

# A VIEW ON THE CURRENT SITUATION REGARDING SEXUAL VIOLENCE IN BURUNDI

## The role of the church and possible avenues for intervention



**Report commissioned by Tearfund**

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## Foreward

This document “A view on the current situation regarding sexual violence in Burundi. The role of the Church and possible avenues for intervention” was commissioned by Tearfund to be a case study for a more general call to the Church : “Silent no More” which looked at the untapped potential of the church in addressing sexual violence.

During the decade long conflict (1994-2005), Burundi was not spared from experiencing sexual violence. The study gives concrete examples of this inhumane treatment. While men were killed and young boys enrolled in armed groups, girls and women were victims of sexual violence. Women and girls who suffered this fate were met by general indifference and were stigmatised and not even granted the right to express their sufferings, while the perpetrators continued untroubled.

Sexual violence still continues even now after the guns have gone silent, and sadly, emerging testimonial evidence is revealing that its prevalence is on the increase now in the post-peace settlement phase. Women and girls who have been sexually abused during the war, or even now ,have no legitimate place among their peers, with their families, in their communities, and in the eyes of their local administration. It is widely known that the domestic and sexual abuse are hardly denounced, though the situation is slowly changing now. This lack of action is due to ignorance, apprehension, embarrassment, fear and lack of confidence in the ability or the disposition of the competent authorities to stop the abuse and protect the victims from the aggressors.

The most vulnerable women and girls to sexual violence are those who, very often but not exclusively, coming from unstable and violent families, have suffered from previous sexual abuse or from extreme poverty. The victims of the sexual violence often suffer from physical damage such as unwanted

pregnancies, sexually transmitted infections even HIV & AIDS, and all types of injuries, psychological humiliation and social exclusion. Sexual abuse is an extreme form of the violation of one’s human rights: the loss of self esteem, stigma, home and school abandonment etc.

The study recommends some actions to be taken especially by people of faith, by Christians in particular. The Church should lead the way in breaking the silence. What we must ask ourselves as people of faith, is how we can create greater awareness in our own communities about the consequences of all forms of violence and work actively to change attitudes and practices that perpetuate violence in homes, families and institutions. Church leaders should exercise their potentialities of being influential in their communities, being closely in touch with their people, being respected, consulted and listened to. Together with all other well intentioned people, faith based organisations and our government, we can make a difference. We are called to have a concerted effort in areas of prevention, breaking the silence by denunciation, support for the victims, speaking out for the weak, the lonely and the oppressed without forgetting the power of prayer.

I think there is hope. We Christians know that love and respect for one another are the best weapons to fight against this atrocity. Let us start doing it. As someone put it: “It is better to light a candle than to curse the darkness”. Let us begin from somewhere, because a journey of a thousands miles begins with one step.

May the Heavenly Father guide us in this journey.

**The Most Rev Bernard Ntahoturi  
Archbishop of the Anglican Church of  
Burundi.**

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## 1. Introduction: the Burundian civil war

The Burundian civil war lasted from 1993 to 2005, but this war was the only the latest in a cycle of violent conflict within the country. Civil unrest in Burundi had been on-going since it gained independence from Belgium in 1962 (Bundervoet et al, 2007:3-4). The unrests were largely due to ethnic divides between the Hutu and Tutsi tribes.

The civil war of 1993-2005 is seen as having officially started with the assassination of Hutu president Melchior Ndadaye (Nillesen & Verwimp, 2010:8). Burundian armed forces and different rebel groups were involved in the fighting and it affected the entire country (Bundervoet et al., 2007:5). In 2005 peace was established with the swearing in of President Pierre Nkurunziza.

The fighting included different rebel groups which based themselves in forests and in neighbouring countries, launching attacks and then hiding again. Sexual violence (SV) was rife throughout the war and has continued after peace was declared<sup>1</sup>.

## 2. The research process

This study looks at the current situation in Burundi regarding SV, with a particular focus on the role of the church. The research methodology, protocol and tools were prepared off-site in South Africa, but implementation on-site was done by a Burundian psychologist well-trained in research methodology in general and the specific research tools in particular<sup>2</sup>.

Two different data collection techniques were used, namely structured interview questionnaires and focus groups. Three different forms of structured interview questionnaires were designed, namely a general structured interview questionnaire, a SV survivor<sup>3</sup> structured interview questionnaire, and a leader structured interview questionnaire. The focus group were done in a nominal group format<sup>4</sup>.

Data collection took place at two research sites. For this qualitative study the selection technique specified that at each site:

- 15 participants should be individually interviewed with the general structured interview questionnaire.
- 5 SV survivors should be individually interviewed with the SV survivor structured interview questionnaire
- 8-10 community leaders should be individually interviewed with the leader structured interview questionnaire
- 8-12 individuals should participate in one group session.

Two research sites were used. Mpanda was chosen as it is located between two big forests (Rukoko and Kibira) that were used during the war as bases by the rebel fighters. These rebel groups were

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<sup>1</sup> For the purposes of this document, SV is used as a general term, denoting any kind of violence enacted through sexual means or targeting the sexuality of a person. Thus a person of either gender can be the aggressor or victim in a sexually violent act. Yet, by taking into consideration the bias of the research participants – who almost always described SV victims and survivors as feminine – the feminine pronoun will be used when referring to SV victims and/or survivors. This does not mean that this document does not acknowledge the fact that men/boys can also be victims/survivors of SV.

