



Muslims for Progressive Values (MPV) **Stakeholder Submission to the Universal** **Periodic Review (UPR) of Burundi**

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About MPV and AICNDH

Founded in 2007 and headquartered in Los Angeles, California, MPV is a grassroots faith-based, human rights organization that advocates for inclusive and egalitarian narratives of Islam, gender equality and women's empowerment, the human rights of LGBTI demographics, freedom of expression, and freedom of and from religion or belief. MPV operationalizes its advocacy campaigns by creating inclusive spaces for critical analysis of religious discourses and scripture, engaging policy processes at the national and global levels, facilitating expression through the arts, and grassroots social activism. MPV acquired Department of Public Information affiliation with the UN in 2013.

The *Alliance des Imams du Corridor Nord pour le Developpement Humanitaire* or Alliance of Imams in the Northern Corridor for Humanitarian Development (AICNDH) is an entity which is comprised of 26 imams operating in northern Burundi.

Foreword

This report has been prepared by AICNDH in consultation with MPV in order to share qualitative and quantitative data based on statistics and the lived experiences of allied religious leaders in Burundi. The purpose of this report is to draw attention to the alarming effects radical ideologies bear on women's rights in the generally isolated Muslim communities of Burundi.

Executive Summary

Misogynistic interpretations of Islamic texts, namely the Hadiths and the Noble Qur'an, have caused Muslim women in Burundi to assume an inferior status in society and have deprived them of equal access to education, work, and all other socioeconomic, civil, and political aspects of life. This effect is exacerbated by the fact that Muslims in Burundi are marginalized from traditional communities, residing in isolated neighborhoods called "Swahili Quarters,"¹ which obviates their integration with the rest of society. This historical marginalization of the Muslim community in Burundi has driven it to withdraw from general activities and institutions such as the public education, which, as a result, has necessitated the development of alternative activities for Muslim communities, which are not necessarily egalitarian or conducive to the empowerment of women.

This isolation has made these Muslim communities highly susceptible to the infiltration of violent extremism, which is a known global epidemic. The rise of this extremism has negatively affected women's rights, correlating to a rise in gender discrimination as well as gender and sexual violence. The ideological dimension of this correlation cannot be overlooked as it poses a severe threat to the formation of a safe, equal, and equitable society and threatens to leave women and young girls behind.

It is therefore necessary for the government to combat these instances of gender violence and discrimination at the theological root by fostering partnerships with religious leaders and scholars with an inclusive worldview to the religious narratives that are informing human rights abuses.

¹ Original term «*quartiers swahili*»

Underlying Realities

The Effect of Radicalization on Human Rights

A significant number of imams promulgate misogynistic narratives of Islamic texts regarding the status of women, counseling their congregations to cease sending their daughters to school and to have their daughters marry at a precocious age as to preserve honor. Therefore, there is a need for Muslim communities in Burundi to be sensitized to the status of women from an Islamic and international human rights perspective.

International politics prioritizes preventing and denouncing violent extremism in the name of religion. The report which UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion and Belief Heiner Bielefeldt presented during the 26th session of the Human Rights Council in March of 2015 highlighted that “innumerable examples demonstrating that violence in the name of religion habitually have a dimension of being pronounced with respect to gender.” Instances of such violence include: acid attacks, so-called honor killings, female genital mutilation and cutting (FGM/C), child and forced marriage, and sexual violence.

Radicalization in Burundi

History demonstrates that Burundi, Rwanda, and the Democratic Republic of Congo are intimately bound together in matters of peace, security, and stability. Moreover, with regard to Islam, the three Muslim communities of these countries are characterized by enormous exchanges with the mobility of preachers and their faithful in the sub-regions.

Although the Muslim communities of the countries of the African Great Lakes are doing their best to combat the radicalization of young Muslims, joint actions between these communities have not yet been enacted.

Generally, the African Great Lakes region, and Burundi in particular, is not immune to global circumstances; indicators reveal a growing menace in the region. Trustworthy sources indicate the presence of radical movements in the forests of the Democratic Republic of Congo.^{2,3} Human trafficking of women and young girls to Arab countries is yet another byproduct of terrorism that is frequently seen in Burundi.^{4,5} Training in radical ideology occurs in groups, however some sources indicate that there are channels for recruiting young Burundian terrorists, which takes them to Congo Kinshasa through

²<http://www.radiookapi.net/2016/07/07/actualite/societe/grands-lacs-ouverture-goma-d-une-conference-sur-l-insécurité-et-le-terrorisme/>

³<http://grouperavenir.org/lutte-contre-le-terrorisme-et-linsecurite-dans-lest-de-la-rdc-et-dans-la-region-des-grands-lacs-evariste-boshab-preside-la-reunion-des-ministres-de-linterieur-de-la-cirgl/>

