



# The Women Network for Peace and Dialogue in Burundi

*An illustration of the critical role women play in conflict  
prevention and resolution*

*January-December 2015*

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*Caption: women mediators working and participating to their initial training.*

In January 2015, UNWOMEN - in partnership with national authorities and civil society organizations - established a nationwide network of women mediators. The network is operating in all the 129 municipalities, with teams of four mediators in each municipality (516 women in total) and supported by 18 provincial focal points. The network is composed of women who have experience in conflict prevention and resolution and well respected in their communities. The aim of this nationwide initiative is to prevent and solve conflicts at the community level and involve all members of the community and local authorities.

The first year of the project, January to December 2015, has coincided with a political crisis and elections-related violence, sparked by the incumbent President's run for a third term, a move contested by the opposition. In this context, women mediators have tirelessly proven their ability to substantively impact on peace.

There have been significant achievements in different areas and at several levels

**Conflict resolution:** Women have dealt with over **5, 200 conflicts** between January and December 2015 with an average of **61% success**. These community conflicts are, on average, **30% familial** (such as domestic disputes, conflicts over resources, etc.); **28% political** (such as tensions between political parties' members, misconduct or arbitrary decisions of local authorities/security forces, violence coming from *Imbonerakure* or other political actors, etc.); **27% social** (such as tensions between neighbors, criminality, etc.); **9% land-related** (such as competition over land); **5% VAWG** (such as rape). In a tense political context, familial, social and land-related can easily be politicized and are highly inflammable with a risk for the stability of the communities. On average, out of all conflicts reported in a province, 24% are addressed with the involvement of women mediators. Conflicts are addressed in close partnerships with local authorities, civil society organizations, religious groups, police force, etc. **in 80% of the cases** ensuring sustainability, buy-in and protection of mediators.

**Conflict prevention:** Women mediators have also carried out numerous awareness raising activities and **succeeded defusing tensions on numerous different contexts**. Their experience in peacebuilding and strong ties with the community have enabled them to lead key initiatives for peace in a highly tense and complex environment by always remaining objective and involving all actors across the political spectrum. This includes organizing awareness raising activities of the importance of tolerance, dialogue, peaceful conflict resolution; working hand in hand with local authorities to inform community members; spreading reliable information to counter rumors, etc. They have successfully **initiated dialogue processes in 17 provinces** with political actors, security forces and civil society. These dialogues allowed the establishment of space for dialogue, increased trust and resolution of problems challenging the stability of the communities.

**Promotion of the participation of women and protection of their rights.** They have been active in **mobilizing women to vote for elections and/or put themselves forth as candidates**. This work has been achieved through supporting civic and education campaigns, directly informing women of the electoral process, raising awareness of the importance of their vote, etc. Women mediators **have also organized awareness-raising activities** of laws protecting women's right, the importance of fighting violence against women and other challenges facing women such as teenage pregnancies, polygamy, common-law marriage, etc.

**Links between local and national level.** The Women Network for Peace and Dialogue aims at going beyond the local level. Links have been established between the local and the national level to contribute to generating structural changes and building societies, institutions, policies, and relationships that are better able to sustain peace and justice. A **close partnership with the Ministry of Home Affairs** has been sustained to encourage them becoming champions in the promotion of women's participation and support the enhancement of institutional framework in favor of gender equality. The Ministry has in turn encouraged local authorities to support the mediators and promote the participation of women in public affairs. The **concerns that were brought up at the local level have fed into a potential agenda** women participating in political dialogue at the regional level will defend so as to ensure they are integrated in the agenda and in the outcomes of the

dialogue. Women mediators have also contributed to **feed early warning systems**. They gathered information which fed the analysis of the ongoing crisis including the assessment of its intensity and implications.

An internal evaluation carried out by UNWOMEN targeting almost 200 stakeholders of the project in 9 provinces has shown the diverse and meaningful impact their work has led to.

*Women have become central actors of conflict prevention and resolution.* The quality of their work and position within the community provide them with many advantages that have contributed to assert them as key actors of conflict prevention and resolution. They **complement the conflict resolution chain** by filling a gap at the lowest level because they are nearer to communities. Because they do not require any sort of compensation, they also **provide the most vulnerable an alternative recourse** to conflict resolution. They are **most trusted by women** victims who find understanding and comfort in them. Local authorities value their work because they **bring a women perspective** to conflict resolution. Finally, thanks to their involvement and legitimacy, they manage to **initiate a stronger coordination** between actors involved in conflict prevention and resolution and position themselves as a driving force on those matters.

*Community conflicts are reduced and prevented in the long term.* There is a **decrease in the recurrence of conflicts in the long term** through several mechanisms such as deterrence to commit violence, learning new ways to dialogue, and dissemination of knowledge on women's rights and on how to protect them. The initiative also contributes to **reducing the number of conflicts brought to judiciary and administrative structures**. By allowing conflicts to be solved outside of the judiciary system, **they contribute to preserving social cohesion** among community members. Finally, they do not only work with the victims of a conflict but with the community at large and **instill in community members the techniques of dialogue and peaceful responses to conflict**.

*The status of women is slowly being elevated.* Thanks to their successes, women mediators allow other women to gradually **develop confidence and self-assertion** and they are themselves more assertive than before. They **inspire other women** to participate in conflict resolution and in political life. Women mediators have also significantly **contributed to the fight against VAWG** by raising awareness, supporting survivors, involving local authorities, etc. Women's rights are better protected and the initiative was instrumental in helping women to speak up. Finally, by engaging with men and demonstrating their capacities through their work, it **positively influence men's attitudes towards women** thereby strengthening women's leadership in conflict prevention and resolution but also in the community in general.

Several factors have been **key to the success** of the project throughout the year:

- ❖ **Flexibility** and constant adaptation of approaches to fit the changing context. This was done thanks to a thorough analysis of the context and political dimensions of the conflict, risks analysis and identification of mitigation strategies, but also opportunities.
- ❖ **Involve key and influential actors** at all levels.
- ❖ Build **inclusive partnerships**, be **transparent** and remain **neutral**.
- ❖ Work with **skilled and experienced women** with strong ties to the community and local authorities.
- ❖ Constantly **document** work, results, impacts, learning processes.