<sup>2</sup> The Unit for Religion and Development Research, Stellenbosch University, is thus particularly indebted to Denise Niyonizigiye, the psychologist who conducted the fieldwork on-site in Burundi.

<sup>3</sup> The term ‘SV survivor’ is used to emphasise that those who experienced SV are not necessarily disempowered and helpless because of what happened to them. The term ‘victim’ carries such associations. When the term ‘SV victim’ is used it is meant to refer specifically to those who did not physically survive a sexually violent attack.

<sup>4</sup> A nominal group is a focus group that revolves around one question. This format of conducting focus groups prevents one person or group of persons from dominating group opinion. For the purposes of this research the nominal group question was “What should the church be doing about SV?”

constantly attacking from the two locations. As Mpanda has fertile lands it was constantly raided and fought over throughout the war.

The second research site was Rutana. It was used as it neighbours Tanzania, where many rebel groups were trained and also taken if they were injured. Thus there were a constant flow of rebel fighters in this area and Rutana was always the starting point of the fighting. Furthermore the land is also fertile, thus rebels would pillage the community for food.

Mpanda is on the north-western side of Burundi, while Rutana is more to the south-east, thus the two communities give a representative picture of Burundi (compared to two neighbouring communities).

The field researcher was assisted in Mpanda by the Communal Administrator. He invited all of the participants individually, which made her work easier. In Rutana she was assisted by the District Overseer of the FECABU Church, who helped her to identify the right participants.

All participation in the research was completely voluntary. All participants completed a consent form before the interview started. The completed data was couriered to South Africa, where it was processed and analysed and the research report prepared.

### **3. Burundi community 1: Mpanda**

#### **3.1 General structured interview questionnaires**

All fifteen of the participants emphasised that there is not equality between men and women. Even male participants acknowledged this. This state of affairs was mainly ascribed to:

- Women having no right to possessions, even though they work very hard in the household
- Polygamy, as men can take more than one wife and husbands being unfaithful is accepted within the community

All except two of the participants mentioned rape or SV as happening during the war, though all mentioned it as happening to only females. When asked to define SV, only one person defined it in a gender-neutral manner.

While all of the participants defined SV as females being forced to have sex with males, seven participants also defined SV more specifically as husbands forcing wives to have sex against their will, i.e. SV as something that also occurs within marriage. Specific situations were described, for example sex directly after labour, sex in strange positions, or sex while the husband is using Viagra. One participant's definition of SV was only within the context of marriage.

All except one of the participants personally know one or more war SV survivor. All of the participants say that there is no reason that it happened to those people specifically, but that it was an accident that could have happened to anyone. While fourteen of the participants said that no-one tried to do anything during the war to stop the SV, it seems that there were some radio stations broadcasting that SV should stop.

Ten participants feel that nothing has been done since the war has ended to assist SV survivors. What has been done seems to be limited to HIV-testing. Those who test positive are given medication. There also seems to be some once-off talks by NGO's and/or government organisations, but nothing is continuously and consistently done to assist SV survivors.

None of the participants expressed any negative feelings towards SV survivors, although this might be a reflection of social desirability bias. All the participants seem to really pity SV survivors, but feel unable to assist them, as they feel they have no resources or ability to help SV survivors.

The community, on the other hand, is accused of stigmatising and discriminating against SV survivors. Especially young girls are ruined by SV, as they will never get a husband if they have been sexually violated. Three participants did not agree with these statements, saying that the community is supportive of SV survivors. One participant explained that the community tends to take the lead from the husband of the survivor. If the husband accepts her, the community will accept her.

Six of the participants said that the church does nothing for survivors. Of the nine that said that the church does assist survivors, they tended to preface their explanation with “only”, indicating that they felt that the church ought to be doing more than it is currently doing.

When it comes to addressing SV, three things were emphasised by the participants:

- The importance of perpetrators being punished properly. For this the participants gave the government, church, security forces and the judicial system the responsibility.
- Training/ educating/sensitizing of people regarding SV. For this the church was given the primary responsibility.
- Getting everybody involved. The participants emphasised that everyone should be addressing this issue, not just one sector of society.

It was interesting that quite a few participants mentioned that parents had an important role to play in addressing SV, through raising their children with the correct values and information about SV.

### **3.2 Nominal group session in Mpanda community**

The nominal group session was done with 12 people, of which two were men. The youngest of the participants was 22 years old, while the oldest was 59 years old. While only the two men were able to read and write, the group was facilitated in such a way the illiterate members could also fully participate.

The group came up with the following 16 ideas in response to question “What should the church be doing about SV?”

