



Breaking cycles of exclusion:

The case of women's participation in politics and peacebuilding at local and grassroots level



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1. Overview


This paper is part of a series of papers looking at the central theme of innovative and transformative approaches to systems and structures of peacebuilding, with a focus on a bottom-up approach from local and community women peacebuilders. While the other papers in this series delve into the contexts of Colombia and Myanmar, as well as provide a global overview, this paper centers on Burundi. Each paper in the series addresses the theme through a context-specific lens, supported by primary research and consultations with those directly involved in peacebuilding.

In this paper we explore the situation in Burundi, referring to the work of the Burundi Leadership and Training Programme (BLTP) within the framework of the LEAP4Peace Programme.

The LEAP4Peace Consortium is a consortium of organisations from Burundi, Colombia, Myanmar, the Netherlands and the UK dedicated to increasing the role of women in peacebuilding and political processes in its target countries. It aims to elevate women's participation in decision-making roles and promote their involvement in peacebuilding efforts on a global scale. It is funded by the Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Over a five-year period (2021–2025), LEAP4Peace is implementing a multifaceted strategy, directly engaging with women politicians in the target countries and offering mentoring, training and networking opportunities to empower women as influential decision-makers in peacebuilding processes. The LEAP4Peace Consortium also collaborates with civil society organisations and political actors, facilitating multi-party dialogue platforms and providing capacity-building support to promote gender equality agendas.

In response to the pressing need to understand the role of women peacebuilders in Burundi, this paper draws on comprehensive research conducted by Dr Guillaume Ndayikengurutse, supplemented by additional case studies and analysis provided by partners in the LEAP4Peace Consortium. The original research lays a strong foundation by exploring key challenges and opportunities within the peacebuilding landscape providing critical context and identifying key barriers to women's participation in peacebuilding. This is then expanded upon with new, firsthand accounts of successful initiatives and ongoing challenges, collated by the LEAP4Peace Consortium, aiming to deepen this understanding by integrating ground-level perspectives and real-world examples of innovative practices. The merged findings not only reinforce the importance of grassroots leadership in peacebuilding but also offer practical recommendations based on a broader and more comprehensive understanding of the situation in Burundi. Together, these combined efforts offer a more nuanced and actionable framework for supporting women's leadership in Burundi's peacebuilding processes.

The research findings are based on semi-structured interviews with 10 players from several sectors, including the political authorities, political parties, civil society, researchers on the issue in question and the beneficiaries of activities carried out to advance the cause of women's participation. By triangulating their points of view with the data found in various documents, it was possible to identify the main trends in the participation of Burundian women in peacebuilding, the obstacles to advocating for women's participation and possible courses of action to make progress in this area. The case studies within were developed by BLTP and the LEAP4Peace Consortium and showcase all



aspects of women's experiences getting involved in politics and peacebuilding, from the inception and initial barriers to supportive factors, to challenges along the way and the final impact and success. They all show the impact of training, community mobilisation and support on women's participation in political contexts and peacebuilding. They also demonstrate the positive cycle of improving women's participation, as the subjects of the case studies were empowered by their improved skills in leadership and conflict resolution, knowledge and financial autonomy to take more active roles in their communities and, in turn, support and mentor other women and young people. The importance of holistic and people-centered training and activities is clear in all three case studies, as the subject discuss the effect this has had on their lives. This can be seen on a wider level throughout the work of Burundian women peacebuilders and women leaders.

The paper begins by laying out the context and political landscape in Burundi, providing information that is crucial for understanding the barriers to women's participation in Burundi. Through primary research and key informant interviews with Burundian actors and peacebuilders undertaken by Dr Ndayikengurutse, the paper explores innovative and transformative approaches to peacebuilding systems and structures in Burundi, and the limits to their success. The paper also showcases three case studies from the LEAP4Peace Consortium which explore the impact of training, financial autonomy and initiatives by BLTP. Finally, it collates and shares reflections and learnings for key decision-makers in Burundi drawing on the research and case studies that can support approaches to peacebuilding and women's participation in peacebuilding.

2. Context

Burundi has had a long history of repeated crises, essentially based on dynamics of political and ethnic exclusion. After decades of colonisation by Belgium, the country gained independence in 1962. Since then, there have been successive episodes of violence based on political and ethnic allegiances, culminating in a civil war that lasted from 1993 to 2000. One of the consequences of these crises is that the country ranks among the “least developed countries”. Burundi’s Human Development Index value for 2021 is 0.426, placing the country in the “low human development” category and 187th out of 191 countries and territories. Nearly 87% of its population lives below the poverty line.

