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BURUNDI

Concilie Gahungere has been CAFOB's Coordinator since December 2004. She has work experience in the field of human rights and women's rights training, conflict management and resolution, leadership, organisational management, project development, planning and follow-up/evaluation, gender and development, the fight against violence against women, etc.

She also has an experience in management as she has worked at a ministry, where she was in charge of the gender and human rights portfolio, then in a conflict resolution organisation, and now at CAFOB.

Burundian women still have problems accessing and controlling land and water



1. Introduction

In Burundi, women are important because of their two key roles: on the one hand, they are mothers, and on the other hand, they are central to their families' livelihoods and their country's economy. However, women do not benefit from the fruits of their labour – they remain the poorest people in the community and are given little social respect. The causes of this are stereotypes in Burundian culture, which treats women as second-class citizens.

Agriculture is Burundi's main economic activity, and most farming is done by women. However, women are doubtful of politicians' intentions to develop the agro-pastoralist sector, which still lacks appropriate technologies. The main tools used for working the land are still the hoe and billhook and women do not have access to weather forecasts, for example. No effort has been made to reduce women's workload when it comes to storing and processing agricultural surpluses – produce is still stored in granaries or jars.

However, the situation is not hopeless as the desire to reconsider women's social status and grant them their rightful place in the community is clearly on the rise.

At global level, a feminist movement emerged in the 1940s. As the years passed, the movement grew and allowed women to make considerable progress, even though there are still challenges to be faced. One of the crowning achievements of this long process was the **Beijing Action Plan**, which was supposed to serve as a base for governmental policies. More recently, the **Millennium Development Goals (MDGs)** accorded special attention to women, aiming to bring them out of poverty and ensure that they are literate. The MDGs are a key point of reference for states, and women must benefit from them.

With a view to increasing understanding of the situation of Burundian women, this article discusses the problems they face in accessing and controlling land and water.

2. Access to land

Over 85% of Burundi's population is involved in agriculture. It is chiefly women who perform agricultural activities and ensure their family's survival, yet women are mere usufructuaries of the land, since the patriarchal system governing Burundian society does not allow women to inherit as their brothers do.

In fact, Burundian women are viewed as labourers for the family. From a very young age, girls have to help their mothers with the housework, look after their brothers and sisters and work in the fields. Together with their mothers, they are responsible for the family's agricultural production. After harvest, production is managed by their fathers or brothers. Women have no say in how family resources are distributed, even though they are the main producers, and their personal needs are rarely taken into account.

When a woman gets married, she leaves her parents' house and invests her strength in building her future life with her husband. She works the farmland, tends the food-producing and industrial crops, looks after the livestock, harvests the crops, and so on. However, the land is owned and managed by her husband. When the man decides to go and sell the produce at the market, the woman must transport it there, whether she wants to or not.

Although women are the main producers, they have no control over proceedings and are unable to take decisions on the distribution of family resources. And the way these resources are spent makes women's situation even worse – at harvest time, a time of plenty, men keep mistresses and become polygamous, which causes their wives a great deal of suffering.

Moreover, women put up with being beaten by their husbands because they cannot simply take their children and go back to where they came from. In a sense, we could say that not allowing Burundian girls to inherit constitutes a form of violence against women.



The number of women and children living on the street is constantly increasing. There are several reasons for this phenomenon:

- Divorced women cannot return to their parents' house – even if they are taken back, they will not be with their children;
- A large number of destitute, disaster-stricken women (widows, women who have been repatriated or deported from Tanzania, etc.) are denied their right to family land;
- Women are abandoned and driven away by their husbands, who want to marry other women;
- Refugee women who marry men from their host country are driven away, with or without their children;
- Some women are born in refugee camps and do not know where they come from, while their parents died in the camps;
- Widows' families-in-law reclaim the land belonging to their dead husbands;
- Young girls with children are cast out by their families;

— Young girls who are raped and fall pregnant are forced to live on the street.

All of these women are forced into poverty and have to wander the streets of the country's capital and the main towns in the provinces. There is no governmental programme to support all the women who end up living in such awful conditions – the country is thus depriving itself of a significant proportion of the workforce, all because of customs and culture.

Here are **a few examples**:

1. The case of Marie H., who lives in a returnee camp. She cannot inherit her father's property, even though she is an only child. Her uncles denied her access to the family property.
2. The case of a divorced woman who went back to live at her family's home while her mother was still alive. When her mother died, her brothers drove her away from the house and refused to give her access to the land. She asked neighbours for help, but they would

not or could not settle the dispute. The woman is now poor and half-mad, and lives underneath an avocado tree.

3. The case of a displaced widow who lives in a camp for displaced people near the colline (hill) on which she was born. Her brothers have refused to give her access to the family land, saying that you cannot mix clans and upset the patriarchal system.

It is absolutely imperative that the legislation is improved. For example, there should be fairer inheritance laws that allow women to access and control land, since it is a necessary resource for families. The only way to bring about this change is to take action against the patriarchal system that deprives women of their right to land. It is obvious that customary laws are incomplete in this respect, so they must be changed to promote women's rights.

3. Access to water

There are regions of Burundi where there are very few sources of drinking water. Even when people want to collect water, they cannot find a place to do so. This is the case in the regions to the north, north-east and east of Burundi. The central plateaus and the Mumirwa regions, on the other hand, have adequate sources of water.

Women are responsible for providing their families with drinking water. But there is a severe shortage of water and only a tiny percentage of the population have access to it. Women's access to drinking water is a long-standing, critical issue, but no solution has been found so far. Burundian women are forced to travel long distances to find water, and the water they draw from wells is often not drinkable. Women sometimes have to use stream water for all their household needs, including consumption.

The absence of wells near people's homes has serious consequences for hygiene and increases the risk of diseases being transmitted. The lack of wells also has negative effects on girls' futures as they are often forced to abandon their education in favour of helping their mothers with household tasks by fetching water from distant sources.

Women living in towns are also affected by the shortage of drinking water. Every day, women, both young and old, living in suburbs of Bujumbura, have to travel long distances to find drinking water. Some draw water from the rivers running through Bujumbura, such as the Ntangwa and the Ruzizi.

Some women are still unaware of the importance of drinking water. Others, who live in poor areas, cannot afford drinking water. Water is expensive in Burundi, especially for a population that has a very low standard of living.

Moreover, even if there is water, Burundian women are unable to make decisions that would allow them to plan how it is used in the house and, above all, for agricultural activities.

We can conclude that government officials must take action to ensure that women have access to drinking water, domestic energy sources, land and inputs for food production.