1. Praying
2. Putting in place counselling committees
3. Providing pieces of advice to the youth and children so that they can resist incentives, peer group pressure and all other types of solicitations
4. Churches should constitute a network whereby they can share information and work together against SV
5. Preparing a curriculum for youth education and putting at their disposal Christian literatures against SV
6. Training trainers among the youth so that they can reach out to as many people as possible
7. Churches should collaborate with other institutions like administration, security forces, and the judicial system so as to mitigate this crime
8. Churches should understand that SV is an issue they should stand up against and that they are responsible for the whole community where they are operating
9. Churches should collaborate with other NGOs in sensitizing the youth on not joining rebel groups, because SV increased during the war and the majority of rebels are young
10. Churches should collaborate with security forces to discourage the trade of pornographic films and drugs, because those contribute to the increase in SV
11. Churches should plan teachings for couples and those who are about to be married, so that marriage be protected
12. Churches, in collaboration with security forces and the administration, should punish husbands who abandon their wives and go to seduce young girls

13. Churches should plan open-air evangelism with the help of Gospel films, because they attract people
14. Churches should increase teachings to men and young boys on SV, because they are the perpetrators of SV
15. Churches should create employment so that the unemployed get jobs and get rid of negative ideas
16. Churches should request funds from the government and other powerful organisations, so that they can organise seminars and implement projects that help to mitigate SV

The group then voted the following five ideas as the top five ideas for implementation. The first two ideas received decidedly more votes than the last three.

1. Praying
2. Churches should understand that SV is an issue they should stand up against and that they are responsible for the whole community where they are operating
3. Churches should request funds from the government and other powerful organisations, so that they can organise seminars and implement projects that help to mitigate SV
4. Churches should plan teachings for couples and those who are about to be married, so that marriage be protected
5. Churches should collaborate with security forces to discourage the trade of pornographic films and drugs, because those contribute to the increase in SV

### **3.3 SV survivor structured interview questionnaires**

All of the SV survivors experienced SV during the war. All were attacked by strangers and all were violated by more than one man. With three of the survivors none of their assailants have ever been caught. In two of the cases one of the assailants has been caught, but in both cases they were released within months.

All of the survivors have spent time in hospital due to the injuries they suffered because of the attacks, although not all have been able to access the medical care immediately after the assault. None had children due to rape, one stating that the hospital gave her medications so that she did not fall pregnant because of the rape.

All of the survivors were rejected or fear rejection by their husbands because of what happened. Only the widow was spared this added trauma, as her husband was already dead at the time of the sexual assault. The one survivor to this day hides it from her husband, as he has repeatedly declared that he will send her away if she is raped. Another survivor explained that her husband at first accepted her and was okay with what happened, but that his family then 'made him hate her'. Another survivor was unmarried at the time of the SV. Her family kept it secret, fearing that she would not find a husband. As her vagina was badly damaged she could not hide it from her husband when she got married. He has now sent her away.

All except for one of the survivors told their own families, though only one survivor seem to have received any real support from her family. This is supported by the fact that none of the survivors mentioned any family members as being particularly supportive. Two survivors never disclosed to their community, fearing stigmatisation. The others disclosed or were forced to disclose because of their physical condition. They felt that some neighbours were supportive, while others discriminated against them.

All except for one of the survivors were positive about their church's role, seeing it as being supportive (the exception says that she has never disclosed to anyone in her church). Their churches have encouraged and comforted them, prayed for them and advised them. When asked what they think churches should be doing for SV survivors, the following was emphasised:



- Comfort, support, and provide counselling
- Provide capital for small businesses
- Provide financial support
- Teach and train about SV

This is echoed by the fact that the survivors asked for many of the same things when it came to the kind of support that they wish they had directly after the SV occurred:

- Capital to start a small business
- That perpetrators be caught and jailed
- Food to feed them and their children
- Encouragement and protection
- Prayers

All of the survivors said that disclosure is difficult. Two of them still usually refuse to do so, simply because people gossip and stigmatise so much. Yet two of the survivors said that disclosing helps them to let go of what happened to them, emphasising that group sessions with other survivors is of particular value. These same survivors prefer being with others to spending time on their own.

When asked for their personal opinion on what can be done to stop SV, all of the respondents emphasised:

- serious punishment for SV perpetrators as the key
- meetings and seminars on SV at churches and NGO's must be increased
- Campaigns against SV

### **3.4 Leader structured interview questionnaires**

Eight leaders were interviewed within the Mpanda community, from the church, civil, government and health sectors. Four were male and four were female.

#### **SV during and after the war**

All eight leaders personally know one or more persons who were sexually violated during the war. They all agree that SV was rife during the war. They mostly feel that it happened because of a general spirit of evildoing, though some feel it was because soldiers were far away from their wives and wanted sex, or because of drugs. It happened to females, because they are easier targets and take care of children and could not flee so fast. Women and girls were mostly raped while threatened with weapons, by a group of men.

Now, after the war, SV is still on-going, though probably not as much as during the war. The leaders blame this on a general deterioration in morals and a lack in self-control. One leader also said that the perpetrators are ex-rebels who are simply continuing what they did during the war. While females are still targeted, the leaders emphasised that children are becoming victims of SV more and more often. SV within marriage and sex with incentives is also becoming more common.

All of the leaders agreed that SV against men (SVAM) can happen, but they are of the opinion that it rarely happens. Half of them think that it did not happen during the war and half think that it is happening now.

All of the leaders agreed that SV within marriage is a serious issue in their community. The issue of polygamy is repeatedly mentioned as the cause, with multiple marriages leading to neglect and abuse of women. All of the leaders also gave very practical examples of women being sexually abused.

