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**STUDY TO DOCUMENT THE EXPERIENCE OF  
BURUNDIAN WOMEN INVOLVED IN THE 2015  
NON-VIOLENT PROTEST MOVEMENT AGAINST  
THE CONTROVERSIAL THIRD TERM OF  
PRESIDENT NKURUNZIZA**



**Final Report**  
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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

On 25 April 2015, the CNDD-FDD party Congress designated President Pierre Nkurunziza as its candidate for the presidential election. As the latter had already been elected twice, in 2005 and 2010, this candidacy constituted a violation of both the Arusha Agreement for Peace and Reconciliation in Burundi signed in Arusha, Tanzania on 28 August 2000 and the Constitution of the Republic of Burundi of 18 March 2005. These two fundamental legal instruments prohibited the President from running for more than two terms.

Following this candidacy, a protest movement against this controversial third term emerged and Burundian women played a significant role in it despite the risks and significant challenges they had to face.

The objective of this study is twofold. On the one hand, it is about to document the experience of women who participated in this movement, by highlighting the crucial role that women play in peaceful resistance movements, relating that role to the international comparative framework. On the other hand, it is about to provide recommendations to support and encourage the participation of women in future peace and social justice initiatives.

By combining the documentary method, the quantitative method (semi-structured questionnaire) and the qualitative method (in-depth interviews and focus groups), and referring to relevant theoretical concepts, namely invisibilization, intersectionality, necrology, and methodological nationalism, the study produced the following results:

1. The involvement of Burundian women in the protest movement against the third term was legally founded. It fell within the framework which allows the freedom of peaceful demonstrations as well as the right to take part in the management of public affairs, rights which are guaranteed by international human rights law to which Burundi had subscribed as well as by domestic law.
2. The involvement of Burundian women in this movement was not only part of the socio-political history of Burundi, but also part of a broader perspective of the evolution of social movements and women's rights in Africa and beyond.
3. Women assumed different roles during this protest movement, even though the will to make them invisible was real. These roles ranged from frontline protests, to collecting logistical resources, advocacy, coordination meetings, awareness raising and international alliances.
4. The women came from different backgrounds and transcended political and ethnic barriers and through their participation in the movement, they raised the voices for justice, respect for human rights and peace, fundamental aspects leading to the common ideal of democracy and good governance.
5. Women have demonstrated an ability to integrate values of solidarity and justice within the movement itself, helping to establish close links between civil society and other protest forces.
6. In addition to these different roles, women have had to endure sacrifices such as brutal repression by government defense forces and its affiliated groups, arbitrary arrests, beatings, sexual violence, threats, harassment, targeted psychological pressure and gender-based discrimination.

7. Despite these obstacles, and drawing on the experiences of other women at the regional and international levels, Burundian women have remained determined, making their commitment a source of inspiration for future generations.

At the end of the analysis, in the spirit of taking advantages from these achievements and taking into account the challenges encountered in this movement, the study makes the following recommendations:

1. Strengthen the political and institutional participation of women by integrating them into political bodies and civil society organizations.
2. Empower women through education, awareness raising on civic and political life and supporting the resilience of women victims of violence during the repression of the movement who are often in exile.
3. Strengthen women's networks and develop their advocacy skills to maximize the impact of women's actions.
4. Use technologies to mobilize women and facilitate their communication.
5. Promote mass mobilization and awareness raising among the population.

## **I. General introduction**

### **1.1. Context**

In violation of the provisions of the Constitution of the Republic of Burundi of 2005 and the Arusha Agreement for Peace and Reconciliation in Burundi signed in Arusha, Tanzania on 28 August 2000, which stipulates that a President could not run for more than two presidential terms, the CNDD-FDD party went against multiple advices from different stakeholders, and decided to designate President Pierre NKURUNZIZA, who was re-elected in 2010 for a second term, as its candidate for the 2015 elections. This was during the party's Congress held on 25 April 2015. Following this candidacy, a popular protest movement against this illegal third term emerged. This movement was mainly characterized by peaceful demonstrations that broke out in several parts of the country. Among the different categories of the Burundian population who participated, Burundian women played a significant role despite the risks and significant challenges they had to face.

### **1.2. Objectives of the study**

The main objective of the study is to enhance and strengthen recognition of the crucial role of women in peaceful resistance movements and provide recommendations to support and encourage women's participation in future peace and social justice initiatives, through in-depth documentation of women's involvement in the 2015 peaceful protest movement in Burundi. More concretely, this study aims to explore the experience of Burundian women engaged in the political struggles and to examine how their participation contributed to shaping political and social dynamics in Burundi, while placing it in an international comparative framework.

### **1.3. Theoretical foundation and scope of the study**

In the analysis of social movements, and particularly protest movements, critical theories offer useful frameworks for exploring the dynamics of power, engagement and resistance.

This study of the experience of Burundian women in the peaceful protest movement of 2015 draws on several theoretical foundations to analyze their role and the specific challenges they faced. These theoretical foundations help connect individual narratives to broader structural dynamics, shedding light on how women navigated a political environment marked by state violence and marginalization. First of all, the concept of invisibilization is central to understanding how women's contributions have often been under-estimated or ignored in media and historical narratives of the protest movement. While these women played active and critical roles in organizing and disseminating the movement's demands, they were often reduced to supporting figures, their leadership and involvement were not fully recognized. This invisibilization is linked to how dominant narratives tend to marginalize women's voices in traditionally male spaces of political contestation.



At the same time, the theory of necropolitics allows us to analyse how the regime in power exercised control over the lives and deaths of protesters, the latter (including women and girls) being targeted by the state's repressive forces. This violence against women protesters reveals a gendered dimension of repression, where female bodies become targets to exercise power and domination. Integrating intersectionality is also crucial to understanding how women's experiences vary based on their gender, class, and ethnicity. This perspective helps to analyze how these multiple identities shape both women's motivations to engage in the movement and the barriers they face. Moreover, referring to the concept of methodological nationalism, the study aims to transcend national boundaries by placing Burundian women's experiences within a transnational framework. It is essential to consider how international feminist movements and global dynamics influence and resonate with Burundian women's local struggles. Furthermore, particular emphasis was placed on the experience of women, collecting direct testimonies to capture the complexity of their experiences and the processes of subjectivation through which they redefined themselves as political actors. These theoretical foundations thus allowed an in-depth analysis of the study while integrating the Burundian women experience in a broad and inclusive theoretical framework.

