

# Political Participation of Women in Burundi

Case Study



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# Acronyms

ABELO	Burundi Association of Municipalities
AFRABU	Association of Repatriated Women of Burundi
CDFC	Family and Community Development Centres
CEDAW	Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Racial Discrimination against Women
CENI	Independent National Electoral Commission
DDR	Disarmament , Demobilisation, and Reintegration
EVC	Every Voice Counts
FNF	National Women's Forum
GBV	Gender based violence
ICC	International Criminal Court
INGO	International Non Governmental Organisation
NAP	National Action Plan
NCDD-FDD	National Council for the Defence of Democracy - Forces for the Defence of Democracy
PRSP	Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper
SGBV	Sexual and Gender Based Violence
SSR	Security Sector Reform
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees

# 1 Introduction

## 1.1 Background of the Case Study

This case study is part of a research project that aims to summarise existing analysis and provide new evidence on the ***enabling conditions for increasing the political participation and influence of marginalised women in fragile contexts***. This evidence will be used for three goals:

- To advocate with the Dutch government, the Dutch international development community, and other (current and potential) donors for greater and more effective support to women's political participation and influence in fragile contexts.
- To advocate for women's participation at high-level national and regional meetings.
- To inform and improve CARE programming on women's political participation and inclusive governance (notably the Every Voice Counts Programme).
- To improve public awareness of the importance of women's political participation and influence and the work that CARE NL, its country offices and partners do in this area through illustrative 'case stories'.

**The overarching question that this research project seeks to answer is: What are the enabling conditions for increasing the political participation and influence of marginalised women in fragile contexts?**

Marginalised women face significant obstacles in participating in public and political life and influencing political decision-making in many developing country contexts. However, these obstacles are particularly severe in fragile contexts where formal institutional structures are often weak and corrupted; informal structures may be discriminatory; politics can be high stakes and violent; and women's capabilities, rights and freedoms may be particularly limited. Therefore, specific attention is required to understand how best external actors can support the political participation and influence of marginalised women in such settings.

For the purposes of this research women's *political participation* will be defined as their ability to actively raise their voice and interests within political and public debates. Women's *political influence* will be defined as their ability to have an impact on political and public decision-making. It is important to note that this participation and influence can take the form of marginalised women engaging directly in political processes or with institutions. However, it can also take the form of power holders meaningfully representing the interests of marginalised women within political processes and institutions and being accountable to them.

Critically, women's mere access to or presence within political processes and institutions should not be understood as equalling meaningful participation and influence, although

they may be an important pre-requisite. Instead, what this research is concerned with is women's ability to make their voices heard and to shape outcomes.

In order to answer the overarching research question, and following the theory of change regarding women's political empowerment that CARE is developing, the research will assess enabling conditions in three domains - agency, power relations, and structures and institutions. It will ask how factors within each domain have facilitated or constrained progress towards women's political participation and influence.

## 1.2 The Research Question & Methodology

Since 2005 an increasing number of women in Burundi successfully get elected during the general elections. CARE has noticed though, that positions that were initially secured by women tend to be occupied by men after women are replaced. The EVC team is interested in understanding how women can be supported to stay in their elected positions and how replacement by other women can be ensured when they leave. This pre-occupation has been translated into the following research questions.

### **Main question:**

Which conditions influence the effective participation of women in politics and in particular the extent to which they stay in power after the elections?

### **Sub-questions:**

1. Which dynamic contributes to or hinders the election of women at the various levels (local to national)?
  - a. What is the dynamic between women leaders of different levels?
  - b. How is women's political participation influenced by power relations within political parties?
  - c. What support and resistance do women experience in their social environment?
  - d. What access do women have to economic resources that enable them to participate effectively?
2. How can the Every Voice Counts (EVC) Programme contribute to the preservation of positions occupied by women, the creation of an enabling environment, and a better defence of women's interests?

The research consisted of a review of the relevant literature, key informant interviews at the national, provincial and local level, as well as focus group discussions with vulnerable women and men who are participating in the EVC programme. Interview guides, the focus group methodology, and the fieldwork programme can be found in the annexes.

The objective was not to investigate a representative sample of stakeholders, but rather to collect qualitative data on the dynamics that affect the political participation of women, with an emphasis on grassroots women.

### **Limitations**

With regard to the research question, it has not been possible to find numeric sustenance for the impression that women in office tend to be replaced by men after they leave, simply because such data are not being monitored. Nonetheless, it was possible to investigate the constraints experienced by women while exerting their functions and to discuss possible solutions.

Due to time constraints fieldwork took place only in Bujumbura and the Province of Gitega. There is no reason to assume though that the experiences would be radically different in other provinces, given the relative homogeneity of the country.

## 2 The Context of Women's Political Participation in Burundi

The study is taking place in the context of an approaching referendum about a constitutional revision, an increasing monopolisation of power by the ruling party, tense relations between the current government and, notably, the European Union, adverse economic conditions, and shrinking space for civil society. Amidst all of this, gender is not particularly high on the agenda, although the Government of Burundi is making efforts to structurally improve the position of women. Before going into details about these improvements and the current political situation, the next section will first describe the administrative and socio-economic system that forms the backbone of the developments described in this paper.

