



## **BURUNDI**

# THE IMPACT OF SMALL ARMS AND ARMED VIOLENCE ON WOMEN

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**GRIP**

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## Summary

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## Foreword

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Burundi is slowly trying to rise out of the ashes after over a decade of civil war between Hutu and Tutsi factions left the country in a state of ruin. The country was plunged into war in 1993 after Tutsi paratroopers assassinated the newly elected Hutu president.

An estimated 300,000 people have lost their lives in the war, while 120,000 live in internally displaced persons' (IDP) camps and an additional 300,000 are exiled in camps in Western Tanzania<sup>1</sup>.

*"It is time for the people to have a change of heart. It is time for the people to share, to love.*

*Let's rid ourselves of these feelings of revenge and war. Let's fight this hatred. Let's ban this rage and unforgiving from our hearts..."*

*Peace song translation, "Yaramenje" written and sung by Burundian artist, Kidum (1996).*

Five years after the signing of the August 2000 Arusha peace deal, which was followed by three additional years of negotiations, six out of seven Hutu rebel groups have made peace with the government. The only remaining rebel group, the Forces de Liberation National (FNL), has been branded a terrorist group by the heads of the region. Peace has returned to all but one small province in Burundi where the FNL is still operational.

### ***A new chapter for Burundi has commenced***

Burundi is moving towards peace. A fragile peace, because there are still many hurdles to overcome, the preparation of post-transitional elections scheduled by the Arusha agreement being just one. The elections, previously scheduled for 1 November 2004, have been postponed, one of the reasons being that disarmament, demobilization and reintegration (DDR) has taken longer than expected. The current mandate of the United Nations mission in Burundi<sup>2</sup> is to assist in the DDR process and the organizing of elections.

Increasing stability and security has prompted the return of an estimated 90,000 refugees and IDPs<sup>3</sup> to all areas apart from Bujumbura Rural, where the FNL still operates. Community

reintegration of the IDPs and refugees from outside Burundi is yet to receive nationwide support, and government bodies like the Ministry in charge of Repatriation and Reinsertion lack funding and do not offer sufficient assistance to returning populations.

Compounding the situation is the emerging humanitarian crisis in northern Burundi, where more than half a million people are in urgent need of food aid.

The harsh reality is that although things are advancing on the political front, the people of Burundi have yet to see the dividends of peace. While it is true that the populations have had a brief respite with the cessation of hostilities, they are now confronted with new forms of insecurity and violence that have little to do with guerrilla warfare.

Sadly, as Burundi moves towards a post-conflict situation, crime has escalated throughout the country. Armed robbery, banditry, road ambushes, carjacking, kidnapping, murder and sexual violence are the norm in a country where the state and rebel groups have been arming and training the youth for over a decade. Men in military uniform gang up with civilians to commit violent crimes, killing and terrorizing urban and rural populations.

The root cause of the escalating crime levels is the extreme poverty the civilian populations are living in. Even families with regular incomes have been reduced to just one proper meal a day. The plight of those who live off meager handouts is revealed in the name given to them – *sinistrées*; people who have lost everything in this war.

Although Burundi is now labeled a post-conflict country, it still has an appalling human rights record. Women and children are the most vulnerable targets. Although many women have become the sole breadwinners in the family – through widowhood or due to high rate of unemployment- they are still the main victims of human rights violations.

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1. IRIN June 18, 2004 report on World Refugee Day citing UNHCR figures of 300,000 in refugee camps in Tanzania [and hundreds of thousands more outside the camps].

2. ONUB (United Nations Operations in Burundi) established May 21, 2004 by the UN Security Council and deployed on June 1st. Military and civilian police strength of 5,526 men.

3. UNHCR December 2004 report total of 90,245 facilitated and spontaneous returns.

Before the civil war, the main targets during these ethnic massacres were men. Women and children were spared to some extent. However, the civil war brought a new twist to the pattern of killings. Women and children were no longer spared but became the very targets of the aggressors. Revenge killings led to the philosophy of “no one should live to tell the story.” And everyone was guilty by association. The brutal violence against women and children of late were used as a weapon on both sides to destroy the enemy. By hitting at what is dear to enemy, you are strategically killing his morale and therefore weakening him.

Women have been the “silent witnesses” to the tragedies that have unfolded in the country. War has always been a “man’s business”. Women are said to have stood by helpless to stop the madness. But to watch and do nothing, is it not a crime in itself?

The report reveals that the same arms directed towards women to perpetuate violent crimes are used to silence them. But as a Burundian woman, I cannot help but think we are all guilty through our passivity, our silence and fear. Who are these men in arms- other than our brothers, husbands and sons? Where are these arms stored other than our own homes?

It is estimated that 80% of households in the capital and larger provinces possess small arms. What is even more shocking is that people interviewed for the research were against civilian disarmament and still support arms as a means of selfdefense. The government distribution of arms to civilians is not recent. Way back in 1972, the government gave arms to civilians “for self-defense” – some arms are still in people’s possession to this

day. Some women feel “hostage” to this logic, the report states, but the truth of the matter is: how many lives have these arms saved? This did not stop the massacre of Burundians – the majority killed in their homes.

The proliferation of small arms is a major security issue in Burundi. In order for the people of Burundi to fully own the peace process and play an active role in a new democratic state, their physical security must be guaranteed. Burundi needs a strong government to silence and eradicate small arms in society. To do this, Burundians must feel safe – the Sword of Damocles must be lifted.

After having been told repetitively that their physical security rested on their shoulders, it is time the leaders of Burundi to reassure the people: sleep soundly because it is our job to protect you and your own.

As elections approach, the integration of armed forces in Burundi is crucial. Without complete disarmament and the creation of an all-inclusive army and police force, creating the new democratic state of Burundi would be like building a castle out of sand.

The sole ambitions of Burundi’s population, made up mostly of farmers, are to return to a normal life, farm their land and send their children to school. The war may be over, they say, but as long as the guns continue to circulate in the country, no man, no woman or child is safe<sup>4</sup>.

*“Umugore n’inkingi ry’irembo.” Translation: The woman is a pillar that holds the house together.*

**Jocelyne Sambira**

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## Executive summary

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This two-month study aimed to document women's experiences with armed violence, in particular the consequences for female livelihoods, families, reproductive health and safety. The team of one international consultant and two Burundian researchers visited eight of Burundi's sixteen provinces, including Bujumbura Mairie. Over sixty-five groups of female professionals, women's associations, rural farmers, displaced women and children, traders, widows, sex workers, and youth groups were interviewed.

Burundian women described mild improvements in human security resulting from the cessation of hostilities subsequent to the November 2003 ceasefire. Yet they also attested to an increase of three other forms of armed violence specifically affecting women: revenge ("private justice"), sexual predation, and illicit economic gain. These developments are partly due to the fact that automatic weapons, homemade rifles, pistols and hand grenades are regularly sold, rented or loaned for use in armed robbery and road ambushes. Armed rape often accompanies these attacks. Provincial officials in Gitega, Ruyigi, Ngozi and Makamba assert that arms proliferation is "under control," yet rural and urban women spoke unanimously of living in a state of "generalized fear."

Other direct consequences of armed violence on women include sharply reduced agricultural

productivity and commercial activities, armed intimidation to dissuade rape survivors from pursuing legal action, widowhood (entailing loss of property/land, rejection and banishment), abduction and forced displacement, orphans and abandoned children.