All eight leaders felt that SV survivors do not disclose. They blame:

- Burundian culture, which sees sex as a taboo subject

- Communities, which will stigmatise SV survivors
- Husbands, who will reject wives who have been sexually violated

Some of the leaders felt that there is some change occurring and that some SV survivors are starting to disclose, due to the work of women's associations helping women to disclose and young girls being trained and speaking out.

### **Stigma and discrimination**

While two leaders said that some husbands can be supportive of their sexually violated wives (especially if the assault happens in front of the husband), they agreed that husbands usually accuse their wives of agreeing to the deed and thus reject wives who have been sexually violated. The husband chooses to disbelieve the wife, especially if there was some form of misunderstanding between the couple before it happened. It seems as if often the SV becomes a pretext for getting rid of the wife and getting a new one.

According to the majority of the leaders there seem to have come a real change in how families respond to a family member who is sexually violated. Whereas families used to ostracise the SV survivor, they now realise they need to support her and they do so. The leaders ascribe this change to trainings by organisations. This same trend is seen in the community in general, though it is not as strong. While the community used to strongly stigmatise and discriminate against SV survivors, training has led to them doing so to a lesser extent. They at least seem to be less directly confrontational and critical of SV survivors.

### **General involvement in addressing SV**

All of the leaders agree that no-one did anything about SV during the war, while there now seems to be different organisations, governmental and non-governmental, involved on different levels. In general the leaders thought that everyone should be involved in addressing SV. They felt, though, that the biggest need is for training on SV and for proper punishment of SV perpetrators. In judging the judicial system, all eight felt that it is working. At the same time, they all agreed that SV perpetrators are getting out of prison too quickly.

### **The church's role in dealing with SV**

While the leaders said that the church did not do anything about SV during the war, they were quick to say that it was impossible for the church to address it during the war, due to the continuous fighting. The pastors who tried were killed. When asked what the church was doing now, it became clear that the church's current involvement is (according to the leaders) basically limited to preaching, and mostly preaching against adultery. There are thus no direct teachings on SV, nor any practical interventions addressing SV.

When asked what the church should be doing about SV, a lot of suggestions were made. Summarised, it lists as follows:

- Train on SV and SV-related subjects
- Collaborate with other organisations to work on this issue
- Initiate solidarity funds to help survivors, both to survive but also to access justice
- Institute commissions to help defend victims in court
- Give brochures on SV-related teachings
- Pray for survivors

### **Cultural traditions that contribute to SV**

All eight of the leaders agreed that there are cultural traditions that contribute to SV. Certain proverbs were mentioned specifically. As one can see these are all cultural traditions that enforce the unequal power and gender relations between men and women, especially when it comes to sex. The following were mentioned (proverbs are put in quotation marks):

- “A women is a mat for guests”
- Practices that oblige young girls to share the room with a male guest
- No talking about sexual issues in church, as it is taboo subject
- “No one can set a limit to the bull”
- People are ashamed of talking about or exposing any matter that is linked to sex
- Polygamy
- Husband can threaten to marry another wife if wife refuses sex
- Custom of marrying your brother-in-law if your husband dies, as he can then do anything with you. The community will just say the custom is not against it.
- Women/girls are not allowed to talk aloud in public
- Proverb that says girl can have intercourse at any age
- Young girls being kidnapped and raped when they go to fetch water/firewood and the community not displaying any real concern about the matter
- If a wife is ill-treated and she returns home, her family just sends her back to her husband, saying that “that is how households are maintained”

All of the leaders were quick to acknowledge and identify the role of cultural traditions in the occurrence of SV.

## **4. Burundi community 2: Rutana**

### **4.1 General structured interview questionnaires**

Once again all of the participants indicated that men and women are unequal in their community. The women insinuated or expressed outright resentment of this situation, blaming cultural structures for the unfair situation. There was a general feeling that women are constantly victimized (expressed by even the male participants), even if this victimization is not always sexual.

All of the participants mentioned SV happening in the war in relation to females. Yet when asked to define SV, six participants were gender neutral in their definition, indication that both aggressor and victim can be of either sex. Almost half of the participants, without being prompted, defined SV as something that happens within marriages as well.

Only two of the participants did not personally know a war SV survivor. All agree that those victims were victims for ‘no reason’ and that it could have happened to anyone. All agree that no-one tried to stop the SV during the war, although people tried to protect themselves by sleeping in the bushes and hiding their girl children in the plantations or bushes. Six of the participants felt that after the war nothing has changed and that nothing is still being done to assist SV survivors. Yet, looking at the answers of those that said that something is being done, it seems that the interventions are limited to SV survivors being able to go to hospital and that some radio stations are telling people to go to hospital if they have been sexually violated.

All of the participants expressed compassion and pity towards SV survivors. They were very negative of their community’s stance towards SV survivors. The community was accused of stigmatising and discriminating against SV survivors and of having no respect for them. The fact that unmarried girls that are sexually violated cannot find husbands was reiterated, as was the fact that husbands expel wives that are sexually violated by other men.

Eleven of the participants said that their church does nothing about SV. Almost all said that they have no SV survivors in their church. Of those that indicated that their church is involved, the involvement seems to be preaching, praying, advising and teaching that you should go to hospital.