The figures available on the situation of the country suffer from a lack of gender-sensitive breakdown. However, the country’s social fabric is characterised by high levels of gender inequality, placing it 127th out of 170 countries in the UNDP’s 2021 Gender Inequality Index. Although Burundian women make up 51% of the population, 87% of whom live in rural areas, men remain the head of the family: they own the property and land, they have the parental authority and they make the major decisions concerning the household and its resources. As girls, heads of households, Batwa women, women living with HIV/AIDS, migrants, refugees, returnees, disabled and internally displaced people, women suffer multiple forms of discrimination. They face numerous obstacles to gain access to the means of production and basic social services, including education. Only one in five teenage girls finishes secondary school. Women are also victims of sexual and physical violence. According to UN Women, 49% of women aged between 15 and 49 say they have been confronted with domestic violence in their lifetime.

As far as economic activities are concerned, there are still major inequalities. Although women make up 53% of the workforce, they are more likely than men to work in subsistence farming (61%) and informal trade (70%), leaving salaried employment largely dominated by men. On the institutional level, gender mainstreaming remains insufficient and women’s political participation is still limited.

On the socio-cultural level, discriminatory social, religious and cultural norms are still prevalent in Burundian society. To a certain extent, women are still seen as second-class citizens who have to play secondary roles. According to a Burundian saying, *“The hen can’t sing when the rooster is around”*. A woman who dares to speak out and gets actively involved may be considered rude by some men. The weight of patriarchy continues to feed the idea of the omnipotence of men to the detriment of women, who remain under their tutelage. This gives rise to different forms of violence, ranging from economic and symbolic violence to various forms of physical violence that they do not dare to denounce, sometimes because of the weight of cultural norms. Another major constraint, with far-reaching consequences for women’s participation in the peacebuilding process, is the situation of young Burundian girls. From an early age, they are not equal to boys. When schooling conditions become difficult, for example, parents generally opt for a girl to drop out of school rather than a boy. Even when girls manage to go through their education, they are still living in conditions of vulnerability that prevent them from becoming true leaders of tomorrow. It is also important to note that specific efforts to help women with special needs to become self-sufficient and participate in peacebuilding activities are still virtually non-existent in Burundi.

3. Burundian women's fight for a gender-sensitive legal framework

The women's association movement is fairly recent. The first associations were set up at the end of the 1980s, in the field of solidarity and self-care, with savings and credit tontines. The enactment of the law governing not-for-profit organisations in 1992, and the crisis that followed in 1993, acted as catalysts for the development of women's political awareness.

Building on individual actions, women, particularly members of the urban intellectual elite, began to organise themselves into associations to help with disaster relief, the search for peace, as well as the prevention and peaceful resolution of conflicts. They have also taken part in the defence of women's rights, and acted to fight violence against women.

The improvement in the legal framework in favour of women's rights is a decisive result of the work carried out by women's organisations to participate in the peace negotiations at the end of the 1990s, from which they were initially excluded. Faced with their exclusion from the peace process, women mobilised to demand the right to be involved in the negotiations. They had already begun to organise themselves through various associations (*examples include the following associations: Association of women for peace (AFP, Association des femmes pour la paix), Association of Women Heads of Households (AFCH, Association des femmes chefs de famille), Association of Muslim Women of Burundi (AFEMUBU, Association des femmes musulmanes du Burundi), Association of Women Jurists (AFJ, Association des femmes juristes), Association of peace-loving women (AFEP, Association des femmes éprises de paix)*) in order to bring relief to people affected by the war, promote messages of peace and reconciliation to the population, demand an immediate end to hostilities between the government and armed groups and involve women in the search for a lasting solution to the crisis.

The women's associations then joined forces to form the CAFOB (*Collective of Women's Associations and NGOs of Burundi (Collectif des Associations et ONG Féminines du Burundi)*) collective. Women then launched a number of peace initiatives. One example is a national seminar for Burundian women organised by women's associations in June 1995, which led to the creation of the Women's Network for Peace and Non-Violence (*Réseau des femmes pour la paix et la non-violence*). Meetings and various conferences bringing together women from the interior of the country and from the diaspora were held with the support of international organisations. These conferences enabled these women to agree on a common position on the issues under discussion in Arusha, which they then presented to the mediators, facilitators and negotiators. They were able to take advantage of these opportunities to demand the participation of women in negotiations. This question of women's participation had already arisen during the second round of negotiations, held from 20 to 29 July 1998, when Burundian women arrived in Arusha as a delegation, without prior official authorisation.