Appreciations of arms prevalence vary; the subject is sensitive and not easily broached. Many Burundian males assert that firearms are needed to defend self and household from "bandits" and armed robbery. Women decry the state of siege and fear created by arms proliferation. Some acknowledge that guns serve to protect the household, but add, "We know their ultimate purpose is destruction." Another conceded, "We are afraid of guns but don't dare denounce them." Women repeatedly stated that civilian disarmament in Burundi is urgently needed to facilitate national reconciliation, catalyse rural development, and ensure civilian safety. However, they stressed that disarmament is not yet feasible, as "all the reasons why Burundians keep arms are still there."

Three conditions for a successful civilian disarmament were mentioned. First, solutions to the political conflict must be implemented by the national government. Second, ethnic reconciliation must occur in good faith at all levels of society. Third, sensitisation efforts are required to secure the interest and cooperation of all civilian arms owners. Also emphasized was the importance of female perspectives in raising awareness about the negative social impact of arms proliferation, and of a gender component in future disarmament efforts, military and civilian.

## Background and Methodology to the Assessment

Through this assessment, SARP sought to better understand the effects of small arms on women, particularly within the post conflict environment in Burundi. This was achieved through a participatory, field based assessment of the key issues identified by Burundian women that define their experiences with small arms and armed violence. The assessment incorporated the diverse views of women based on their experiences during the war, including internally displaced, refugees, and urban and rural women. While little information exists, in some cases small arms have increased the threat of intimidation and abuse of women, and heightened the lethality of gender based violence. Constrained by fear of violence exacerbated by the easy availability of SALW, women's political participation, as well as their capacity to perform daily household functions such as food provision, water and fuel collection and other family sustenance activities, is severely curtailed. (UNIFEM) The assessment sought to investigate some of these issues in order to better plan for post conflict recovery and situation women as active players in the process.

### Assessment Objectives

Recognizing the important role that women play in post conflict recovery;

- To provide stakeholders with key information on how women are affected by small arms and armed violence, with a view to enhancing programming by ensuring women's views are incorporated and initiatives supported that are directly relevant to women.
- To gather and analyze key information on how women are affected by small arms and armed violence, with a view to provide support DDR and reintegration processes by compiling

women's issues and concerns, as well as their capacity to support recovery and reconciliation.

- To provide local women with the opportunity to air their views on how women's issues can be incorporated into existing programs, and how best the international community can support the capacity development of women in the fight against small arms proliferation.

### Methodology

The effects of small arms and armed violence were assessed through a participatory methodology, which incorporated the use of focal groups, semi structured interviews and community wide discussions. When appropriate, separate focal groups for women were utilized. However, in some instances it was difficult to reach rural women, given the prevailing security situation. The methodology and style of facilitation was designed to encourage two way discussion and shared learning between local communities and external stakeholders. In addition to the above, interviews were held with relevant organizations (UN, INGOs, local NGOs, and media houses) working in Burundi.

The assessment took place in 8 of Burundi's 16 provinces, selected on the basis of security, as well as the degree to which arms proliferation had occurred during the war. Provinces that were stable enough to visit but that had experienced significant fighting and civil unrest were ultimately selected. Burundian colleagues and independent observers were consulted throughout the process, and the assessment team (headed by a UNDP-SARP Consultant) made alterations to the plan as necessitated by the situation on the ground.

The assessment took place over an 8-week period from August – October 2004, with time allocated for extensive field research and shorter periods in Bujumbura for reflection and analysis. The consultant was supported by UNDP Burundi for all logistical and administrative issues, including field travel.

## Introduction

From August to October 2004, a consultant hired by UNDP's Small Arms Reduction Programme (SARP) undertook an investigation of the impact of arms-related violence against women in Burundi. What has the flood of guns, grenades and other light weapons done to female livelihoods, family structures, women's physical security and reproductive health? Are women predominantly passive victims, or do they play an active role in the violence by smuggling arms, hiding criminals, or otherwise abetting armed groups? How are women coping with the tenuous transition process and the possibility of renewed ethnic violence should national elections, now postponed to April 2005, not go peaceably?

At this writing, the disarmament and demobilization of national military and former rebel combatants is underway. African Union forces handed over to the United Nations Operation in Burundi (ONUB) on June 1, 2004. A predominantly African peacekeeping force of 5650 troops are deploying around the country. Armed with a Chapter Seven mandate, UN troops are authorized and able to protect civilians in imminent danger. Despite this reassuring presence, however, civilian massacres and forced displacement continue. The August 13, 2004 slaughter of over 160 Congolese refugees in Gatumba occurred within earshot of government army battalions, who did not intervene<sup>5</sup>. In September 2004, fear of renewed ethnic violence drove hundreds in Kirundo province to flee into neighboring Rwanda for safety<sup>6</sup>.

In the capital Bujumbura, a recent UN report found that between six and ten persons are killed daily as a result of violent crime and armed robbery<sup>7</sup>. A national disarmament, demobilization and reintegration program for former combatants has begun, but the question of civilian disarmament remains undecided. The current study finds small arms and arms-related violence among civilians to constitute a primary threat to women's physical safety, economic livelihoods and reproductive health<sup>8</sup>.

"Between Burundians, a deep distrust has set in."

Regarding the prospects for stability and a reduction of armed violence in Burundi, views vary considerably. International donors and observers are reasonably optimistic<sup>9</sup>. In individual interviews and available documents, Burundian politicians and military officials are more cautious about the country's immediate future, the need for civilian disarmament and the cessation of violent crime. "During this cease-fire period, looting and robbery contribute to Burundi's instability," writes Ambassador Hakizimana<sup>10</sup>.

Civilian sentiment, particularly women, is less optimistic. Few women interviewed expressed confidence in the outcome of the transition process, let alone their fellow citizens. "Between Burundians, a deep distrust has set in," a PTSD (post-traumatic

4. Quote from a Burundian refugee woman in the Ngara camp in Tanzania, Pascasie Sindihebura.

Nov. 2004. IRIN Radio programme on "Refugee opinions on post-transition elections for Burundi."

5. Joint Report of MONUC, ONUB and UNHCHR into the Gatumba Massacre, 5 October 2004 (S/2004/821).

6. "Hundreds flee for fear of violence," 5 October 2004, [http://www.irinnews.org/report.asp?ReportID=43509&SelectRegion=Great\\_Lakes&SelectCountry=BURUNDIDRC-RWANDA](http://www.irinnews.org/report.asp?ReportID=43509&SelectRegion=Great_Lakes&SelectCountry=BURUNDIDRC-RWANDA)

7. BBC reported this on Nov 10. Still looking to confirm these allegations with OCHA Burundi//

8. A recent BBC report on crime in Burundi concurs, "Burundi faces the challenge of removing thousands of weapons that people, including civilians, have acquired in more than ten years of civil conflict." BBC News online (<http://news.bbc.co.uk/go/pr/ft/-/2/hi/africa/3006307.stm>), 11/09/04.

9. A number of public assessments made in 2004 corroborate this statement. The Belgian Development Cooperation described an international donor conference (more than one billion USD raised) on 26 January in the following way: "The conference in Brussels [...] took place within a different context: no longer that of a country in conflict, but of a country that for the first time in more than ten years is really on the road to reconciliation and peace and can therefore make an important contribution to the stabilization of the Great Lakes region." More recently, the UN Secretary General wrote, "Despite delays in some areas of the peace process, the negotiations on post-transition powersharing had shown signs that the parties were willing to find common ground to implement the Arusha timetable and preserve peace in their country," First report of the Secretary-General on the United Nations Operations in Burundi, S/2004/682, 25 August 2004.