Once again the participants gave a wide range of actors the responsibility for addressing SV. The following issues came across as being important:

- SV perpetrators should be properly punished
- Sensitizing and training on SV
- Churches should give capital to SV survivors so they can start small businesses
- Trainings focusing specifically on gender and value of women

#### **4.2 Nominal group session in Rutana community**

Ten people attended the group session, of which one was a man. They were between the ages of 24 and 51 and only four were literate. The group came up with ten ideas in response to the question “What should the church be doing about SV?”

1. Pray
2. Prepare teachings so that people may know what attitude to adopt when SV happens
3. Take care of SV survivors, because SV survivors are tortured and need assistance
4. Initiate prosecution against the perpetrator of SV, because it seems that administration authorities are not concerned with this problem
5. Train people who will advocate for the victims of SV, because they are often with little means and are threatened by perpetrators and their families to such an extent that they are discouraged to initiate or continue the prosecution
6. The church should take this SV concern as hers because the survivors of SV are her people and the consequences that SV brings about fall upon her
7. The church should invite people – as you did – so that they voice their ideas about SV
8. The church should put in place counselling centres to help the survivors because the latter go to pastors for counselling while they do not have the capacity to help in this request
9. The church should set up community groups so that communication is promoted in case of SV and then assist the survivor as soon as possible, and so make every case be the community’s and not the individual’s
10. The church should build hospitals to treat survivors of SV, because receiving medical expertise that certifies that they have been sexually violated requires \$10, which they can’t afford
11. The church should prepare vocational trainings/teachings and income generating activities, because SV put them in extreme poverty, while working together would enhance dialogue and raise self-esteem

The group voted the following five ideas as their five top implementation ideas:

1. The church should take this SV concern as hers because the survivors of SV are her people and the consequences that SV brings about fall upon her
2. Prepare teachings so that people may know what attitude to adopt when SV happens
3. The church should set up community groups so that communication be promoted in case of SV and then assist the survivor as soon as possible, and so make every case be the community’s and not the individual’s
4. Take care of SV survivors, because SV survivors are tortured and need assistance
5. The church should put in place counselling centres to help the survivors because the latter go to pastors for counselling while they do not have the capacity to help in this request

At the end of the session the participants emphasised that the key to everything was Idea 1. The church has to first take SV as its own concern, only then the other interventions can be implemented.

#### **4.3 SV survivor structured interview questionnaires**

Only one of five survivors that were interviewed experienced SV during the war. With the rest it has happened since the war has ended. Three of the survivors knew their assailants. The two who were attacked by strangers were both violated by more than one man. These assailants have never been

caught or punished. The other three perpetrators have all been caught and prosecuted. Two are serving long prison sentences, while one was released without any punishment.

Two survivors fell pregnant due to the rape. One cannot have children due to what happened. Except for the survivor that was violated during the war, all have been to the hospital.

None of the survivors are married or were married at the time of the SV. The four post-war SV survivors tell of families that have been reasonably supportive. The family of the war SV survivor was present in the room when she was sexually violated. Yet they have never spoken about it and they still pretend that it never happened.

The war SV survivor has not told anyone in her community. Of the post-war SV survivors, one says that she has a supportive community. The rest say that the community gossips and stigmatises and that the perpetrator has been wrongly accused. One survivor, a young girl raped by her headmaster, can no longer attend school as her schoolmates refuse to attend school with a pregnant girl.

All of the survivors have a positive experience of their churches. Many told stories of how they were comforted by members of the church and how church members practically intervened to assist them. One SV survivor stopped going to church after she was sexually violated, but the local church leader came to her house and encouraged her to come back. Another tells of how her church prayed for her and treated her well. The war SV survivor tells of how the pastor supported her, allowing her to continue singing in the choir, praying for her and counselling her. When asked what they think churches ought to be doing for SV survivors, the following was emphasised:

- Visit and comfort them so do not feel abandoned
- Do not gossip about them or stigmatise them
- Pray for them
- Be active in searching for perpetrators

The survivors disclosed three dominant needs, which echo what they are expecting from the church. Firstly, for perpetrators to be caught and punished. Secondly, for assistance so they can take care of themselves and their children. And thirdly, for emotional support, in the form of comfort, care and counselling.

The survivors indicated that others know what happened to them, although only one of them actually disclosed it herself. Only the war SV survivor has been successful in keeping it a secret. They all indicate that they feel shame because of what happened and that it is very hard to disclose. All of the survivors said that they prefer being on their own to being with other people.

#### **4.4 Leader structured interview questionnaires**

Nine leaders were interviewed in Rutana. They were of the religious, civil and educational sectors of the community. Six were male and three were female.

##### **SV during and after the war**

All nine leaders personally know someone who was sexually violated during the war. They all agree that SV was rife during the war, blaming it on general evil-doing and partly on soldiers being far from their wives and eager for sex. Females, both women and girls, were targeted during the war, usually with the threat of a weapon and attacked by a group.

All of the leaders agree that SV is still happening. Four felt that it is not as common as during the war, while three felt that it is actually on the increase. They blame it on evil-doing and a bad moral culture, but also on witchcraft beliefs and poverty. While it is still females who are being targeted, the majority of the leaders feel that younger females and children (girls and boys) in general are now

also becoming victims of SV more often. The use of incentives (like money, food or sweets), which takes advantage of the poverty situation is happening more frequently.