#### **1.4. Methodological approach**

To ensure a comprehensive and rigorous analysis of the experience of Burundian women, this study combined quantitative and qualitative research. Regarding the quantitative research, a semi-structured questionnaire was developed and provided via secure links, guaranteeing the confidentiality and anonymity of the responses. Each participant received a link, allowing them to answer the questionnaire independently. This questionnaire, developed with particular attention to the theoretical concepts discussed earlier (invisibility, necropolitics, intersectionality, etc.), was designed to be understandable and relevant. The questionnaire was also translated in Kirundi. Thirty-nine people were able to fill it. In addition to this quantitative aspect, qualitative methods were useful in this type of study which deals with the experience of women as they allow access to the diverse personal experiences and their respective realities, bringing in their voices, something that the quantitative method does not always make possible. It is in this perspective that this study used documentary analysis, in-depth interviews and focus groups.

#### **1.5. Report outline**

The report is divided into three chapters. The first chapter focuses on analyzing the extent to which women's involvement in the 2015 movement against the third term was legally founded. The second chapter is dedicated to reviewing the literature on women's involvement in social and political transformation movements in Burundi and elsewhere in the world. Finally, the third chapter explores the results revealing in a concrete way the individual and collective experiences lived by Burundian women during the protest movement against the third term in 2015.

## II. Legal foundations for women's involvement in the protest movement against the third term



Photo 1: Peaceful protest march of women in the streets of Bujumbura

First, we wanted to verify whether the involvement of Burundian women in the protest movement against the third term of the late President Pierre Nkurunziza had a well-established legal basis. We reviewed the various relevant legal texts and found that their involvement in the movement was based on the one hand on the freedom of peaceful demonstration and on the other hand on the right of every citizen to take part in the management of public affairs, two rights pro-

claimed in several international and regional human rights instruments binding Burundi. The same rights are also enshrined in Burundian domestic law.

### 2.1. Normative framework of freedom of demonstration at international level

In 2015, when the Burundian women and men decided to protest against the third term and to participate in the demonstrations, we sought to find whether this commitment was part of the exercise of their freedom of peaceful protest enshrined in international standards

#### 2.1.1. The Universal declaration of human rights

The first international legal instrument to enshrine the freedom of peaceful assembly is the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR). Adopted on 10 December 1948 by Resolution 217 A (III) of the United Nations General Assembly, this Declaration proclaims in its Article 20.1 that " everyone has the right to freedom of peaceful assembly and association ".

The term "every person" used here refers to both men and women. Furthermore, the UDHR enshrines in its Articles 2 and 3 the principle of non-discrimination based, among others, on sex in the exercise of all the fundamental rights and freedoms it contains. Being a Declaration, the UDHR was not initially of a binding nature. This is why other international human rights instruments of an undeniably binding nature were subsequently developed to incorporate the rights proclaimed in the UDHR. This is the case, as far as the right to peaceful assembly is concerned, of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights

#### 2.1.2. The International covenant on civil and political rights

Adopted in 1966 by the United Nations General Assembly in its resolution 2200 A (XXI), and which entered into force in Burundi on 9 May 1990, this Covenant takes up in its article 21 the right of peaceful assembly already set out in the UDHR. According to this article, " The right of peaceful assembly is recognized. The exercise of this right may be subject only to restrictions imposed in accordance with the law and are necessary in a democratic society, in the interest of national security, public safety, public order, or to protect public health or morality, or the rights and freedoms of others." Of course, as we can see, the Covenant, like the UDHR, does



not literally provide for freedom of peaceful protest. It only enshrines the right to peaceful assembly. Never mind. Because the Human Rights Committee, the body responsible for interpreting the Covenant, has already established the link between the right to peaceful assembly and freedom of peaceful protest. The latter is in fact a modality of the first one. In its General Comment No. 37 on the right to freedom of peaceful assembly (2020), the Committee considers that in addition to the right to peaceful assembly protecting the non-violent gathering of people for specific purposes, mainly for the expression of opinions (paragraph 4), peaceful assemblies can take many forms, including demonstrations, protests, rallies, marches, sit-ins, candlelight vigils and flash mobs (paragraph 6). Thus, the women who participated in the protest movement against the third term were simply exercising a fundamental human right that allows individuals to contribute to shaping the society in which they live.

### **2.1.3. The Convention on the elimination of all forms of discrimination against women**

Adopted on September 18, 1979 and ratified by Burundi on January 8, 1992, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women is another international human rights instrument that enshrines the right of women to participate in the management of public affairs, this time on an equal footing with men. This is the case in its article 7 which stipulates that States parties shall take all appropriate measures to eliminate discrimination against women in the political and public life of the country and to ensure that they are on an equal footing with men in all aspects of life. And it is in the definition of political and public life as given by the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women that we understand that the commitment of Burundian women in the peaceful protest of the third mandate fits perfectly. According to this Committee, in its General Recommendation No. 23 (1997), the political and public life of a country is a broad concept. It covers on the one hand the exercise of political power, including legislative, judicial, executive and administrative, and concerns all aspects of public administration as well as the formulation and implementation of policies at the international, national, regional and local levels. On the other hand, and it is in this context that we must understand the commitment of Burundian women against the third mandate, it includes the numerous activities of civil society, public councils and organizations such as political parties, trade unions, professional associations, women's and community organizations and other entities playing a role in public and political life. As a result, the women's organizations that took part in the movement against the third term only took part in the management of public affairs by playing a role, on an equal footing with men, in public and political life, as provided for by the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women.

### **2.1.4. The Resolution 1325 of the United Nations Security Council**

The Resolution 1325 adopted by the United Nations Security Council on October 31, 2000, is also one of the instruments that served as the basis for the commitment of Burundian women against the third mandate. This Resolution was based on the premise that in armed conflicts, women were the major victims of the adverse effects. It was therefore important to promote their equal participation in all efforts to promote and maintain peace and security and to increase their participation in decisions taken for the prevention and resolution of disputes. To the extent that the third term violated a peace agreement, namely the Arusha Peace and Reconciliation Agreement, it was quite normal that women, the main victims in case the country faces again the horrors of war, stood up against this betrayal.

## **2.2. Normative framework at regional level**

The affirmation of fundamental principles relating to human rights has not been limited to the international scale and only under the auspices of the United Nations. The regional blocs have also taken an interest in this and have in turn put in place instruments dedicated to human rights. This is the case of the African regional bloc. Thus, during the 18<sup>th</sup> Conference of Heads of State and Government of the Organization of African Unity which was held in Nairobi, Kenya on June 27, 1981, the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights was adopted. It was ratified by Burundi on July 28, 1989. The freedom of peaceful demonstration is also enshrined in this Charter. Under its article 11, it stipulates that "Every individual shall have the right to assemble freely with others. The exercise of this right shall be subject only to necessary restrictions provided by law in particular those enacted in the interest of national security, the safety of others, health, ethics, or rights and freedom of others". Here too, the content of this right was clarified by the monitoring body of this instrument, namely the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights. During its 60<sup>th</sup> Ordinary Session held in Niamey, Niger from May 8 to 22, 2017, the Commission adopted the Guidelines on freedom of association and assembly. According to these guidelines, the right to freedom of assembly is extended to peaceful assembly or demonstration (paragraph 70).