10. Letter to the UN Permanent Consultative Committee on Security Matters in Central Africa, 25 June 2003. Elsewhere, Ambassador Midonzi of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs wrote, "As long as disarmament has not been concluded in a satisfactory manner, the post-conflict period will be characterized by a permanent insecurity: armed robberies, rapes, road banditry, gangs of looters, rackets, etc." 29 March 2004.

stress disorder) counselor in Gitega confided<sup>11</sup>. "Killing," the director of a women's cooperative sighed, "has become a banal affair"<sup>12</sup>. Armed robbery, rape, intimidation and extrajudicial revenge are increasing; the war may be ending but for civilians the terror continues.

Many informants, male and female, were reticent to discuss arms proliferation, possession, and its effects on their lives. Arms are seen as "political," and therefore a potentially incriminating discussion topic. Our research team was often told, "Don't expect anyone to tell you they have a gun." Nevertheless, local informants estimated the proportion of arms possession in Bujumbura Marie and larger provincial capitols, such as Gitega, Kayanza, and Ruyigi, at 80% of all households. Government figures on small arms ownership, legal or illegal, are not publicly available.

"Burundi faces the challenge of removing thousands of weapons that people, including civilians, have acquired in more than ten years of civil conflict."

Questions of origin and regional arms trafficking are an enigma to many Burundians.

André, the director of an independent radio station in Bujumbura, attributes the spike in small arms circulation in Burundi to three factors from the late 1990s. First, the government sponsored

popular self-defense programs, whose enrolment Human Rights Watch estimates to have exceeded 30,000. Second, the disintegration of the Rwandan army (ex-FAR) in 1994-95 led to their flight across the region and into Burundi specifically, where they sold off weapons and munitions, often very cheaply<sup>13</sup>. Finally, the dispersion of the Zairean Army (FAZ) in 1996 saw a great influx of weapons and munitions, a flow that continues with ongoing conflict, illegal mining and resource extraction in Eastern Congo.

The following sections take stock of women's experiences with armed violence in Burundi. Section One sets the context for the detailed discussion on women's experiences with small arms in Burundi. Section Two examines both the direct and indirect impacts of armed violence on women. This report grouped women's responses into three categories: armed robbery and vulnerability, sexual violence; and widowhood and prostitution. Women's recommendations for a possible civilian disarmament program follow in the conclusion.

11. Interviews, Gitega, August 2004.

12. Interviews, Bujumbura, August 2004.

13. Interviews, Bujumbura, August 2004. A Kalashnikov for \$100 USD was common. Names have been changed to protect informants.

## 1. Women and arms possession

In Palestine, Sri Lanka and El Salvador—armed conflicts of equal intensity and duration to that of Burundi—women have taken an active role in the pursuit of military objectives. Also in these countries, women have undertaken acts of terrorism whose primary targets are civilian. The research team found no evidence that Burundian women have actively or voluntarily participated in combat operations, clandestine gun trafficking, armed banditry or robbery. Abduction of men, women, and children by armed factions was not uncommon in ten years of conflict. In these instances, we were told, abducted women were forced to cook, draw water, bear children, and transport supplies for various armed groups.

On the civilian side, the drive to acquire arms for domestic protection and self-defense reflects a widespread sense of unease and distrust of the political situation, and of fellow Burundians. Françoise, the director of a radio station whose programming is devoted to reconciliation between ethnicities, characterized the general sentiment. “These days, it’s not that I have a gun to fight in the war, I have a gun to defend myself against theft and banditry<sup>14</sup>.” Unknown assailants had tossed grenades into Françoise’s home two months earlier.

“These days, it’s not that I have a gun to fight in the war, I have a gun to defend myself against theft and banditry.”

It is at this level of individual self-defense and domestic security that women experience arms possession, proliferation and armed violence. Individual and group discussions with women in Bujumbura Marie, Gitega, Ruyigi, Makamba, Kayanza, Ngozi, Rutana, and Cankuzo provinces revealed that while women are subject to widespread sexual violence, armed robbery, and frequent intimidation, arms possession for domestic safety is not an exclusively masculine phenomenon. Even in instances where women expressed a fear of small arms bordering on trauma, many claimed to agree with the safety rationale behind domestic weapons possession. Others said they dared not speak out against guns and the dangers they posed: fear both

of weapons and their husbands forced their silent consent. For these women, arms in the home are seen as a necessary risk, less threatening than the daily menace of armed robbery, rape and assault.

In Ruyigi, on the Tanzanian border, the female leaders who received our team initially denied arms possession in the home and the community generally. Their suspicion of us was palpable; we could talk only abstractly of the socio-economic crisis caused by the war. After a number of awkward silences, an elderly woman confided, “*Of course* arms are all over Ruyigi. We can’t afford to trust anyone because we have no idea which way the country is headed<sup>15</sup>.”

“We can’t afford to trust anyone because we have no idea which way the country is headed.”

In Makamba, the director of a church-funded aid association described a gender difference on arms possession. Men, she told us, generally defend arms in the home as a means of added safety, an “insurance policy.” On the whole, women tend to see them as a danger to the family, particularly in light of tragic accidents involving guns in the home. Numerous cases were related of children playing with grenades that exploded, of domestic disputes that deteriorated into a struggle for the household weapon, ending in the murder of husband or wife. “Because of this crisis,” she concluded, “it will be very difficult to change the way our men perceive guns<sup>16</sup>.”

### 1.1 The ‘arms race’: official distributions and illegal acquisitions

Few interlocutors, male or female, were comfortable discussing the identity of gun owners and the origin of weapons currently in circulation. Open suspicion, accusations of espionage, and long silences characterized many of our interviews, particularly with professionals and civil servants. While most acknowledged the consequences of arms proliferation, violence and insecurity on rural development, national reconciliation and reconstruction, they were resistant to closer analyses of

14. Interviews, Bujumbura, August 2004.

15. Interviews, Ruyigi, August 2004.

16. Interviews, Ngozi, September 2004.

the issues. Rural women were the most forthcoming. "You want to know who loots, who shoots, who rapes?" asked a smiling widow in Kampazi displaced camp, Kayanza province<sup>17</sup>.

In group and individual discussions, women frequently referred to government and rebel distributions of automatic weapons to civil servants, teachers, and other professionals in urban and rural areas across the country for the purposes of civilian self-defense. Such distributions were readily confirmed when cross-referenced with other Burundians, but no official record of these programs appears to exist<sup>18</sup>. According to informants, civilian recipients of both sexes were trained in weapons use; the arms they received remain in their possession. Rebel leaders apparently effected similar distributions in areas under their direct control. The purported aim of these policies was to reinforce the safety of elite civilians belonging to a given armed faction or political party<sup>19</sup>. Male youth were organized into "civil defense forces," trained and tasked to secure urban neighborhoods and rural hillsides. Some of these groups were disbanded following last year's ceasefire, we were told, but others continue to operate in rural districts.

Researchers were able to meet a small number of informants with diverse political allegiance who spoke openly of these initiatives and their consequences for women and Burundian society generally. These women drew a significant distinction between the effects of officially distributed weapons and those acquired illegally or assembled locally.

Through rental and sale, gun ownership is becoming highly lucrative.

Esperance, the director of a family development center in Kayanza, described two groups of arms users in Burundi. The ways in which these weapons are used differs drastically. The first group, to which Esperance belongs, are the civilian "elite" who received arms and training from the government for self-defence. These weapons are static as opposed to dynamic; they "sit at home" and are used only in the event of an attack. They "pose no threat to society" because their owners are not aiming them at innocent people. The recipients of official distributions, Esperance alleged,

are not the people responsible for the current spike in insecurity, armed robbery and rape<sup>20</sup>.