## I) CONTEXT

While conflict inflicts suffering on everyone, women are particularly affected by its short and long-term effects. However, women are rarely mere passive victims of conflict and should not be treated as such. Women can serve as the forerunners of peace movements that prevent and end conflict even if these determined efforts are often behind the scenes. The United Nation Security Council has recognized the role of women as agents of peace in its landmark resolution, Resolution 1325, adopted in 2000. Several resolutions have followed to give meaning and effect to R1325. Fifteen years later, the Global Study compiles the growing evidence that the involvement of women in peace and security issues is critical. The engagement of women in peace processes contributes to the conclusion of talks and the successful implementation and durability of peace agreements. Women also have an essential role to play in the prevention of conflicts and human rights violations including through addressing root cause of conflicts and the development of peacebuilding strategies at the grassroots level. Burundian women are no exception and, on the contrary, demonstrate the soundness of these findings.



In Burundi, political conflicts and ethnic tensions led to a painful civil war between 1993 and 2005 and to the death of hundreds of thousands people. The conflict left divided communities and a stark need for reconciliation. In the in the lead-up to the 2015 elections, the incumbent President’s run for a third term—a move contested as unconstitutional by the opposition and part of civil society—sparked a political and security crisis. Since late April 2015, tensions between the Government and opposition have led to sporadic violence between security forces and protesters in the capital, Bujumbura, intensification of insecurity and human rights violations which led to the death of at least 400 people and flight of over 2370,000 refugees and 25 000 internally displaced persons. Despite calls for internationally-mediated dialogue between the government and the opposition, there has been little progress.

Burundian women, pillars of the family, have had a vital role in promoting peace by participating in the Arusha accords and working for the reconciliation of divided communities at local level. However, their participation remains limited by structural barriers such as a traditional marginalization from decision-making processes and political arena, lack of knowledge and confidence to act, household responsibilities, lack of coordination between women’s CSO, etc. In order to tackle these barriers and involve women in finding solutions to this particularly challenging time of Burundi’s history, UNWOMEN has developed and implemented a comprehensive approach. It aims at promoting the role of women in peace and women’s rights at the local and national level with expected results at short, medium and long term.

Several activities related to Women, Peace and Security have been implemented (and continue to be implemented) by UNWOMEN within the PBF project “Promoting the role of women in peace consolidation”. It is a multidimensional project aiming at i) strengthening the role women in conflict prevention and resolution, ii) developing the capacities of political and institutional actors as well as capacities of women for an enhanced participation of women iii) creating platforms for dialogue between elected men and women and constituents to develop accountability and common strategies to tackle challenges to peace. As part of this project, a civic and education campaign was implemented in 45 municipalities aiming at raising awareness on the rights of women and how to protect them. UNWOMEN also initiated platforms of dialogues between women from political parties in 5 provinces to allow their collective thinking and collaboration on the improvement of the relations between political parties.

The present report focuses on an initiative established in late 2014, by UNWOMEN in collaboration with the Ministry of Home Affairs and CSO partners: the Women Network for Peace and Dialogue. The objective is to prevent and manage conflicts at the community level. The network of 534 women mediators all across Burundi has been active since the beginning of the current crisis and helped diffuse tensions and raise awareness on peace and political tolerance. This report presents the main achievements, impacts and lessons learned during the first 12 months of the project, between January and December 2015. The data and information collected and presented in this report are based on information gathered by the mediators and provincial focal points of their work, on close monitoring of their work by UNWOMEN and implementing partners throughout the year and on an internal evaluation that was carried out by UNWOMEN in 9 provinces and led to the interview of over 200 partners.

## OBJECTIVES AND EXPECTED RESULTS

### Objectives:

Involve Burundian women in a unified movement for the promotion of dialogue, conflict prevention and resolution at the local level.

Strengthen the influence and visibility of women's role within their community.

### Expected results:

Risks of community conflict (political tensions, communication problems, violence against women, gender discrimination, etc.) are reduced through the work of mediators.

Women are more involved in peacebuilding

Women's civil society organizations are better organized to promote the role of women in the prevention and management of conflicts

## II) WHO ARE THE MEDIATORS?

### HOW MANY ARE THEY ?

The Women Network for Peace and Dialogue consists of 516 women mediators working in all municipalities in Burundi (129 in total), with teams of four mediators in each municipality and supported by 18 provincial focal points.



*Mediators of Gitega Province*

### HOW WERE THEY CHOSEN ?

Women mediators were chosen by partners from civil society according to strict criteria guaranteeing they have the knowledge, capacity and legitimacy to intervene as mediators in the communities. These include their previous experience in conflict prevention and resolution, involvement in civil society organizations, several years living in the community, ability to read and write, etc. They also had to be representative of the Burundian population both ethnically and politically, be at least 18 years old, and be physically mobile enough to travel around the community.

### WHY WOMEN?

Burundian society remains traditional and relies on traditional mechanisms rather than judiciary system to solve conflicts. Because it is a patriarchal society marginalizing women, only men have historically been members of traditional conflict resolution structures. However, women have risen up to their role of agents of peace during the political and ethnic strife that shook the country in the past decades. In each street, neighbor, village, there are women who are central figures of peace, who are respected as leader and seen as “wise” person to turn to and rely on to solve problems. Women members of the Women Network for Peace and Dialogue are these women. They constitute a core of women leaders able to substantially and positively impact on the peace and development of their countries. However, their participation remains limited and unevenly supported by man. Their contribution needs to be further enhanced to reach an equal participation and elevate the status of women. That is why the initiative solely relies on women with the aim of involving men alongside as partners.

## WHAT ARE THEIR TASKS?

Women mediators were tasked with preventing and solving conflicts at the local level in particular in the light of the electoral process. This includes being proactive and looking for conflicts that could potentially escalate, directly mediating conflicts, advising and assisting victims, building partnerships, raising awareness in the communities, etc. Their goal was to diffuse tensions and prevent any kind of conflicts from being politicized and escalating.

## WHAT PROFILE DO THEY HAVE?

They come from diverse backgrounds. They are farmers, business women, civil servant, professors and teachers, medical staff, etc. However, two main categories of women are clearly distinct i) rural women involved in agricultural work, living in rural areas and minimally educated ii) civil servants who are further educated, mostly working in education system or state institutions and living in urban areas. Both have their strong and weak points. Rural women are closer to communities but less able to interact with local authorities. Civil servants are less dynamic at grassroots level but comfortable with building partnerships and advocating to local authorities. The selection process ensured these two types of women are equally represented in the team of 4 so as to combine these characteristics.

## WHAT SUPPORT HAVE THEY BENEFITED FROM?

Although they had previous experience in conflict prevention and resolution, UNWOMEN has organized a three days training prior to the beginning of their work as mediators. The training aimed at further building their capacities in mediation techniques, partnership building, advocacy, reporting, and other skills required for the achievement of their goals. The training that gathered all women mediators of a province also aimed at fostering a sense of belonging to a nationwide network of women dedicated to the same objective and thereby strengthening their self-confidence. Women mediators have also receive monthly allowance to cover their transport and communication cost. No compensation or “salary” have been given so as to encourage volunteer work and sustainability of their work.