### **2.2.1. The African charter on human and peoples' rights**

Like the UDHR and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, the African Charter on Human Rights enshrines the right to take part in the management of public affairs in their country, which involves, as already noted, influencing the direction of public affairs.

Thus, according to Article 15 of the Charter, all citizens have the right to participate freely in the government of their country, either directly or through freely chosen representatives, in accordance with the rules laid down by law. It goes without saying that among the citizens are women since all the rights guaranteed by the Charter are enjoyed without any discrimination, including that based on sex (article 2).

### **2.2.2. The African Charter on Democracy, elections and governance .**

Besides the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights, another regional legal instrument that recognizes the importance of women's engagement in public affairs is the African Charter on Democracy, Elections and Governance. Adopted on 30 January 2007 in Addis Ababa by the Heads of State and Government of the African Union, this Charter stipulates that States Parties recognize the vital role of women in the promotion and strengthening of democracy and thus create the necessary conditions to ensure their full participation in decision-making processes and structures at all levels, as an essential element of the promotion and practice of a democratic culture (Article 29, points 1 and 2). Through their commitment against the third term, Burundian women have played a forefront role in promoting a democratic culture based on respect for the principle of legality and alternation.

## **2.3. Normative framework at national level**

At the time of Burundian women's involvement in the protest movement against the third term, in addition to the above-mentioned international and regional framework, there was a national legal framework that protected their right to peaceful demonstration. At the national level, the right of Burundian women to take part in the management of public affairs, which was demonstrated by their involvement in the protest movement against the third term, was based on two main legal texts, namely the Arusha Agreement for Peace and Reconciliation in Burundi of 2000 and the Burundian Constitution of 18 March 2005.

### **2.3.1. The Arusha Agreement for Peace and Reconciliation in Burundi.**

In 1993, the assassination of the newly elected Burundian President Melchior Ndadaye plunged the country into an extremely deadly civil war. In an attempt to put an end to it, the international community, under the leadership of the United Nations and the Organization of African Unity, began a negotiation process involving the various parties to the conflict. Initiated under the mediation of Tanzanian President Julius Nyerere and then resumed under the auspices of former South African President Nelson Mandela after his death, this process culminated on August 28, 2000, in Arusha, Tanzania, with the signing of the Agreement for Peace and Reconciliation. Without going deep into the analysis of the role that women played in this process - this will be the topic of a point in the next chapter - the aim here is to show what this agreement provided in terms of women's right to take part in the management of public affairs and which was thus a basis for their commitment to the movement against the third mandate of 2015. The signatories of the Arusha Agreement have indeed recognized, well before the above mentioned Resolution 1325, that Burundian women have suffered greatly from the various crises that the country has experienced since independence: thousands of women have become widows and traumatized. Their property has been looted and their children have been taken out of school. Fearing for their lives, the husbands of some of them have fled the country, leaving their wives alone, with little or no means of survival. Among the refugees and other war victims, more than half are women and children facing an uncertain future. Being the main victims of the conflicts that have plunged the country into mourning, it was quite normal that Burundian women get involved in opposing the destruction of an Agreement that marked the end of their many years of ordeal.

### **2.3.2. The Constitution of March 2005**

The Constitution of 18 March 2005 enshrined the freedom of peaceful demonstration in two ways. The Arusha Peace and Reconciliation Agreement, another text of Burundian internal law which enshrined the right of women to take part in the management of public affairs is the Constitution of March 18, 2005. As with the freedom of peaceful demonstration, the enshrinement of the right to take part in the management of public affairs was twofold. On the one hand, it was indirect through Article 19 of the Constitution, which gave constitutional value to the rights guaranteed by international and regional human rights instruments, including the UDHR, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, and the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights. It was also direct because a provision of the Constitution clearly stipulated this right. It was Article 51 which provided that *"Every Burundian has the right to participate either directly or indirectly through his representatives, in the direction and management of State affairs subject to legal conditions, in particular age and capacity"*. In order to indelibly mark this participation of women, the Constitution of March 18, 2005 was the first to set a minimum quota of 30% representation of women in high decision-making bodies. This was the case in the National Assembly (Article 164), the Government (Article 129) and the Senate (Article 180). In conclusion, it follows from all of the above that the involvement of Burundian women in the protest movement against the third term was legally founded as it fell within the framework of the exercise of their freedom of peaceful demonstration as well as that of the right to take part in the management of public affairs, rights well guaranteed by international human rights law to which Burundi had subscribed as well as by domestic law. It goes without saying that this movement of Burundian women against the third term was not unique in its kind. It was part, as the literature allows us to see, of a broader context of the role of women in

the processes of political transformation, whether in Burundi, before and after 2015, or elsewhere on the African continent and even in the world. The second chapter of this report is dedicated to the review of this literature.

### **2.3.3. Law N°1/28 of December 5, 2013 regulating demonstrations and meetings in public spaces in Burundi.**

In addition to the 2005 Constitution, there was a specific text that regulated demonstrations and public meetings. According to Article 1 of Law No. 1/28 of December 5, 2013 regulating demonstrations and meetings in public spaces in Burundi, "*public meetings and demonstrations are free in Burundi*".

### **2.3.4. The right to take part in public affairs management.**

Another human right that legally allowed the Burundian women's protest movement against the third term is the right of every citizen to take part in the management of public affairs. And as for the freedom of peaceful demonstration, this right was also enshrined in Burundian law in the sense that it was proclaimed by international and regional instruments relating to human rights ratified by Burundi as well as by Burundian domestic law.

## **III. Documentary review of the involvement of women in the process of social and political transformation in Burundi.**

This chapter highlights the actions that Burundian women have already taken in the different processes of social and political transformation in Burundi as reflected in the literature review. The chapter also highlights the actions taken by other women around the world that could be a source of inspiration for other future engagements. Long before 2015, Burundian women had distinguished themselves in resistance movements and social and political demands. The involvement of Burundian women in political demands or social resistance can be analyzed in three steps: before the 2015 protest movement, during the 2015 protest movement and after the failure of the 2015 protest movement.

### **3.1. The involvement of Burundian women before the 2015 protest movement**

#### **3.1.1. Burundian women and decolonisation**

The first documented resistance movement so far is that of women from the Buyenzi district of Bujumbura in 1995. In what they called the fight against prostitution; the Belgian colonial authorities had introduced a tax on unmarried women. The disappointment of those "free women" pushed them to resist by deploying several modes of action such as refusing to pay this tax and submitting a petition to the Vice-Governor General. Subsequently, it was in the process of decolonization that Burundian women distinguished themselves as central actors of political change. Meetings to discuss their role in the search for independence were organized and led to the creation in 1960 of the first women's political activism organization, the Union Culturelle des Femmes Burundaises (UCFB). In the meantime, women had obtained the right to vote, which meant that through their massive participation in the legislative elections of 1961, they played a decisive role in the victory of the UPRONA party which campaigned for the independence of Burundi.

