



**REGIONAL CONFERENCE FOR THE RESTITUTION OF THE STUDY ON THE EXPERIENCE OF  
BURUNDI WOMEN WHO ENGAGED IN PEACEFUL DEMONSTRATIONS IN 2015 IN BURUNDI  
AND EXCHANGE OF EXPERIENCE.**

**MEETING REPORT**

**Kampala, November 2024**

## **1. Introduction and background**

In 2015, the late President Pierre Nkurunziza, then President of the Republic of Burundi, decided to run for a third unconstitutional term, in violation of the Arusha Agreement for Peace and Reconciliation in Burundi. This historic Peace Agreement allowed Burundians to live in peace for 10 years, after a long period of political-ethnic conflicts. In response to this unconstitutional approach, human rights organizations organized peaceful demonstrations to demand respect for the Constitution. Women human rights defenders played a particular role in the organization and execution of this civic demonstration.

The Burundian Coalition of Human Rights Defenders (CBDDH), thanks to the financial support of “Gender Innovation Funds”, commissioned a study to document the experience of Burundian women during the peaceful demonstrations against this third term of the late Pierre Nkurunziza in Burundi.

Gender Innovation Funds, is one of the components of the Strengthening Civil Courage Program (SCC-Program). It was founded by ABAAD and PAX and implemented in partnership with the 4 members of “SCC-Alliance”, namely: ABAAD, Amnesty, DefendDefenders and PAX.

The CBDDH organized a regional forum to share the results of the study with Burundian HRDs, as well as representatives of other coalitions from African countries to exchange experiences. This conference was held on November 12, 2024 at the Silver Springs Hotel, Kampala, thanks to the support of DefendDefenders which has hosted the CBDDH since 2015. The conference brought together 28 (17 women/11 men) Burundian human rights defenders including delegates from Kenya, Sudan, South Sudan and Burkina Faso (via teleconference).

## **2 .Opening ceremonies**



In her welcome remarks, Ms. Eulalie Nibizi Executive Director of the CBDDH thanked the participants for their presence at this forum aimed at sharing and learning from women from other countries. She expressed clear expectations: how to sustain women's resilience, learn lessons from the past and explore innovative initiatives to inspire Burundian women.



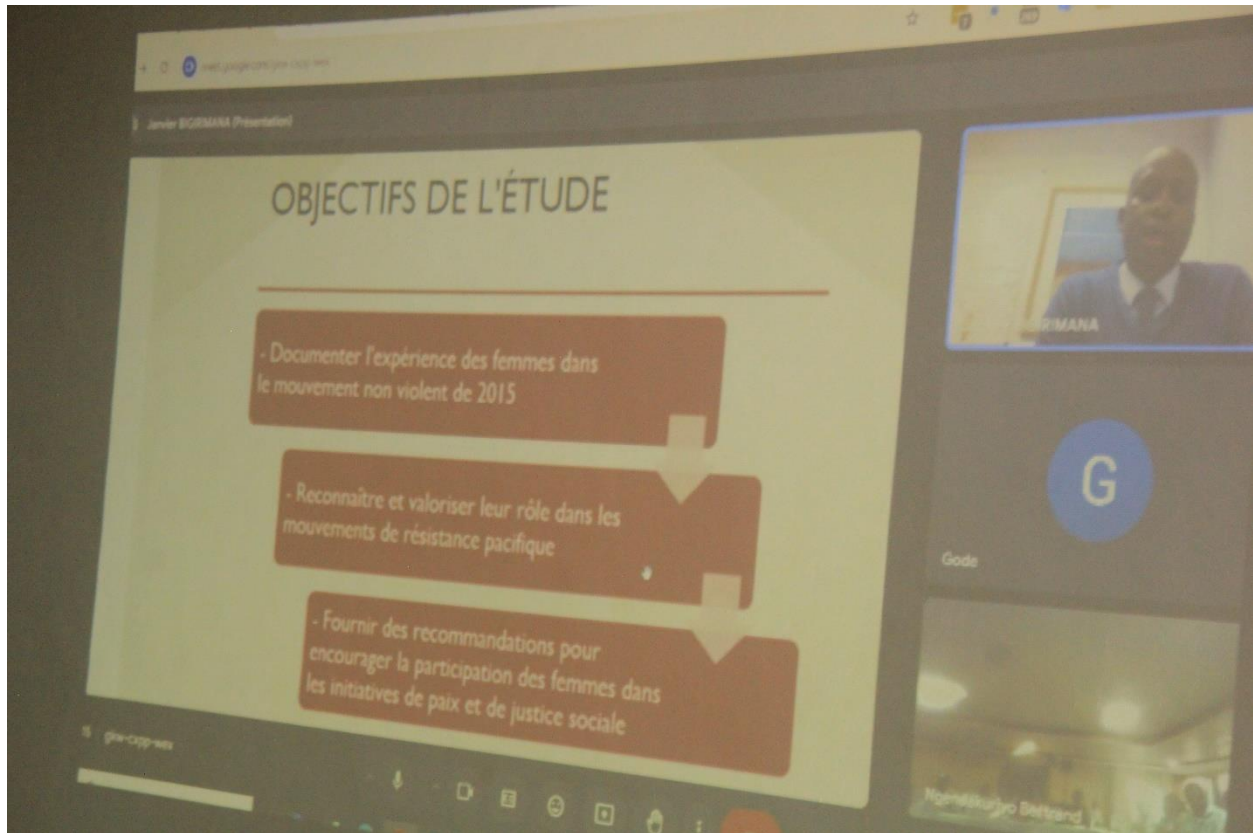
Joseph Bikanda, Coordinator of the Pan-African Network of Human Rights Defenders, on behalf of Hassan Shire, Executive Director of DefendDefenders and President of AfricanDefenders, welcomed the participants. He welcomed the initiative of this conference because DefendDefenders attaches great importance to the exchange of experiences, networking and capacity building of HRDs. He also recalled the support given to coalitions and associations in this direction before wishing fruitful exchanges to the participants. Mr. Joseph Bikanda also confirmed the determination of DefendDefenders and AfricanDefenders to continue to support the CBDDH and HRDs in exile, through socio-economic integration programs.