*Mediators of Bubanza Province and women leaders gathering for the internal evaluation*



*A mediator of Bururi province*



*Women in Rumonge Province working in fishing*



### III) MAIN ACHIEVEMENTS

Competition among political elites at the national level is not the only conflictual dynamic affecting the country's stability. There can be other deeply-rooted conflicts that affect a larger portion of the population and which require long-term structural changes. Similarly, conspicuous violence at the national level can overshadow serious conflicts at the local level. As forerunners of peace, women both contribute to solving immediate conflicts at the local level and strategizing to bring about structural changes at the national level through advocacy, awareness-raising, mobilization work, etc. Their peacebuilding work at sub-national levels complements the one taking place at the national level and must not be overlooked. Indeed, when peace processes at the national level seem to be stalling, women continue to nurture peace and strengthen the resilience of communities against the spread of conflict. The progresses achieved at the sub-national levels can also positively influence and sustain peace processes at the national level.

The Women Network for Peace and Dialogue aims at having such a comprehensive approach by intervening in different areas and at all levels to address challenges related to the context and ensure women are at the center of conflict prevention and resolution mechanisms. Women mediators and their partners have solved and reduced conflicts in the short term at the local level, prevented conflicts in the long term, and initiated structural changes while complementing peace processes at the national level and bringing about achievements that can be built upon.

#### 1) A significant contribution to the resolution of conflicts at the local level

Despite peacebuilding efforts, many conflicts continue occurring at the local level and jeopardize the stability of a community and of the country. They are related to access to land, economic or political issues, local governance, ethnicity, religion, etc. These conflicts have become even more acute and highly inflammable in the context of the political and security crisis that has emerged during the 2015 electoral cycle. Women mediators have actively contributed to solving and reducing these conflicts in the short term and preventing their escalation.

##### 1.1) The women network for peace and dialogue: main trends and figures



*Women mediators mediating a familial conflict*

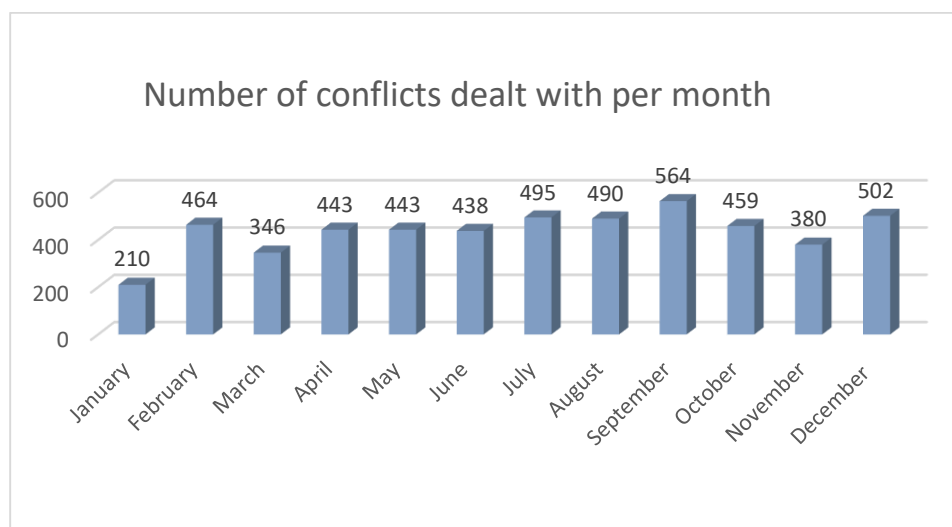
5234  
CONFLICTS  
DEALT WITH

61% OF  
SUCCESS

95%  
BENEFICIARIES  
SATISFIED

- **Total number of conflicts dealt with**

Women have dealt with 5234 conflicts between January and December 2015.



The number of conflicts women have dealt with per months has been increasing thereby demonstrating a positive learning curve. However, the evolution of the context and the sensitivity of certain conflicts, has, at times, limited their ability to perform.

- **Percentage of success**

Month	Success	Failures	Half-success
<b>April</b>	346	62	35
<b>May</b>	265	50	39
<b>June</b>	249	73	116
<b>July</b>	265	113	125
<b>August</b>	298	83	109
<b>September</b>	325	104	147
<b>October</b>	282	76	102
<b>November</b>	232	57	75
<b>Décember</b>	226	61	164
<b>Total</b>	<b>2488</b>	<b>679</b>	<b>912</b>

Conflicts have been mitigated with an average of 61% success over the year.

An internal evaluation conducted in 9 provinces has shown that 95% of interviewed beneficiaries are satisfied by the mediators' work and the way they had handled their conflicts. The 5% remaining were unhappy about the settlement that was found through the mediation.

Unresolved conflicts are structural or complex ones and require a longer time to be resolved. That is why a conflict can be seen as unresolved at a given time although mediators are in the process of solving it. When a conflict is too complex for a mediator

CONFLICT  
DEALT 80% IN  
PARTNERSHIP

70%  
INTERVIEWEE  
KNOW THEM

76% OF  
WOMEN  
VICTIMS

or requires the intervention of another actor, they refer victims to appropriate structures which can assist them. The mediators then follow up on this conflict to ensure it finds a solution.

- **Level of partnership**

Conflicts have been solved in partnership with other stakeholders in 80% of cases. 90% of targeted partners including local authorities, police, judiciary system, CSO, etc. interviewed during an internal evaluation testify working with women mediators.

In many municipalities, information sharing and calls for support go both ways between partners and the mediators. Local authorities and CSOs contact mediators to support them in solving conflicts that were brought to them and vice versa. They have developed an open channel of communication and a habit of collaborating.

- **Level of awareness of the mediators' existence**

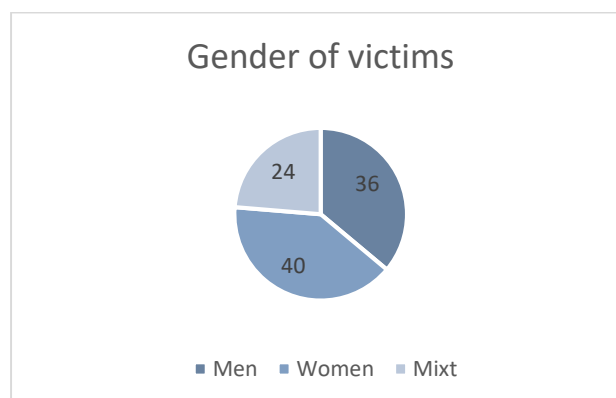
During the internal evaluation, 70% of community members interviewed knew mediators as women leaders involved in the Women Network or other leadership activities.