### 2.1 General Developments

After having gained independence from Belgian rule in 1962, Burundi's monarchy was transformed into a republic in 1966. Its post-independence history is one of on-going ethnic conflict between the Hutu majority (85%) and the Tutsi and Batwa minorities (respectively 14 and 1% of the population), preventing the country from rising from poverty. Burundi's economy is still essentially one of subsistence agriculture, combined with cash crops, such as coffee, tea, sugar and cotton. Population density is among the highest in Africa (315/km<sup>2</sup>) and on the rise with a population of whom 70% is younger than 15 years old. With an essentially rural economy the implication is that arable land becomes an increasingly scarce asset, with average land holdings shrinking from over 1 hectare in 1973 to 0.5 hectares in 2009<sup>1</sup>

A representative democracy since 1992, the Republic of Burundi is currently divided into 18 provinces, 119 municipalities and 2,638 *collines* ("hills"), the smallest administrative unit, which corresponds in most cases with a village. Provinces are headed by a governor and a three-member council, appointed by presidential decree. Municipalities are governed by democratically elected mayors and councils, the sizes of which depend on the number of inhabitants. The (also democratically elected) *colline* council consists of five members, irrespective of the size of the electorate, and is headed by a chief.

In addition to the municipal councils, general elections determine the presidency and the composition of the parliament. The President is both the Head of State and the head of government. The senate is chosen indirectly, by the municipal council members.

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<sup>1</sup> New Agriculturalist 2012 - <http://www.new-ag.info/en/country/profile.php?a=2965>.

While party adherence is a prerequisite for the general elections, this is not the case for the *colline* elections, although party politics often play a role in the background.

President Pierre Nkurunziza has been in power since 2005. His third term was approved in 2015 by the country's Supreme Court, following massive civil unrest and a failed coup, during which over 300,000 people fled the country, more than a thousand persons got killed, and 8,000 were detained on political grounds<sup>2</sup>. The adoption of a new constitution in May 2018 enables him to extend his rule by another two mandates after 2020<sup>3</sup>. The country's largest political party, the NDPP-FDD<sup>4</sup>, headed by Nkurunziza until he was elected President of the country, has ruled since 2005. Twenty other registered parties have since formed a relatively powerless opposition, although 2-3 among these are big enough to exert a certain amount of influence.

Corruption and the increasing appropriation of power have in recent years led to the deterioration of international relations and in particular the suspension of aid by the EU, as stipulated by the Cotonou Agreement of 1996. Aid suspension affected the availability of foreign currency in the country, which in turn had a negative impact on private sector investments. Currently, the only sector with good access to foreign currencies is the development sector. This also happens to be the environment, in which many Tutsi's, after their loss of power during the civil war, and having benefited from quality education while in exile, came to work. The recent "NGO Charter<sup>5</sup>", ordering the relocation of funds from private institutions to the State Bank, and imposing a 60/40% ethnic (Hutu/Tutsi) division among NGO staff, appears to be an effort of the government to regain control over financial resources, access to jobs for Hutus/party loyalists, while at the same time keep an eye on international civil society movement.

Other steps by the Burundi government that have raised concern have been the suspension of cooperation with the United Nations, and the withdrawing from the International Criminal Court (ICC) in October 2016, as well as the restructuring of the ruling party in March 2018. In its new structure, the President becomes the permanent secretary general of the party, who will take advice from a group of "wise men", appointed by him on grounds that are not being formally shared. Needless to say, this development further undermines the already feebly democratic party structure.

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<sup>2</sup> League Iteka, Repression and Genocidal Dynamics in Burundi, FIDH November 2016, No 685a.

<sup>3</sup> The exact contents of the constitutional text had not been shared until two weeks before the referendum and had consequently not been publicly debated; the referendum took place in a context of threats and suppression of political opposition.

<sup>4</sup> NCDD-FDD: National Council for the Defence of Democracy - Forces for the Defence of Democracy.

<sup>5</sup> Adopted by the parliament on December 23 2016.



## 2.2 The Context of Gender

### Social norms

Social relations in Burundi are characterised by patriarchal rule and patrilineal descent, leading to male dominance and persistent conventions about gender roles. Although the constitution says otherwise (c.f. Article 25), convention demands that women ask permission from their husbands (or fathers) to move and speak in the public space. Their access to resources is weak, since they have no formal right to inherit. The scarcity of land makes any advocacy for the inheritance rights of women a sensitive topic, which is therefore mostly avoided<sup>6</sup>. Gender based violence (GBV) is common practice. Only recently have women started to speak up about physical, economic and sexual violence. Their access to the justice system is limited, but there have been successful examples of community dialogue leading to improved gender relations (see Chapter 2 for a more detailed discussion).

The immediate post-conflict period has brought some opportunities to renegotiate gender relations. This was not so much related to women's role in the peace negotiations, as to the different roles that men and women had taken during the war. The UN-led peace process, and subsequent DDR and SSR remained largely gender blind, in spite of pressure by local women's rights organisations and INGOs to take women's interests into account (Myrntinen & Nsengiyumva 2014: 9). Myrntinen & Nsengiyumva in their study found that “the post-conflict era has witnessed both a questioning of old norms as well as a re-assertion of old norms – the expectation that now, after the abnormal period of conflict and displacement, the nation can return to ‘the way things should be’, and expectations that blend the two”. These debates evolved mainly around gender relations in the household, domestic violence and SGBV. (Ibid: 18).

