

# Human security and reconstruction efforts in Rwanda: impact on the lives of women

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## Introduction

Reconstruction efforts supported by funding agencies seek to create conditions of sustained peace in post-conflict societies. In deadly civil conflicts, in which organised violence stigmatises members of the affected society, the struggle against insecurity in all its manifestations during the reconstruction phase is thus an essential condition for peace.

Since intra-state conflicts are often the result of structural problems, their resolution calls for the identification of corrective measures that are capable of influencing the sources of insecurity. Basically, then, interventions should not only seek to rebuild social infrastructures and rehabilitate the state, but must also support reforms that will resolve political, ethnic, and socio-economic tensions. For that very reason, promoting human security in post-conflict societies means taking specific actions that support a safe environment, social harmony, equal status, and equitable access to resources and to the decision-making process (Gervais 2002b:13–17). And at the intersection of these actions, one would place an intervention framework focusing on security problems that concern women.

Worldwide evidence of increased gender-based violence in civil strife and armed conflict (Human Rights Watch 1996; Lindsey 2001), and of the severe consequences on women of such conflict (Manchanda 2001; Turshen and Twagiramariya 1998), underlines the duty to address these issues by sustained actions that meet women's security needs in post-conflict conditions. In fact, gender-based violence still remains high during reconstruction periods, proving that peace is not enough to ensure women's security. In many cases, women are also confronted with radically changed realities: they have to assume new roles and new responsibilities at the family and

community levels, and in so doing they are more susceptible to new forms of insecurity. As a result, it seems pertinent to question how development agencies have approached and sought to mitigate these security concerns. How do reconstruction efforts carried out or supported by funding agencies address issues of safety and security in the lives of women and girls? Do their actions or projects make a concrete difference to women's security? What can we learn in terms of strategies and approaches?

In recent years, UN institutions and bilateral donors have in many ways supported peace activists, human-rights advocacy groups, and grassroots community activists in their efforts to improve their ability to build peace in post-conflict societies (UNDP 2002). At the same time, NGOs are increasingly taking voluntary initiatives, promoting and implementing programmes that help build and consolidate peace in these societies (International Alert 1998; Leonhardt *et al.* 2002). Efforts have also been made to 'engender' government programmes with technical assistance from development agencies (Zucherman 2002).

Focusing on Rwanda, this paper examines a sample of initiatives and tries to evaluate how pertinent the interventions sponsored by aid agencies that seek to meet the security needs of women have been. It also tries to identify lessons for future actions assisting post-conflict populations. In doing this, I have used three indicators to assess efforts to establish a more secure environment for women. If appropriately defined in accordance with the Rwandan context, personal security, economic security, and socio-political security are indicators that may be used to reveal the effects or impacts of these actions on women's security.

The research used in this paper focused on initiatives included in socio-economic development projects funded by the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) and implemented by Canadian NGOs (Oxfam-Québec, CARE-Canada, and Development and Peace). These projects are found in different regions of Rwanda (in the provinces of rural Kigali, Umutara, Gitarama, and Butare), and their beneficiary populations are mainly women, including survivors of the genocide, and returned refugees of 1994 as well as refugees from camps in the DRC and Tanzania. In addition, this study also assesses the effects of initiatives carried out by women's organisations or collectives. The information and data used here were gathered during several visits to Rwanda in 2001 and 2002, including project visits, and were collected from Canadian NGOs acting as implementing agencies,

as well as through a review of official documents and documentation produced by local NGOs, and meetings with government officials and local elected representatives, as well as heads and members of associations.

## **The case of Rwanda**

In the aftermath of the 1994 Rwandan war and genocide, aid programmes were concentrated on reconciliation activities, rehabilitation of the legal system, and economic and social recovery. Over and above the funding from international financial institutions and bilateral organisations, external aid was mainly offered by UN agencies (WFP, UNHCR, and UNICEF) and by foreign NGOs that seek to involve beneficiary populations directly. These interventions sought to counter the consequences of war and genocide by providing help to displaced persons, food aid, reconstruction of infrastructure, services for genocide orphans, institutional support to local NGOs, and reconciliation projects.