All of the leaders said that SVAM is something that can happen, but only two thought that it happened during the war. Currently, though, it is happening (seven leaders agreed) and it has left the community feeling like the end of the world has come.

One leader stated that SV within a marriage is impossible. The rest strongly felt that it is a serious problem within the community, although people are hesitant to talk about it. The leaders blame the current situation on the cultural model of wives having no standing within a marriage and having no right to refuse sex.

All of the leaders agreed that SV survivors do not disclose. They will only disclose if someone else saw the act and they thus cannot hide it, or if they are so badly physically damaged that they have to go to hospital. Survivors try to hide it because of Burundian culture that demands silence on such matters and the fact that SV survivors are ostracised by the community.

### **Stigma and discrimination**

Two leaders said that husbands will understand and comfort their wives should they be sexually violated. The rest were adamant that husbands argue that the wives agreed to it and they therefore reject them, or at least ill-treat them or get another wife. The same leaders that said husbands are supportive of sexually violated wives said that families are supportive of sexually violated family members. They rest tended to differentiate between the survivors' own family and their family-in-law. The family-in-law tend to reject and ill-treat the SV survivor, telling the husband to divorce her and get a new wife. The survivor's own family tend to try and keep the matter a secret, if possible, in order to spare her and themselves the shame. Many families, though, also reject and ill-treat the survivor.

All of the leaders agreed that SV survivors are treated with contempt and disrespect by the community. Communities always accuse the survivor of agreeing to the deed. Unmarried girls have an especially dismal future, as no man will be allowed to marry a sexually violated girl.

### **General involvement in addressing SV**

All of the leaders said that no-one did anything to stop SV during the war, arguing that it was impossible. One leader did say, though, that the church prayed for SV survivors. Two leaders felt that nothing is still being done to address SV. The rest felt that there are some interventions, from the governmental, civil and religious sectors. These interventions seem to be limited to teaching and training and one gets the impression that the leaders feel it is not very intensive or effective.

Responsibility for addressing SV is delegated to all sectors of society, including government, civil society and the church. The leaders feel strongly that the judicial system is not working. There are excessive delays, perpetrators pay bribes and are freed, and if you are poor you cannot afford the prosecuting process. This has led to many families preferring to handle it differently, by making the perpetrator or his family pay the victim and her family compensation.

### **The church's role in dealing with SV**

When asked to evaluate the role of the church, six of the leaders felt that the church actually stayed active during the war, addressing SV. It was actively speaking out against SV, preaching against adultery, and praying. Currently it seems that the church's role is still the same. It is still in this preaching and advisory role, but none of the leaders could give any examples of practical involvement with SV survivors or attempts at mitigating the occurrence of SV.

When asked what the church should be doing about SV, the following was mentioned:

- Establish treatment centres where survivors can go (without having to travel far)
- Support survivors financially
- Training of people on SV
- Churches should get together and define an action plan together
- Collaborate with other organisations, so they can build capacity and can address the problems
- Pay bus fares of victims who are prosecuting, because many abandon their cases because of poverty
- Create of counselling centres
- Initiate a fund to cover the cost of medical expertise
- Advocacy, because if this is done the government will listen too

The importance of training of all people on SV and of collaboration with other organisations was mentioned repeatedly.

### **Cultural traditions that contribute to SV**

Only one leader said that there are no cultural traditions that play a role in SV. He was of the opinion that it is a plague that came with the war. The rest though that there are cultural traditions that contribute to SV. Certain proverbs were mentioned specifically. The following were mentioned:

- “A true man is one who eats his food and that of others”
- Marrying widows (sister-in-law), which gives every man in the family authority over the widowed sister-in-law
- Cultural practice of considering the rapist of your daughter as your son-in-law
- “A girl is a guest’s mat”
- Burundian culture not allowing people to speak openly about SV
- Burundian culture not allowing people to speak openly about sex
- Polygamy
- Tradition of sex between father-in-law and daughter-in-law
- “No limit for the bull”
- “The unique wife is your mother”, which means that only one wife is not enough
- “No one can always eat the same meal”
- “The bull should not be kept for oneself”

Polygamy was blamed again and again, for how it views women and the relation between men and women.

## **5. Discussion**

The following section will discuss the issues that came across strongly throughout the different interviews and sessions.

### **5.1 Gender inequality**

While only the general structured interview questionnaire directly asked participants about gender equality, this issue was often raised by participants themselves. Everyone who spoke about it, including men, felt strongly that there is not equality between men and women in Burundi.

This inequality lies on all levels of interaction within a household, the most common arena for interaction between men and women in Burundi. It is reflected in the economic power within the household, with women owning no possessions. Women have no decision-making power, nor do they have ‘ownership’ of their children. Lastly it is reflected in sexual relations. Women cannot refuse sex, nor negotiate the manner in which sex occurs. Men are even allowed multiple wives, while women have to remain monogamous.

The female participants expressed – either outright or by insinuation – their dissatisfaction and (in some cases) outrage with this situation. They are not at peace with the situation, content with it simply being Burundian culture. There were some male participants who were also outright in their condemnation of the gender power imbalances.

The participants who discussed the gender inequality easily drew the link between the unequal power structures and the SV on-going within their community. They gave countless examples of how the power of the males was translated into sexual abuse of women, with the community condoning the behaviour. The link between how the Burundian culture upholds and enforces this gendered power imbalance was also easily recognised and identified.