### 3.1.2. Women and the struggle for equal rights

However, four years after independence, in 1966, the monarchy was overthrown. Since then, Burundi has lived under the military regimes, with only a single political party UPRONA until the advent of multipartyism in the early 1990s. Throughout this period, women's collective action no longer focused on political transformations but rather on demands relating to their legal status. Thus, the Union of Burundian Women (UFB) created in 1967 and integrated into the UPRONA party tried hard to obtain legal reforms aiming to establishing gender equality. The emblematic example of their role in fighting for legal reform concerns the Persons and the Family Code of 1980, even if they did not succeed in including gender parity provisions in this code. Indeed, in 1973, the Minister of Justice set up a Commission for the Modernization and Standardization of Burundian Law, the starting task was to begin with family law. This commission included representatives of the UFB who were able to use all their influence to ensure that the inequalities that Burundian women had suffered until then disappeared in the draft Code of Persons and the Family. They also had to make sure the final version kept the same spirit but the success remained mixed. As for example, thanks to their role in the Commission, the representatives of the UFB were able to obtain that the draft of the Code of Persons and the Family enshrine equality between men and women in the process of divorce and in matters of professional choice. And during the resolutions of 1974 and 1975, the UFB will request that this equality between men and women in these matters be included in the final version of the Code. *Ultimately*, this request from the UFB will not be satisfied, the authorities considering, for example, unrealistic that adultery by men and women be treated on an equal footing. Despite this failure, the UFB will not give up and will continue the fight and thanks to the new political context of the 90s, this fight will this time bear fruit. Indeed, the late 1980s and early 1990s were periods which, in the wake of the La Baule Declaration, were characterized by an unprecedented movement of liberalization of African political regimes. Burundi was no exception to this general trend. As already noted, it was at this time that the main instruments for the protection of human rights, both those adopted at international and regional levels, were unconditionally ratified. These are for instance the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women and the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights. In addition to this ratification, on March 13, 1992, Burundi adopted a constitution that is considered in the Burundian collective mind to be the first truly democratic that Burundi has ever known since its independence. And for good reason because, it is this constitution that rehabilitates the multiparty system (article 53) that had been abolished in 1966. It is this constitution that devotes for the first time some thirty articles to the fundamental rights and freedoms of individuals and citizens, including freedom of association. It is in this context that emerged the birth and development of several civil society organizations, including women's organizations, such as the Association of Women Lawyers of Burundi (AFJB) which, even before their legal recognition, campaigned, alongside the UFB, for the reform in 1993 of the 1980 Code of Persons and the Family. As a result, most of the discriminatory provisions against women that existed in the 1980 Code were not reproduced in the 1993 revised Code.



### 3.1.3. Burundian women acting for peace

However, in October 1993, following the assassination of President Melchior Ndadaye, Burundi entered an unprecedented civil war that left several hundred thousand burundian dead.



PHOTO 2: Burundian women with Nelson Mandela, mediator in the inter-Burundian peace negotiations in Arusha.

Since then, women decided to focus mobilization on peace actions. This is how women, especially members of the urban intellectual elite, began to organize themselves into associations to participate in disaster relief, in the search for peace, and in the prevention and peaceful resolution of conflicts. It was in that mindset that the Coalition of Women's Associations and NGOs of Burundi (CAFOB) was created in 1994 on the initiative of seven women's associations. This coalition will distinguish itself in the protest against the embargo imposed to Burundi by its neighboring countries following the Coup d'Etat of

President Pierre Buyoya in 1996, and later in the promotion of women's participation in the Arusha peace process. Taking advantage of the various meetings involving political leaders from the countries in the region that had imposed the embargo, particularly Uganda and Rwanda, the representatives of CAFOB, at the top of which was Sabine Nsabimbona, were able to explain the catastrophic effects of the embargo on women, which led to the latter being lifted in 1999. In 1998, in order to bring peace in Burundi, peace negotiations were organized in Arusha. Initially, Burundian women were excluded. But defying the categorical refusal of the political parties and the government to see them at the negotiating table and by tirelessly lobbying hard with the negotiators, mediators, facilitators and diplomats, their cause was finally heard and they managed to participate in the Arusha peace process. Thus, under the leadership of Catherine Mabobori, one of the founding members of CAFOB, a delegation of seven women managed to obtain permanent observer status from January 2000. This delegation also managed to secure that the Arusha Agreement take into account women's demands, such as recognition of their important contribution to the reconciliation, reconstruction and development of Burundian society and the integration of the gender dimension in the final Agreement. Only the demand for parity in political institutions could not be retained in the Agreement, but with the Constitution of March 18, 2005 which was inspired by the Arusha Agreement, a quota of minimum 30% in the high decision-making bodies will be granted to them.

### 3.2. The involvement of Burundian women during the 2015 protest movement

Because of the role women played in the Arusha peace process, they could not remain on the sidelines of the protest movement against the third term of 2015 which shamelessly violated the Arusha Peace and Reconciliation Agreement. Well before the fateful day of April 26, 2015, coinciding with the start of the demonstrations, some women's civil society organizations part of the " *Stop the Third Term* " campaign had begun to send warning messages about the catastrophic consequences that could result from the announcement of Pierre Nkurunziza's candidacy for a third term. And when the protests broke out, women participated heavily alongside other groups of the population, either on the front lines, in logistics, or in lobbying and advocacy. As an illustration, on April 28, 2015, two days after the start of the demonstrations, a group of women and girls wrote to the Heads of State of the East African Community asking them to organize a summit on Peace in Burundi. This summit will take place on May 13, 2015 in Arusha. Before this summit, the same group had sent a letter to the Heads of State in which



they stated that they were opposed to the third term and at the same time demanded the release of imprisoned demonstrators, the postponement of elections and the opening of radio stations, etc. In the meantime, on 10 May 2015, a group of women was able to organise demonstrations that resulted in what no other group of demonstrators had ever managed to do: to bring the protest against President Pierre Nkurunziza's third term to the centre of Bujumbura, which had been protected by the police since the start of the movement. These women reiterated the experience with better mobilization on 13 May 2015 by managing to reach Independence Square before an attempted Coup d'Etat was announced on several private broadcasting radio stations at the time when President Nkurunziza was in Tanzania for the abovementioned summit of the East African Community. However, following this attempted coup, bloody repression fell on any voice of protest, and peaceful demonstrations failed after unspeakable chaos, and, peace once again became fragile. Despite the failure of the demonstrations, women will not give up. They will direct their struggle towards the process of restoring peace, as they did during the Arusha peace process.