When asked if the government had a plan to reclaim these arms, Esperance and other "elite" women responded identically. Reclaiming arms from civilians, we were told, is conceivable only if and when a credible political solution is found, one that enables ethnic reconciliation. "With all the fear and intimidation surrounding national elections," a radio journalist confided, "this will not be tomorrow<sup>21</sup>." In Burundi, ongoing insecurity is the product of three inter-related factors: ethnic rivalry, political competition, and extreme poverty. Improved security for women is contingent on sustainable solutions in these three areas of tension.

Arms proliferation is not in itself a danger, these women implied, as the social impact of arms must be considered in light of their origin and purpose. Arms distributed for self-defense do not affect society in the same way as those bought or made with the intention to steal, rob and rape. In the course of research, very few "elites" were heard to speak critically or even skeptically of the official distributions, rebel or government, to arm and train civilians for self-defense.

The second group of gun users apparently obtained them illegally or made them from local materials. These illicit weapons are not static or merely defensive; their purpose is material gain through armed robbery, organized banditry, rape, physical assault and intimidation. Although we did not knowingly interview persons using arms to such ends, we were repeatedly told that these "bandits, rapists, and thieves" would not surrender their arms easily, if at all.

17. Interviews, Kayanza, September 2004

18. Independent evaluations, however, do. Of note is the December 2001 Human Rights Watch Report, "To Protect the People: the Government-sponsored 'self-defense' program in Burundi" : [http:// www.hrw.org/reports/2001/burundi/burundi1201.pdf](http://www.hrw.org/reports/2001/burundi/burundi1201.pdf)

19. After justifying official arms distributions during the war, the research team asked the Governor of Gitega how many arms had been distributed in this way. "About 30," he replied. More transparent was the District Commander in Makamba, who told us unequivocally that with so many arms having been distributed over the years, it is "very difficult to know who has what and how many of them [arms] they have." Interviews, Makamba, October 2004.

20. Interviews, Makamba, September 2004.

21. Interviews, Makamba, September 2004.

To distinguish between official and illegal provenance and intent is coherent and legitimate. Yet the majority of informants—men, women and youth—painted a more nuanced picture of arms-related violence, and the origin and aim of weapons currently in circulation. Although difficult to verify, we heard innumerable accounts of arms being sold, loaned and rented by civil servants and soldiers to “bandits” and others whose intent is material gain through armed violence.

If these stories are true, the implication is that not all officially distributed weapons are simply static or idle, waiting for domestic attack before being fired. Weapons distributed for self-defense are now enabling the armed robbery, rape and insecurity that have reduced women’s lives to a fearful fragment of what they were before the war. Thérèse, a legal counselor to rape survivors in Gitega, told us: “These [distributed] guns have not brought us peace<sup>22</sup>.” Referring to arms received or acquired for self-defense, youth in Makamba were similarly critical: “At first arms were used for self-defense, now people use them to steal and rape<sup>23</sup>.”

“At first arms were used for self defense, now people use them to steal and rape.”

Rural women frequently asserted that weapons used in armed violence, particularly rape and robbery,

originated in rental or sale by government soldiers, former rebels and civil defense units such as the *Gardiens de la Paix* (Guardians of the Peace) and the civilian cadre of “militants combatants” trained by various armed opposition movements. Through rental and sale, gun ownership is becoming highly lucrative. After an armed attack, we were told, stolen goods and cash are shared between assailant and gun owner, or the owner is paid a rental fee (50\$/day being the current rate).

Arms and armed violence in Burundi will not abate as long as the economic incentive driving their use and acquisition remains. The absence of legal repercussion for perpetrators, according to many interlocutors, is an additional incentive to rape, rob and steal. Women in the eight provinces visited recognized impunity as an enabler of arms proliferation and violence against women.

Section Two will expand on the above by presenting women’s specific experiences with armed violence and their views on its negative social impact. Three general areas are addressed: armed robbery and vulnerability, gender-based violence and rape, and widowhood and orphans.

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22. Interviews, Gitega, August 2004.

23. Interviews, Makamba, September 2004.

## 2. Women under the gun: direct consequences of armed violence

Whether illegal or official in origin, arms proliferation along with grinding poverty, unemployment, and a dysfunctional judiciary have combined to create a climate of desperation and impunity. Recourse to armed violence for vengeance and material gain is commonplace. Banditry and armed robbery, in particular, are legendary features of the security landscape across Burundi. On 13 August, a UN News Agency reported from Bujumbura, the capital:

Twenty-one cases [of armed robbery] were registered in July and the figure so far for August is even higher. According to the special bureau of investigation for Bujumbura districts [...] 12 armed robberies were reported between 1 and 12 August, in which two people were killed and eight injured. Four armed robberies took place in less than 24 hours on 10 August. Bandits armed with grenades and other weapons attacked a businessman in Buyenzi suburb injuring three people. The same night, one person was killed and another injured in an attack on a bar at Musaga neighbourhood in the south of the capital<sup>24</sup>.

While news accounts, police investigations and obituaries serve to chronicle tragic events, they often fail to capture the socio-economic toll on families, particularly women and children. Repeated interviews revealed the degree to which the effects of armed violence for women and girls are especially palpable. "This crisis has taken women hostage," explained an Anglican priest in Makamba<sup>25</sup>.

"This crisis has taken women hostage."

Women often described a recurring cycle driving arms proliferation and armed violence, independent of the war. Bandits and thieves benefit from impunity, and arms sales increase, as people feel unprotected by the forces of order. Looting, stealing, and sexual violence will continue, Françoise explained, as long as so many people are armed in a climate of impunity.

Aaron, director of a group supporting torture victims, sees a similar cycle. Where a dysfunctional

judiciary ensures immunity for perpetrators, he explained, victimisation leads directly to armed vengeance. Individuals or families suffering armed attacks often find themselves without recourse to effective legal action. Vengeance seems the only option. Rape survivors, for instance, may send their brothers to avenge the family with further violence.

"The lack of justice perpetuates violence—when there is justice there is no violence."

Youth groups in Makamba spoke dejectedly of living in a state of "generalized panic." Freedom of movement is severely limited, they said, and no one circulates after dark. There is no trust between individuals; no sense of solidarity among the population, because of the extreme suspicion between ethnicities. As an example, they cited the dire situation of displaced persons and returnees from Tanzanian refugee camps, now in Makamba province. In 2002, a group of returnees were murdered returning to their hillside (commune Mabanda). News of the slaughter spread and now all displaced and returnees remain in camps where they believe there is safety in numbers<sup>26</sup>.

A number of youth in rural provinces see the spread of arms and armed violence not as a vestige of the war, but as driven by poverty and destitution. "Bandits have become all powerful, and this attracts many young men." The constant threat of robbery and assault means people avoid wearing nice clothes, jewelry, or shoes for fear of being targeted. No women are involved in this form of crime, these youth explained, but they are often its victims. How do girls respond to these risks and the poverty causing it? "In order to get money, girls don't join the armed gangs, they sell themselves<sup>27</sup>."

"In order to get money, girls don't join the gangs, they sell themselves."

In each of the eight provinces visited, women and youth recounted similar tales of prostitution for economic survival and its consequences. In rural

24. 8/13/2004, IRIN ([http://www.irinnews.org/report.asp?ReportID=42664&SelectRegion=Great\\_Lakes&SelectCountry=BURUNDI](http://www.irinnews.org/report.asp?ReportID=42664&SelectRegion=Great_Lakes&SelectCountry=BURUNDI))

25. Interviews, Makamba, September 2004.

26. *ibid*

27. *Ibid*.

and urban areas alike, young girls whose families cannot afford education turn to prostitution. Unwanted pregnancies result in fatherless children who are often rejected by the mother, her family, and other siblings. HIV/AIDS transmission is presumably higher, although no figures exist. Abandoned children are the first to become street children, whose increasing numbers in urban centers some women described as a “social time bomb<sup>28</sup>.”