The level of awareness of mediators vary according to proximity: the further the interviewed person is from where the mediators live, the less he/she will know about them.

- **Women are the primary victims of conflicts**

Women are victims of conflicts in 76% of cases which shows the prevalence of violence against women.

This partly explains why mediators are often called upon by victims. Female victims feel they will be better understood by another woman. It is important to note that women mediators are also called upon by men who have either been victimized or who are party to a conflict. The internal evaluation revealed that men trust the mediators and call upon them as long as they feel that women mediators are not biased towards women.



## 1.2) Illustration of their work

For analytical purposes, the conflicts women mediators have dealt fit into five main categories: familial, social, land-related, VAWG (rape) and political conflicts. To deal with conflicts, mediators use methods such as direct conflict mediation, advising and assisting victims, referring them to appropriate structures, organizing synergies to tackle local problems, liaising with local authorities, etc.

Familial, social and land-related conflicts are very common in Burundi and greatly affect the stability of the community. In order to grasp the importance of dealing with these kind of conflicts for the improvement of the overall current political situation, it is important to first understand Burundi has a traditional society. Familial, social and land-related conflicts are resolved with community assistance thereby systematically impacting an entire community. The line between these types of conflicts and political ones is often blurred. In a politically-tense situation, these conflicts can easily be politicized and inflamed which poses a risk for the general stability of the community. For this reason, dealing with familial, social or land-related conflict can have a direct impact on the improvement of the overall situation in Burundi.

Type of conflict	January	February	March	April	May	June	July	August	September	October	November	December	Total
<b>Familial</b>	88	152	119	105	74	114	143	116	176	134	146	213	<b>1580</b>
<b>Political</b>	32	87	92	172	258	217	192	153	98	58	47	55	<b>1461</b>
<b>Land-related</b>	17	77	29	26	12	19	33	63	77	53	34	42	<b>482</b>
<b>Social</b>	39	80	84	106	68	82	120	147	200	205	139	174	<b>1444</b>
<b>VAWG (rape)</b>	34	68	22	34	31	6	7	11	13	9	14	18	<b>267</b>

30% of  
familial  
conflicts

**Familial conflict** represent 30% of the total number of conflicts mediator have dealt with throughout the year. Familial conflicts include domestic disputes (sometimes leading to psychological, physical or economic violence), common-law marriage, polygamy, management of a household's resources and properties, etc.



Member of local authorities, police, Women's Forum, member of CSOs and women mediators debating on what should be done to solve a conflict in Cankuzo.

*In Cankuzo province, a woman was chased from her home by her husband because he wanted to live with another women whom he brought to the house, which was particularly traumatizing for the children. The husband was a high-ranking member of the ruling party at provincial level and used his position to intimidate anyone who would try to reason with him. He went as far as threatening people with a weapon. Women mediators persevered and managed to organize a coalition of partners involving local authorities and the Women's National Forum. The coalition was able to get the husband convicted for his various crimes, evict the second women from the house, and return the woman to her home and children. (see picture above)*

*In Rumonge province, Rumonge municipality, a couple living in concubinage have two children. The parents of the women came to take away one of the children as compensation for the dowry that was not paid for their daughter. The man refused to let this happen and the conflict became physical. Women mediators intervened to stop the confrontation. Through dialogue, they managed to broker an agreement between the parents and the couple and the child returned in his family.*

*In Bubanza province, Musigati municipality, a husband was fighting with his wife over his taking of a second partner. He was spending his income on the second women and not meeting his obligations towards his legal wife and children. Women mediators met with the wife and husband separately and advised both of them before holding a mediation session in partnership with local authorities. Fortunately, they came to an understanding and the husband left his second partner to fully take care of his family.*

27% of  
social  
conflicts

27% of conflicts dealt with by the mediators are **social conflicts**. They include tensions between neighbors or community members, thefts, harm of property or injuries to people, etc.

*In Muramvya province, Muramvya municipality, a conflict between the director and vice-director of a local school erupted. The newly hired vice-director suspected the director of the embezzlement of funds meant for renovation of the school. Women mediators were called upon to help solve the matter. They convinced both of them to bring the subject to the school council and order to find a solution. A small investigation proved the vice-director's allegations wrong. Both men committed to work together to run the school and use resources in a transparent manner.*

*In Bujumbura Rural, Bugarama municipality, the cow of a household escaped and damaged the land of a neighbor. Subsequently, the neighbor kept the cow until the household would repay him for the damages that were done. The owner of the cow held his wife responsible and beat her. The wife came to see the mediators to ask them for help. Women mediators brought the case to local authorities who forced the husband to pay for his wife's medical care and for the damages done to his neighbor, which he did. The cow was returned to his owner.*

*In Bururi province, a conflict between a money-lender and borrower erupted due to an unpaid debt and was about to escalate. Women mediators organized a mediation session to reestablish trust between these two men and a peaceful solution was found. A payment plan that satisfied both parties was devised.*

9% of  
land  
conflicts

**Land-related conflicts** are mostly between members of the same family, linked to inheritance or share of properties but also between members of the community. They represent 9% of the conflict mediators deal with.

*In Kirundo province, a man was building his house on land belonging to someone else thereby creating tension with the owner. Women mediators mitigated the conflict and allowed a peaceful solution to be found with the support of the chief of the colline. The neighbor agreed to sell this piece of land.*

*In Bubanza province, Gihanga municipality, a conflict erupted between siblings regarding the succession of their parents' properties. The parents had shared their properties between all the children, boys and girls. However, the boys refused to let their sisters inherit. The case was reported to the police who intervened and called upon the mediators to assist the victims and advise them throughout the resolution process.*

*In Gitobe municipality, a man tried to sell a property without the consent of his wife and her family which created high tensions. Mediators got involved and through dialogue the family was able to find common ground and reconcile.*