## **5.2 SV within marriages**

The participants in Burundi are outright in their recognition that SV is happening between husbands and wives. Only one person said that SV between a married couple is impossible. Very often the research participants raised the subject without being prompted, for example during the general structured interview questionnaire, by defining SV as something that can also happen between a husband and a wife.

In all of the research sessions this issue came up. Sexual violence, specifically husbands sexually violating wives, seems to be extremely common in these communities and it is blamed on the gender inequality present within Burundian culture. Wives are not allowed to refuse sex and with the threat of second wives (polygamy) hanging over them, they are forced to comply. The powerlessness of wives and the absence of any form of sexual negotiation was highlighted.

## **5.3 Polygamy**

The matter of polygamy links up with the previous two discussion issues. Many of the participants blamed polygamy for the gender inequality and sexually violent culture of their communities. They feel that polygamy has created a context in which men have been awarded impunity to do whatever they sexually want with women, in a community which will never condemn their behaviour. Sons learn from their fathers and therefore the traditions continue. It thus seems that polygamy has become warped – although no-one explained how this happened or what the ‘pure’ form of polygamy was – and that women are suffering because of it. Both female and male participants were constantly saying that polygamy is playing a central role in creating an environment and breeding ground for SV.

## **5.4 Cultural stance on sex**

Burundian culture demands that no-one, and especially not females, should talk about sex or SV. This creates a situation which is conducive to SV. In the first place, SV survivors do not disclose and perpetrators are free to violate others. If one looks at SV within marriages, it leaves spouses free to do it again. Secondly, without talking about sex and SV one cannot create an environment that counters such behaviour and protects people. Thirdly, it leaves any person who does speak out and counters this cultural taboo open to the stigma and discrimination of the whole community, which inhibits disclosure.

Thus the cultural stance on sex is actually creating an environment conducive to SV. Research participants themselves identified this link between the Burundian cultural stance towards sex and the occurrence of SV. Thus, in order to address SV, one will have to address the cultural stances towards sex and SV.

## **5.5 SV against men**

The participants in Burundi were more open to recognising the idea of SVAM, although this might have been due to a recent spate of SVAM attacks by female perpetrators in Rutana. Many participants also defined SV in gender-neutral terms, revealing that both males and females can be



aggressor and/or victim. In general, though, the idea of SVAM is still seen as an abhorrent, shocking idea by the community and SVAM is seen as an exception rather than the rule.

### **5.6 War vs post-war: possible change in SV perpetrator and victim profile**

A very limited number of SV survivors were interviewed and one should be careful to generalise from the comments of such a small number of survivors. But taken in conjunction with the comments of the other research participants, it seems that in the post-war context the general profile of SV perpetrators and those they target is changing.

During the war women and girls were generally sexually violated by random groups of strangers, men whom they have never seen before. Post-war it seems that perpetrators are targeting those that they know. SV perpetrators are often neighbours, relatives, and other known community members. Furthermore, it seems that more and more often they are targeting youth, and even children, of both sexes. This is ascribed to the economic situation in Burundi, with the extreme poverty making youth more available for sex for incentives.

### **5.7 Need for SV training**

All of the research sessions and participants emphasised the need for training. There is a belief that training the Burundian people on SV will make a difference. These trainings should furthermore specifically address the imbalances present within the communities, for example how SV survivors are mistreated by community members. There is a belief that attitudes and behaviour will change if people are trained and this is reflected in the answers of some of the research participants, which tell stories of the positive changes that had occurred in families and communities due to training.

This issue was raised again and again, by research participants from all of the different sessions. This seems to be the intervention that they feel will make the biggest difference to the occurrence of SV and in the care of SV survivors.

### **5.8 Need for gender training**

This issue was raised directly by only a few participants. Yet the gender inequality and power imbalances were a great concern and the need for training constantly mentioned. Thus it seems necessary to highlight the need for gender training in particular, which will focus on the issue of gender inequality and power imbalances within Burundian culture. These trainings will focus on emphasising the value of women. It will not look at SV, but specifically at gender inequality.

One cannot deal with SV without dealing with the fact that women are grossly mistreated and undervalued. These gender trainings would be a long term project of working on this issue.

### **5.9 Counselling**

There seems to have been very little or no counselling available to SV survivors. None of the SV survivors that were interviewed mentioned receiving counselling from a trained counsellor. When it came to designing action plans and possible avenues for involvement for the church, counselling was always suggested as very important.

Many of the SV survivors mentioned how much it helped to talk about what happened with other people that experienced the same things. This highlights the need for support groups, another form of therapy.

This is thus an avenue of support that can and should be explored. Training of pastors and/or lay counsellors, the starting of SV survivors support groups, as well as special counselling centres for SV survivors are all possible interventions.

### **5.10 Apprehending and punishing perpetrators**

Apprehension and punishment of SV perpetrators is seen as one of the best ways to deal with SV. Most of the participants felt that if SV perpetrators were just caught and punished properly, SV will happen much less often. Many of the SV survivors also indicated that they will be able to deal with what happened much more easily if the perpetrator/s had just been caught and punished.