### Election quota

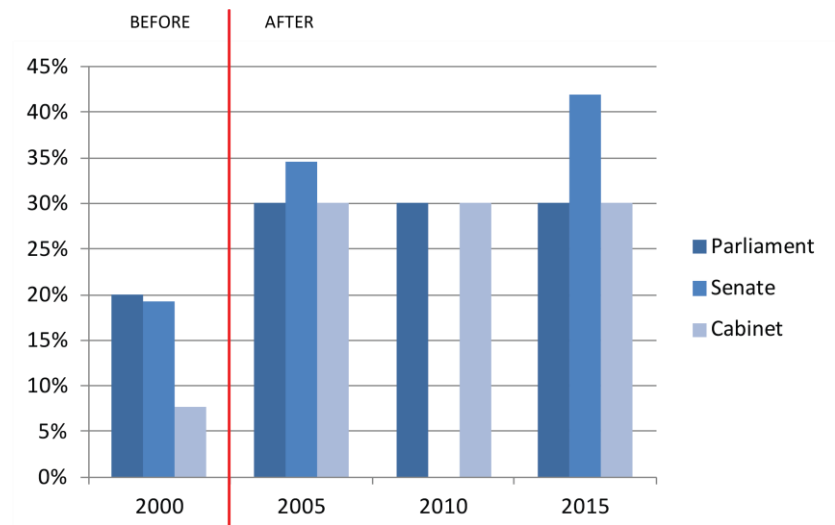
A quota was introduced in the 2005 Constitution to ensure that at least 30% of the parliamentarians, senators and ministers would be female<sup>7</sup>. This instrument has so far been successfully applied in the sense that the past two elections indeed resulted in the required number of women representatives. In 2010 the electoral lists were composed such that enough women had electable positions; in 2015 the quota needed to be put into effect through co-optation. Rather than a minimum proportion though, the quota appears to be treated as a maximum and is therefore unlikely to lead eventually to parity.

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<sup>6</sup> In 2013 CARE facilitated a multi-stakeholder process to develop a strategy paper on inheritance rights. This work was dropped after a public statement by the country's President that he did not wish for "foreign intervention in our agendas" and accusations of civil society involvement in the failed coup d'état of 2015.

<sup>7</sup> The Constitution also includes a quota for the ethnic composition of the parliament (60% Hutu and 40% Tutsi).

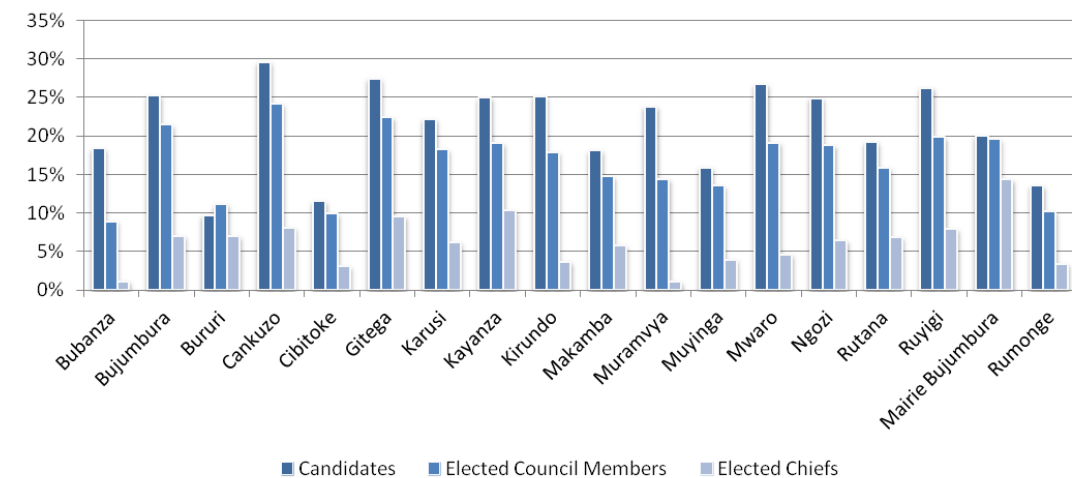
Figure 1: Comparison of women's representation in Parliament, Senate and Cabinet before and after the introduction of the constitutional quota.



Sources: COCAFEM/CARE 2017 and CENI 2015.

The impact of the quota can be appreciated when experience with the general elections is compared to the *colline* elections, where no rule determines the male/female balance. During the 2015 elections, only 22% of the candidates were women and 15% out of all elected representatives were women. Chances to become a council member were higher than to become chief: 17 versus 6% on average, although there is some variation between provinces. Interesting too, is that the odds for a male candidate to get elected are more than twice as high as for a female candidate (68% against only 29% for women). This reflects the difficulties that women experience in campaigning: fewer resources, less mobility, and a less well developed political network result in less exposure to their potential electorate and fewer moments to influence.