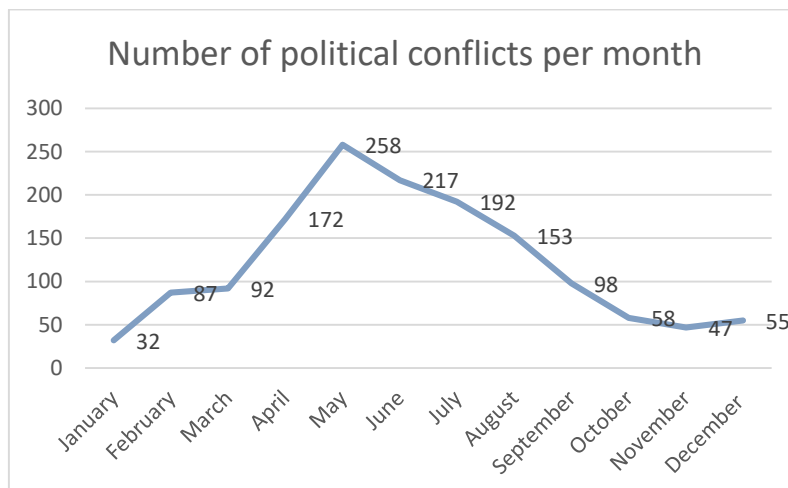
5% of rapes

The cases of rapes are a separate category of the conflict women deal with. They represent 5% of the total number of cases. In such case, women mediator advice, assist and make sure they receive appropriate care.

*In various municipalities of Gitega province, women mediators have assisted and accompanied survivors of sexual violence to tribunals and hospitals so as to ensure they receive the appropriate care and protection.*

28% of political conflicts

Finally, women mediators have been very active in dealing with **conflict related to politics or the electoral cycle**. They represent 28% of the conflicts mediators have dealt with. The conflicts include tensions between security forces and citizens, tensions between members of different political parties, tensions within a household because of different political affiliations, negative consequences of rumors, unsubstantiated imprisonment of opposition members, etc. Although they had little experience dealing with such situations, they have now gained the confidence and practical know-how to tackle sensitive political and electoral conflicts.



*In Mugongo-Manga municipality, Bujumbura Rural province, a tense situation arose in May during the protests, when protesters had blocked the main road leading to Bujumbura and the police was ready to shoot at them unless the road was reopened. One of the protesters' demands was the release of some of the protesters that had been imprisoned. After three hours of negotiation, the mediators succeeded in reaching an agreement between the protesters and the police in which the protesters agreed to leave the road open in exchange for the police freeing ten protesters.*

*On a different day, the mediators calmed the demonstrators that were attacking the police chief for compiling lists of people that have been involved in the protests. The provincial focal point succeeded in convincing the police chief to stop compiling such lists, which appeased the protestors and accordingly anger declined among young*

*In Ruyigi province, in June, five men and a woman were arrested and imprisoned for their involvement in opposition political parties. Women mediators, alongside other members of political parties, advocated for their release by arguing it is an individual's right to belong to their chosen political party under Burundian law. They eventually succeeded and the prisoners were freed. Similarly, in many provinces and municipalities, women mediators have advocated for the release of those unjustifiably detained for their political beliefs. They also visited prisons to provide food and assistance to prisoners and to ensure they were being kept in human living conditions.*

*During the last months of 2015, in provinces such as Bujumbura Mairie and Cibitoke, women mediators have raised awareness among youths who were considering joining armed groups and successfully convinced them to carry on with their lives and studies and to voice their opinions through peaceful means.*

They have also dealt with tensions linked to the electoral cycle itself. They have been involved in each stage of the electoral process: they observed voter registration and distribution of electoral cards, intervened to ensure peaceful political meetings, mitigated tensions on voting day, etc.

➤ *voter registration*

*Members of opposition political parties wanted to collect their voter cards but the person responsible for voter registration at the municipal level refused to administer them arguing it was too late. These people called upon the mediators to assist them. Women mediators came to talk to the man in question to advocate their rights. Subsequently, he agreed and distributed the cards.*

➤ *Campaign meetings*

*In Makamba, members of the ruling party disturbed the holding of an electoral meeting organized by an opposition political party. Members of the opposition party turned to local authorities who called upon mediators to assist them. All together, they talked to the ruling party members and rose awareness on political tolerance to diffuse the situation and avoid a similar event in the future.*

➤ *Voting day*

Most mediators were accredited to the CENI and able to participate in the observation the elections.

*In Mwaro province, Kayokwe municipality, some members of an opposition party were stopping people from going to vote. Women mediators talked to them and succeeded in convinced them to let people vote freely.*

## 2) A proactive role in conflict prevention

### 2.1) Awareness raising activities and spreading reliable information

In Burundi, civil war has torn apart the social fabric. Although reconciliation work has been ongoing, communities still need to further build their capacities dialogue, be tolerant, peacefully solve conflicts, act as responsible citizens, etc. Traditionally the best way to reach population was through radio. 90% of Burundian citizens have access to and actively listen to the radio. However, main independent media have been closed since May 2015 thus creating a dearth of reliable information and reassuring messages. Women mediators have played a critical role in spreading information and have worked hand in hand with local authorities to inform community members and develop peaceful and inclusive conflict resolution mechanisms.

*In Gitega, Bujumbura Rural, as well as other provinces, women mediators participated in weekly security meetings organized by local authorities where they shared information, brought up concerning matters, and promoted women's rights. According to one municipal leader, "It is more convincing when a woman singles out party activists [who create tensions] to keep peace. They feel embarrassed and ashamed".*

*During the upheaval of the protests, mediators held meetings to sensitize internally displaced persons and residents to the importance of living peacefully in order to diffuse tensions between the two groups.*

*In Muyinga province, women mediators have raised awareness of women leaders on addressing familial conflicts. They also met with young boys and girls to raise awareness of peaceful conflict resolution. Similarly, in Butembe municipality, mediators organized a meeting with 60 members of associations to raise awareness of the importance of peace within their community and identify common interest to maintain peace rather than being divided by political beliefs.*

Women have also **countered rumors and diffused exaggerated fears with verifiable information**. This prevents widespread panic, heightened in Burundi since independent media outlets were shut down in May 2015.

*In Gihanga municipality, a rumor spread that a group of young man would kill anyone not supporting the ruling party and created fear. Upon finding that this was exaggerated, women mediators advised local authorities to hold a security meeting to counter the rumors and defuse tensions. Women mediators, in partnership with local authorities, also met with these youths and local leaders of the party to dissuade them from using violence and spreading threatening messages.*

These examples are found in almost all the provinces and vary according to local contexts.

### 2.2) Organization and facilitation of provincial dialogues for peace<sup>1</sup>

A lasting peace relies on the strong and ongoing commitment of community members to collectively address divisive issues through non-violent means. Dialogue is a tool that can be used to identify sources of tension, develop a common understanding of what is at stake and form mitigation strategies based on a common interest to keep peace. Participants commit to move an agenda forward through their own action or together

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<sup>1</sup> See separate report for further information



with other groups. It also allows for enhanced trust and encourages positive changes at the personal and institutional level.