Afterwards, women were never again absent from the Arusha negotiations, even though they had initially been categorically rejected by the political parties and the government. In the corridors of the negotiating rooms in Arusha, they organised to lobby negotiators, mediators, facilitators and

diplomats relentlessly. To garner support for their cause, they also lobbied donors, international organisations, African women's organisations and eminent personalities, as well as leaders in the region.

Analysing the draft peace agreement, the women identified three priority demands (*UNIFEM: Les Actes de la Conférence Pluripartite des Femmes du Burundi pour la paix (Annexe)*, pp. 39-45):

- i. Improving the representation of women in all aspects and at all stages of the peace process, including in decisions concerning the terms of application of this process and the negotiations themselves, as well as in the monitoring and application of peace agreements;
- ii. Highlighting the impact of the conflict on women so that all participants in the peace process understand what is at stake;
- iii. Insisting on the need to include the gender dimension in all the fundamental issues addressed during the negotiations.

At the end of the conference, and following information and awareness-raising sessions, the heads of delegation taking part in the negotiations officially recognised the important contribution made by women to the reconciliation, the reconstruction and the development of Burundian society. They pledged to take women's concerns into account and guaranteed that they would be able to participate directly in the implementation of the Peace Agreement. In fact, almost all the recommendations made by women were included in the final document of the Peace Agreement, with the exception of the clause on the minimum quota of 30% demanded by women, in order to promote gender equality in participation in decision-making at all levels.

However, thanks to the perseverance of women, this minimum quota of 30% was finally incorporated into Burundi's post-transition Constitution about the Government and Parliament. So it took five years for this quota to be enshrined in the Constitution. A new milestone was reached with the extension of this quota to the communal councils in the electoral code adopted in September 2009. Other texts sensitive to women's rights were subsequently published, such as the criminal code, which has included provisions on the punishment of rape and violence against women since 2009, as well as the 2016 law on gender-based violence.

The lobbying and advocacy work carried out by women during the peace process raised awareness of the importance of gender sensitivity in the various legal texts and policies initiated in general in the country. Organisations committed to the cause of women's rights focus today on raising awareness, lobbying and advocating with political decision-makers, as well as building women's capacity and empowering them financially. This mobilisation of women, which began during the peace process and continues to this day, is instilling a new dynamic, enabling Burundian women to have a certain (albeit still inadequate) place in the political and legislative processes initiated in Burundi.

4. The search results

Informed by an extensive literature review, as well as interviews with key players, this research highlights the fact that Burundian women's fight for full participation in peacebuilding and democratisation has been, and remains, a bold one. Burundian women have achieved a great deal in this sector. Despite their limited presence in leadership positions, the few women who do emerge, generally stand out for their ability to establish good governance in their communities. Community members, including men in positions of authority, generally recognise them as key players in reconciliation, which is crucial in a society long divided by conflict. Through various organisations, they participate in the civic education of society, promoting the values necessary for a democratic and peaceful society. Their ability to detect the seeds of conflict has allowed them to establish themselves as players in the prevention and resolution of conflicts, thereby preserving peace.

However, the weight of patriarchy, the persistence of discriminatory social, religious and cultural norms, the unequal access to resources, the lack of financial autonomy, discriminatory conditions for the development of young girls, as well as economic, moral and physical violence all undermine the efforts of Burundian women to participate in peacebuilding. Added to this are the tactics used to manipulate the legal achievements concerning women's participation, the primacy of politico-ethnic criteria over the representation of women's status, the capture of opportunities by the socio-political and economic elites, and other constraints linked to the intrinsic functioning of Burundi's political system. Meanwhile, these constraints hinder advocacy for the full participation of women in political processes in general and in peacebuilding in particular.

Decision makers in Burundi must consider supporting and funding the types of activities discussed, as well as striving to create an enabling environment in the political world so that when women peacebuilders do reach positions of leadership, they can continue and be successful. Time and financial resources are also noted as key drivers or limiters of women's ability to contribute towards peacebuilding in their communities and nationally.

