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# 16 Days of Activism: Addressing gender-based violence in Burundi and Rwanda

This week marks the last week of 16 days of activism against gender-based violence. Gender-based violence is a broad concept: it includes sexual, physical, emotional and economic harm done to someone based on their gender, usually targeted at women and girls. It is an issue that is high on the agenda in both Rwanda and Burundi. According to the Demographic and Health Survey of 2014-2015<sup>1</sup>, four out of ten Rwandan women experienced physical, sexual or emotional violence from a spouse. In Burundi, at least 40% of women experienced some form of gender-based violence<sup>2</sup>. Due to alarming numbers such as these, CARE Nederland has implemented the Every Voice Counts program in Rwanda and Burundi to address the prevention and response to GBV through capacitating women, men and civil society to advocate for a life free from gender based violence.

## Government efforts

The governments of these neighboring states have recognized the importance of including women's rights and the elimination of GBV in their policies. Rwanda adopted a law against GBV in 2009 and has had a national policy on GBV since 2011. The national GBV policy has three objectives in relation to gender-based violence, which are prevention, response, and monitoring. The policy specifies the key actors responsible for the implementation of the policy and it is complemented by the National Strategic Plan for GBV. The law, policy and the strategic plan include all the different forms of gender-based violence: violence that causes physical, sexual, psychological or economic harm.

This law, policy and plan were adopted as part of the Rwandan government's commitments as signatory to international frameworks and agreements related to gender-based violence, such as the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination of Violence Against Women (CEDAW), the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, the International Conference on the Great Lakes Region Kampala Declaration, and the Protocol to the African Charter on Human and People's Rights, to name but a few. The government of Rwanda has shown commitment to challenging GBV by establishing the National Gender Monitoring Office (GMO) as an institution that monitors the implementation of national and international gender commitments at all levels.

In Burundi, the government ratified several international documents as well. CEDAW, the Kampala declaration<sup>3</sup>, and the UN Security Council Resolution 1325 have been incorporated into the Burundian constitution. The government of Burundi has developed several national policies and laws regarding the issue of women's rights and gender-based violence. Since 2016, Burundi has also had a law focused on gender-based violence. Although the law punishes acts of GBV, it does not include important provisions such as compensation for victims of GBV.

**40%** of

Burundian and Rwandan women have experienced gender-based violence.

<sup>1</sup> Demographic and Health Survey Rwanda 2014-2015: <https://dhsprogram.com/pubs/pdf/FR316/FR316.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> Enquête Démographique et Santé au Burundi 2016-2017: <https://dhsprogram.com/pubs/pdf/PR89/PR89.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> [The Kampala Declaration](#) on Sexual and Gender Based Violence was signed in 2011 by members states of the International Conference on the Great Lakes Region. The declaration was signed to prevent, end impunity and provide support to victims of SGBV.

The Burundian government is currently implementing a National Gender Policy effective from 2012 until 2025. One of the priorities of this policy is to eliminate GBV. A study done by USAID in 2017<sup>4</sup> indicated that there are some gaps in the implementation of this policy. There is very little budget available within the Ministry of Human Rights, Social Affairs and Gender to fund this policy and it is insufficient to cover all the needs that have to be addressed. A coordination mechanism to oversee the implementation of the policy has also not yet been set up.

### Budgets and social norms

On paper, women and girls in Burundi and Rwanda are well protected. In practice however, gender-based violence still occurs frequently. In Rwanda, this is partly due to limited capacity of the Rwandan government to prioritize GBV in their plans and budgets due to many competing priorities. Evaluations done over the last few years by the Institute for Policy Analysis and Research (IPAR)<sup>5</sup> illustrated that GBV has not been included in the Imihigo planning of districts across the country. Imihigo, or



performance contracts, is a decentralized planning process through which the district authorities commit to achieving certain results within a year and are held accountable by their constituents. The plans included in Imihigo are grouped within three categories: economic development, social welfare, and good governance and

justice. As gender-based violence is considered a cross-cutting issue, there is insufficient budget in the Imihigo dedicated to this matter. The consequent lack of prioritization of GBV in district and national government budgets is among the many challenges why GBV in communities remains prevalent.