The current conflict in Burundi has been characterized by a lack of dialogue between political parties and between the Government and civil society. Freedom of speech and the ability to express ideas remain limited. The political space for opposition has decreased significantly. The facilitation of dialogue is therefore all the more necessary and critical to find a peaceful solution to the political crisis.

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Seventeen dialogues for peace were organized (in every provinces of the country) with political, security and civil society actors. They were organized and facilitated by mediators and provincial authorities with the support of the Ministry of Home Affairs.

As a result:

- ✚ A framework for dialogue was established between various actors across the political spectrum.
- ✚ Women had the opportunity to express their concerns which translated into commitments from participants to advance these issues.
- ✚ Participants were able to share concerns about the situation and talk about them freely which defused tensions, especially in Rutana where the dialogue took place at the height of the crisis. Recommendations on how to maintain peace were made.
- ✚ Tangible outcomes were achieved such as the release of arbitrarily arrested people, the substantial decrease of rumors and suspicions, the strengthening of mutual trust between different categories of people, commitments by local authorities to protect the properties of refugees, etc.



*A provincial dialogue in Bubanza province*

Dialogues among women have also been organized in two neighborhoods in Bujumbura. Women across the political spectrum shared their experiences, concerns and ideas on how to advance peace in Bujumbura and in their neighborhoods.

### **3) A work dedicated to advance the cause of women**

The elevation of the status of women remains limited due to a number of barriers. Burundian women continue to face institutional discrimination in many areas of their life including access to land, employment, etc. They also lack knowledge of their rights and how to protect them. Women must know these rights and use them to influence the development of inclusive and gender-sensitive decision-making processes and institutions. Women mediators, as members of women's civil society organizations, are active in spreading knowledge of and defending women's rights. They have intensified these efforts through the network.

### 3.1) Mobilization of women for the elections

They have been active in mobilizing women to vote for elections and/or put themselves forth as candidates. This work has been achieved through supporting civic and education campaigns, directly informing women of the electoral process, raising awareness of the importance of their vote, etc.

*In Cankuzo province, the provincial focal point contacted members of the Women's National Forum to analyze the main barriers to the candidacy of women in local elections. They realized a fee that was imposed by local authorities was discouraging women from running to office. They contacted local authorities and successfully convinced them to remove this fee so as to make candidacy more accessible to women.*

### 3.2) Dissemination of knowledge on their rights

Women mediators have benefited from trainings and been involved in leadership activities. Thus, they now have a broader knowledge of gender issues and experience in leadership. Consequently, they have a responsibility to spread this knowledge and confidence to other women. The more women are aware of their rights and able to advance their status, the closer they will be to forming a critical mass and having enough leverage and influence to achieve gender equality. Women mediators have organized awareness-raising activities of laws protecting women's right and how to protect them, the importance of fighting violence against women and other challenges facing women such as teenage pregnancies, polygamy, concubinage, etc.

*In Cankuzo province, women mediators organized awareness-raising sessions on family code, targeting young girls of marriageable age to educate them about the negative aspects of entering into common law marriages.*

*In Kigamba municipality, women mediators organized awareness-raising sessions in schools for students on unwanted pregnancies in schools.*

*Mediators from Gitega and Mwaro provinces raised awareness among women on the importance of their involvement in women's organizations. They also raised awareness of parents, especially among Batwa (an underprivileged minority ethnic group), on the importance of enrolling girls in school. Similarly, they raised awareness of the benefits of using birth control and family planning to limit the number of births as well as of the importance of legalizing marriages to protect the rights of women and children.*

*In Bubanza province, Mpanda municipality, parents forced their daughter to drop out of school because, according to them, a girl does not need to be educated but rather has to help the mother taking care of the house and family. Women mediators talked to the parents, advising them by explaining the importance of the girl's education and how it would affect her life. They finally agreed to let their daughter continue her studies.*

## 4) Contribution to changes and resolution of conflicts at the national level

UNWOMEN is seeking to establish a link between what has been done at local level and strategic level. Indeed, in order to strategically build peace, the work done at local level needs to contribute to generating structural changes and building societies, institutions, policies, and relationships that are better able to sustain peace and justice.

#### 4.1) A key partnership with the Ministry of Home Affairs and local authorities

UNWOMEN has worked in close partnership with the Ministry of Home Affairs and fully involve them in the promotion of women's participation in order to enhance national ownership of the project. The Ministry is sensitive to the importance of women's involvement in peace processes and the political arena generally. They encourage local authorities to support the mediators and promote the participation of women in public affairs. Their involvement is crucial, as the participation of women and protection of their rights can only be enhanced with the involvement of influential actors and decision-makers at the highest level.



*The Governor of Cankuzo Province and the Provincial Focal Point*

Women mediators also work on strengthening accountability between elected officials and their constituents. For instance, they encourage local authorities to meet their responsibilities as elected representatives by alerting them to and requiring their support in tackling problems affecting the community. In 2016, framework for dialogues between elected officials and their constituents will be organized so as to further strengthen accountability.

#### 4.2) Linkages between dialogues at local, national and regional levels

Political dialogues at national or regional levels often tackle issues brought by political elites. These issues can reflect personal concerns or be limited to the political competition at national level. They are not necessarily representative of the problems that the majority of people face on the ground and which challenge the stability of communities. It is therefore essential to elaborate an agenda for Burundians at local level and integrate it into high-level dialogues processes. As mentioned above, women mediators have been instrumental in facilitating consultations at provincial level to identify local concerns. These concerns have fed into a potential agenda women participating in political dialogue at the regional level will defend so as to ensure they are integrated in the agenda and in the outcomes of the dialogue.



*A women speaking up during a provincial dialogue*

#### 4.3) Contribution to early warning mechanisms

It is increasingly acknowledged that early warning mechanisms are essential to prevent the escalation of conflict. Women are on the ground and immersed in communities; as such, they are forefront observers of the evolution of tensions/conflicts that herald and can potentially fuel a conflict at national level. For example, the increase in VAWGs can be an indicator of rising tensions. As demonstrated throughout this report, women also have the capacity to quickly organize responses to the eruption of tensions. Thus, early warning mechanisms have to be gender-sensitive and rely on women to ensure a swift response where violence erupts.