4.1 Women's involvement in the various aspects of political life

Firstly, Burundian women are emerging as indefatigable peacemakers, because of their ability to overcome the divisions that undermine society and thanks to their ability to work together to strengthen social cohesion. A government executive testifies: *"The effectiveness of women in preserving peace is well established. They manage to channel conflicting interests towards peace. The proof is that communes (municipalities) run by women generally experience less conflict."*

Far be it from us to suggest that women are intrinsic peacemakers. Both the distant and recent history of Burundi can provide examples of women whose words and actions have generated conflict or could have done so. For example, a woman parliamentarian argued that President Pierre Nkurunziza was an envoy of God, born to rule Burundi for all eternity. Such words carry great weight in the history of conflict in Burundi. Another example would be this female provincial governor who said that opponents didn't belong in her province and consequently hunted them down day and night to imprison them. Like men, women can therefore be agents of peace, just as they can fuel or

aggravate conflicts. But in the specific context of this research, we start from the hypothesis based on the role of women in peacebuilding.

Secondly, women are already playing an important role in civic education through various organisations. A number of players have commented on this important aspect of community life. *“The various training activities on civic education have not only helped to encourage more and more women to get involved in politics, but have also eased community tensions in some neighbourhoods, particularly during election periods,”* points out a leader of a women’s organisation. This is evidenced by the number of women who have been able to get elected to the councils of notables, following the capacity-building activities they benefited from.

Thirdly, women are perceived as outstanding political mobilisers within the various political parties. This is justified in particular by their ability to use various methods mostly involving discretion. They very rarely engage in open political confrontation. Nevertheless, they discreetly get closer to people, especially in electoral contexts, and manage to rally them to their causes. Unlike men, who generally choose to use expedient methods in terms of propaganda, sometimes running the risk of counterproductive confrontations, women often use discreet methods such as door-to-door canvassing, which has become a common feature of political practice in Burundi. Testimonies about the role played by women in the fight for independence in the ’60s or the return to democracy in the ’90s speak volumes, particularly about their contribution to raising awareness during decisive elections.

Fourthly, women play an important role in a country like Burundi, which has experienced repeated violence and is therefore evolving in a context marked by trauma, and which, consequently, does not easily lend itself to peace and democracy or to peaceful electoral processes. The traumas run deep and have an impact on all political processes. Women are renowned for their lucid view of the past, which enables them to bring community members together, across divides. As one of the female interviewees put it, they are champions of reconciliation: *“Our province has been badly affected by violence, especially since the political crisis of 1993. We have been involved in reconciliation activities for several years. Women play an essential role in this work. They help us a lot in approaching wounded individuals and sometimes succeed spectacularly in restoring the dialogue between people who hardly spoke to each other.”* In this respect, their effectiveness is linked, on the one hand, to the fact that they are able to show more compassion and sincerity in their approach and, on the other, to the fact that they are aware that the consequences of conflicts are more serious for them than for the rest of the communities. Of course, the conflict episodes of the past do not usually paint them as criminals.

Despite the immense achievements of women involved in peacebuilding in these varied and important roles in the Burundian political landscape, they continue to face significant challenges based on gender inequality, a lack of prioritisations of women’s participation by power brokers.



Case Study I

Investing in youth as a strategy for greater political participation and peacebuilding: THE CASE OF GENEVIÈVE NIYOMWUNGERE/KARUSI

Participation by Burundian women takes many different forms, including working within their community such as this case of Geneviève Niyomwungere. The work of community peacebuilders like Madame Geneviève has been strengthened through civic education and training programmes, delivered in this case by BLTP.

Geneviève Niyomwungere first got involved in political activism at the age of nineteen. Born in 1993 in the commune of Buhiga, in Karusi Province, she joined her party in 2012 while completing her general secondary education.

In Ms. Genevieve own words: *"A young girl deeply committed to politics, this is what motivated the leaders of my party to trust me and involve me in most of the party's activities, and that is how I was selected to take part in a series of multi-party youth training courses organised by the BLTP in collaboration with the NIMD between March 2018 and September 2020.*



This training covered different topics that have opened my eyes, namely:

- i) peaceful conflict management,*
- ii) democracy, good governance and citizenship,*
- iii) political leadership and gender equality, and*
- iv) youth entrepreneurship: economic dimension for self-employment and elements for strengthening political positioning.*

Since then, I have been using the skills and knowledge acquired in that context to participate peacefully in political life within my party and on a wider scale within my household, with my entourage and in my workplace at the Buhiga Youth Centre, where I supervise young people as vice-president. I joined the centre as a volunteer when I was unemployed. It wasn't long before I was hired, following a positive assessment of my work by the Centre's management. She continues: Although, in our country,

the culture and social norms in general are not favourable to women's political participation, in my political career I have first benefited from the support of my parents, then of my husband and my parents-in-law. Ever since I got married in 2016, I've had three children (two girls and a boy) and the general support has pretty much been unanimous.