## 2.1 Armed robbery and vulnerability

When armed assault targets the household, businesses, public transport or rural markets, women inevitably figure among the victims. Mme Candide, director of a network of women’s associations in Bujumbura, explained that armed theft and assault have transcended their origins in the ethnic tensions that initially accompanied the outbreak of conflict in 1993.

Armed robbery and attacks are now a generalized, mundane feature of Burundian life. A constant escalation of armed violence has led to a vicious circle involving gun-related violence, impunity, and an increased demand for arms for self-defense. Mme. Candide added that ending impunity for perpetrators was not a high priority for the current administration. “More than anyone else,” she ventured, “the government has dirty hands<sup>29</sup>.”

“Arms and armed robbery target the household; this means women are directly affected.”

Other women characterized urban incidents involving armed theft in the home and on the street as “banditry.” Aggressors act alone or in small groups. When victims are female, rape often accompanies the attack. Rural incidents, called “looting” (*pillage*), involve armed attacks on households or farms and include theft, destruction of property, and physical violence. Murder, rape, and abduction of women and girls characterize these episodes. In both scenarios, aggressors operate in a “no risk” environment—“ça ne leur coûte rien,” one woman said—aside the possibility that survivors will seek revenge, which is not uncommon.

Women commonly cited fear, a pervasive sense of insecurity, and limited movement as the primary effects of armed violence and banditry. When

asked if arms themselves figured among the worst threats to women in Burundi, a woman in Bujumbura who had been shot during street fighting in 2001 answered that it was first poverty, then arms. “People use arms for banditry and robbery because there is such hunger and deprivation. “The country needs to move forward, but guns are holding us back. You can’t work in peace, in security<sup>30</sup>.”

“The country needs to move forward, but guns are holding us back.”

Across Gitega province, women spoke of having to walk in groups to market and fields for protection. In Gitega town, by contrast, banditry and armed violence have abated since the November 2003 ceasefire. Nevertheless, a counselor for THARS<sup>31</sup> in Gitega specified that many people feel a sense of depression, hopelessness and loss from the war. Few believe it possible to regain all that was lost in over a decade of fighting and fear. Consequently, rural farmers are less inclined to work in their fields. Agricultural production has not regained its former momentum in any of the rural provinces visited.

In the Tankoma IDP site outside Gitega town, a group of women were asked if arms were present in their camp. “We are poor people,” one woman replied. “The poor don’t have guns, but we are the first to be subjected to them.” When asked to expand further, she said that armed gangs opposed their returning home, and that this was the biggest armed threat they faced. They said they remained in the camp because it was the only place they felt safe.

In a Rutana IDP camp, women said they feared returning home because the people who killed their families in 1993 remain unpunished. “What’s to stop them from killing again if we return?” one widow exclaimed. When asked about the justice system and criminal courts, women said there was no such thing. “These killers already benefited once from impunity, surely they will again.”<sup>32</sup>

28. Interviews, Bujumbura, August 2004.

29. Ibid.

30. Ibid.

31. Trauma Healing and Reconciliation Services

32. Interviews, Rutana, September 2004. “The country needs to move forward, but guns are holding us back

“Armed intimidation of displaced persons and refugees, common throughout the country, is symptomatic of a deeper problem, the lack of inter-ethnic trust. How did they think this could be resolved? The dozen women gathered for a discussion in Gitega responded without hesitation, “Punish the guilty.” Impunity enables the violent crimes of the past to accumulate, threaten individual lives, and destabilize the country’s transition process.<sup>33</sup> Most importantly, for these displaced women, impunity diminishes the prospect of ethnic reconciliation in Burundi, and binds them to the misery (but relative safety) of camp life perhaps for years to come.

“[We] poor don’t have guns, but we are the first to be subjected to them.”

Women in Kayanza saw the solution to ethnic conflict in political terms, as retrospective justice was deemed unlikely and evidence difficult to obtain ten years after the fact. “The political parties have to stop their [ethnically] divisive language,” one woman protested.<sup>34</sup>

Arms and the threat of armed violence influence women’s livelihoods in a number of different ways. In Ruyigi, women claimed that although security had improved significantly with the ceasefire, most urban families remain armed because the hiatus of relative calm is not expected to last. On the hillsides in rural areas, handmade firearms are common. Women also voiced a concern to avoid dispute with their neighbors, as the slightest misunderstanding often leads to armed reprisal.

Regarding gender relations, women in Makamba stated unequivocally that they did not trust men with arms, under any condition. Government soldiers, rebels, civil defense forces: none are perceived as “protecting the population.” Men with arms, regardless of their vocation, are seen as capricious wielders of potentially lethal force who can force anyone to do anything at anytime, with impunity.

In Ruyigi, Makamba, and Cankuzo, economic activity has atrophied under regular assault by armed bandits operating on the rural roads between markets and towns. Wealthier traders are regularly targeted because their trucks are easily recognized in an area of few motorized vehicles. The impact of armed robbery is felt on commercial activity at all

levels: women selling produce at rural markets avoid carrying cash, as this attracts armed attacks. Rural markets in Ruyigi are often disrupted by gunfire, which sends traders running. They return to find their produce and belongings stolen. Robbery is so pervasive in Ruyigi, another woman emphasized, that when dowries are presented for marriage, future husbands are requested to make bank transfers instead of paying cash. Although perhaps an isolated incident, the anecdote attests to the perceived danger of cash possession, as this could prompt armed robbery.

In Kayanza town, many business people have fled for fear of banditry and armed robbery. According to displaced women in rural areas, rebels have stolen all the cattle and goats, thus robbing local farmers of mobile wealth and resource in time of difficulty.<sup>35</sup> As to the impact of armed violence on rural development, they answered, “There is no development. If anything, we are regressing: when you have produce to sell, they steal it; if you have any merchandise, they steal it. These stolen goods are resold for nothing or very little. This destroys market value and makes economic development impossible.”<sup>36</sup>

“Because of insecurity, the household economy suffers. Girls are the first to suffer the consequences.”

At the beginning of the war, women in Kayanza explained, arms possession was considered prestigious. Now that so many firearms are in circulation, no one dares to accuse rapists or robbers because of fear of reprisal. In the Kampazi IDP camp near Kayanza, women said they hear

33. Interviews, Gitega, August 2004. In Ruyigi, a women’s group considered the prospects for national reconciliation and concluded, “First, the guilty must publicly admit their wrongdoing.” For these and many other victims of ethnic violence, there can be no ethnic reconciliation without justice. 34. A commonly heard threat in rural areas from extremist agitators, or “mobilisateurs politiques,” is “Hasigaye imisi mikeyi” (“your days are numbered”; literally, “few days remain” in Kirundi). It implies an imminent return to armed violence should their political party not win the national elections. Interviews, Cankuzo, October 2004.

35. We were told of a common expression around Kayanza: “If you see a goat, run!” The only remaining animals are those of rebels and/or bandits, who stole them from civilians. A goat sighting, apparently, implies the likelihood of bandit or rebels nearby.

36. Interviews, Kayanza, October 2004.

gunfire nightly, as armed robbery and assault are widespread on nearby hillsides. Within the camp itself, firearms and grenades are common. Their own sons have created a civil defense unit and use handmade rifles (“mugobore”) to protect the site at night.<sup>37</sup>

In Kayanza town, women do not circulate after 6:00 pm, although they travel on foot to their fields during the day without fear. But time spent working in the fields is minimal given the distance, and hours spent walking consumes valuable daylight hours. The consequences of reduced a workday can be severe and far-reaching. Foremost is a basic inability to feed the household. Related are the smaller harvests that afford precious little to sell at market, which in turn reduces family income and makes children’s clothing and schooling unaffordable. When education becomes a luxury, girls are forced to stay home while boys continue their studies, finances permitting.