### 3.3. The involvement of Burundian women after the 2015 protest movement

Following the political crisis that arose from the third term, the Heads of State of the East African Community will attempt a mediation process between the Burundian government and the political opposition. They will appoint President Museveni of Uganda as the main mediator



*Photo 3: Resilience of Women in Exile: Refugee women learn sewing with the support of Maison Shalom in Rwanda.*

on July 6, 2015 during the summit organized in Dar-es-Salaam. In order to boost this mediation, the same Heads of State will appoint, during an EAC summit in Arusha, on March 2, 2016, the Co-mediator or facilitator in the person of William Mkapa, the former President of Tanzania. Each time that talks were organized by the mediation, Burundian women, now united in an organization called the Movement of Women and Girls for Peace and Security (MFFPS) have continued to make their demands known. Following the failure of the East African Community mediation by 2018, Burundian women in

the Movement MFFPS continued advocating for peace, women's rights and against sexual violence. In 2020, a new Burundian women's movement called the "Women and Girls Inamahoro Movement" appeared in women's activism, focusing on advocacy for peace and the fight against gender-based violence in Burundi. New women's initiatives were launched to strengthen the capacities of refugee women and support their economic integration and resilience.

### 3.4. The involvement of women elsewhere in peaceful protest movements

It not only in Burundi that women have distinguished themselves in movements aimed at political transformation or peace recovery. A few examples provide a witness of this, and lessons can thus be drawn for the benefit of future generations of committed women.

#### 3.4.1. Case of « Arab Springs »

The Arab Spring refers to a series of popular protests that occurred in several countries in the Arab world starting in December 2010. In these protests, women have taken an active role both on the social media networks and in the streets, despite threats sometimes coming from their own families, and despite the numerous acts of violence and even assassinations that they have had to face. In Egypt, for example, young girls dared to defy their families and spend entire

nights camping in Tahrir Square, something that goes against Arab norms. On the Tunisian side, their participation was not limited to public demonstrations, but above all to contacts with the various networks, to share information, warning public opinion, inside and outside their country, of the details of the ongoing uprising. As for Yemen, women have managed, despite the pressures put on them, to find the strength and courage to go out and express themselves in the streets. It was therefore a Yemeni woman named Tawakkul Karman who won the Nobel Peace Prize in 2011, in recognition of her role in the protests.

### **3.4.2. Case of peace negotiations in Liberia**

Liberia is one of the West African countries that has been shaken by a rather deadly civil war that began in 1989. In order to put an end to this conflict, which is one of the most atrocious on the African continent, Liberian women played a fundamental role in forcing the protagonists to negotiate peace.

After creating *the Women of Liberia Mass Action for Peace Campaign*, they first threatened a "sex strike" to force men to negotiate peace. They were later able to meet with the President Charles Taylor and forced him to agree to participate in peace negotiations in the presence of other warring faction leaders. Thanks to their involvement, negotiations took place in Accra, the Ghanaian capital. And to push for a peace agreement, women blocked all access points, including windows, preventing the negotiators from leaving the negotiations rooms before an agreement was reached. This initiative was decisive in leading to the signing of a Peace Agreement in 2003.

## **IV. Experiences of Burundian women involved in the 2015 protest movement**

As recalled in previous chapters, in 2015, Burundian society was deeply shaken by Pierre Nkurunziza's controversial decision to run for a third presidential term, in violation of the Arusha Peace Agreement. This agreement, signed in 2000, was meant to ensure democratic governance and prevent armed conflict after years of civil war. This decision provoked a major political crisis, marked by intense repression against popular protests, in which women played a decisive role. This chapter explores the various forms of engagement/experiences of Burundian women during the 2015 protest movement, highlighting their motivations and resilience despite the challenges they were facing. Quantitative and qualitative interviews and focus groups conducted with important figures in Burundian society (political leaders, activists, academics and lawyers) reveal important facets of their mobilization, their actions and the internal dynamics of the movement. These elements illustrate the significant impact of women in this critical period for governance and democracy in Burundi.

### **4.1. Political context and women's motivations.**

The political context of 2015 is fundamental to understanding women's mobilization. Since the signing of the Arusha Agreement (see previous chapter), the Burundian population had hoped for a peaceful transition and long-lasting stability. However, despite promises of democratization, the Nkurunziza regime has moved towards a concentration of power, which has led to growing discontent among citizens, including women, who have traditionally been marginalized in politics. The possibility of an illegal third term brought back the fears of violence and civil war, encouraging women to take action to protect their families and peace in Burundi.

The interviews show that women's motivations were based mainly on emotional and social factors: protecting their children, preserving peace, and rejecting authoritarian repression. One interviewee expressed this fear: "We have already experienced war. Violence destroys families, and we wanted to prevent our children from experiencing that" (Interview 1, 2024).

According to the questionnaire data, 27% of women mobilized to oppose the violation of the Arusha Agreement, while 21% were motivated by respect for human rights and 12% by opposition to political violence. In addition, 11% of participants mentioned the quest for social justice, and another 11% mobilized for change of leadership and democratic alternation at the top of the stat. Only 3% of women indicated economic justice as their main motivation.