*It needs to be said: peace is on everyone's lips, which means everyone wants peace, but what do we need for it to really take hold? **We need to find the root causes of conflict and fight together for justice, open up to the reality of others and learn from them.** That's what I'm trying to do through the Youth Centre, which aims to bring young people together, regardless of their ethnic, political, religious or regional affiliations. These centres have been created to offer young people a chance to meet up, play sport, make music, read, sing, access a computer and learn computer skills, etc. Young people are brought together to enable them to play, study and learn what they're interested in, while being with others. This way, they learn about political tolerance and how to live together. I've learnt that during the crisis my country faced from 1993 to 2000, it was young people who were singled out to attack others on the basis of criteria that were not at all objective! This is why anyone who wants to eradicate the evil of war and consolidate peace must raise awareness among young people. That's what I've been doing ever since.*



*I must also stress that the training I've had with young men and women involved in politics, organised by the BLTP, made me aware of the needs of young girls and women involved in politics. My position at the Buhiga Youth Centre has given me the opportunity to organise women from political parties into associations. The one called **Association for the solidarity of the women of the Karusi centre** (Association pour la solidarité des Femmes du centre Karusi in French, known by its acronym, ASFCKA) gathers women coming from political parties active in the commune, but also women involved in women's/girls' organisations, as well as associations of women living with disabilities. Our association has a total of 147 members. One of our aims is to consolidate peace in our community, and to do so, we try to work together on income-generating activities. One of our favourite activities is growing food together, which enables us to interact regularly and talk about a number of topics that are close to our hearts, including safeguarding peace. "*



4.2. Barriers to women's participation

In political terms, the Burundian system is still based on rules or practices that do not allow women to participate fully in the various political processes. Holding important meetings at late hours and a reflex to resort to physical violence are such prohibitive elements (*Interview of 6 March 2024*), to name but two. As an additional complication, let's mention the primacy of politico-ethnic criteria, which means that women who are promoted to positions of responsibility do so much more for reasons of political or ethnic affiliation than to represent the female condition. As a result, they defend political and sometimes ethnic objectives more than they serve the cause of women's emancipation. Let's not pretend that women are called upon to represent only women. Furthermore, the legal framework for women's participation remains limited. It should be noted that the 30% quota does not enshrine equality between men and women. It doesn't apply either to strategic positions or certain elective bodies such as *colline* (hill) councils and councils of notables. The requirement to have at least one woman lined up among the three successive candidates on electoral lists is certainly respected, but it is rare for a woman to head a list.

The quota of at least 30% required for the representation of women on most bodies is subject to a great deal of manipulation. For example, instead of respecting this quota at the level of each communal council, it is respected overall at provincial level. As a result, women's representation is becoming inconsistent across the country, since the 30% quota is not systematically observed in all municipalities. Yet, it is important that gender equality issues – which elected representatives in general and elected women representatives in particular are supposed to raise – are dealt with in the same way and with sufficient intensity in all municipalities of the country.

Furthermore, women are still absent from strategic positions. Of course, it is important that they are represented in elective bodies such as the National Assembly, the Senate and communal councils. But we have to bear in mind that there are other positions of responsibility which are strategic in that those who occupy them work with the population on a daily basis and are regularly called upon to make major decisions. In other words, it's not only the positions that are accessed through elections that are important to the life of the nation. These include executive positions in key sectors of national life, such as Agriculture, Justice, Education or Health. In some provinces, the percentage of women in these positions is close to zero. Generally speaking, the presence of women in these major leadership positions in Burundi hovers around 24% (*AFRABU, Evaluation of the level of women's participation in decision-making bodies at all levels and in all sectors, 2022 edition*).

There is therefore a male monopoly on strategic positions within the State. The few women who are entrusted with responsibilities remain confined to positions linked to social affairs. In the collective imagination, these jobs are at the bottom of the ladder. This trend is deeply rooted in the cultural norms shaping Burundian society. The so-called "easy" tasks are entrusted to women, while the "hard" tasks fall to men (*Interview of 8 March 2024*). It is a form of discrimination that does not really speak its name, but has a real impact on women's participation in peacebuilding. Indeed, these functions or responsibilities, which are considered to be central, are also decisive for peacebuilding within communities. For example, the provincial administration is made up of authorities that make

decisions in a wide range of areas, where citizens need to be served fairly. But this administration is dominated by men (over 75%), with the few women involved working as social affairs advisors. This is a major obstacle to women's participation in peacebuilding and community development.