Women in Makamba described the new forms of insecurity that have evolved since the end of war in the province. Rape, banditry and armed robbery were not the everyday menace they have become. How do women protect themselves from attack at home or in the fields? When an attack is imminent, “we scream and make noise to attract attention.” During the war, they kept machetes and other armes blanches in the home for protection. “Now we don’t keep anything in our homes that could be used as a weapon against us during an attack.” They told of neighboring families with knives in the home, and of the tragedy that ensued during a robbery.

“Now we don’t keep anything in our homes that could be used as a weapon against us during an attack.”  
“People never killed each other because women stayed united.”

When asked who was most affected by armed violence and insecurity, a group of peasant women in Makamba did not hesitate before answering. Women have more domestic responsibilities than men, and this disparity becomes critical when the burden of family survival falls to women. Forced displacement is particularly illustrative. During the war and in domestic attacks, families must flee if they are to survive. Men, women and children often initially escape together, but as women are charged with caring for the children, their escape can be

protracted. Men fend for themselves, fleeing “without a thought or care” for wives and children. The result is that men have an easier time surviving in all the confusion, danger and difficulty of forced displacement. Staying alive while on the run with small children is so challenging that mothers often lose one or more of their offspring. Pregnant women, we were told, lose the embryo due to the physical and psychological stresses of forced displacement; some do not survive the duress.

The Burundian war was fought on two fronts, the interpersonal and the political. Armed opposition movements were locked in combat with government forces from 1994 until late 2003. Fighting continues against one maverick rebel group, the *Forces Nationales de Liberation* or FNL. At the interpersonal level, communities were divided along ethnic lines. Massacres and revenge killings decimated civilian life, scarring survivors and entrenching “the notion that ethnicity is a divisive issue. This in turn feeds interethnic violence.”<sup>38</sup>

Yet according to Mme Collette, leader of twenty-one women’s associations, Makamba and Kibiyi communes in Makamba province were remarkable exceptions. War was raging between factions, but on the interpersonal level, “people never killed each other because women stayed united.”<sup>39</sup> Civilians in Nyanza Lac and Kayogoro communes were not so lucky: the ghosts of ethnic violence remain a daily presence in their lives.

“People never killed each other because women stayed united.”

When asked what held communities together during periods of extreme ethnic antagonism, mutual fear and distrust, Mme Collette described a social network resistant to this corrosive logic. “Rural and urban women’s groups existed before the war. This meant that women from different levels of society knew each other and worked together

37. For more information on the mugobore, see annex.

38. That ethnic identity is reified through violence, and thus the product of Burundi’s former periods of conflict over land or politics, is a common view both in and outside the country. Cf., Mark Vincent and Birgitte Sorensen, *Caught Behind Borders. Response Strategies of the Internally Displaced* (London: Pluto Press, 2001), p. 52.

39. “La population ne s’est jamais entretuée parce que les femmes sont restées solidaires.”

regularly. Also, some older members had survived the interethnic massacres of 1972, and could speak from experience of the wounds these left on society.” Although men were involved in the politics at the source of the ethnic violence, Mme Collette explained, as husbands they were receptive to their wives’ counsel against interethnic violence, even as it engulfed the country.<sup>40</sup> Ethnic tensions were never lacking, Mme Collette clarified, “but it never turned violent.” During military campaigns and rebel attacks, local inhabitants would flee together, hiding in the bush as long as necessary. Mme Collette said this also contributed to interethnic solidarity.

In the eight provinces visited, the primary consequences of armed robbery and the vulnerability resulting from arms proliferation can be summarized in the following points.

- In a country where 90% of the population survive on subsistence agriculture, production has hit bottom. Livestock are regularly stolen. Widespread famine or extreme food insecurity are reportedly not imminent, but armed violence and banditry have drastically curtailed the rural agricultural economy.
- Populations of urban centers have risen because of rural insecurity and ‘safety in numbers’. Advent of large numbers of rich and poor have brought new social tensions and problems (e.g., street children).
- Domestic economic hardships impacts young girls first, who are attending primary school in greatly decreased numbers. Economic survival leads girls in two directions: out of the home into premature marriages or into prostitution. The latter results in increased unwanted pregnancies and rejected children. Premature marriages (also concubinage, polygamy) are born of desperation: families are incapable of supporting their children so adolescents must provide for themselves (14-16 years old). Divorces or broken marriages common in such alliances, and girls must fend for themselves, leading to prostitution, unwanted pregnancies, and/or HIV/AIDS.

## 2.2 Sexual violence

For the purposes of this assessment, sexual violence in Burundi will be addressed in three dimensions: the role of small arms in the act of

violation itself, the lack of legal protection for victims, stigmatization and other modes of social condemnation.

Of the grave consequences for women of arms and armed violence in Burundi, sexual violence receives the most attention from donors and humanitarian agencies. Nevertheless, quantifying rape in Burundi, armed or unarmed, is difficult guesswork. While the act of rape itself is not exactly taboo, discussing it openly is. As a rape counselor in Cankuzo informed us, “Whether or not a weapon was involved, women in this province will not admit to being raped.” Adding insult to injury, it is the victim, not the rapist, who bears the onus of blame.<sup>41</sup>

“Whether or not a weapon was involved, women in this province will not admit to being raped.”

When found out, rape survivors are castigated, banished or abandoned by their husbands and families. When undesired pregnancies result, offspring are rejected and often abandoned by the mother. Fear of rape-related stigma and banishment can lead women to self-abort. This entails medical complications, even maternal mortality. Silence about rape is preferable, said women in Ruyigi, because the prospect of social rejection is more dreadful than the rape itself, as it lasts a lifetime.

The majority of women we met claimed that sexual assault, when outside the home, usually occurs in the event of armed theft. If women or girls are present when farms and homes are attacked and robbed, they are raped. Such acts victimize both the women and their family, as husbands will blame and reject their wives. Women flee with the children, and a struggle with extreme poverty begins.

Silence about rape is preferable because the prospect of social rejection is more dreadful than rape itself, as it lasts a lifetime.

According to trauma counselors, however, small arms are not the sole enabler of sexual violence in the country. The primary cause, according to women counselors in Ruyigi, Gitega, Makamba and

40. Interviews, Makamba, September 2004.

41. Interviews, Cankuzo, August 2004.

Kayanza, is cultural: the diminished status accorded to women in Burundian society. “In Burundian culture,” one counselor explained, “maintaining appearances is more important than confronting realities.” Where gender inequality is the norm in times of peace, periods of violence and social upheaval clearly exacerbate gender discrimination. All women interviewed emphasized that rape has long existed in Burundi and predates the war, but only in the last five years has the scale of the problem surfaced publicly. This is due, we were told, to concerted efforts by local and international organizations and women’s associations to educate and sensitize the larger population, accompanied by medical and psychosocial services for rape survivors.

Small arms play an important enabling role in sexual violence. Armed threats block rape survivors from seeking medical legal assistance. Armed aggressors and rapists are encouraged by a failed and corrupt legal system, which has deteriorated to such a point that many victims do not even consider legal recourse a viable option. Those seeking to rectify an injustice prefer revenge, a common practice decried by many informants as it usually involves murder. Rape survivors sometimes send their brothers to kill the rapist when the latter’s identity is known.

“In Burundian culture, maintaining appearances is more important than confronting realities.”