Figure 2: Female candidates and elected representatives per province as % of the total in the 2015 *colline* elections



SOURCE: Commission Electorale Nationale Indépendante (CENI), 2015: 106-107

In that sense the, otherwise highly contested, 2018 constitutional project initiated by the ruling party offers opportunities that are not in the forefront of the debate. A

revision of the electoral code is expected, which gives an opening to advocate for the quota extension to the *colline* level. Although more measures are needed to ensure equal political participation of women, the rule will surely further women's role in local politics.

### Appointed offices

The quota does also not apply to appointed public offices, the effect of which shows from the figures presented in the table below. Most of the positions listed here are obtained through Presidential decree. Women's participation clearly lags behind in each of these, except for the position of Assistant Minister, where parity has been achieved.

Table 1: Percentage of women in public office in 2016

OFFICE	% WOMEN
Ministers	25%
Assistant Ministers	50%
Governors	17%
Directors General	16%
Provincial Director Health	11%
Provincial Director Primary Education	6%
Provincial Director Secondary Education	11%
Permanent Secretaries	10%
Peace Missions	7%
Courts & Tribunals	7%
Party leaders	8%

SOURCE: AFRABU, 2016: 15

Only seven out of twenty ministries employ at least 30% women, while the Gender Ministry leads with 50% women.

The weak representation of women in party leadership (Table XX) contributes to their under representation in both elected and appointed positions, because of the dominance of party politics in both spheres (COCAFEM/CARE 2017: 7-9).

Table 2: Women in decision-making positions in main political parties

PARTY	EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE	BUREAU OF THE EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE
CNDD-FDD	23%	-
FRODEBU	18%	16%
UPRONA	27%	21%
CNDD	27%	33%
MRC	40%	29%
FNL	9%	0%
MSD	-	27%
UPD	32%	-
ADR	54%	-

PARTY	EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE	BUREAU OF THE EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE
ABASA	20%	33%
PARENA	5%	-
FRODEBU NYAKURI	32%	33%

Source: COCAFEM/CARE 2017: 38)

### Resolutions and texts

The Burundi constitution foresees in non-discrimination in its Article 19, which reads:

*“The rights and duties proclaimed and guaranteed, among others, by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the International Covenants on Human Rights, the African Charter on Human and Peoples Rights, the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Racial Discrimination against Women and the Convention on the Rights of the Child are an integral part of the constitution of the Republic of Burundi.”<sup>8</sup>*

While this text has far-reaching implications, its application is poorly enforced, as are the conventions and charters it refers to. The country has no independent human rights body to monitor state compliance with international standards and constitutionally protected rights. CEDAW reporting is usually behind schedule. The latest report is from June 2015, which combines the 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> report. Before that, the last report dates from 2008, combining the 2<sup>nd</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> report. Similarly, while the UNHCR Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace & Security was adopted in 2000, the National Action Plan (NAP) for the implementation of the resolution was developed first in 2011<sup>9</sup>, upon persistent advocacy by national women's groups<sup>10</sup>. It spanned the period of 2012-2016. For lack of budget it has only been partially implemented and monitored; a follow-up plan was recently adopted though not yet published.

Although the constitution is clear on equal rights for all, the Persons and Family Code awaits updating in line with the former. Its Article 88 states different ages at first marriage for men and women (21 for the first and 18 for the second), and men are appointed head of the conjugal community, only to be replaced by women in their absence. As stated earlier, another flaw in the legislation is the absence of an inheritance law. Customary law rules, determining that women cannot inherit from their parents. In particular the lack of entitlement to land rights thus perpetuates the economic dependence of women (COCAFEM/CARE 2017: 60-61).

Positive measures are the revision in 2009 of the Penal Code in favour of the repression of Sexual and Gender Based Violence (SGBV) as well as the adoption in 2016 of a law on the prevention and repression of SGBV and the protection of its victims. The National

<sup>8</sup> From Title II: "Of the Charter of the Fundamental Rights and Duties of the Individual and Citizen", 2005 Constitution.

<sup>9</sup> It should be said though that at the time, only 25 out of 192 Member States had adopted a NAP (Cordaid/Global Network of Women Peacebuilders, 2011: i).

<sup>10</sup> Source: <http://www.peacewomen.org/peacewomen.org/nap-burundi>.

Strategy against Gender Based Violence accompanies the law. Efforts are on-going to share and implement these texts, but these are not without challenges.

The Ministry of National Solidarity, Human Rights & Gender in conjunction with the Ministry of Interior is actively involved in creating awareness at all levels about the SGBV law. The effectiveness of this work is hindered by the fact that the French text has not (yet) been translated into the national language, the only language mastered by a good deal of the (rural) population (COCAFEM/CARE 2017: 9 and interview data). The authorities established centres for the victims of SGBV in three provinces; in the remaining provinces access to GBV services remains difficult. Other measures to implement the law include the creation of a vice and youth squad, the nomination of SGBV focal points in the provincial justice system, and a national committee charged with the monitoring of SGBV and the efforts to eliminate it. So far, the budget to make these structures operational is largely lacking. If anything, these measures give a sense of the acuteness of the problem: in 2016 22,482 cases of SGBV were registered, of which 79% concerned women<sup>11</sup> (Ibid: 10).

