

**Great Lakes Policy Forum**  
**Meeting Report**  
*December 4, 2003*

The December Great Lakes Policy Forum was dedicated to discussing and analyzing women's roles as both survivors of conflict and advocates for peace in the Great Lakes region. The forum speakers were Elizabeth Powley of Women Waging Peace, Krista Riddley of Amnesty International, and Laketch Dirasse of the United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM). Discussion emphasized that while women have suffered enormously during the Great Lakes' conflicts, they are now spearheading peace and reconciliation efforts.

**Summary of Remarks**

Violence against women has been a defining feature of the Great Lakes' conflicts during the past decade, with both militias and armies perpetrating crimes against women regardless of social status, age, or ethnicity. In many instances, rape has been used as a weapon of war to terrorize and humiliate communities. But as peace processes continue to progress in DR Congo and Burundi, while Rwanda continues in its post-conflict development, women are seeing a corresponding increase supporting overall efforts towards reconciliation.

In Rwanda, the parliamentary elections in October of this year revealed just how important of a role women are playing in the country's post-conflict development, as women earned 49% of seats, the highest percentage of national parliament participation by women in the world. This accomplishment is partially explained by the demographical trends in Rwanda, where, immediately following the 1994 genocide, women constituted 70% of the population. The Rwandan government has also taken innovative and active steps to promote women's political involvement, having established an official position for women at every level of the decentralized political framework. In fact, women were allotted 24 of the 80 seats in the Chamber of Deputies—the parliament's lower house. At the sector and level<sup>1</sup>, Rwanda instituted a triple balloting system—consisting of a women's ballot, a youth ballot, and a general ballot—in which women and youth representatives are each guaranteed at least one-third of council representatives. Such efforts at gender mainstreaming have enabled the government to earn, for its domestic policies, a reputation of inclusiveness.

Other reasons besides demographics are also contributing to the high levels of female representation in Rwanda's government. First, the general population perceives women, who constitute only 3% of genocide suspects, as being more capable for forgiveness and reconciliation than men, an important trait—whether it is perception or reality—in a country struggling to move beyond the legacy of genocide. The fact that women chair both the National Unity and Reconciliation Commission and the *Gacaca* courts—the two cornerstones of Rwanda's reconciliation efforts—is evidence of this observation. Second, the country's ruling RPF party originated in Uganda, a country with a strong tradition of female involvement, and thus may have adopted this receptiveness to female participation while in Uganda. Finally, women's civil society groups have organized effectively under the umbrella network known as Pro-Femme, thereby strengthening women's voices in all aspects of post-conflict reconstruction. Pro-Femme has worked together with the international community to implement capacity building training that aims to erase the disparity between opportunities (e.g. economic and educational) historically available to men and women.

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<sup>1</sup> Rwanda's system of government is broken into five levels. The most local is the cell, followed by the sector level, district level, province level and finally national level.

The Rwandan government has not, however, earned the same reputation for fairness and inclusiveness during its involvement in eastern DRC. Allegations of widespread rape have been levied against the Rwandan army and its local RCD allies (among various other armed groups). If accurate, this discrepancy between domestic and international policy undermines the larger Great Lakes gender initiatives that have been propagated by the UN.

Indeed, the Rwandan example offers insight into a UN framework that has been adopted to encourage women's participation throughout the Great Lakes region. In order to develop a holistic and sustainable strategy, UNIFEM has analyzed a number of important factors that are inextricably linked to women's development in the region, including poverty, violence, and the HIV/AIDS epidemic. Statistics reveal just how pervasive these issues are: the population below the poverty line is estimated at 61% in DRC, 51% in Rwanda, and 36% in Burundi; and women constitute between 49 and 51% of HIV infected persons, making the epidemic a gender issue. These trends, together with the widespread sexual violence, have made women in the Great Lakes region particularly vulnerable. The UN, in large part through UNIFEM, has developed a comprehensive framework for addressing this complex subject.

Four guiding principles underpin this strategy: the Beijing Platform for Action (BPFA), the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW, which has been ratified and signed by Rwanda, Burundi, and DRC), the African Charter on Human and People's Rights, and the UN Security Council Resolution 1325. The emphasis on promoting gender equality in the context of human rights has been allied with extant regional initiatives and aims to promote gender equality in the context of conflict, HIV/AIDS, and poverty. Importantly, the focus is not only on changing national policy—the Rwandan government's decision to alter inheritance laws to include women, for example—but also involves capacity building for civil society groups through pilot programs and other initiatives.

Efforts at gender mainstreaming have begun to yield results in the Great Lakes region. Aside from the aforementioned evolution in Rwandan politics, progress has also been made in other fields. Gender issues have been addressed in the Burundian peace negotiations during an all party women's peace conference, for example. Similarly, Rwanda and Burundi have both made significant progress towards constitutional, judicial, and legislative reform. Indeed, UNIFEM has worked with Rwanda's *gacaca* courts towards capacity building, particularly in terms of gender awareness during the proceedings. Further, international support to local women's organizations in each of the three countries has allowed them to expand and improve upon their programs. To facilitate continued success in this field, it is necessary to include men in the gender process so as not to make it solely a women's issue. Increasing participation in discussions about gender will serve as a form of sensitization that will benefit the inclusion of women across the region.

The DRC remains the Great Lakes region country that faces the greatest challenges in terms of advancing gender issues. First and foremost, the country must take steps to hold militia groups accountable for the violence that is still being perpetrated against women, particularly in the east. In certain cases, particularly in Ituri province, combatants have targeted certain women based on ethnicity. With reports of an estimated 60% of armed combatants being HIV positive, rape can be tantamount to a death sentence. For survivors, there are few options: the legal and security institutions in the country are severely limited, if indeed they exist at all, while support structures such as trauma counseling are also negligible. Because discussion of rape remains a taboo—a culture of silence pervades—women often do not have options in their communities either; consequently, only one out of an estimated 30 survivors of rape ever reports the incident.

Limited progress towards improving services has occurred under the lead of Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) and other NGOs who are increasing their presence in the region as security improves. To complement this field support, the transitional government should think about how to demonstrate its commitment to women. One way in which to achieve this would be to increase the cooperation between the transitional government and local governments in order to develop the social services that have been disrupted during the past thirty years. In addition, the International Criminal Court (ICC), which has launched an investigation into the Ituri violence, is an important tool for addressing sexual violence, for rape, as defined by the Rome Statute, is a crime against humanity prosecutable as a war crime. By cooperating with the ICC, the transitional government would be taking a major step towards achieving accountability for sexual violence in the region.

In addition, the former rebel leaders participating in the new government should issue directives to their soldiers to immediately cease sexual violence lest they face severe penalties. Once the violence is addressed, the transitional government could then shift its focus to reforming policies that discriminate against women—including rescinding limitations on women’s ability to inherit property, for example. This process will require time and cooperation among the regional and international parties involved in the DRC. Throughout all of these policy recommendations, the government and NGOs should work together to implement public sensitization campaigns that address the need to change the culture of silence that leaves women to endure alone. Such a coordinated approach would offer the DRC an opportunity to join its neighbors in taking important initial steps towards empowering women.

The recent steps that the Great Lakes region has taken towards achieving peaceful solutions to conflict has positively affected peace efforts and, in many cases, have been initiated by women. As security in the region improves, women are emerging as important and active agents for peaceful change. With support from international organizations such as UNIFEM, women’s organizations are building their capacity to empower women in cultures where gender had historically been an important determinant in social and economic status. Challenges remain, however, to ensure that national and local policies both prevent women’s susceptibility to violence, while simultaneously encouraging their participation in the political, economic, and educational arenas.