Women mediators have gathered information which fed the analysis of the ongoing crisis including the assessment of its intensity and implications, such as levels of violence and arbitrary detentions, closure of schools, consequences of the conflict on women, the number of people fleeing or arriving in their communities as IDPs, hotspots during the elections, etc. This information proved essential to adapt the role of mediators. This system continues to be used and, if need be, can be strengthened to systematically alert to the resurgence of violence and sustain early warning mechanisms.

## IV) A LASTING IMPACT ON COMMUNITIES

Complement conflict resolution chain by being nearer to communities

Provide the most vulnerable with alternative recourse to conflict resolution

More trusted by female victims

Intimate understanding of women's concerns and community problems

Less conflicts resolved at higher levels

Create disincentives

### 1) Women are becoming central actors of conflict prevention and resolution

Women have become key figures of conflict prevention and resolution. They have real added-value and complement already existing conflict resolution mechanisms.

✚ As members of the community, they have intimate knowledge of the challenges households face and can identify appropriate solutions to address them. This strategic position makes them all the more credible and accessible to community members.

✚ By acting at the lowest level, they complement the conflict resolution chain. Indeed, other actors involved in conflict resolution (such as local authorities, police, etc.) are generally at the community level and not at the household level. Because they live close to people, women mediators are prone to notice households' conflicts and are proactive about finding solutions. Community members also turn to them to resolve these conflicts before they reach higher levels of resolution.

✚ Mediators do not ask for money or drinks as traditional actors of conflict resolution usually do (including local authorities and Bashingantahe). Calling upon them also does not lead to procedural costs unlike the judiciary system. Thus, they offer an alternative recourse to conflict resolution to the poor and most vulnerable. The beneficiaries interviewed strongly emphasize this contribution.

✚ Women victims prefer turning to women mediators for help. It is easier and more comforting for a female victim to confide in another woman rather than in a man, especially when it involves a family conflict. Women mediators also have a greater ability to understand the challenges they face and listen to them.

✚ They bring a female perspective to local authorities in the resolution of some kinds of conflicts. In some municipalities, they are systematically called upon by local authorities or police to assist and advise them in dealing with familial conflicts.

✚ Women have opportunity and legitimacy to coordinate other actors involved in conflict prevention and resolution. They are at the center and key leaders of peacebuilding strategies.

### 2) Decrease in conflicts in the long term

✚ The initiative contributes to reducing the number of conflicts brought to judiciary and administrative structures. Fewer conflicts reach courts and local authorities thanks to the work of mediators. Conflicts are resolved directly at lower levels. Research carried out by UNWOMEN shows that on average, the initiative deals with 24% of conflicts occurring within a province.

✚ They significantly contribute to the reduction of long-term conflicts through several mechanisms. First, they create disincentives in particular for the use of violence against women. Men see that if they mistreat their wife, women mediators and their organizations will get involved to find a solution or there will be consequences to their acts. They know that their actions are being observed and can be punished which discourages violations of women's rights.

Development of a culture of dialogue and peaceful resolution of conflicts

Enhance women's self-confidence

Pave the way for their participation

Encourage women to defend their rights

Develop a coordinated network of CSOs

Slowly change men's mentalities

✚ When they are solving a conflict, they do not only work with the family but also with the surrounding community. They instill in community members the techniques of dialogue and peaceful responses to conflict. They thus help to create a habit of dialogue that can reduce conflicts in the long term. Finally, by disseminating information on the rights of women and the need to protect them, they give tools to women and community members to better defend these rights and thus reduce the number of violations.

✚ By unburdening the judicial institutions of conflict cases, mediators contribute to strengthening social cohesion. Indeed, when a conflict is settled by a judicial institution, it creates an irreparable rift between members of the community. For reconciliation to be possible, conflict should be settled amicably which is what women mediators allow.

### 3) Enhancement of the status of women

The initiative is substantially contributing to removing existing barriers to women's participation and changing mentalities of both men and women in favor of gender equality.

✚ Women mediators allow other women to gradually develop confidence and self-assertion and they are themselves more assertive than before. Their successes inspire others and pave the way for other women to get involved. Some women beneficiaries, for example, have shown interest in wanting to be mediators themselves.

✚ Women mediators encourage other women to become more interested in the life of their community. They also give them the tools and knowledge to do so. As a result, women increasingly participate in meetings at the hill level and in associations. Women mediators have opened a window of opportunity for women to participate in the public realm.

✚ Women's rights are also better protected. The voices of women mediators go further and deeper within the community which help to reach people who are not active and would not otherwise hear messages promoting peace and women's rights.

✚ The initiative was instrumental in helping women to speak up. They are less and less afraid to report violations of their rights. The presence of mediators gives them confidence and someone to support them. The testimonies gathered overwhelmingly mention this impact.

✚ Emerging networks of local CSOs have formed as a result of collaboration (information sharing, joint actions, etc.) among and between mediators and their partners. For example, several initiatives involving local multiple CSOs have been carried out to find solutions to local problems (including polygamy and common law marriage). This collaboration improves the efficacy of conflict resolution.

✚ Women mediators have significantly contributed to the fight against VAWG by raising awareness, supporting survivors, involving local authorities, etc. A consciousness that VAWG needs to be denounced and fought, has emerged and continues to grow within women and communities.

✚ They are engaging with men and demonstrating their capacities through their work. As a result, the mentality of men is slowly changing in favor of women. They readily acknowledge and praise the role women have played in diffusing tensions in their communities and encourage them to participate. This support of the participation of women in conflict prevention and resolution can then spill over to the support of the participation of women in political arena and community management.

### Situation analysis and flexibility

Several factors have been key to the success of the project throughout the year:

➤ **Flexibility and constant adaptation of approaches to fit the changing context**

The context in Burundi has been highly sensitive and constantly evolving. Thanks to ongoing analysis of the situation, thorough risk analysis and identification of mitigation strategies, UNWOMEN has been able to adapt its programming accordingly and identify the best opportunities for the participation of women. This context analysis includes being aware of the political dimensions of the conflict and adapt vocabulary, approaches, behaviors, networking, etc. accordingly.

➤ **Involve key and influential actors at all levels**

Influential actors need to be involved in order to bring about significant and concrete change. For example, instead of only developing a partnership with the Ministry in charge of Gender, other partnerships have been initiated with the Ministry of Home Affairs and the Ministry of Justice. Local authorities, traditional and religious leaders and men in general have also been called upon to promote the participation of women and work alongside them to prevent and solve conflicts. It is with the support of such actors that the status of women can substantively improve in Burundi.