### **Mainstreaming gender**

A National Gender Policy was developed for the period 2011-2025, along with a five year national action plan. Gender was also integrated as a cross-cutting concern in the Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (PRSP). The Gender Ministry has succeeded in establishing sector-based gender entities in each ministry, with the aim of mainstreaming a gender perspective into policy at all levels. The entities are partly operational, but, except for the Ministry of National Security, lack funding to implement their action plans.

Another important effort by the Gender Ministry in recent years has been the elections of and technical support to the National Women's Forum (FNF)<sup>12</sup>. Although in principle an interesting structure, because of its representation from the national to the municipal level, the FNF is up until now not sufficiently resourced and too much dominated by (male) party politics to live up to its potential.

Funding granted to the implementation of gender policy in 2018 adds up to 7 billion Burundi Franc, which is 0.06% of the overall national budget<sup>13</sup>. If this percentage is indicative of the importance given to gender equality, advocacy for the cause still has a long way to go.

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<sup>11</sup> For lack of a harmonised database, certain data are missing from this overview.

<sup>12</sup> The elections of the FNF have been up for renewal, but await the necessary budget to organise these.

<sup>13</sup> Oral information; Ministry of National Solidarity, Human Rights & Gender.

## 3 Political Participation at the Grassroots Level

### 3.1 Engaging in local politics

*"It is true that a law was adopted<sup>14</sup>, but the men who created that law are not ready to support women on their path."*

This statement made by a woman from Gitega represents a sentiment shared in all interviews that women receive little support from men when they try to get politically engaged. Women tend to meet with resistance at home and in the council.

In the council, resistance is associated with women moving and speaking in the public space and women touching subjects that are considered to be not their business. Extreme sensitivity exists around inheritance issues and land rights. The current pressure on land tends to aggravate this and women do not yet benefit from legal backup through a modernised Family Code. Funeral practices are a man's domain as well, although a female councillor proposing to replace the traditional funeral cloth by a coffin managed to convince the council, after she dealt with initial opposition.

#### **Family honour**

At home, resistance relates to men's fear of being dominated by their politically active wives, and the connected apprehension for rumours spreading about dominant wives and neglecting mothers, whose sense of morality gets tainted through politics. This is about more than simply the relationship between husband and wife. Family honour is critical in patriarchal societies, and it is a man's job to protect it. Any behaviour by women that is considered immoral or irresponsible reflects upon the family as a whole. Conversely, this is also true for the opposite: exemplary behaviour by women contributes to the family reputation. The weight this carries makes change in this domain sensitive and complex, though not impossible.

A council member recalls how one day, she was asked to replace the chief in his absence and addressed the community to mediate a land dispute. Her father in law got so upset seeing his daughter in law speak in public about a topic that he considered being a male prerogative, that he left the meeting. At home his wife suggested that he be open to the new practice. Additionally, the municipality advised that female councillors have the right to intervene in such cases. The case was settled and five years later, when elections were due again, he was so convinced by his daughter in law's qualities that he actually voted for her.

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<sup>14</sup> Reference is made to the 2005 Constitution and the 30% quota.

### **Dispute settlement**

An area in which women's interventions are undisputed is that of marital or family conflicts. Female council members are often greatly appreciated for their wisdom and impartiality in solving matters. Both men and women mentioned that women from the village more easily approach the council when it counts a female member. Although settling disputes may seem rather trivial, it represents a good deal of the work of a *colline* council, since higher level policy issues are dealt with and budgeted at the municipal level.

Women face other difficulties when they seek to participate in local politics. Campaigning efforts are often hampered by budget constraints, stemming from their lack of economic independence. Financial difficulties are exacerbated by the fact that none of the *colline* council work is remunerated. Not helpful either is their limited mobility and the volume of their workload. Many women mentioned how difficult it is to find the time and the resources to attend critical meetings. As one might expect, it appears that female council members are often not married or beyond child bearing age. Low levels of education entail many practical difficulties, but they also affect women's self confidence<sup>15</sup>.

### **Cabaret**

Another rather critical constraint is formed by the habit of men to meet informally in bars, in Burundi indicated as the *cabaret*. This is where votes are won and council decisions prepared over beer. It is an "old boys network" from which women are mostly excluded. Although it is not forbidden for women to enter the *cabaret*, it tends to be frowned upon if they do. And even if decisions are made officially during council meetings, it is generally acknowledged that very often positions were taken in the *cabaret*. Female members miss out on the opportunity to access information early, to massage opinions through shared drinks and companionship, and to prepare their argument on the basis of known opposition.

It takes courage for a woman to present herself as candidate. Women mentioned that the case was discussed before an extended family council, where they would hear that they would have to bear all the consequences on their own. This could imply taking the criticisms, the extra work, the administrative procedures, and the cost. They need skill to navigate their various responsibilities and create space to manoeuvre, while being mindful of the respect due to their husbands and elders. All of this is not so easy, particularly considering the low degree of self-confidence that women admitted to have.

### **Male support**

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<sup>15</sup> Although adult literacy rates are increasing again since the end of the civil war, women's literacy still compares unfavourably to that of men (62% against 70% for men in 2014) and secondary school attendance is still below 11% (UNESCO Institute for Statistics).