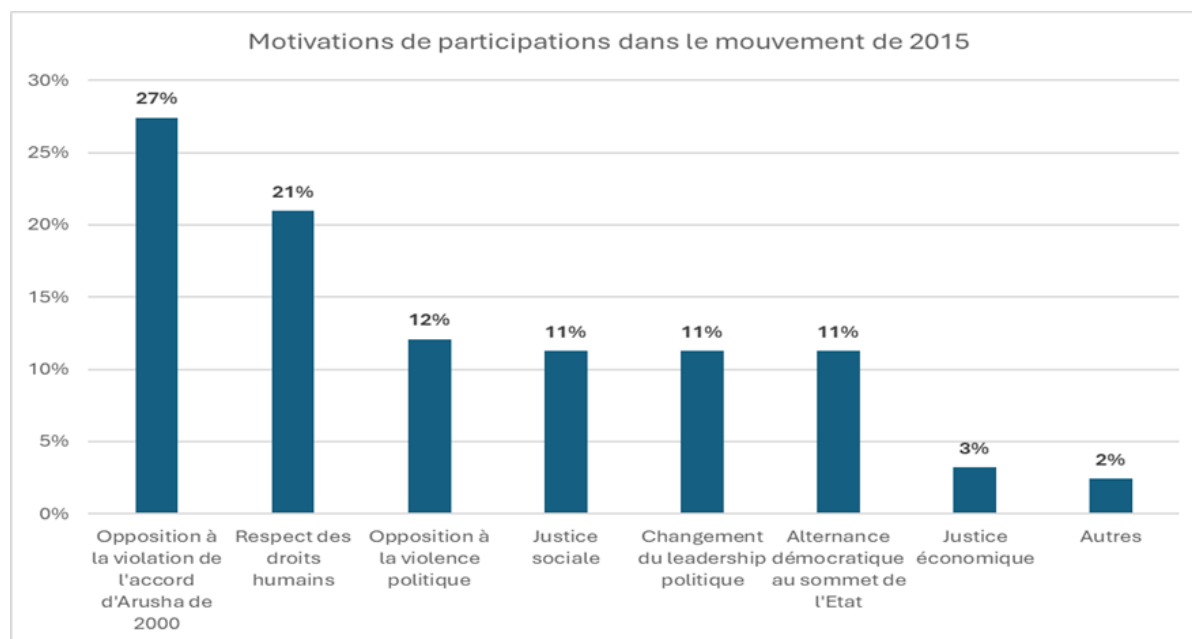


FIGURE 4.1 – Motivations de participation dans le mouvement de 2015

## 4.2. Impact of the Arusha Agreement on women’s mobilisation

The Arusha Agreement had given Burundian citizens, including women, hope for stability and political rights. The accord included important provisions to ensure democratic inclusion and the limit of presidential power. However, in 2015, the decision to run for a third term was seen as a betrayal of the accord, raising concerns, particularly among women who saw the accord as protecting their security and that of their families. “The violation of the accord was a betrayal of all of us,” said one activist (Interview 2, 2024). Thus, the motivations of Burundian women in 2015 went beyond simple political participation. They mobilized to defend a social and political contract which they have contributed to build (Interview 1, 2024) and on which they had based their hopes for the future. By defending the Arusha Agreement, Burundian women were also defending their right to a stable and peaceful environment, according to participants in a focus group organized as part of this study.

## 4.3. Resource mobilisation and social organisation

Resource mobilization is a key aspect in understanding the conduct and sustainability of the 2015 protest movement. Women demonstrated a remarkable ability to organize and structure their actions despite a context of limited resources. In sociology, resource mobilization theory stipulates that social movements depend on the ability of actors to gather and effectively use available resources to achieve their goals. In this case, Burundian women were able to mobilize their social networks, their time, and their financial means to support the protest movement against the third term.

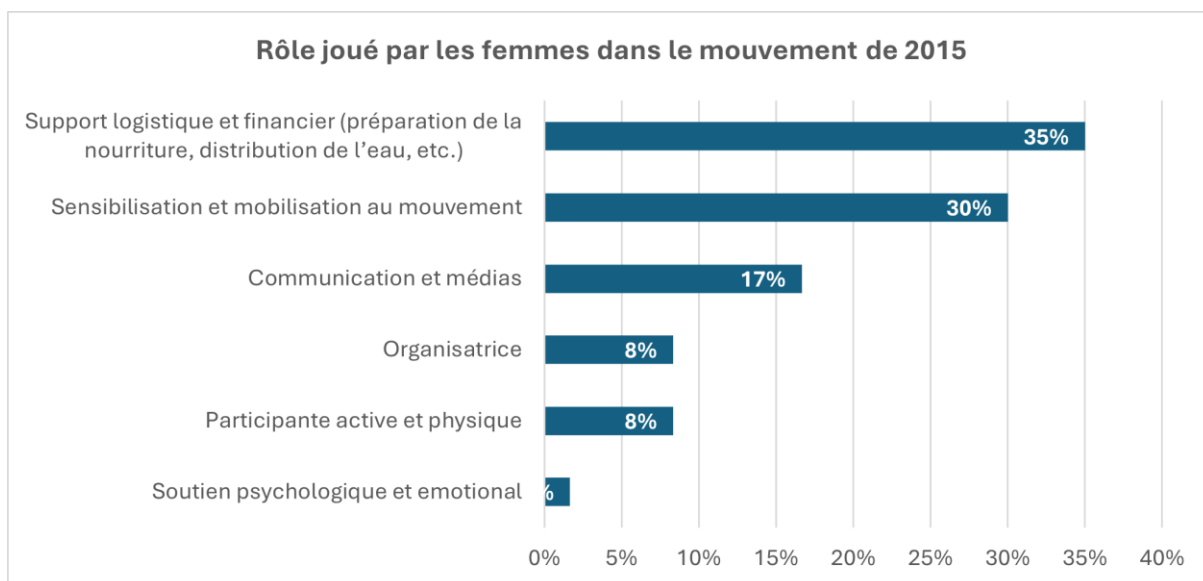


FIGURE 4.2 – Rôle joué par les femmes dans le mouvement de 2015

According to the questionnaire data, 35% of the study participants said they played a logistical and financial support role, taking charge of preparing food and distributing water for the protesters. The other 30% said they were involved in awareness-raising and mobilization for the movement, helping to rally a greater number of participants to the cause. About 17% played a role in communication and media, spreading the movement's messages through social medias to avoid censorship in traditional medias. Other women actively participated on the ground, with 8% physically present at the protests and 8% involved as organizers. Finally, 2% of the participants provided psychological and emotional support to members of the movement, offering a space of comfort following the repression. Meanwhile, in-depth interview reveal that women set up fundraising systems to purchase food, water, and medicine for protesters. These resources were often collected and distributed discreetly to avoid reprisals. One interviewee explains: *“We used our networks to obtain food, prepare it, and distribute it discreetly to protesters. It was risky, but we had no choice”* (Interview 3, 2024). This logistical support helped keep the movement alive despite repression and the lack of formal financial resources.

#### 4.4. Women’s solidarity and support networks

Female solidarity was also a pillar of this mobilization. Women supported each other, sharing not only material resources, but also emotional and psychological support that was essential in a context of repression. In several testimonies, it emerges that solidarity between women went beyond their differences, helped to strengthen the resilience of the demonstrators and create a solid community ready to face the challenges together. *“It was a solidarity that transcended political affiliations. We were united by our desire for peace and justice”* (Focus group, 2024). This solidarity allowed women to collect food and other supplies, but also to coordinate support actions for the families of imprisoned or injured protesters. This network of solidarity provided continuity and resilience to the movement that was crucial in maintaining pressure on the government.

#### 4.5. Forms of engagement of Burundian women

##### 4.5.1. Active participation in demonstrations

Burundian women played a central and visible role in the 2015 protests, expressing a strong personal and symbolic commitment against President Nkurunziza’s third term. Their presence

in the streets, often with children on their backs, was a courageous act of commitment, illustrating their refusal of injustice and their aspiration for a peaceful future for Burundi. This gesture was much more than mere participation: *“Walking in the streets with our children was not just a protest; it was an act of faith in the future of Burundi”* (Interview 4, 2024). Their involvement marked symbolic moments, such as the demonstrations of 10 and 13 May 2015 when women led the processions to arrive in downtown Bujumbura. Women’s participation also added an emotional and inclusive dimension to the movement, attracting international attention and strengthening the legitimacy of popular demands. By mobilizing their personal resources and assuming crucial responsibilities in the organization, they made the movement more cohesive and sustainable, thus asserting their place as leading actors in the struggle for peace and democracy in Burundi.