The problem seems to lie on two levels. On the one hand perpetrators are not caught as the SV happened during the war. On the other hand, perpetrators are caught, but the judicial system is corrupt, with bribes being paid and ridiculously short sentences being served. Furthermore, SV survivors can often not afford to attend court hearings and thus the cases are thrown out.

That is why many participants asked that SV survivors should be assisted financially so they can make sure their perpetrators are prosecuted.

### **5.11 Collaboration**

When asked who should be addressing SV, many different role players were mentioned: church, government, INGO's, NGO's, security forces, civil society, etc. But what many participants emphasised was the need for collaboration. Often, in response to being asked who should address SV, the prompt reply was 'everybody'! When asked to elaborate, participants would explain that the issue is of such an extensive nature that everyone should be involved and that everyone's expertise is needed for the matter.

When asked to focus specifically on the church, some participants emphasised that the church should not be hesitant to work with non-religious institutions, such as the government or NGOs.

### **5.12 Practical support for survivors**

From the interviews it seems that very little practical support is being offered to SV survivors. Practical help seems to be limited to hospital care for severe physical trauma and HIV-testing for all survivors. Yet it seems that very little else is being offered to SV survivors, by any institution. Yet there is definitely a need. Poverty is extreme and SV survivors are usually rejected by partners, family and community. Many of the SV survivors that were interviewed told of their severe financial need.

### **5.13 Threat of poverty**

Poverty is a big concern in Burundi. It also appears to be one of the driving factors behind SV. With people being desperate for food, money and schooling, sex for incentives is becoming more common.

In addressing SV one will have to think in a preventative way as well. Looking at poverty will be one such preventative intervention.

## **6. What is the church's involvement?**

The goal of this study was to get a better idea of the current role of the church in Burundi in dealing with SV. This was discussed in section 3 and 4, but in short:

- Church involvement is generally limited to basic preaching, teaching and advice about SV. In many cases, this seems to only be teachings against adultery.
- Many churches still avoid the subject totally, probably because of the Burundian cultural taboo on talking about sexual matters
- Basically no involvement with addressing the practical needs of SV survivors, for example food, money for hospital fees, or school fees
- Apparently no direct dealing with SV or its causes. For example, a pastor would preach against adultery, but not define SV and preach against it.
- No attempt by the church the change members' and the community's opinion and treatment of SV survivors

- SV survivors have a very positive view of their churches. They feel supported by their churches. Although the support was rarely of a very practical nature, they feel comforted, accepted and loved.
- The group in Rutana community identified what is possibly at the heart of the issue: “The church should take this SV concern as hers because the survivors of SV are her people and the consequences that SV brings about fall upon her.”

Thus the involvement of the church in Burundi as a whole seems to be fairly limited and at a fairly basic level.

## **7. Where to from here for the church?**

Taking into account the status quo that was identified, as well as the needs identified by the research participants, what is the best course of action for the Burundian church in dealing with SV? The following plan is proposed.

### **7.1 Accept responsibility**

The first step will always be, like the group in Rutana said, for the church to accept responsibility for dealing with SV. It has to see sex as a spiritual issue and addressing SV as part of its mandate. Until the church accepts this responsibility it will never start dealing with the occurrence and consequences of SV.

### **7.2 Gender inequality as focal point**

Although the research focused on Burundi as a post-war country, the research participants seem to be much more concerned with the situation in their country because of their cultural heritage. But the situation for war SV survivors is also so perilous because of the cultural beliefs and situation. The gender inequality and power imbalances present in Burundian culture is seen as the reason or starting point for SV. It has created an environment in which SV can and did blossom.

Thus, based on what the fieldwork has shown, it is suggested that the church adopts addressing gender inequality as its own personal mandate. This will mean confronting and changing a culture, but the church is the institution best-placed in society to bring about such change. It is a grassroots, trusted organisation. Once again, it is emphasised that this will be a long term process.

### **7.3 Training**

There is a big need for training, both on SV and gender issues. The church is perfectly positioned to provide such training, with its grassroots involvement throughout the country and its ability to reach all people in all communities. It is present in every community throughout Burundi.

It is important, though, that such training not only be provided to church members but to all community members. Furthermore, the training should focus on a wide range of issues relating to SV, such as gender equality, culture, HIV, stigma and discrimination, etc.

There should be collaboration in creating and facilitating such trainings. The church does not have the resources or expertise to do all of it and there are organisations that have the capacity and drive to do so. Thus partnerships are important.

### **7.4 Counselling**

For the same reason that the church is perfectly positioned to provide training, it is perfectly positioned to provide counselling. It can reach SV survivors throughout the country. The church is also trusted, thus SV survivors tend to turn towards the church with such personal matters.

Churches themselves need not provide the actual counselling, though. If it is provided by NGOs, for example, churches are in the position to put survivors in contact with the counsellors at the NGOs.

Partner organisations can also provide counselling training for pastors or lay counsellors within the church.

### **7.5 Practical support**

Churches need to get more directly and practically involved. While financial support, in the form of micro-loans or school fees, is often needed, this is not the only form of practical support. Home-based care, cooking of food, tending of fields, cleaning, etc. can directly assist SV survivors. Practical support thus does not automatically require financial means. There are different ways of being involved in a hands-on, direct way and the church needs to explore and implement these.

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