⁴<http://www.rfi.fr/afrique/20160618-burundi-burundaises-femmes-traffic-pays-golfe-oman-exploitation-sexuelle-travail>

⁵<http://www.imburi.info/index.php/actualites/4484-burundi-arrestation-des-sept-personnes-accusees-du-traffic-des-femmes-et-jeunes-filles-burundaises>

the ADF-NALU terrorist group and sends them to Somalia, Libya And Nigeria. Recent events in Rwanda, where recruiters have been caught red-handed, confirm this.^{6 7}As a result, terrorism itself has manifested itself both within Burundi and without, as in the case of the young Franco-Burundian who had stabbed three police officers in France in 2014.⁸

The effect of this worldwide prevalence of radical currents is undoubtedly compounded in the isolation of communities such as the so-called “Swahili Quarters,” which has led to an increase in cases of gender discrimination and violence against women. Hence, there is a need for initiatives to raise the status of women led by Muslim leaders.

The Role Religious Leaders Have to Play

Unfortunately, many imams and Islamic scholars generally have little knowledge about either human rights frameworks or sexual and reproductive health. As such the position of leaders on the implementation of women’s rights is very divided: the majority of imams and Sheikhs are hostile on the subject relating to women’s rights to access education, work, family planning, and equity. While others are indifferent or ignorant at best.

It is well known that imams have a broad influence in Muslim communities around the world, and their support is crucial in promoting gender equality and preventing violence against women and girls. It is also known that many imams are already advocating for gender parity and are themselves often ostracized, ridiculed, and sometimes threatened by more radical imams for their alternative and inclusive worldview. It is therefore crucial to empower women’s rights affirming imams by providing them with positive public support, as well as funding to assist them in their workshops, radio programming, and youth-leader conventions including programming which produces a multi-level and multi-formatted message against dominant extremist narratives.

⁶<http://www.bbc.com/afrique/region-37131363>

⁷<http://www.rfi.fr/afrique/20160126-rwanda-imam-soupconne-terrorisme-lien-le-groupe-ei-tue>

⁸http://www.arib.info/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=10564

Areas of Concern

- I. The erroneous, man-made interpretations of Islamic texts that, along with the Burundian culture which already assigns less importance to women, lead to gender disparity in access to education, access to work, and, consequently, all social, economical, and political aspects of society.
- II. The historical marginalization of Muslim communities in Burundi has led to their isolation, meaning that national efforts to ameliorate the status of women are not reaching those areas.
- III. A significant number of imams preserve a misogynistic interpretation of Islam for women, through their ministry.
- IV. There is a significant number of social obstacles and pressures preventing Muslim girls from accessing education, despite the fact that it is free in Burundi.
- V. A considerable number of Muslim women are deprived of their right to work. If and when these women do work, they are assigned more menial tasks.
- VI. Lack of regulation of forced marriages, child marriages, and polygamy, which deprive a girl of the freedom of choosing a spouse, obviate the socio-economic opportunities of women and pose significant problems for them.
- VII. Promiscuity in the Muslim communities, commonly known as "Swahili Quarters," poses a disadvantage to Muslims because it causes early and unwanted pregnancies. This situation is due to poor education in sexual and reproductive health, as a result of the position of Muslim leaders against contraception, and the prevalence of early and forced marriages, and cases of polygamy.⁹ These factors contribute to impede women's socio-economic autonomy. In addition, Muslim women are discouraged from seeing male doctors and, therefore, often cannot access basic health care, especially when they are pregnant.¹⁰
- VIII. It goes without saying that the fertility rate of women is extremely high (> 6.1 according to some surveys) forcing Muslim women to care only for children and the home. As a result, women are driven into misery and poverty, which strengthens her dependence on her husband's power.

⁹ <http://observers.france24.com/fr/20151028-burundi-mariages-precoces-forces-15-anscampagne-sfblsp-coutume-grossesse-pauvrete>

¹⁰ <http://allafrica.com/stories/201209110775.html>

Recommendations

We recommend to the government, which is the guarantor of the entire nation, including imams and Islamic scholars who are close with the population and the faithful, the following:

- I. Organize a conference of imams to allow for review of the interpretations of certain texts which justify violations of the rights of women and human rights in general.
- II. Contribute directly to education by constructing model schools to accommodate both girls and boys.
- III. Contribute directly to healthcare for women and children by building facilities for sexual and reproductive healthcare.
- IV. Bring all imams to understand the problematic effects of violence and discrimination based on gender.
- V. Provide instruction and resources to educate Burundian women of their rights so that they can engage in defending them.
- VI. Sensitize children and youth to the problematic effects posed by misogynistic or other harmful interpretations of religious texts.
- VII. Build the capacity of good-willed imams to integrate theological explanations of women's rights in their sermons.
- VIII. Build the capacity of imams to understand the importance of promoting responsible and human rights-affirming understandings of religion and sexuality in their communities.