Although about 96 per cent of the state's investment budget was financed by external aid, a significant characteristic of this aid has been the importance of NGO assistance after the genocide. This contribution represented 7–10 per cent of all the aid received by Rwanda between 1995 and 2000 (Gervais 2002c:6–7). Indeed, many NGOs have provided indirect support to the state budget by funding the construction of local social infrastructure (schools, health centres, water-supply systems, etc.). In post-reconstruction Rwanda, NGOs mobilised an important means to initiate changes in local communities in terms of resource management for reconciliation and governance.

Before looking at the selected interventions, it may be appropriate to offer a general overview of the context in which these were set in order to shed light on how the lives of women have been affected by war and genocide.

### ***Post-genocide situation***

With the slaughter of more than a half million individuals and unprecedented population movements, the genocide of 1994 had the effect of irremediably transforming Rwandan society, and the country was forced to confront the consequences of organised violence and the loss of a significant part of its human and economic capital.

Rwanda's agriculture-based economy was completely destroyed by the war, forcing most of its population to live in a state of extreme

precariousness. The food shortages caused by the destruction of crops and the severe reduction in cultivated land was aggravated by the inability of many households to obtain the labour they needed. In 1996, 34 per cent of families – with an average of six to seven young dependants – were headed by widows, unmarried women, and wives of prisoners suspected of genocide (Ministry of Gender and Women in Development 2000:2). This reflects the fundamental changes that took place in the demographic structure of Rwanda, where, even today, 64 per cent of the labour force in basic production is female. Burdened with increased responsibilities (heads of household or farms, economic actors), women had to adapt to these new roles in a particularly restrictive context. For instance, a study carried out on violence against women in Rwanda revealed that 80 per cent of victims surveyed showed signs of trauma and 66 per cent of them were HIV-positive (AVEGA 1999:24–6). Indeed, it is estimated that 250,000 women were raped during the war and the genocide, between 1990 and 1994 (Muganza 2002). In addition to obstacles arising from the conflict and genocide, Rwandan women and girls have to deal with deeply patriarchal forms of social organisation.

### *Initiatives for women during the reconstruction period*

A look at the projects undertaken in Rwanda during the reconstruction period reveals that there were two types of initiatives aimed at supporting women's efforts to react to the upheavals caused by conflict and genocide: the formation of solidarity groups and production associations, and the establishment of advocacy groups and women's collectives.

Since 1995, women have joined together in associations averaging 15 to 20 members, either spontaneously or at the behest of charitable organisations and NGOs, to cultivate collective fields or to carry out income-generating activities. The main motivation for these associations is to ensure the economic survival of their members. With financial support from international NGOs and bilateral or multilateral donors, various associations have also sprung up with the mission of defending the strategic interests of women: representations to government to have discriminatory laws reviewed and activism in favour of more equitable representation of women in political life. These associations have also taken on the task of providing legal and medical assistance services, forming groups to assist survivors, and providing business advice.

As mentioned previously, gender-based violence, the depth of extreme poverty, and non-egalitarian customary practices and discriminatory laws were among the main challenges faced in the aftermath of the conflict and genocide by the majority of Rwandan women. In an attempt to reveal the effects or impacts of aid-agency interventions on women's security, indicators such as personal security, economic security, and socio-political security were created and used as methodological reference marks.

### *Personal security*

In order for the physical or personal security of Rwandan women to be guaranteed or formalised, they must be protected both legally and socially from threats and acts of aggression.

Since 1994, organised violence against women has been curbed and legal measures have been instituted to punish acts of sexual violence, thus ending the *de facto* impunity that prevailed in Rwanda. Very few perpetrators of acts of sexual violence committed during the war and genocide of 1994 have been brought to justice, however, despite the large number of cases identified (Joseph 2000:47). Most recent statistics show, nevertheless, that the courts are currently processing at least 600 rape complaints and that guilty verdicts are increasingly frequent (Muganza 2002). The government has set up – albeit belatedly – a programme for training health officials, police, and *gagaca* (traditional village-based) judges to help women who were victims of violence during the genocide.