There has therefore been no significant change compared with past practice in this area. One might have thought the introduction of the quota system for elective positions would raise awareness of the need to entrust women with responsibilities in non-elective positions. But this has not been the case. This may lead us to believe that it is the strength of the law that allows women to accede to elective bodies, rather than a change in mentality based on an understanding of the merits of including women. In short, as far as elective positions are concerned, there is a tendency to respect the law to a certain extent by promoting women's access, but they remain excluded from non-elective positions with high levels of responsibilities.



Case Study II

“The training courses have awakened in us a desire to know more about our rights as women and how to assert those rights as female politicians.”

“We lobbied the party’s national office and the President signed a resolution integrating women into all the party’s bodies, which makes me very happy.”

Training of women peacebuilders is also key in furthering the roles women hold that were discussed in the findings above. For example, this case study which looks at the experience of Marie Ndayishimiye shows how training can support women to be political mobilisers. It explores the impact of collective action of women on political structures and on strategies for increasing women’s representation at community and national levels.

“My name is Marie Chantal Ndayishimiye, I’m married and the mother of 4 children (a boy and three girls), all of whom have reached the legal age since the youngest is fifteen, which means I have enough time to devote to my political passions. I am currently Vice-President of the Organisation of Social Democratic Women (OFSOD, Organisation des Femmes Sociales Démocrates).

My political career started as a simple member in 1991 when I was studying at university. My commitment increased significantly after the assassination of our political leader, President Melchior Ndadaye, the hero of democracy in Burundi, followed by that of President Cyprien Ntaryamira. Three things are crucial to a political career: will, commitment and support. By support, we mean the various types of capacity building and support from third parties. I was encouraged to get more involved by my husband, who was a politician. He told me that a dynamic, intellectual woman should get involved in politics to contribute to a better future for her country. Nowadays, I have the support of my whole family, including our children. Sometimes, we talk to them together and find out that, even as children, they have constructive ideas. In addition to my professional and family commitments, they know that I have to make time for the party: attend meetings, go on visits, contribute to the party...

In terms of capacity building, I have attended many workshops organised by the BLTP and the NIMD, which have helped me to broaden my horizons and encourage the women in my party to join decision-making bodies. After attending these workshops, in particular the training of trainers in inter-party dialogue and the training in strategic planning for political parties, I facilitated internal women’s workshops in which I got very involved so that the women of the FRODEBU party could have a framework to participate in the 2020 elections.

All these training workshops organised by the BLTP/NIMD have greatly improved my knowledge, whether in terms of drawing up action plans or coming up with a strategic plan for the integration and effective participation of women in decision-making bodies. These courses awakened in us a thirst to learn more about our rights as women and determine how to best assert our rights as female politicians.

I'm very happy with the steps currently taken by the women in my party. Before this training, women were afraid of joining these bodies, and we were facing prejudice about the lack of capabilities of women, so there was one spot out of seven in the bodies. The training courses we attended made us realise that we will have to win the places given to us by law, the 30% in the bodies. First of all, with the support of the BLTP/NIMD, we started giving feedback on the training we had received, where I played the role of an internal trainer for the party. A commission of 8 women was subsequently set up to negotiate with the party office to win their places in decision-making bodies at national, provincial and even communal level." She explains that it wasn't easy for the men to give in, because there was no shortage of arguments.

"Through presentations to the CDN, which is a decision-making body at party congresses, the party President signed a protocol forcing the federations to take into account the 30% quota for women at all levels. Today, out of the 18 provinces, only one federation has not reached the quota, while the others have at least three members of the federal office out of seven.

The commission of 8 women is continuing its work to promote greater participation by women by organising meetings and collecting contributions, so that it can organise visits in the provinces and communes to raise awareness among women about the texts so they can get elected and support women's candidacies for the 2020 elections.

We also learnt how to work with members of other political parties, how to communicate with them and how to avoid and manage conflicts. These training courses have also strengthened my determination to work for the political advancement of women."

Asked about the way she perceives the context of political work as a woman in the opposition, she said that it's not an easy task, but the most important things are will and commitment. Whether in the opposition or in power, women experience the same participation issues. They have to work and break through like men in order to evolve. Men and women study and succeed in the same way. Just as they succeed in their studies, women involved in politics will succeed in their careers. Mrs Marie Chantal works for the Parliament and claims that her political affiliation and commitment have no impact on her work.