Vengeance and the “settling of accounts” are such frequent reactions to personal tragedy and impunity that some women’s associations focus exclusively on curtailing the practice among young people. Mme. Adelaide described the message her association conveys to young rape survivors and war orphans in Muramvya and Bujumbura Rurale: “Do not seek revenge for your loss; to do so is to prepare your own grave. Choose the path of education and development.”<sup>42</sup>

Other NGOs and women’s associations are working to improve enforcement of laws prohibiting rape, and offer free legal assistance to rape survivors who wish to pursue their aggressors in court. Small arms figure here not only as enablers of rape, but also to intimidate and dissuade survivors from accusing their aggressors or speaking out publicly.

Accusation of one’s rapist can result in death threats, physical assault and armed intimidation.

“Guns and the threat of violence buy silence.”

Around military posts in rural areas and IDP sites in Kayanza, soldiers target young girls for rape. This has been the case all throughout the war and continues so today. When mothers denounce these military, they themselves are threatened and, in some instances, raped. Maison Shalom in Ruyigi maintained that sexual violence combined with arms is accelerating the spread of HIV/AIDS among men associated with armed groups.

In Ruyigi, rural women spoke about the frequency of armed rape in hillside communities using artisan rifles, or “mugobore.” Aggressors are not soldiers or exrebels, but local inhabitants and neighbors. “The rapists are known,” one woman said, “but victims dare not denounce them.” She went on to describe a typical scenario: a woman is approached by a man brandishing a *mugobore*; the demand for sex is tacit, the armed threat evident. The victim yields—“better to be raped than to be shot”—and remains silent for fear of reprisal and continued violence.

“Violence against women is an obstacle to the achievement of equality, development and peace...”  
(UN Declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against Women)

In every province visited, trauma practitioners and rape counselors emphasized that the numbers of armed rape that remain unregistered and untreated far surpasses existing records. This also means that HIV/AIDS is propagating widely and silently, although testing facilities are very limited in rural Burundi country, making infection rates unknowable.

## 2.3 Widowhood and prostitution

An equally devastating consequence of armed violence is the high number of widowed mothers in Burundi. In all eight provinces visited, women decried and lamented the plight of widows in town,

42. Interviews, Bujumbura, August 2004.

in displaced camps, and on the hillsides. As with victims of rape and sexual violence, widows suffer the double indignity of shame and blame for their plight.

Widows suffer particular discrimination under Burundian law. They cannot inherit property. Dire poverty and desperation are the direct result of widowhood, and under the weight of shame and destitution, many widows flee with their children and turn to prostitution for survival. Widowhood also means that as the sole head of household, widows are left with far fewer hours in the day to work in the fields. Agricultural production drops off, sometimes drastically, with immediate consequences for children's health and education. This descent is accelerated when the threat of armed attack and rape keeps women from working in their fields.

Widowhood entails a series of forced compromises that appear to vary little across the country. Primary among these are the material lack and destitution that stem from the fact that widows have no inheritance rights and lose all belongings and property to the late husband's family. According to a human rights activist in Ngozi, "If she fails to receive the support of the inlaws, she is lost." Widows are thus forced to support their family alone and bereft of property, land and personal effects.

"If she fails to receive the support of the inlaws, she is lost."

With destitution caused by years of conflict, prostitution and consensual concubinage are rife in hillside communities. Consistent hard drinking among the poorest exacerbates these tendencies; quotidian promiscuity is often widows' sole means of economic survival.

Women explained that in Burundian culture, widows are denigrated and mistreated by men and women because they have no "man to protect them." According to the cultural logic, because they are without man and are subject to the sexual whims of any passing male, they are presumed "prêtes à tout" and are labeled "loose." Widows in Kayanza described a vicious cycle of desperate indigence driving widows into prostitution, who then contract HIV and perish, leaving behind children who turn to delinquency, begging and

banditry to survive. Alternately, children born of these liaisons are rejected by other children in the family and are blamed for their accidental birth.

Widows in Nyanza Lac displaced camp said that although armed gangs were a primary impediment to returning to their hills, another serious concern was the fact that they have no physical help to rebuild their homes. Some claimed they felt obligated to remarry with any available man, sometimes even with brother of the deceased husband, simply for protection and meagre material assistance. Extreme indigence drives these alliances. Such relations rarely last and often end in conflict or flight, both of which further their descent into destitution.

"At home there is nothing for us; we have to make ends meet somehow."

For lack of finances, daughters of widows drop out of school or cannot attend at all. They marry prematurely, often as a second or third wife, simply because there is too much poverty at home. "At home there is nothing for us; we have to make ends meet somehow."<sup>43</sup>

Youth groups in Makamba described a different scenario. In their state of extreme poverty, they said, many widows cannot remarry, and are further denigrated by society because they lack a husband "to protect them." Widows are assumed to be promiscuous: chased from their land, poor and weak, they are more likely to turn to prostitution to survive, thus confirming society's condemnation.

In Kampazi displaced camp, Kayanza province, widows claimed that husbands were killed not only in the war but continue to die in armed robberies in homes. Consequences of widowhood include lack of education and healthcare for children, and multiple sexual relations and polygamy driven solely by economic necessity. The offspring of these relations are rejected, abandoned and become street children. Local men refer to the proliferation of polygamy as "reconstruction," meaning that families have been so decimated by war that the social imperative now is "to multiply." Women clarified that this was just a pretext for male exploitation of vulnerable women.

43. "A la maison rien ne va, et on doit se débrouiller ailleurs." Interviews, Makamba, September 2004

“Society views [widows] as an embarrassment — imagine how this must make them feel.”

In Kayogoro camp, Makamba province, widows justified these exploitive relations, including prostitution, in terms of “improved security.” Women explained that there was “more security in prostitution” because they exercise a degree of selfdetermination: the absence of any connection to local men, however tenuous and abusive, can lead to rape. Prostitution, or “vagabondage sexuel,” as women called it, engenders a modicum of male protection. It is seen as safer than remaining constantly alone, exposed and vulnerable to physical abuse and sexual violence by unknown delinquents, armed gangs and bandits.

Widows in Kayanza claimed that although there is no protection for widows generally, older widows are relatively safe from sexual violence and exploitive manipulation. Young widows have no

access to land for cultivation and are more easily manipulated by married men or soldiers. Liaisons with married men, military or civilian, can create open conflict between the widow and the wife, sometimes involving physical violence.

Prostitution, or “vagabondage sexuel,” engenders a modicum of male protection.

One widow, the youngest of the group, spoke candidly about her sexual dalliances or “vagabondage sexuel.” She explained that there had been no other way to survive after losing her husband and children in the war in 1993. She fled to Kayanza town and took a rented room paid for by a friend. At that time, prostitution was the only way to make ends meet. She is now a member of a women’s association that supports street children in Kayanza.

### 3. Conclusion and Recommendations

No one interviewed in the course of this research felt that Burundi was ready for civilian disarmament. The need for arms as a means of self-defense was repeatedly identified as unchanged, despite peace accords and a significant diminution in military combat around the country. Progress in pacifying armed political movements has not meant less armed violence against civilians, however.

While both men and women are aware of the negative impact of arms proliferation and armed violence on civilian well-being, livelihoods and the social fabric, there remains an important gender gap around perceptions of arms possession. According to many women, ongoing insecurity and armed violence reinforces the male perception that arms are essential to personal safety and domestic selfprotection. Some women noted feeling “hostage” to this logic: despite a fear of arms in the household, for instance, women don’t dare denounce them. When asked about this silence, a woman in Makamba lamented, “Our men don’t change.”