Yet, when women do get elected, and manage to effectively exert their function, the experience is often very positive. Both men and women shared experiences of female chiefs and councillors whose work was greatly appreciated by the community. Women are said to be more impartial, less open to corruption, and therefore more credible than men. Having fewer options to rely on their network, female councillors convince not by who they know, but what they propose.

A man related how he initially wanted to present himself, but decided to support his wife's candidacy instead. The reason was that he realised she was loved more by the population and therefore stood a better chance of winning. Another man explained that he supported his wife to participate in the 2015 elections, because he saw that people liked to come to her for advice. She won and is now the *colline* chief. A male *colline* chief says that his wife became a "ten household chief"<sup>16</sup> upon proposal by the community. He claims that if she wishes to present herself to the *colline* elections in 2020 he will support her.

All these men enjoyed the way in which their wife's political work benefited the household. They felt respected and appreciated by the community. Their household had become a reference to the wider society and they were ready to continue to support their wives in the future. Some had even accepted to take on part of the household chores to facilitate the work of their spouse. During group discussions elected women also mentioned that support from male leaders had been instrumental in the exertion of their functions, notably in relation to conflict resolution.

## 3.2 Strategies

Given their important role in elections and the exertion of the function of elected representative, a critical strategy for women is to get their husbands on board. The fact that allegedly a good deal of female councillors is divorced or widowed suggests that more work needs to be done in this department.

A good entry point seems to be the "ten household" route: a rather low key position, a role as chief of ten households allows women to gain experience and their environment to develop trust in their political participation.

Because the lack of funding and independent revenue has proved an important obstacle for women to engage in politics, CARE has been working on financial autonomy through the creation and support of saving and lending groups. The groups seen in the communities of Giheta and Bwoga in Gitega Province appeared to successfully

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<sup>16</sup> *Chef de dix ménages* in French. This is the smallest governance unit in Burundi, mainly serving to manage neighbourhood relations. Although not a formal position, it is widely acknowledged throughout the country.



contribute to income generation, but also provided a platform to share experiences and build life skills.

Another interesting strategy is women's use of the very successful community radio *La voix de la femme*, the "Women's voice". Started as a local reconciliation effort after the end of the civil war, the radio now has a one million listenership and coverage in ten provinces, although the most interactive activities take place in the 31 *collines* surrounding Giheta. Through its extensive network of volunteer correspondents, the radio actively contributes to conflict resolution and awareness raising around many sensitive and taboo subjects.

The *colline* based reporters actively investigate household and neighbourhood conflicts and thereby contribute to mediation and sensitisation. The radio discussions are supported by experts, while they invite contributions by listeners. In the course of its ten years of existence the "Women's voice" has become instrumental in breaching taboos and changing opinions around many topics, including gender relations and SGBV. The radio has actively supported battered women by providing a safe house. Importantly, it also lends support to women's campaigns by giving them a platform to speak. Debates on the work done by council members contribute to transparency in governance and exposure of women's realisation to a wide audience.

# 4 Higher Level Leadership & Support to Grassroots Women

## 4.1 National Level Political Leadership

*"As long as the executive bodies of political parties, where decisions are made that include the positioning of women on the electoral lists and the appointment of public offices, do not incorporate women, for sure, their preoccupations will not be taken into account."* (COCAFEM/CARE 2017: 40)

If it is difficult for vulnerable women to engage in local politics, national politics are entirely beyond reach for most. The figures in Chapter 2 have shown that the quota is a necessary measure to further women's participation, but it is surely not enough. The 30% is rarely exceeded where the quota applies (parliament, senate and government), and where it does not apply (appointed positions, party leadership) in most cases figures are lower still.

The quota as an instrument, though necessary at this moment, is of limited value. It tends to be used as a maximum rather than a minimum, it provides opponents arguments to create doubt about quality and fairness of competition, particularly where women are co-opted, and it does not in itself pave the way to political participation for all women.

When women do get elected or appointed, the representation of women's interests is not self-evident. The general sentiment expressed in interviews is that party politics tend to outweigh these. Elected women<sup>17</sup> are more inclined to support the general (male dominated) party line than to put gender equality on the agenda<sup>18</sup>. It is also party loyalty that helps to further political and public careers: it affects positioning on the electoral list, but also appointments are allegedly influenced by political parties -and notably the ruling party-, be it behind the scenes (Ibid: 37). This means that defending general women's interests can be in direct opposition to the personal interest of elected and appointed women. Conversely, female elected representatives who fail to defend women's interests may give a false sense of legitimacy to adverse measures.

Within political parties, the organisation of women into leagues does not help their ascension to power: being confined to their own department, access to meaningful leadership positions becomes difficult. Beyond their own party there are no ties between female elected leaders.

Women at high-level political positions appear to be disconnected from their constituencies and do not seem able or interested to bridge the gap between

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<sup>17</sup> And men for that matter; there is no reason why gender equality should not be on the agenda of men in public offices.

<sup>18</sup> The practice of voting by hand (as opposed to blind voting) discourages women from taking a position other than the one proclaimed by the party.

