

GENDER DYNAMICS AND TRANSITIONAL JUSTICE IN BURUNDI

Building Bridges in Burundi

Gender and Programmatic Context



The use of transitional justice to address Burundi's conflict history was first addressed within the framework of the Arusha Peace and Reconciliation Agreement signed in 2000.

In terms of gender-just approach to transitional justice, it was only in 2020 during the 75th UN General Session that the Special Rapporteur on the promotion of truth, justice, reparations and guarantees of non-recurrence reported that gender issues have been "ignored or touched upon in only a superficial way" by truth commissions worldwide. The report stressed the need for gender-responsive transitional justice mechanisms that addresses the complexity and intersectionality of the experiences of women, men, and gender and sexual minorities in the face of gender-based violence. Otherwise, the Burundian Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) processes would be incomplete.

Building Bridges in Burundi is a country-wide, five-year peacebuilding project, developed to mitigate the root causes of conflict and instability in Burundi. The program supported the Burundian Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) with a community-based approach to reconciliation focused on the global transitional justice (TJ) four pillars: truth seeking, prosecution, reparations, and institutional reforms.

BBB employed men and women as TJ focal points to organize community-based truth and reconciliation processes and intergenerational dialogues. The gender study found that while communities for the most part welcomed dialogue, there was still resistance against the process itself of truth and reconciliation and mistrust of the mediators who were thought of as meddling in matters that did not concern them.

"I had an issue with my husband and we couldn't solve it on our own, I knew this madam was a mediator and she lives in our neighbourhood. So I ran to her. she came with me to meet my husband and after long dialogues, we were reconciled."

(Female, Busoni, Rutana)

"I received training on the peaceful resolution of conflicts. That is very useful to me when it comes to settling a dispute amicably.."

**(Chantal, Mubimbi,
Bujumbura-Rural)**

Gender Study Findings on Good Governance

In 2021, a gender study was conducted to examine how BBB initiatives made an impact on gender relations at community level. The study was conducted through semi-structured interviews and focus-groups across 13 municipalities in Burundi. Here we share our main findings and recommendations.

Main findings and observations:

Women are more likely to participate or testify if they were supported and motivated by TJ focal points who are women.

Women are also more likely to participate if outreach sessions on the work of TJ focal points can be scheduled during the time of day more conducive to women's schedules.

When testifying or facing their past tormentors, women feel more vulnerable than men and are more likely to feel re-victimized during the process. Perpetrators of violence (mostly men) intimidate those who intend to speak or testify about the past (see other column).



Narrative theater on Transitional Justice: Mpinga - Kayove

In terms of the gender dynamics, respondents recognized that transitional justice issues can be different for men and women as they experienced different realities during past crises and conflicts:

Men were more involved in armed groups or in the national army. Women were left behind to take care of children and orphans, find food, and manage their schooling often in difficult conditions.

There were cases of rape and other violence perpetuated against women and girls.

Widows and orphans had to abide by discriminatory land laws that did not give them rights to properties left by their husbands or fathers.

Women have testified that transitional justice process only reawakened painful memories that often led to re-traumatization.

Most women did not appreciate the work of the TRC such as the exhumation of mass graves of the 1972 massacre perpetrated against the Hutu ethnic tribe. They fear not only a hidden political agenda, but also the past being too painful to revisit.

Recommendations:

There is a need therefore to strengthen the capacity of TJ focal points on ensuring trauma-informed spaces and facilitation to avoid the re-victimization and re-traumatization of survivors.

There is a need to depoliticize the narrative around TJ processes and ensure a politics-free, trauma-informed space.

Strengthen support to existing youth networks that promote intergenerational dialogue as part of the TJ process.

There is a need to develop advocacy strategy to better link community-based TJ approaches to the national TRC.