An awareness campaign was undertaken to raise consciousness regarding the severity of sexual violence in Rwanda, a society still heavily characterised by various forms of violence against women. According to provincial sources, six rapes took place in February 2002 in the district of Gabiro alone. In a school in Kigali, a survey revealed that 60 per cent of girls had been raped. Thus, on International Women's Day, the Public Service and Labour Minister made it clear in a speech she made to a crowd gathered in Murambi, a small city in the north-east of the country, that violence against women is no longer allowed in Rwanda and that severe punishment would be administered against rapists in the future (Kayetesi 2002). Nevertheless, data show that violence of a sexual nature in Rwanda is far from decreasing. Compared to other sub-Saharan African countries, girls have access to relatively equal education. The school attendance rate is identical for boys and girls at the elementary level and higher for girls at the secondary level. However, the survey also revealed that sexual harassment

by staff is a problem that girls face in secondary schools throughout the entire country (Ministry of Finance and Economic Planning 2001:31).

There remains a feeling of insecurity in the daily lives of women and girls. Following the genocide, many young adults aged between 13 and 20 years found themselves as heads of family and had to take charge of much younger children. According to the first available national statistics, these comprised 13 per cent of Rwandan families in 1996. Over time, their number has decreased somewhat (Ministry of Finance and Economic Planning 2002:2) but the ravages of HIV/AIDS seem to be perpetuating the situation. In a study aimed at learning about the conditions in which these young heads of household live, interviews conducted with a sample that covered the entire country led to the conclusion that their rights are regularly disregarded and their health and education needs ignored by the community (ACORD 2001:26). Given the rarity or shortage of land and Rwanda's particularly severe overpopulation, the property these youngsters inherited from their parents is coveted by other members of their families, or even by strangers. Moreover, with communities torn apart by war and genocide, traditional support mechanisms no longer operate. In addition, it is conventionally considered unacceptable for women to inherit from their families. Since girls who are heads of family enjoy no protection, they live in a climate of permanent insecurity and are vulnerable to attempts at intimidation and sexual assault, particularly at night. For a while, actions by charitable organisations and local and international NGOs allowed material assistance to be provided to these orphans, but the security and rights problems have not been given any special attention. This feeling of insecurity is also shared by other women, as indicated by the results of national consultations carried out as part of the poverty-reduction strategy development process (Ministry of Finance and Economic Planning 2001:37).

Many survivors of the genocide had their homes pillaged or destroyed during the struggle. It was estimated at the time that 2 million people were homeless, including more than half a million deemed to be vulnerable (Ministère du Plan 1996). In 1996, the massive return of repatriates from camps in the DRC and Tanzania raised fears of an increase in violent incidents between these returning owners and new home occupants. To lessen or eliminate this threat, donors funded home-construction projects, considered to be an indispensable condition for stability in the country and the security of the people.

Through its partner agencies, CIDA was the main bilateral funder of this displaced persons resettlement and reintegration programme. With the collaboration of local people, Canadian NGOs, such as Development and Peace in the provinces of Butare and Gitarama and Oxfam-Québec in the provinces of Byumba and Rural Kigali, built houses in various parts of the country and tended to the most needy. Widowed heads of household made up 35 per cent of beneficiaries of the programme funded by Canada (Bureau d'Appui à la Coopération Canadienne 2000:14). Before this, house building was the domain of men, who alone held title to property. By giving priority to the most vulnerable and by making this a condition for funding, NGO projects promoted the taking into account of women's needs in housing programmes. In many cases, women signed individual contracts recognised by communal authorities. The signing of a contract between a woman, the local authority, and the NGO in fact brought about a major change: women and girls were recognised as owners of their homes. These programmes also contributed to the recognition of the right of women and girls to hold property, and gave legitimacy to their role as heads of family.

### *Economic security*

The economic security of Rwandan women is guaranteed only when they can satisfy their own basic needs and those of their dependants as economic producers and actors. With over 90 per cent of the population dependent on agriculture, access to the means of production is an essential condition for economic survival and a source of a minimum income. Although their participation on farms was indispensable, in the past, the role of women as producers was misunderstood or ignored by the state, by society, and by development projects. Traditionally, men owned the land and women could not inherit or own it: marriage remained the main route for women to gain access to land. Following the genocide, one of the challenges for female heads of household was to secure a cultivable plot of land in order to ensure their family's subsistence. One frequently observed way of doing this was to join an associative group.

After 1995, many associative or solidarity groups were created or promoted by international or local NGOs. Supported by an NGO, these associations were able to obtain authorisation from local authorities to cultivate communal land, land left fallow by its owner, or lowland land and marshes in the public domain. Marshland rehabilitation and the development of radical terraces – with funding from NGO projects –

allowed land that had until then been unusable to be exploited. For example, Oxfam-Québec supports 44 women's associations and 250 mixed associations with almost 4000 women members in the province of Rural Kigali (Gervais 2002a:14). As part of its activities, Oxfam-Québec, in co-operation with the associations it supports, has developed productive terraces on hillsides and transformed lowlands into cultivable land. In the project zone, these lands are cultivated by associations that share in the harvest.