### **3. Participants' expectations**



Before the presentation of the results of the study by the consultants, the participants also expressed several expectations, in particular: the strengthening of women's networking for the citizen struggle, the promotion of women's solidarity in the fight against injustices, the maximization of the commitment of women in crisis contexts, the discovery of innovative mechanisms to strengthen their mobilization.

#### **4. Presentation of the study on the 2015 crisis in Burundi**



The discussions were fueled by the results of the study under the title: “Study to document the experience of Burundian women who engaged in the non-violent movement during the 2015 crisis” and, based on these results and the experience of women from other countries represented, a reflection focused on innovative mechanisms to strengthen the capacities of women in claiming their rights.

Presenting the results of the study, the consultant, Me Janvier Bigirimana, first announced the objectives of the study, namely:

- Document the experience of women in the nonviolent movement,
- Recognize and promote the role of women in the public resistance movement,
- Provide recommendations to encourage the participation of women in peace and social justice initiatives.

##### **5. The forms of involvement of women identified**

Addressing the forms of engagement of Burundian women during the demonstrations against the 3rd term of the late President Pierre Nkurunziza, the consultant listed among others:

- Active participation in demonstrations, often with their children at their backs, a gesture which, according to some of their testimonies, constituted an act of faith in the future of Burundi.

-Logistical and humanitarian support. The women organized food and medicine distributions for protesters and even hid wanted activists to protect them from authorities. This logistical support was crucial to the resilience of the movement.

-Advocacy and the role of women-led unions: Trade unionists have played a decisive role in mobilizing support and advocating for the cause internationally. Influential female figures have used their positions to pressure the government and raise international awareness of human rights violations in Burundi. This advocacy not only increased the visibility of the movement, but also attracted external support which helped to increase pressure on the regime.

-Digital mobilization and engagement on social networks: the engagement of young women from inside and outside the country on social networks played a key role in the dissemination of information in real time on the repression and demonstrations. Thanks to digital platforms, they bypassed censorship and managed to attract the attention of the international community and young women played a vital role.

-Female solidarity and support networks: Female solidarity was also a pillar of this mobilization. Women supported each other, sharing not only material resources, but also essential emotional and psychological support in a context of repression.

## **6. Learn from the experiences of other countries.**





The plenary debate session began with an experience-sharing session led by delegates from Kenya, Sudan and Burkina Faso. Speaking, Ms. Marvlyn from Kenya immediately indicated that during the recent protests in June, Kenyan women lost 151 of their own. Actions taken by the Kenyan coalition before and during the protests include:

- Strengthening of legal protection for women. If a woman was arrested, no more than 24 hours were to go without filing a complaint with the competent court;
- Establishment of a “Digital Mama” mental health service: empower women by providing them with digital education to protect themselves well;
- Support women economically, especially at the community level, etc.

Regarding Sudan's experience, Ms. Aida Musa of Sudanese Women for Peace and Development noted that during the 2019 protests that led to the departure of General Al Bashir from power, women played a big role in the protests. They also participated in those of 2023. However, the war between the 2 military groups is killing many people, especially women. According to her, 7.7 million women left Sudan and most lost their husbands, 6 million were killed, 1.5 million disappeared, almost a million were sold into slavery; clarifying to those who did not want to believe it that these figures reflect reality.