Bujumbura and the rest of the country. Women at the grassroots level said they lacked the support from their sisters at the national level. They expressed both the wish to meet the women they had elected and to receive coaching from more experienced politicians. Their focus, however, seemed more towards the local level than the general (more abstract) cause.

Differences in women's participation between the 2010 and 2015 elections, according to several interlocutors and the COCAFEM/CARE 2017 study, point to yet another factor of importance. While in 2010 women successfully negotiated positions on the electoral lists that allowed them to get elected without co-optation, the situation reversed with the 2015 crisis. In part this was due to women's own reticence in the face of reduced political space and heightened tension; in part women from the municipal to the cabinet level were consciously replaced by men because they believed the crisis "demanded" this (Ibid: 57). The general political crisis thus thwarted the earlier attainments with regard to women's political participation.

## 4.2 Women's movement

Some of the key players in the women's movement in Burundi are COCAFEM, MIPAREC, and AFRABU. The first is a sub-regional network of women associations established in 2001 and comprising 11 umbrella organisations, including 3 in Burundi (CAFOB, Dushirehamwe, RFP), 5 in DRC and 3 in Rwanda. The 11 umbrella organisations combine 1,861 associations all working at the grassroots level. COCAFEM follows up on the implementation of the Kampala Declaration on SGBV and the UN Security Council Resolution 1325 through periodic regional conferences. MIPAREC is a Burundi based NGO whose area of expertise lies in the organisation of solidarity groups and Voluntary Saving and Lending, economic empowerment, inclusive governance and peace building. AFRABU is the Association of Repatriated Women of Burundi, originally representing the interests of female returning Hutu refugees, but whose peace building mission includes a strong focus on the promotion of women's political participation.

These organisations have been instrumental in key achievements such as the elaboration of the UNSCR 1325 National Action Plan, the mainstreaming of gender in the PRSP, and the development of the National Gender Strategy. These efforts, achieved in close collaboration with the Gender Ministry, multi- and bilateral partners (notably UNIFEM) and with the support of INGOs, have led among others to the revised constitution in 2005 and the SGBV law. They continue to advocate for parity in elections and nominations, effective political participation by women and the reduction of gender based violence.

At the local level, the organisations support women in improving their access to land, voluntary saving and lending, income generation, skills development and advocacy. Although certainly relevant, in view of enabling women to increase their effective political participation, the scale of this support appears to be limited, both geographically and in term of budget. Promising new efforts are the creation of spaces of dialogue, where women of all levels meet to discuss themes, such as SGBV, or follow-up of the Kampala Declaration, UNSCR 1325, etc. Government contributes to these

spaces by disseminating and clarifying existing laws and policies, listening to grass roots women especially and engaging in debates about changes in policies and laws.

### 4.3 Bridging the Gap: Opportunities for (Support to) Grassroots Women

Opportunities of two sorts can be distinguished here: those provided by the national political context and opportunities to scale up efforts and multiply their impact.

#### **Taking advantage of the lower levels of political participation**

The *colline* councils are in fact a modern democratic replacement of the traditional courts, which used to be ruled by men only. Even though the institution is still under development, it is a historic first in the sense that it provides a chance for local women to govern and advise. Since the stakes are not so high at this level, a position is more easily conquered than a parliamentary seat or a high level posting. This is even truer for the "ten household" chiefdom.

Although it is of course critical that women gain access to decision making posts at all levels, the value of local level positions is not to be underestimated. They provide an accessible opportunity for women to build political skill and stamina, allowing them to gain self-confidence and catch up with the experience that men have been able to develop for many years. They can thus convince others of their skills and gain strength in numbers, in due time making the quota a redundant measure.

#### **A new electoral code**

The renewal of the constitution during the upcoming referendum is an opportunity to subsequently renew the electoral code. The Independent National Electoral Commission (CENI) might be a strategic ally in this. Having experienced first-hand the difficulties of respecting the quota in the light of the disadvantageous positioning of female candidates on the electoral lists, CENI could be interested in proposing a system of alternation, whereby every other person on the list should be a woman.

#### **Making use of numbers**

The demographic composition of the country is such that the female electorate is bigger than the proportion of male voters by 1-2%. Unlike some other countries, men and women in Burundi vote individually and not in line with the family preference. This suggests that if all women would vote for female candidates, they stand every chance of winning. It does require those female voters to be aware of the stakes though and to feel confident to cast their own vote, rather than transferring it to a male family member.

#### **Structures and networks with national reach**

Burundi has a number of organisations and networks that could help to bridge the gap between the local and the national level. On the side of the authorities this would be the Family and Community Development Centres (CDFC) of the Ministry of Gender, found in each municipality, and the National Women's Forum (FNF), with members at every administrative level, down to the *colline*. Although both are notoriously under-funded, the CDFCs have the staff capacity to contribute to civic awareness raising and skill

building, while the FNF could play a role in conveying concerns from the *colline* to the national level. The latter will only work though, if the forum can stay clear from influencing by the ruling party.

Another network with national reach is the Burundi Association of Municipalities ABELO. It comprises a network of female elected representatives, whose ambition it is to contribute to women's capacity building and to mainstream gender into communal development plans. Collaboration between ABELO and NGOs specialised in income generation and advocacy, such as Myparec and COCAFEM, could lead to a multiplication of results. The community radio mentioned earlier might help to strengthen this effect.