Many women were quick to assert that in the absence of armed violence, insecurity, and political struggle, as subsistence farmers Burundians are highly productive. “As soon as we Burundians stop hearing gunfire, we produce.” Yet the population will need some encouragement from its leaders, we were told, if it is to take up commercial and agricultural activities again in earnest. Many Burundians anticipate further political violence, and are reticent to reinvest their energy, time, and money into activities that could be stolen or destroyed with impunity.

Even if national reconciliation is realized, another woman opined, it will be impossible to end armsrelated violence by collecting all the arms in the country unless poverty is addressed. “Poverty is a primary cause of the violation of human rights,” said a legal counselor for rape victims in Gitega. Absent a radical shift in the national political logic (i.e., from selfinterest to collective interest), the nexus of poverty, fear, impunity will continue driving human rights violations and the use and proliferation of small arms. Because of arms use and unchecked

proliferation, the counselor continued, “the most fundamental human right, the right to life, is violated. People are the source of development, and arms and armed violence obstruct development by creating and perpetuating a climate of constant insecurity.”

“...Arms and armed violence obstruct development by creating and perpetuating a climate of constant insecurity.”

As for a national policy regarding small arms, armed violence and eventual disarmament, trauma counselors at Maison Shalom in Ruyigi suggested that education and sensitisation programs are the essential initial step. People cannot be expected to surrender their arms if they do not see the destruction and suffering they generate—an awareness clearly evident from these interviews. It is the next step of addressing the causes of armed violence among civilians that confounds men and women interviewed for this study. The solution is in equal parts economic, legal, and political. Once the security of a stable political future is in place, administrative attention can focus on redressing a fallen judiciary: the crisis of impunity and lapsed legal enforcement are primary enablers of armed violence, rape and robbery across the country. A solid political entente is equally essential to generate the trust that is required to render the logic of armed self-defense obsolete.

Small arms possession has become an economic livelihood, and requires an antipoverty strategic approach. Youth from *Gardiens de la Paix* and other self-defense militias will need vocational training so they can live productively without armed violence as their sole means of survival. Small arms are arguably a primary enabler of sexual violence: they serve both to intimidate victims into submission and to ensure their silence. The threat of armed violence ensures immunity for rapists.

#### Recommendations

Military and civilian disarmament are urgently needed in Burundi to facilitate national reconciliation, catalyze rural development, and ensure civilian safety. However, Burundian women stressed that disarmament is not yet feasible, as “the reasons why Burundians keep arms are still there.”

Women strongly supported a future civilian disarmament program, although three preconditions for such an initiative were deemed essential.

1. Viable political solutions to the conflict must be reached and implemented by the national government. Peace and security are the sine qua non of any civilian disarmament initiative. The reasons why Burundians acquire and use small arms (self-defense, destitution, judiciary void) must be addressed if a call to disarmament is to be remotely credible.
2. Reconciliation must occur in good faith at all levels of Burundian society, beginning with rural areas where land disputes threaten to re-ignite interethnic violence and impede return and reintegration of refugee and displaced populations.
3. Massive sensitisation efforts on the negative social impact of SALW proliferation are required to secure the interest and cooperation of weapons owners. Also emphasized was the importance of female participation in these awareness campaigns, and of a gender component which recognizes women's role both in the keeping of weapons and the solutions necessary for civilian and military disarmament.

provide "safety" and income to many people, urban and rural. At present, most civilians and authorities are very far away from these basic insights, as fear and suspicion dominate most people's thinking (consequences of a prolonged siege mentality).

2. Economic alternatives are essential to voluntary civilian disarmament. Such a program must be framed and executed as a development/anti-poverty initiative. Must be voluntary, not a forced confiscation campaign. "Skills for guns" could be a possible message/orientation. The nature of the incentives will be defined by a detailed study of the expectations of different weapons holders.
3. SARP should work closely with UNDP Burundi to initiate an assessment/ arms survey to determine numbers and owners, and support a government campaign. This should form part of the foundation of national a civilian disarmament programme.
4. Justice systems should be reformed not only to be responsive to cases of rape and sexual violence, but to end impunity for those who commit acts of banditry and armed violence.

### ***Other recommendations***

1. Disarmament must be seen as a path to development and security; weapons currently

## Annex 1. Artisan rifles or "Mugobore"

In Ruyigi province, we met with a high-ranking judiciary police officer. We talked of recent ambushes and rural banditry generally, and his ability to control it. Burundians occasionally mentioned a handmade firearm they called 'mugobore', but I had yet to see one.

*Mugobore* are artisan rifles first developed by a Tanzanian paramilitary force called the Basungusungu, who patrolled their border with Burundi against illegal trafficking. When rebel movements began in 1994, they depended on their rural support base to supply them with weapons. Industry-grade weapons were scarce and expensive, so most attackers used machetes, the preferred weapon of Rwanda's *genocidaires*. Rural farmers began fabricating *mugobore* to supply the rebels. *Mugobore* fabrication spread into Burundi's rural regions. They are now the preferred weapons of certain civil defence groups and particularly rural bandits operating in the war's margins, preying on fellow civilians.

We asked the officer what kinds of weapons were most in circulation around Ruyigi. He stood and walked over to the shadowy pile behind the door. From the tangle of bicycle handlebars, bicycle inner tubes, and random blocks of wood, he pulled out what looked like a toy rifle, cobbled together from bits of wood, lengths of metal tube, and rubber straps. Holding it high, he demonstrated its firing mechanism, not a trigger but a coiled spring that he pulled from the butt of the rifle and released. He tossed the gun back onto the pile and returned to his desk. For the officer, clearly the *mugobore* was nothing more than a recurring irritation, a source of many woes. We asked him about the impact of such rudimentary firearms on the rural population. Were they lethal, or just crude props to intimidate the unarmed? Would the officer allow us to take a photo?

*Mugobore are the poor man's temporary escape from poverty.*

"There will be no photo," he informed us. He then explained that bullets fired from *mugobore* have no accuracy, and to injure or kill the target must be point blank. As to the significance of *mugobore*, the officer was more philosophical. *Mugobore* are the poor man's temporary escape from poverty. With a *mugobore*, anyone can show up at a busy rural market in broad daylight, shoot in the air to scare people off, and collect what money and goods remain. Since women do most of the trading in rural markets, they are the most affected by these raids. In cases of sexual assault, a woman is approached with a *mugobore* and the demand for sex is tacit. Generally she yields, and remains silent for fear of reprisal.

In Ruyigi province, women claimed that *mugobore* often result in misfire accidents in the home. Gunshot victims, we were told, do not go to hospital for treatment, for a number of reasons. Receiving qualified medical treatment requires that they lie about the cause of accident, out of fear of legal repercussions or police investigation relating to illegal gun possession. Accusations of rebel involvement were common during the war, and could result in loss of life. Official gunshot statistics, like those for rape, are well below actual figures because victims believe these incidents must remain clandestine.

*Mugobore* production and use will be difficult to eliminate for two reasons. First, *mugobore* production, although illegal, is a widespread and well-known craft: civilian disarmament programs can recover the guns but not the knowledge. In terms of armed violence and civilian insecurity, *mugobore* fabrication is a veritable Pandora's box. Second, *mugobore* use is no longer war-related, but is now driven purely by economic necessity. *Mugobore* are bought and sold (approx. 10\$ per unit) but are more lucrative as a tool for bandits and thieves. Recovering the weapons themselves is therefore senseless without a credible and effective socio-economic component: training in income generating activities can be effectively leveraged to interest *mugobore* users (currently synonymous with 'bandits' for many Burundians) in pursuing non-violent economic livelihoods.



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