Aida Musa appealed for solidarity, suggesting working together; to feel the suffering of each woman as her own suffering. She proposed the creation of a regional, then African, network of women human rights defenders. She regretted that in Sudan, there is no education for girls, women have no rights. Even in the family, the woman does not have the right to say no, it is always the man who decides. Madam Aida Musa concluded by calling for change now.

Mesdames Florence Ouattara et Zongo Coulibaly Zenabou du Burkina Faso ont partagé leurs expériences en indiquant que :



- There are many women's human rights organizations in the country, because since the Revolution of Thomas Sankara, women have been recognized as full citizens and have started to organize;
- Two main methods are organized to claim their rights: going out and demonstrating with kitchen utensils and, if necessary, applying the principle of nudity for women;
- Pressure demonstrations are organized at the National Assembly during the vote on important laws;
- Platforms for women leaders have been created;
- But the shrinking of civic space for reasons of fighting terrorism makes activism difficult, they concluded.

## **7. Recommendations**



From the debates which followed the exchange of these experiences, some key ideas emerged (which can be considered as innovative mechanisms), namely:

- The importance of documenting violations to guarantee reparation for victims in favorable contexts in the future;
- The importance of developing strategic work plans to anticipate threats, based on the experience of Kenya;

- The importance of strengthening unity and solidarity among women HRDs and working with women's community associations;
- The importance of using technological tools to overcome obstacles;
- The importance of promoting regional and international networking and connections.
- Continue to raise awareness among women of the importance of supporting the fight for women's rights. The participants in fact increasingly appreciated the development of positive masculinity.

## **8. Group work**

During the forum, working groups reflected on ways to mobilize women to defend their rights peacefully while ensuring the sustainability of this movement among younger generations. The proposed strategies were structured around three main axes:

- Strategies for mobilizing women internally and perpetuating the movement among young people;
- How to create solidarity between women HRDs?
- How to strengthen and innovate the impact of women in non-violent protest movements.

The first group highlighted the importance of strengthening women's capacities through targeted training and awareness-raising. These initiatives would allow them to better understand their rights and claim them effectively. The creation of networks and collaborative platforms has also been identified as a crucial step to promote the sharing of experiences and strengthen solidarity between actors of change. Empowering women and promoting their leadership have been highlighted as key elements, so that they can play a leading role in non-violent movements. Furthermore, digital tools, such as social media and online platforms, offer valuable opportunities to raise awareness among a wider audience and mobilize more support. Peaceful collective actions were recommended to carry out demands effectively while demonstrating the power of non-violent engagement. Finally, the involvement of young people in these initiatives was deemed essential to ensure the continuity of the movement, as was the documentation of lived experiences, which will make it possible to strengthen advocacy campaigns.

The second group emphasized the need to create real solidarity among women human rights defenders. This solidarity involves collaborative actions, the facilitation of networking, the sharing of resources and skills, as well as the launch of collective and unified campaigns. The group also insisted on the inclusion of women from diverse ethnic, religious or regional backgrounds to ensure balanced representation and enrich perspectives in the fight for human

rights. Finally, establishing a climate of trust was deemed essential to encourage collaboration and strengthen ties between defenders who are engaged in peaceful protest movements.

Finally, the third group proposed practical approaches to strengthen the impact of women in non-violent movements. It was emphasized that supporting women leaders by offering them adapted resources and promoting their initiatives is essential. Innovative strategies, such as the use of digital technologies and the creation of intergenerational alliances, make it possible to amplify the scope of actions. In addition, effective communication through the media and the development of impactful messages are essential tools to raise public awareness and challenge decision-makers. The organization of exchange workshops and collaboration with other organizations was also proposed as concrete means to strengthen advocacy and awareness campaigns.

In conclusion, Ms. Eulalie Nibizi Executive Director of the Burundian Coalition of Human Rights Defenders (CBDDH) invited participants in the forum to observe a minute of silence to pay tribute to the women and men victims of the 2015 political crisis in Burundi. She then thanked the participants for their fruitful deliberations and recommended that the recommendations of the Regional Forum be included in the study report. She also promised participants to integrate these conclusions and lessons learned from the experiences of women from other countries represented in the forum into strategies and action plans of the CBDDH. She expressed her gratitude to DefendDefenders for its multifaceted support to HRDs in general and to the CBDDH in particular.

The conference which began at 9 a.m. ended at 5:15 p.m. with a fraternization session.

**Done in Kampala, le 13 November 2024**

**Bertrand Ngendakuriyo**

**Forum Rapporteur**

Annexes.



