Development of these lands by solidarity groups benefits their members, who see the precariousness of their situation lessened by being able to secure their basic needs and by providing, in many cases, a surplus to be sold in the market-place. But, so far, these groups only have the usufruct of these lands that their work helped make cultivable. The marshes belong to the Rwandan government and the situation regarding the lowlands is confusing and controversial. The associations and NGOs have invested in equipment and labour to make these lands cultivable but, for the time being, the associations' rights to these lands are in no way guaranteed and it is very possible that some associations might be dispossessed in favour of other groups or individuals (Gervais 2003:31). Also, this property question remains delicate and could mortgage the future of these associations by jeopardising their source of income, particularly in places where many people are landless. Moreover, for many women, the only way to have access to land is to belong to an association, which makes them highly dependent on those associations to ensure a minimum income.

In partnership with Development and Peace, the Irish NGO Trócaire supports the Conseil Consultatif des Femmes Commune de Musambira (Musambira Women's Advisory Council - COCOF), founded in 1995 in the province of Gitarama in the south of Rwanda. COCOF currently has more than 2000 women members in 91 socio-economic associations. This organisation, developed with technical assistance from Trócaire, has been granting credit to its members at an interest of 2.5 per cent per month, with a credit-recovery rate of 97 per cent (COCOF 2001). The relatively productive nature of the COCOF credit system is an indication that its members are now able to carry out more lucrative economic activities.

The statements of association members in various regions of the country (Gervais 2003) regarding their greater ability to pay education costs and to buy medicines, as well as the disappearance of cases of severe malnutrition in certain regions, suggest that most women have



passed the survival and bare-subsistence levels and that their standard of living is improving somewhat. However, the financial security of female agricultural producers remains fragile because of the vulnerability of their activity to climatic conditions, land productivity, and marketing difficulties.

### ***Socio-political security***

The socio-political security of women in Rwanda can only become a reality if the society to which they belong respects women's rights and allows women to exercise them. To determine whether there has been a noticeable change in this direction, it is worth looking at the legal framework, the place occupied by women in their communities, and their level of involvement in and control over household decision making.

In Rwandan society, a set of discriminatory laws sanctioned non-egalitarian customary practices in legal, matrimonial, and hereditary matters. Also, after the genocide, women who were widowed and young orphaned girls could not inherit their husbands' or fathers' property. Women's associations such as the Forum for Women Members of Parliament in Rwanda, the Pro-Women Collective, and the Association for the Defence of Women's and Children's Rights (HAGURUKA) successfully fought to have a law passed on the matrimonial system and inheritance rights based on the principle of equality of the sexes. Formal recognition of equal access to resources provided the first legal framework for the protection of the rights of married women and orphaned girls (Ministry of Gender and Women in Development 2000:4). HAGURUKA notes that the inheritance law is starting to be applied and complaints in this area are decreasing. However, about 60 per cent of households are, in the eyes of the law, considered to be common-law unions (Ministère des Terres, de la Réinstallation et de la Protection de l'Environnement 2001:25-7). In other words, many marriages are informal.

Most unions are not registered at the district level due to people's inability to afford related expenses such as legal fees and dowry (Gervais 2003:15). Rwandan law recognises only monogamous marriages celebrated before a civil status officer. Women living in common-law marriages and single women with children constitute a significant part of the population, but their rights are not protected by the new law. Moreover, this law leaves a legal vacuum regarding how land is distributed among heirs from the same family. Until the new land law promised by the government (Ministry of Finance and Economic

Planning 2001:60–1) actually materialises, nothing prevents unfair practices against women when sharing land rights. A first land bill was removed from the parliamentary agenda because of strong objections from some quarters of society.

By promoting a participatory process, projects implemented by international and local NGOs have made it possible for women to get involved in decision making within the associations being supported. Through training and awareness activities, some of these projects have encouraged women's access to decision-making positions within their associations. For example, in the 250 mixed associations supported by Oxfam-Québec, 50 per cent of members sitting on decision-making bodies are women (Gervais 2002a:17). At general meetings of productive associations, it is no longer rare to see female members express and defend their points of view. Such behaviour seems to be becoming more and more socially acceptable. This greater role of women in their community is also evident in their greater involvement in local affairs.