#### **4.5.2. Logistical and humanitarian support**

Women not only participated in the protests, but also provided logistical support to the movement. They organized food and medicine distributions for protesters and even provided secure places for wanted activists to protect them from the authorities. This logistical support was crucial to the movement’s resilience. Testimonies collected during the focus group indicate that *“women were often on the front lines of logistics, ensuring that protesters had food and medical supplies”* (Focus group, 2024). This logistical role highlights the organizational capacity of Burundian women and their ability to discreetly mobilize their resources despite the close eye kept on them and repression of the authorities.

#### **4.5.3. Advocacy and the role of women -led trade unionists**

Trade unionists played a decisive role in mobilizing support and advocating for the cause at the international level. Influential women figures used their positions to put pressure on the government and raise international awareness on human rights violations in Burundi. This advocacy not only raised the visibility of the movement, but also attracted external support that helped increase pressure on the regime. Testimonies reveal that *“without women’s advocacy, the movement would not have had the same impact internationally”* (Interview 5, 2024). By using trade unions and other platforms such as women’s associations to relay the movement’s demands, women were able to place the struggle within a broader framework of defending human rights.

#### **4.5.4. Digital mobilisation and engagement on social medias**

The engagement of young women from both inside and outside the country on social media has played a key role in spreading real-time information about the repression and protests. Through digital platforms, they have escaped the censorship and managed to attract the attention of the international community: *“Social media has been our weapon to denounce abuses, and young women have played a key role in this”* (Focus group, 2024). Young women shared videos, photos and testimonies, raising global awareness and amplifying the visibility of the repression. This digital mobilization allowed the movement to go viral and demonstrated the power of social media in modern peaceful protest movements.



## 4.6. Obstacles et sacrifices

### 4.6.1. Specific violences and repression targeting women

The repression directed at women involved in the 2015 protest movement took particularly brutal and gendered forms, and explicitly aimed at discouraging their participation. The data in the graph show that women faced various obstacles, which not only limited their influence in the movement, but also submitted their determination to harsh moments. Among the obstacles identified, 36% of participants indicated that the repression by the defense and security forces was the main obstacle. This repression resulted in arbitrary arrests, beatings, and, in some cases, sexual violence. This violence was not accidental: it was used as a weapon, aimed at intimidating, terrorizing and discouraging the women involved. One testimony collected illustrates this reality well: *“The sexual violence was a clear message to discourage us from continuing, however it only strengthened our determination”* (Interview 6, 2025). In addition, 30% of respondents mentioned repression by members of the ruling party and affiliated groups as another major obstacle. These actions included threats, harassment, and targeted psychological pressure, sometimes extended to activists’ family members. Women, seen as symbols of peaceful resistance, were often strategically targeted, with the aim of undermining the cohesion of the movement. Communication difficulties, reported by 15% of participants, also hindered the coordination and dissemination of their actions. In a context of constant persecution and increased censorship, women had to develop discreet strategies to exchange information and organize activities. This climate of mistrust and restriction slowed down the effectiveness of their initiatives and limited their ability to effectively raise public awareness, both nationally and internationally. A lack of support, mentioned by 12% of respondents, is another significant barrier. In the absence of formal support structures, women had to deal with a particularly hostile environment, lacking necessary support they needed to carry out their actions safely and effectively. This lack of support not only increased the personal risks they were exposed to but also fuelled a sense of isolation, which sometimes hindered their engagement. Finally, although less frequently reported, gender discrimination was identified by 4% of participants. This discrimination was reflected in patriarchal behaviors aimed at minimizing their role and limiting their visibility within the movement. In addition to facing political repression, these women also had to challenge gender norms that,



*Women protesters violently dispersed by the police with tear gas and water cannons in Bujumbura streets*

Finally, although less frequently reported, gender discrimination was identified by 4% of participants. This discrimination was reflected in patriarchal behaviors aimed at minimizing their role and limiting their visibility within the movement. In addition to facing political repression, these women also had to challenge gender norms that,



in many cases, hindered their full participation and recognition of their struggle.

#### 4.6.2. Professional and family sacrifices

Commitment to the movement also required personal and professional sacrifices. Some women gave up important positions to devote themselves fully to the cause. They often had to face exile, with its consequences on the stability of their homes, as well as detention and torture. The precariousness of single women in refugee camps and family pressure also pushed some to repatriate. This demonstrates the extent to which they were prepared to risk their safety and careers to defend their cause. “For us, there was no choice. It was a question of survival for our country” (Interview 7, 20243).

#### 4.7. Impact and legacy of women’s engagement

The engagement of Burundian women in 2015 left a lasting legacy in the struggle for democracy. Their participation not only inspired the youth, but also redefined the role of women in Burundian society. Their action is today recognized as an example of resilience and peaceful mobilization. This legacy is also part of the United Nations *Women, Peace and Security Agenda*, showing that women can be key actors in peace and stability. This movement has therefore paved the way for increased female participation in peace processes in Burundi and can be a source of inspiration for other countries in conflict.

### V. General conclusion and recommandations.

The main objective of this study was to document the experience of Burundian women who became involved in the 2015 protest movement against the third term of the late President Pierre Nkurunziza.

