding and of national economic growth. Their involvement was facilitated by different national and international non-governmental organisations mainly through community workshops, seminars etc.

Since then, in some places, women have been trained in conflict transformation, conflict resolution, early warning tools and mediation techniques. Many of them have become conflict mediators within the cross-cluster peace committees in the communities where they live. They were helped by civil society organisations whose focus is conflict resolution/transformation. These organisations facilitated community workshops during which simulation exercises were organised to help them to contextualise their work and to have a better understanding of transformation. In some places, a follow up community committee has also been put in place.

> ***"Widows brought food to men who were incarcerated for having killed these women's husbands.***

In fact, women's perception of themselves as victims has changed over time and they have become true agents of change, drivers of progress and pillars of reconciliation in Burundi. Returnees, displaced persons, and ex-combatants, both men and women, work together in harmony and have a strong will to develop the society. Women also participate actively in economic development, one of the essential conditions for reconciliation and transformation. At the community level, thousands of women are involved in a microcredit

system where they mutually give and receive loans/credits and reimburse at the lowest interest rates. This system allows them to access economic opportunities by initiating income generating activities. Consequently, their lives have improved: those who could not send their children to school are now able to do so and are able to pay the school fees, those who used to eat once in a day can eat three times a day, etc.

The role of women can also been seen in the promotion of the rule of law where they actively participate in fighting against gender-based social injustice. This is currently seen through the development of national policies, laws and strategies which take into account the contribution of women. Examples of this are the Poverty Reduction Strategy Pillar II, the penal code of 2009, the UN Resolution 1325 action plan, the national strategy to fight against gender based violence, and the 2025 vision, among others.



PHOTO: JUDITH BATUSAMA/IRIN

Over 550,000 citizens were displaced during Burundi's civil war. In 2005 some refugees began to come back to the country. A group of returnees holding a national flag as they listen to the welcome speech at Gatumba border post.

Women and trauma healing

Trauma healing and reconciliation, in which many women have participated, are key processes to sustain peace and development. Almost a decade after the conflict formally ended, these issues are still of vital importance in Burundian communities. When trauma healing and community reconciliation are provided, family relationships significantly improve, and reconciliation is better sustained. According to the Legal Representative of Trauma Healing and Reconciliation Services in Burundi, David Niyonzima, "the seeds of tomorrow's wars grow in the soil of today's unhealed traumas; the seeds of tomorrow's peace grow in the soil of today's healing and reconciliation".

In a nutshell, a community must heal itself, and this healing must be holistic in order to foster a culture of peace. For example, after they participated in the trauma healing and community reconciliation sessions, women of Mutaho, in Gitega Province, decided to visit the men who killed their husbands, who were currently jailed in the Central Prison in Gitega. This also happened in Ruyigi where widows brought food to men who were incarcerated for having killed these women's husbands. They did it as a sign of reconciliation after the men had confessed their crimes and asked the widows for pardon. These actions carry a deep meaning of reconciliation and not many people would do the same. These women are dedicated to consolidating peace and reconciliation in their communities, so that life can regain the meaning it used to have before the conflict.

Recently, the international community became more interested in issues concerning the role of women in peace and security. The Platform for Action of the United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women (Beijing, 1995) said: "While entire communities suffer the consequences of armed conflict and terrorism, women and girls are particularly affected because of their status in society and their sex"[2]. In October 2000, the United Nations Security Council adopted an innovative resolution (UN Resolution 1325 on women, peace and security), which recognises that maintaining and promoting peace and security requires the participation of women in decision-making, and which calls upon all actors to adopt this perspective.

The international community recognises the need to increase the participation of women in conflict resolution and takes account of gender in all analyses, policies and programmes designed to overcome conflict and promote peace. As Burundi is waiting for the implementation of a Truth and Reconciliation Commission, women should be strongly represented in that commission, as they have already substantially started developing community initiatives to sustain peace, development and reconciliation.

Members of the groups who attended trauma healing workshops are stable-minded now, which can be observed by the way they meet one another. They actively listen to each other, and they have compassion for one another, which was not the case before. Many of them report that there are no more conflicts in the families of the participants in the workshops. They regained their trust in people which enabled them to say and believe that life, peace and reconciliation are intertwined and yet possible.

Though Burundi was affected by ethnic and political divisions, it remains a very beautiful country, where life has deep meaning and reconciliation is possible. On the basis of their achievements after the conflict and their contribution in the post-reconstruction period, women have shown that they constitute a force for peace and reconciliation and therefore should always be involved in peacemaking and peacekeeping. They are drivers of peace, sustainable development and reconciliation.

1 Arusha Peace Agreement, Article 3:1 – Post-colonial period

2 The United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women (Beijing 1995): Platform for Action, paragraph 135