The decentralisation policy adopted by the government involves transferring responsibilities previously allocated to the provinces to the district level. This means that districts are now the main level of power, with the provincial level of government assuming the role of supporter of the central government and local jurisdictions (Gervais 2002c; Ministère de l'Administration Locale et des Affaires Sociales 2000). This reform took effect in March 2001 with general elections in all 106 districts, in which women raised their representation above 25 per cent of elected seats at the district, sector, and cell levels. In this context, the election of six female mayors is quite significant, as it is the first time Rwandan women have been able to take on the responsibilities of elected office through an open democratic process. Moreover, the presence of women in the cabinet – numbering five ministers out of a total of 26 – was strengthened in 2002. This has been an overall improvement in the conditions that were prevalent until 2001, when women's political representation was virtually non-existent.

Nevertheless, competition for the allocation of cultivable plots of land on living sites grouped within new settlement zones – the solution proposed by the government to accommodate new arrivals – shows that the transformation of the decision-making process within communities is variable. It is not rare to see female heads of household being allocated land that is infertile or located far away from where they live. And the involvement of women in household decision-making processes appears to have generated little concrete progress.

According to a socio-economic study carried out in three districts in the northeast of the country, home to a CARE development project for women and councils aimed at capacity building, skills development, and material inputs, the inequitable sharing of household income and resources to the detriment of women is still commonplace (Ndahimana *et al.* 2001:39). Traditionally, it is men who manage assets, with women having free access only to crops produced near the home. In recent years, the involvement of women in associations is more tolerated by men because, since the end of the period of emergency, aid has been directed to strengthening associations and is no longer paid directly to beneficiaries. Members of women's associations in the same region that are also helped by CARE say that their husbands are more favourable to their belonging to an association, but that within the household the status quo remains (Gervais 2002a:30). Thus, it is still a common practice for male heads of families to control income from work on plots belonging to associations.

### *Evaluating the impact of these initiatives*

Physical assaults on women have diminished significantly since 1994, but the level of sexual violence in Rwandan society remains alarming. The strengthening of the criminal code and awareness campaigns show, however, that violence against women is becoming less acceptable.

Through their associations, women have gained access to means of production that have allowed them to improve their living conditions – with a majority of them having actually managed to get beyond the survival and subsistence stages. But considering the link between poverty and women's ability to exercise their rights, progress in achieving women's economic security must be supported by donors and NGOs in ways that adopt a more long-term perspective.

Democracy within associations is helping to eliminate various forms of discrimination by promoting the election of candidates based on new criteria such as competence. And, in this sense, productive associations constitute a platform that allows women to exercise their rights within their community. However, the changes observed at this level seem to have had little impact on relations between men and women within family units.

The initiatives carried out within the context of reconstruction programmes in Rwanda have thus brought about changes that have had a positive impact on the security of women and girls. But, given the exceptional nature of the reference point – the genocide of 1994 –

it is too early for a final verdict on the permanence of these effects. Meanwhile, access to resources remains a vital challenge in Rwanda and a real source of tension between men and women. In sum, the achievements of recent years in terms of strengthening human security remain fragile and must be consolidated.

## Conclusion

An impact analysis of selected initiatives conducted by intervening agencies in Rwanda during the reconstruction period highlights the complexity of safety and security issues in the lives of women.

Although practices varied widely among organisations and donors, these initiatives have helped to create a safer environment for women. However, specific strategies focusing on women's and girls' security would better benefit them if they were more consistently planned so as to take into consideration other crucial issues. In fact, some initiatives did not have the anticipated results because they were not designed on the basis of an understanding of the ways in which issues of poverty, gender, and security intersect. For instance, the level of violence against women *post facto* and the very slow process of change to bring about greater gender equality within family units and communities should stimulate donors and NGOs to devote more attention to the impact of their initiatives on men and women, and to develop strategies to reduce the sources of tension. Furthermore, while most projects or activities are operating at the micro-level, the complexity of safety and security issues calls for focusing far more on ways of strengthening relationships both between these interventions and other actions at the regional and national levels, and with proposed sectoral policies.

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