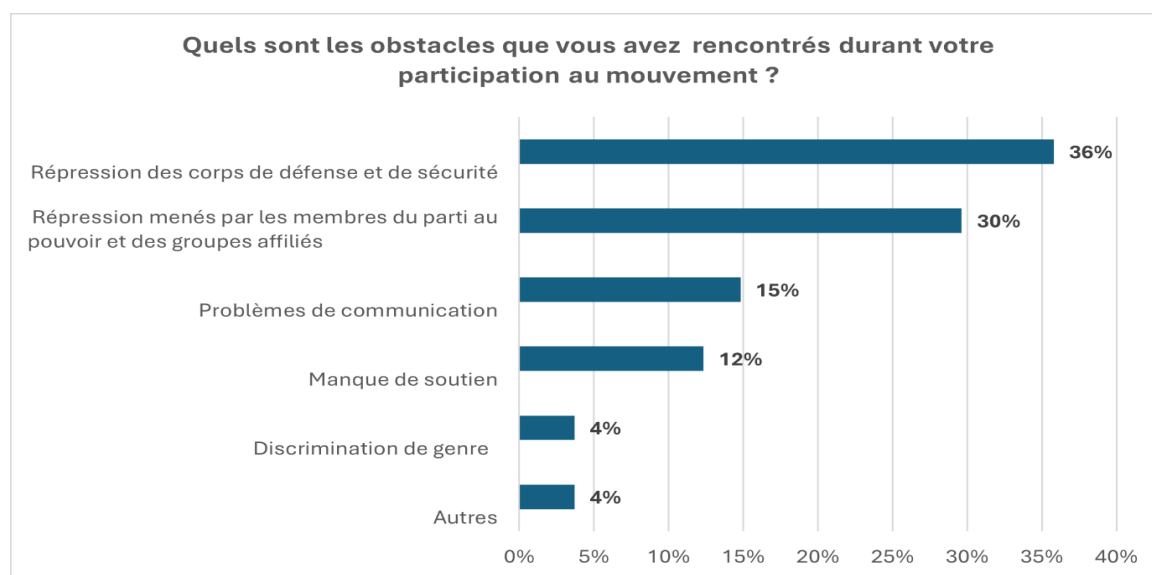


FIGURE 4.3 – Les obstacles rencontrés par les femmes durant la participation au mouvement 2015

#### 5.1 Main conclusions

At the end of this study, several key elements are likely to be noted as conclusions:

1. The involvement of Burundian women in the protest movement against the third term was legally founded as it fell within the framework of the exercise of their freedom of peaceful demonstration as well as that of the right to take part in the management of public affairs,

rights well guaranteed by international human rights law to which Burundi had subscribed as well as by domestic law.

2. Their involvement in this movement was not only part of the history of Burundi but also part of a broader perspective on the evolution of social movements and women's rights in Africa and beyond. It appears that women are no longer confined to the role of "housekeepers" but rather increasingly play a leading role on the political and public scene of their countries despite the repressive risks they face.
3. Specifically on the 2015 protest movement which marked a turning point in the country's political history, with a strong and significant involvement of women, the study highlighted the different roles assumed by Burundian women, as well as the obstacles they had to overcome.
4. By mobilizing their networks, resources, and social influence, women have made an outstanding contribution to structuring the movement and making demands for justice, respect for human rights and peace heard.
5. Women from diverse backgrounds have been agents of change through resource mobilization, logistic support, advocacy, international awareness raising, frontline protests, coordination meetings and international alliances. Their participation has transcended political and ethnic divisions, laying the foundations for unity around a common ideal of democracy and good governance.
6. Moreover, women have demonstrated an ability to integrate values of solidarity and justice within the movement itself, helping to establish close links between civil society and other protest forces.
7. This movement also highlighted the importance of family support, particularly the support of husbands, which sometimes helped to overcome financial and social constraints.
8. In addition to the different roles played by women in the 2015 protest movement, the study highlighted the obstacles and sacrifices endured by women such as brutal repression by government defense forces and affiliated groups, arbitrary arrests, beatings, sexual violence, threats, harassment, targeted psychological pressure and gender-based discrimination.
9. Despite these obstacles, Burundian women have been able to make themselves heard and have helped shape the narrative of the protest. Their determination has often been strengthened by these same sacrifices, making their commitment a source of inspiration for future generations. At the same time, the influence of women's struggles in other African countries and elsewhere in the world has fueled their strategy and resilience, reinforcing the importance of sharing experiences at the regional and international levels.
10. Overall, although the 2015 movement did not achieve all of its immediate objectives, it laid the foundations for a lasting citizen awakening and a collective struggle for more just and equitable governance. Burundian women, through their active participation and resilience, have demonstrated that the struggle for democracy and human rights cannot be achieved without their contribution.
11. However, in order to be able to perpetuate these achievements and taking into account the challenges encountered in this movement, structured and systematic strategies deserve to be suggested. The following recommendations are based on an integrated approach developed by the women participating in the study, aimed at eradicating structural barriers and strengthening women's capacities in essential spheres.

## **5.2 Main recommendations**

### **5.2.1. Strengthening the political and institutional participation**

The integration of women in political bodies and civil society organizations is crucial to foster inclusive and representative decision-making. This involves facilitating their access to decision-making bodies, not through co-optation mechanisms but through participation based on competence and skills, under the principles of meritocracy. According to the participants, it is essential to promote equal representation of women at all levels of governance, from local to national level, so that they can directly influence public policies and guide decisions towards greater gender equity.

### **5.2.2. Empowerment through education and awareness raising for civic and political life**

Women's empowerment inevitably involves access to quality of education and increased awareness on socio-political issues. Encouraging girls to go to school from an early age and encouraging them to engage in political and social issues in the same way as boys helps to create a generation of informed, empowered and committed women. Educational programs should include specific modules on gender-based rights and social justice, enabling women to better understand and defend their rights in the public sphere.

### **5.2.3. Strengthening women's networks and developing advocacy capacities**

Women's networks and women's organizations play a central role in promoting women's rights and influencing policies. Supporting these networks, particularly in the area of lobbying and advocacy, helps create synergies and maximize the impact of their actions. Awareness-raising campaigns, training workshops and experience sharing among successful women leaders in politics will help strengthen women's individual and collective capacities, making their advocacy more coherent and influential.

### **5.2.4. Using technologies for mobilization and communication**

Technology offers a powerful tool for mass mobilization and the dissemination of ideas. Women can make use of digital platforms to raise awareness, mobilize support, and amplify their voices. In addition, writing open letters and public statements to decision-makers can highlight women's specific concerns and formulate concrete demands for change in gender justice. Technology can also facilitate the coordination of actions and improve the effectiveness of mobilization campaigns.

### **5.2.5. Promotion of mass mobilization and awareness raising among the population. Using technologies for mobilization and communication**

To allow change to be deeply rooted, it is necessary to conduct massive awareness campaigns and encourage women's participation in political parties and social movements. These initiatives enable women to contribute to national development and take full ownership of their role in society. Organizing conferences and training sessions on patriotism and national history can also inspire a sense of civic responsibility among the younger generations, encouraging them to actively participate in issues of peace and social justice

### **5.2.6. Strengthening female solidarity and unity**

Solidarity among women is a key asset to strengthen their collective influence. Fostering unity based on common values, regardless of religion, ethnicity or political ideology, helps build a resilient and supportive women's movement. This solidarity is particularly crucial for women

in exile, who must overcome the challenges of socio-economic integration in their host countries. By networking and promoting collaboration across borders, women can build a strong movement that is resistant to attempts at marginalization.

### **5.2.7. Women's economic empowerment**

Economic independence provides a solid foundation for women's empowerment, allowing them to reduce their dependence on patriarchal structures and strengthen their position in decision-making processes. It is crucial to develop economic support programs, entrepreneurship training, and microfinance projects aimed at making women financially independent. Once economically independent, they will be better placed to play an active role in political and social debates, without being limited by economic constraints.