Mrs Marie Chantal's assessment of the work of the BLTP/NIMD in Burundi

The NIMD's work in Burundi is important, as it helps build the capacity of political party leaders and party women to promote themselves politically. We would like to see its activities continue and, as female politicians, we are asking that the process of coaching the women of political parties in implementing their action plans for the political advancement of women be continued until our action plans are completed and until the 2025 elections, when we hope to have many women in parliament and on communal councils.

4.3. Financial autonomy

Income-generating activities are crucial in this respect. Many of the women involved in their communities have testified that they would not have been able to get involved if it hadn't been for the income-generating activities that gave them their own financial resources. A woman from Gitega province, who benefited from the BLTP's activities and is now the provincial leader of a political party, is one of them (*Interview of 5 March 2024*). This woman used to take part in her party's activities, using the financial resources allocated to her by her husband. These resources were very limited and irregular, and therefore did not allow her to engage in politics on a systematic and regular basis. After participating in groups that enabled her to earn a regular income and undertake her own income-generating activities, she became fully involved in politics and was able to emerge in a position of leadership. In addition, we are increasingly seeing the emergence of women leaders at community level thanks to financial empowerment initiatives. Through their multifaceted involvement in communities, these women are becoming key players in peacebuilding.

In economic terms, it should be stressed that political practices are particularly costly in Burundi. There is a multifaceted system of membership fees that is reinforced at specific times, during elections, for example. This is a major constraint when it comes to women's political involvement. A woman involved in politics underlines this: *"Sometimes, I do wonder if my political involvement really has any added value. I put a lot of money into it and I don't bring anything home. Of course, I understand that it's important to serve your country, but when it doesn't allow you to help your family make ends meet every month, I can't help but wonder if it's really worth it. Two thirds of my salary go to party contributions."* (*Interview of 24 February 2024*)

The unequal access to resources between Burundian women and men exacerbates this trend. Land is a particularly important asset in Burundi, where agropastoral activities make up the most important income-generating activities. Burundian women are still denied the right to inheritance, which deprives them of an important resource in their commitment to peacebuilding. Because of their lack of financial autonomy, they find themselves in a situation where it becomes difficult to mobilise for peace. This is exacerbated by the fact that even the development policies initiated in the country remain largely gender insensitive.

For example, up to December 2023, 39,730 women out of a total of 81,320 people had benefited from the activities of the Economic Autonomisation and Youth Employment Programme (PAEEJ, Programme d'Autonomisation Économique et d'Emploi des Jeunes), even though they make up the majority of the population. Initiated by the President of the Republic in the early days of his mandate, the PAEEJ aims to develop "structuring" projects to enable young people to create income-generating activities, thus mitigating the effects of unemployment. It is therefore clear that the gender imbalance characterising the access to this project's activities is an obstacle to women's emancipation. The PAEEJ is one of the flagship programmes set up by President Évariste Ndayishimiye to empower Burundi's young people. Worth 40 billion Burundi Francs a year, this fund aims to promote the financial independence of young people.



The postulate of the link between access to financial resources and political participation leads us to consider that the unequal access to the resources provided by the PAEEJ hinders the political participation of Burundian women. This issue of access to resources is crucial in the context of a general deterioration in living conditions in Burundi, especially as women suffer the consequences of this trend more than men.

Women's organisations committed to improving women's participation in peacebuilding have shown that they understand that women's financial autonomy is one of the essential prerequisites for peacebuilding. This is one of the major conclusions of this research. These organisations are increasingly developing income-generating activities for women, such as savings and credit groups. The women who benefited from such initiatives stressed that it was an important asset for them in their political careers or in their commitment to the cause of peace (*Interview of 7 March 2024*). Indeed, these activities enable the beneficiaries to ensure social cohesion among themselves, but also to acquire the means to initiate peacebuilding actions through political commitment in their communities. This approach, which has already been adopted by most organisations, has already borne fruit.

In 2022, for example, a new body responsible for community mediation in the collines and neighbourhoods was added to the institutional framework of the State of Burundi. Called the council of notables, it has an important role in the communities insofar as it has the prerogative to settle all disputes at grassroots level. It is therefore an important peacebuilding body. Colline notables also boast a fairly high threshold of legitimacy, since they are elected by the citizens. The members of these councils of notables include many women, sometimes in proportions that are unexpected in the context of Burundi. This is a very positive step forward in terms of gender equality, which, according to those we spoke to, has been made possible by the increase in income-generating activities for women, as well as the intense mobilisation of women prior to the elections to these councils, to encourage them to stand for election and to get elected (*Interview with a leader of a women's organisation, 10 August 2023*). Women play an important role in these councils of notables, which enables them to become involved in conflict resolution at community level, thereby tackling the various injustices suffered by women. This is how they contribute to the promotion and protection of women's rights in their communities. It is clear that women's involvement in the community and in high-level bodies depends on their ability to mobilise financial resources.