➤ **Build inclusive partnerships, be transparent and remain neutral**

Relationships have been tense between the Government and civil society but working with both have proved essential. The sustainability of the project relies on the involvement of both sets of actors. Additionally, actors across the political spectrum have been involved. Garnering the support and trust of multiple stakeholders has required transparency, inclusivity, and neutrality. Thanks to this participatory and inclusive approach, activities have received the necessary support for their successful implementation. Outcomes of activities are also stronger because they are representative of various stakeholders.

At local level, in order to ensure the security of mediators, the women were encouraged to always work in partnership and never act on their own. Working in partnership bolsters their approach, provides them with more legitimacy, and enhances the efficacy of their peacebuilding work.

➤ **Work with skilled and experienced women with strong ties to the community and local authorities**

In order for women to influence conflict prevention and resolution outcomes, navigate political sensitivity and build coalitions, they need to have a certain level of legitimacy within the community. Women mediators were able to build on the legitimacy they had already acquired. They were also able to adapt their work to the context and identify the best approach.

➤ **Constantly document work, results, impacts, learning processes**

The innovative strategies used by UNWOMEN to tackle challenges brought about by the crisis, have shown the importance of constant documentation of activities, results, impacts and learning processes in order to continuously improve the work being done and replicate such strategies in different contexts.

### Work with influential actors

### Build inclusive partnerships and remain neutral

### Work with skilled and experienced women

### Document the work done

## VI) QUOTES FROM MEDIATORS AND PARTNERS



*Ndikumana Leocadie*

**Ndikumana Leocadie**, Province Rutana, Municipality Rutana  
Profession: Works in the education system

“Even growing up, I have always been a partisan for peace. I inherited it from my father who fought for peace during the past conflicts. In 95, we managed to convince our community not to give in violence and remain peaceful [...] To be a good mediator you need to be polite, welcoming, impartial and neutral, tolerant and calm [...] Defending human rights can be a sensitive issue to work on and lead to threats but I am lucky the collaboration with authorities in my province are very good [...] Sometimes we are seen as being revolutionary women because we are pushing for a changes in traditions. Men are not used to seeing us being involved outside of the household. When women try to participate, they need to be smart and adapt their behavior in order not to offend men”.

**Kajambere Mélanie**, Mugongo Manga, 50  
Profession: Veterinary

“I believe in justice and I do not like when someone disrespect the rights of others [...] In our municipality, many youths have been arrested after the protests. We have advocated for their release and looked after them to make sure they would not be killed. Eventually we succeeded and tried to reconcile local authorities with these youths [...] Our main challenge is that some people think we are political opponents when we are not and simply want to protect human rights and peace [...] Women is the pillar of a family. She is the one who has to educate the children and also the husband not to bear weapons or use violence. Peace start in the households”.



*Kajambere Mélanie*



*Rose Nyandwi*

**Rose Nyandwi** Makamba Province, Makamba municipality  
Profession: Cultivatrice

«We are proud to show that women are capable of and to contribute to maintaining the well-being of communities and women in particular [...] We support local authorities, police, and judiciary system in their work to fight against VAWG and strengthen social cohesion [...] My pride would be if Burundi was in peace and everyone’s rights would be respected, women’s rights in particular [...] The challenge was for other partners to get to know us better and trust us. Some see us as minding issues that do not concern us [...] Participating to the network has built our capacities and enhanced our visibility and legitimacy. We now have better relations with local authorities”.

**CEJP, Gitega:** “Men listen to women mediators because they are respected as women leaders. Some people do not know how to express or solve their problems, mediators help them doing so. Now women who are victims of violence speak up more than before and men ask their opinion to women. They teach a new way of solving conflicts without asking for anything in exchange and by doing it for the sake of peace



*Partners from a religious organization in Rumonge province*



*Women mediators, women from CSO and the iudae in Cankuzo*

**Judge, Cankuzo:** “Women mediators do an incredibly important work by alerting on some conflicts. They are everywhere. They are well known within communities and people turn to them. Now people are more reluctant to violating women’s rights because they know there will be consequences. Now women work in synergy which scare men. Men are scared of them and of traditions changing, it will still take a while before there can be gender equality. But by talking about women’s rights and by them participating, things will eventually change.

**Member of Women’s National Forum, Rumongue:** “Before, we did not collaborate that much but since the mediators have been part of this network, they share information and collaborate more. Now we never act without one another. We always share information and decide together what strategy we should use to solve a conflict. [...] People turn to us because we do not ask for anything and understand women’s concerns better. Slowly our work contributes to changing men’s mentalities”.

**Giheta, social councillor:** “Less conflicts arrive at the municipality level thanks to them. Most conflicts are resolved within communities and only the more complex ones reach us. Women mediators have also been trained and know laws and principles unlike most Burundians who are uneducated. They spread this knowledge which contributes to preventing conflict from occurring again.”



*The project coordinator interviewing a partner from a political party*



## VII) CONCLUSION AND PERSPECTIVES

The Women Network for Peace and Dialogue has proven to be a perfect illustration of the findings of the Global Study demonstrating the critical role women play in conflict prevention and resolution. Thanks to their experience and credibility within the communities, women mediators have asserted themselves and become major actors in the same way as other traditional actors of conflict prevention and resolution.

They have acted at several levels. In terms of conflict resolution, they have successfully dealt with a large number of familial, social, political, land-related and VAWG conflicts in partnership with various actors, including local authorities, thereby fostering buy-in and lasting solutions. The community became more and more aware of their work and increasingly called upon on them to deal with conflicts. Members of the community praise and encourage their work, affirming the crucial results they are bringing for communities. Women have also been active in conflict prevention in particular through the organization of dialogues between political, security and civil society actors which contributed to diffusing tensions. They contribute to developing habits of dialogue and peaceful conflict resolution. Through their work, women are advancing women's rights and elevating their status within the community. They are changing the mentalities of both men and women by showing a positive example and paving the way for an enhanced participation of women in conflict prevention and resolution as well as in the public realm. Their level of attainment can feed the national processes for peace, in particular through the development of an agenda for women and for peace in general.

As the crisis in Burundi protracts, it is crucial to continue strengthening the capacities and to keep supporting women mediators and of their organizations so as to enable them to participate and lead in early warning and conflicts prevention mechanisms. The Women Network for Peace and Dialogue will continue operating in 2016 thanks to the funding of the Global Acceleration Instrument. In order to adapt their work to the current context, women mediators will emphasize their work on forming and sustaining local networks of partners involved in conflict prevention and resolution and facilitate dialogues at the hill, municipality and provincial levels between political, security and civil society actors thereby ensuring peaceful solutions to conflicts and placing women at the core of these conflict resolution mechanisms.