

## **Women, War and AIDS: The Friends Women's Association in Burundi**

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It is true what the women of Burundi say--they are not associated with the war, neither by taking stances in public decisions about the Hutu-Tutsi conflict, nor by joining the military. However, they assist passively. Worst of all, through their compliant silence, they have indirectly contributed to the preparation for wars that have killed their own children, their brothers and husbands, and their friends. And, thus, in turn they themselves suffer deeply the consequences of these passively supported decisions for war. Perhaps they suffer even more than those actively engaged in war because their inaction turns them into silent victims.

Again and again, the women of Burundi have experienced the trauma of the cyclic wars that occurred before their eyes, in 1965, 1972, 1978, and 1993. Now, many children and young girls are left alone in refugee camps or wandering through the streets. And the widows, too, live with un-cried tears for those they have lost.

All of these women have become traumatized, whether by one or many of the following consequences of war. In fear of their lives, they fled their homes. To flee is a traumatic experience by itself. Yet, while fleeing, many became the target of sexual violence by combatants or by others who take advantage of them. On the road that exiles traveled, they saw babies sucking at dead mothers but, overwhelmed by tragedy, they were unable to help. In their hiding places, they saw their sisters and mothers die during difficult baby deliveries. They were forced to throw their babies into rivers.

For months or years, women lived separated from their children and husbands, in different refugee camps. Those who lost their first husbands while young, in the wars of the 60s and 70s, have lost other husbands in the recent wars. Many are widows. Because they were afraid, they sought any male around to protect them during the night. Many women have had multiple marriages. Some women have turned into "sexual vagabonds," wandering from man to man, because no programs exist to help them think of alternative solutions. Their economic struggles add to their grief and despair.

In 2001, 11.3% of the adult population was HIV positive. Not surprisingly, the spread of the HIV/AIDS epidemic is extremely threatening to Burundi women. It is a sign of the hidden life crises that women will share with no one, because they live under a veil of fear, misinformation, and shame.

Thus, the program developed by *Friends Women's Association* is born from an awareness of the plight of women, an understanding of the consequences of war, and a yearning for peaceful and healthful ways of living. Through this women's group, we want to address these issues among ourselves. We want to develop women-to-women actions in villages and cities that begin to solve our problems. We need to create a setting where women can sponsor self-promoting activities and programs at all levels: spiritual/moral, physical, intellectual, and socio-economical. Through these programs, we will grow beyond our passive support of war; we will enhance our abilities to actively participate in the peace efforts.

Combating the HIV/AIDS is one way of building peace. This virus can be a more powerful killer than the gun, even though we don't hear the sound of its bombing. The doubly wounded people--those who have HIV in war-torn countries--need assistance and we don't want them to feel unwanted, rejected in their sorrow and fear of death; nor do we want to foster a spirit of revenge in them through our passive neglect of their needs. We are concerned for our women.