**“The Barundikazi” – Burundian Women’s Quest for a Voice in the Peace Process**

The “*Barundikazi*” – the women and girls of Burundi – have been at the center of the current political and security crisis, as victims, activists and peacebuilders. The visit on 25-26 February by the African Union High-Level delegation (consisting of the heads of state of South Africa, Senegal, Gabon, Ethiopia and Mauritania) may present one of the last remaining opportunities to quell the escalating violence, which has been triggered by President Nkurunziza’s contested third term, unparalleled since Burundi’s decade-long civil war. For Burundi to re-take a path to peace and development, the Inclusive Inter-Burundian Dialogue must immediately resume to revive the stalled Kampala talks, and put women’s voices and experiences at the forefront.

Nearly 240,000 have fled Burundi to escape the violence, [half of whom are female](http://data.unhcr.org/burundi/regional.php). The levels of [gender-based violence](http://static1.squarespace.com/static/506c8ea1e4b01d9450dd53f5/t/5678aee07086d7cddecf1bab/1450749707001/20151222%2BTanzania.pdf) and rape during their flight to safety are distressing. Living conditions in refugee camps remain precarious. Those who have stayed have experienced and/or are at risk for unabated violence, killings, torture and disappearances. [Patterns of sexual violence](http://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=16953&LangID=E) and gang rape, perpetrated by members of the security forces and pro-government “Imbonerakure” youth to humiliate and instill fear in opposition neighborhoods, are emerging and increasingly ethnicized. The loss of male breadwinners – killed, disappeared, or exiled – in Burundi’s traditional social hierarchy system is undoubtedly so disproportionately increasing women’s socio-economic burden.

Nonetheless, the “*Barundikazi*” have stood up and organized [non-violent marches](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dCU-hRoN0Js) as early as December 2014 to demand that peace and security be a *sine qua non* condition for free elections and that the constitution and the Arusha Peace Agreement, which ended the 1993-2005 civil war, be respected. Members of the “[*Movement of Women and Girls for Peace and Security*](http://www.mffps-burundi.org/favicon.ico)”, created in the midst of the anti-third term demonstrations, have been forced into exile. They have however been able to participate, although minimally, in the Bujumbura (July) and [Kampala](http://www.mffps-burundi.org/12janv/MFFPS-%20Statement%20Of%20MLB%20at%20the%20opening%20of%20Dialogue%20%28Kampala%2C%2028%20Dec%202015%29.pdf) (December) 2015 preliminary peace talks. A “*Women, Peace and Security Platform*” has additionally been established, which unites women from political parties, religious groups and women's organizations. While women’s formal participation and legitimacy in the peace process remain contested by the Burundian government, the Platform sets out a framework for their potential role. Preparations for national consultations are underway and will seek to shape a women’s roadmap for the peace talks, addressing the full participation of women in governance, rule of law and development.

These recent initiatives in Burundi demonstrate the significant contributions by women to peacebuilding, in particular by mobilizing across the political and (ethnical) divide. They are however marginalized and not part of the formal peace process. This reflects global trends, with women representing a [mere 4 per cent](http://www.unwomen.org/~/media/headquarters/attachments/sections/library/publications/2012/10/wpssourcebook-03a-womenpeacenegotiations-en.pdf) of peace agreement signatories between 1992 and 2011. Peace processes tend to be driven by traditional rather than human security concerns, prioritizing the participation of warring parties and potential spoilers, seeking ceasefires and/or power-sharing arrangements between opposing groups that are invariably composed of men.

Research has demonstrated that women’s participation does not [risk derailing](http://graduateinstitute.ch/files/live/sites/iheid/files/sites/ccdp/shared/Docs/Publications/Beyond%20the%20Normative%20Can%20Women%27s%20Inclusion%20Really%20Make%20for%20Better%20Peace%20Processes.pdf) peace negotiations, as argued by sceptics. To the contrary, women’s contributions can strengthen broad social support, which in turn enhances the legitimacy of the peace process and its implementation. Women’s role is critical to ensure a more adequate reflection of Burundian demographics and of security needs and other aspirations of society as a [whole](http://www.peacewomen.org/sites/default/files/partpol_postconburundinepal_falch_2010_0.pdf). Rather than promoting elite-driven undemocratic deals, women have proven to be advocates of not only their own positions but for more just [societies overall](http://www.c-r.org/downloads/AccordInsight_WomenBuildingPeace_WomenBuildingPeace_0.pdf) – something that is sorely missing in Burundi’s current political economy of abuse and corruption.

The Arusha peace talks demonstrated that getting women’s voices heard does not come easily and full participation remains an on-going struggle. Only after the talks were underway in 1999, seven women were granted mere observer (rather than official negotiating) status after intense lobbying and exclusion. Parallel to the formal negotiations, these observers and warring parties’ female representatives developed recommendations during an [All-Party Women’s Peace Conference](http://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/03AWomenPeaceNeg.pdf). Many of the recommendations were incorporated but no women signed the agreement. Their prominence though in decision-making bodies did increase, with [at least 30 per cent](http://africa.unwomen.org/en/where-we-are/eastern-and-southern-africa/burundi) of seats in the senate, national assembly and government reserved for women.

The inclusion of women is particularly pressing given the visit by the high-level delegation to consult the Burundian government on [the dialogue process and the deployment of the MAPROBU prevention force](http://african-union.africa-newsroom.com/index.php?/press/the-african-union-appoints-the-highlevel-delegation-to-burundi). The Inter-Burundian Dialogue should learn the main lesson from Arusha and ensure women’s meaningful participation from the current pre-negotiation phase.

Participation is not merely a question of [increasing numbers](http://wps.unwomen.org/~/media/files/un%20women/wps/highlights/unw-global-study-1325-2015.pdf), as is often assumed. Nor is it enough to have women on the sidelines as observers. Women should be at the heart of the negotiations where they can effectively influence decision-making. To this end, facilitators must generate concrete incentives so that all negotiating teams appoint female representatives and do not ignore such requests, as in Kampala. The mediation team should also lead by example and add its own gender expert/advisor as a senior member of the team. It is essential to include gender-specific considerations regarding security, accountability, governance, socio-economic recovery, political participation in the agenda, and the outcome of the dialogue. In designing and monitoring a ceasefire agreement, gender-based violence ought to be recognized as a violation with appropriate sanctions for [perpetrators](http://www.peacebuilding.no/var/ezflow_site/storage/original/application/b6f94e1df2977a0f3e0e17dd1dd7dcc4.pdf). Donors of course can play an important role, for example, by supporting coalitions of women and women leaders of civil society. The negotiations should nevertheless aim to move beyond protection matters or technical fixes through gender quotas and reach agreement on measures to address the root causes of gender-based violence and gender inequality.

At this juncture in Burundi, women’s equal and meaningful participation - as envisaged by UN [Security Council Resolution 1325](http://daccess-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N00/720/18/PDF/N0072018.pdf?OpenElement) – is necessary to foster an inclusive and more robust peace process.

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