Case Study III

Women's economic empowerment, a path to successful political participation: the case of Léonie NTIHABOSE/APDR

Economic constraints can be a major barrier to women's participation in political processes and in peacebuilding. Women's organisations can provide some of the solutions to this and support women to find financial autonomy, which has many consequences including increased participation, which is discussed in this case study.

Léonie Ntihabose is a 36-year-old mother of two.

In 2016, despite the weight of the patriarchy and the persistence of social norms that prevent women from fully playing visible roles, including entering politics, she joined a political party, the Alliance for Peace, Democracy and Reconciliation (APDR, Alliance pour la Paix, la Démocratie et la Réconciliation). As an active member of this party, she is permanently called upon to take part in various training courses, particularly



those organised by the BLTP. These courses reinforce her skills and abilities to communicate and coexist harmoniously with those around her.

For example, she often intervenes in the management of community conflicts and does not hesitate to oppose any person, man or woman, willing to disrupt the public order in their commune, and to stand up to preserve the peace. That is why she is known as a peacemaker at the local government level.

Following advocacy actions supported by the BLTP and carried out by women affiliated to political parties, and after the latter committed to promoting the inclusion of women in governing bodies, Mrs Léonie has now become provincial president of her party's women's league in the greater Gitega Province. She recounts: *"I am regularly invited to national celebrations to represent my party. If they call on five political parties represented at provincial level, I'm always among them, not because*

I'm a woman, but because I'm the President of my party's provincial women's league. I have no doubt that if we have to set up some kind of specialised commission at provincial level where the political parties are represented, I will always be part of it. This gives me hope that I will always be able to contribute to building peace, since political participation and peacebuilding are somehow linked. I am confident that my contribution to peacebuilding will never be overlooked, as it is appreciated by the administration."

Asked about the economic recovery pillar of the United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325, Mrs Léonie said: "After the training courses provided by the BLTP through the Leap4peace programme, I was lucky enough to join the VSLA MUKENYEZIKEREBUKA multi-stakeholder group. We started practising saving and loans, and I started selling fruit (pineapples and mangoes) at the Gitega market. Initially, I asked for a loan of 200,000 Burundi Francs and bought a bag of mangoes and twenty pineapples. With the BLTP's financial support for our group, I applied for additional credit and started buying larger quantities (eight bags of mangoes and half a truck full of pineapples). I earn enough to support my family and to take part with dignity in my party's activities. For example, I help pay the rent of the party office and I take part in meetings organised by the party throughout the country without asking my husband for any contribution. This means paying the ticket, providing for accommodation and contributing to the party. What's more, I helped other women who didn't have a job to leave their home. When we unload this half a truck load of pineapples, women come take them from my stand and go sell them in the streets, we agree on the profit and, in the end, they keep their profit and give me what I'm owed. This allows them to support their own families. Isn't it a useful way to keep women busy?" asks Mrs Léonie.

She concludes: "I can safely say that empowering women is key to their successful political participation."



5. Conclusion

From a strategic point of view, it is important to create permanent frameworks, which can take various forms, to raise men's awareness of gender equality in order to strengthen the participation of Burundian women in the peacebuilding process. Further efforts must be made to effectively eradicate the various forms of gender-based violence. Income-generating activities for women must be increased and better coordinated. Work on changing social, cultural and religious norms must be organised on an ongoing basis. From early childhood through to university, the living and learning conditions of young girls must be a priority for all those concerned with improving the participation of Burundian women. Women's access to resources in general and to land in particular is of paramount importance. What's more, the existing legal framework for gender equality should be applied in the best possible way to open up new perspectives. The effectiveness and experience of Burundian women in crucial peacebuilding contexts, such as electoral times, mean that they must play a central part in these processes. Women's leadership outside the political sphere also needs to be promoted. Effective mechanisms for monitoring and evaluating legal achievements in the area of gender equality must be put in place and strengthened. Similarly, the improvement of the existing legal framework to fully enshrine gender equality must constantly be put into perspective.