# 5 Conclusions & Recommendations

## 5.1 Conclusions: Back to the Research Question

This paper has sought to investigate the conditions that influence the effective participation of women in politics and in particular the extent to which they stay in power after the elections. Four different dimensions were looked at: the dynamic between women leaders of different levels, the influence of power relations within political parties, the support and resistance experienced by women in their social environment, and the access of women to economic resources that enable them to participate effectively. In addition, these dimensions were considered against the background of the general political climate in Burundi today.

In favour of women's political participation are the overall legal framework and the international conventions that were ratified and integrated into the constitution. Important achievements are the 30% quota (in spite of its limitations), the SGBV law, the national gender strategic plan, and the 1325 National Action Plan. Supportive efforts at the local level are the various capacity building programmes, the Voluntary Saving and Lending Groups with their income generating activities, the mainstreaming of gender into the communal development plans, and the advocacy support by COCAFEM through the EVC programme.

In spite of these developments, the constraints experienced by women are manifold. The oppressive political climate culminating in the 2015 crisis has led women to withdraw and the authorities to pro-actively replace women by men. In particular at the local level, women experience difficulties caused by low educational levels, lack of economic resources and time, prejudice and resistance. The insufficiency of resources might be more easily circumvented if *colline* council work had some form of remuneration. Women do not have the same experience and access to networks as men, and the informal influencing in the *cabaret* does not help in that regard. Grassroots women experience a gap with the higher level elected women and would like to benefit more from their support. A true representation of women's interests is hampered not just by a lack of connectivity between the levels, but also because party dynamics tend to dominate political choices of men and women alike.

Looking towards the future, women's participation is bound to increase when the quota is extended to the *colline* level. There is potential for a multiplication of efforts through collaboration with structures that have national reach. The same structures could contribute to a mutual strengthening of women's effective participation at the various levels, and thus lead to a better representation of women's interests nationally.

## 5.2 Recommendations

This final section focuses on actions that can be taken by CARE to strengthen women's political participation, notably at the grassroots level.

The options are somewhat limited by the general political climate and the current shrinking of space for civil society. In spite of these limitations, a constructive dialogue with government is still possible, provided that contributions are evidence based and confrontations are avoided.

Taking into account the above, the following recommendations may be considered.

1. Where gender norms are addressed, the patriarchal context and the wider family relations need to be included, as suggested in Chapter 3. The EVC programme is already working with the husbands of elected women. This appears to be a good practice, which might even be extended to include other relatives. As suggested earlier, successes reflect positively upon the entire family. Exploiting such cases by showcasing them through the community radio might eventually cause a tipping point in the general opinion. The sentiment to create is that gender equality is in the interest of all; no country can develop leaving half of its population behind.
2. At the same time, it might be useful to look towards the next generation. Gender norms take root in childhood, and could be changed by addressing parenting styles and sexual/gender education at school. Interventions related to parenting or schools are not necessarily implemented by the EVC programme directly, but they could be coordinated with other stakeholders or the CARE Programme Conjoint.
3. Women at the *colline* level expressed a desire for coaching by more experienced women. This could very well be organised in collaboration with ABELO, since a partnership between EVC and the latter is already taking shape. Coaching should include political skills, as well as boosting the self-confidence of grassroots women.
4. The same collaboration could be used to develop a better awareness among female politicians of their role in representing the interests of all women. ABELO can be instrumental in bringing women from all the provinces together and building their advocacy skills.
5. It might be useful for the EVC team to investigate if more leverage can be created by working more intensively with networks and structures with national reach, such as the FNF and the CDFCs, while being mindful of the limitations mentioned earlier.
6. Topics for further research include:
  1. The cost of gender inequality and SGBV to the nation
  2. The path to national politics followed by current female leaders
  3. What strategies used by the women's movement in Burundi have been successful and why
7. Develop a strategy plan based on a detailed actor and risk analysis around the following topics:
  - i. A new electoral code, including extension of the quota to 50% and to the *colline* level, and compulsory alternation of male and female candidates on the electoral lists (possible ally: CENI; target: the government)

- ii. Dissolving the women's leagues in political parties and pushing for increased rates of women in the executive bodies of parties (possible allies: elected women, ABELO; target: party leadership)
- iii. Remuneration of *colline* council work, in line with the remuneration of municipal council work, to facilitate women's access to these positions (allies: to be investigated; target: the government)
- iv. Changing the culture of voting by hand and *cabaret* negotiations in favour of more formal and objective procedures (allies and targets to be investigated).
- v. Effective budget allocation for the implementation of the National gender Strategy and the SGBV law and their dissemination in the national language.

Effective lobbying requires further investigation into the strategies to be employed, the actors to be associated and targeted. Naturally, the role of the programme in advocacy is always to support and facilitate efforts by the women themselves, rather than engaging in advocacy itself. Depending upon the topic, donors could provide support through diplomacy, the leverage of international relations and funding.



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## Programme documents

EVC Programme Document

EVC Burundi Advocacy Pathways Updated 2017

EVC Year 1 Burundi Annual Report

EVC Year 2 Burundi Annual Report