Another reason for the persistence of GBV is the nature of the social norms and values related to gender relations and the family. Men and women often view the man as the provider of the family, a scenario in which the woman is expected to support her husband and take care of the children. Before it was revised, Rwanda's Family Law included a provision that stated that men were the head of the family. Burundi's Code of Persons and the Family still includes an article that states that the husband is the chief of the family: "He performs this function to which the wife contributes morally and materially in the interest of the household and children." In line with this existing belief and norm as formalized by the government, gender-based violence has been considered acceptable, both by men and women. When men are seen as the sole providers of the family, women are left in vulnerable economic and social positions. Although national policies and laws are implemented to protect and promote women's rights, in the communities unequal power relations between men and women remain persistent and lead to harmful consequences such as GBV.

### Every Voice Counts

Through the [Every Voice Counts](#) program, CARE and our civil society partners want to change the status quo. The program organizes meetings within the community to discuss gender-based violence and women's rights. The community is informed about existing laws regarding gender and GBV. Not only women and girls are targeted in these meetings.



<sup>4</sup> USAID/Burundi Gender Analysis Final Report 2017: <https://banyanglobal.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/USAID-Burundi-Gender-Analysis-Final-Report-2017.pdf>

<sup>5</sup> IPAR research from [2013/2014](#), [2014/2015](#), and [2015/2016](#).

Men engagement is an important element in protecting women's rights. The program trains men on the topic of GBV so they can support the fight against it. The program also works with role models (both men and women) who share their life transformation stories to raise awareness on GBV and campaign against it.

Aside from capacity-building, the Every Voice Counts program wants to improve services related to GBV in the communities. The [community scorecard](#) is one approach used for this purpose. It focuses on four areas: health, social, legal and security. Community members meet the service providers who work in these different areas and have the chance to address any problems they encounter. The service providers together with the community commit to implement actions to improve the services. In follow-up meetings, service providers are held accountable to the extent that they deliver on the actions that were agreed with the communities.

In Burundi and Rwanda the community scorecard approach creates spaces for dialogue and negotiation that generate not only evidences on the gaps in GBV policy implementation but also on the quality of participation of local people in such an accountability process. By and large, the Every Voice Counts program is promoting and using existing spaces for dialogues where women, men and community leaders can safely raise and discuss not only issues of gender-based violence but also governance challenges and feedback mechanisms from central and local government authorities. These efforts to claim spaces for dialogues and for people's voices to be heard are approaches of the Every Voice Counts program to promote critical dialogue and engagement between citizens and formal authorities.

In Burundi, the Every Voice Counts program also organizes debates between experts and government officials from different ministries to discuss their roles related to GBV prevention and response. These debates are aired on the radio and are valuable to civil society and community-based organizations to be informed on the government's position towards GBV. For the participants of the debate itself, the discussions are useful to agree on what is expected of each of them. The Every Voice Counts team in Burundi has also managed to influence the government's process of developing a gender policy and strategic plan by delivering input and advice. CARE and partners also engage with the Ministry of Gender to harmonise the database on GBV which is a way to address the problem of not having national data that shows the extent of GBV incidences in the country.

### **The future ahead**

Although the capacity-building, advocacy and accountability efforts of the Burundian and Rwandan governments and of programs like Every Voice Counts are rising, there is still a lot to be done to meet the needs and sustain a true transformation. 16 days of activism runs from the International Day of Elimination of Violence Against Women on November 25th until Human Rights Day on December 10th. During this global moment gender-based violence is on the agendas of all stakeholders: women and men in the communities, civil society organisations, international NGOs, and governments worldwide. Yet gender-based violence is also an issue throughout the rest of the year. Real change can only be made when well-implemented laws and policies are matched with a change in awareness and attitudes of the people themselves, which is a long term process. By 2020, the Every Voice Counts program can contribute to this change by ensuring that local authorities include GBV in their plans and budgets. According to an African proverb, if you wish to move mountains tomorrow, you must start lifting stones today. Every Voice Counts is advocating for those stones to be lifted, by governments, CSO's, INGO's and ultimately by the men and women in GBV stricken communities themselves.

