



# REBUILDING THEIR BROKEN LIVES “Kwiyubaka”



# “We are still alive. We want to work. Our dignity is at stake.”

## The cry of Burundian Women refugees in Uganda

Since 2015, more than 350,000 Burundians have sought refuge in neighbouring countries. About 50,000 of them are refugee women and children who have fled to Uganda. This is the largest refugee crisis that Burundi has ever known. Burundian refugee women including women Human Rights Defenders are suffering in silence. Their spirits have been broken; and their homes and lives have been destroyed. A generation of Burundian children have been traumatized and now live shattered lives. They carry unhealed scars, trauma as well as complicated physical and psychological health issues that remain untreated.

In its 2017 report to the United Nations Human Rights Council and subsequently, in its 2018 and 2019 reports, the United Nations Commission of Inquiry on Burundi stated that it has reasonable grounds to believe that crimes against humanity have been committed since April 2015 and are still being committed in Burundi.<sup>1</sup> The crimes committed are serious human rights violations, including extrajudicial executions, arbitrary arrests and detentions, torture, sexual violence, cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or enforced disappearances, which several refugees have personally suffered from.

Thousands of refugee women have experienced sexual violence and/or gender-based violence (SGBV). Refugee women are more affected by violence than any other population sector and are at a higher risk of rape and other forms of sexual violence.

**Light4All** is a non-profit organisation working in Uganda with vulnerable communities; in particular refugee women, children and youth to improve their livelihoods, mental and physical well-being. On International Women's Day and with the support of **DefendDefenders**, **Light4All** launched a strategic advocacy framework to initiate action to protect and rebuild the lives of Burundian refugee women.

In March 2020, **Light4All** interviewed six Burundian refugee women in Kampala and Nakivale settlement camp to bear witness to their suffering and pay tribute to their courage and resilience. The interviews reveal the harrowing personal stories of Burundian refugee women who are the victims of unspeakable atrocities, sexual and gender-based violence; allegedly committed by state security forces or imbonerakure. Some of the women were gang raped and others tortured. Many have lost their husbands or do not know their whereabouts for at least five years.

After uprooting their families to flee persecution, the entire frame of reference of women refugees has changed. The social structure that they once knew is a thing of the past. Helplessly, they are watching their children succumb to alcoholism and drug use in camps. Fleeing for their lives came with huge financial loss and they long for dignified work to earn a living like they used to do. They no longer have access to services, community support, and resources in order to feel empowered.

*“We fled with our intelligence, skills, experience and abilities that we can put to good use in the community. We want to work. We want our dignity back.”*

Burundian refugee women and women human rights defender victims of SGBV need more robust and coordinated scalable economic and social support. Concerted and sustained attention by all agencies is necessary to ensure that there is a holistic approach to success for all refugee women. Livelihood and economic empowerment programmes can be entry points for SGBV victims to receive information, and access services for emotional and psychological support.

Our advocacy efforts are anchored in specific strategies and build on evidence demonstrating the positive impact of economic inclusion on women refugees and host communities. Improving livelihoods through economic inclusion will increase their self-reliance and resilience while reducing their vulnerability.

Access and control over economic resources will ensure that the basic needs of these women and their families are met. This would reduce dependency and negative coping mechanisms and it would contribute to the host countries' economies and security. We want to empower women to meet their needs in a safe, sustainable, and dignified manner. It is paramount that we prepare them for their future whether they return home, integrate in their host country, or resettle in a third country.

Improving their livelihoods, mental wellbeing and achieving economic inclusion cannot be done in isolation. It requires the engagement of a broad range of stakeholders, leveraging the added value and strategic position of everyone. We are looking for support including funds to provide psychosocial, economic and mental support to mend their broken lives.



**Chantal Mutamuriza**  
Executive Director  
Light For All

<sup>1</sup><https://www.ohchr.org/en/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=22016&LangID=E>.

# Meet the women who compel us to act

Their cry for restored dignity is our call



# BEATRICE KANYANGE

Beatrice Kanyange is 40 years old, separated and a mother of three children.

**A**s an opposition party member, Beatrice Kanyange was arrested and spent 8 days with her 15-month-old son in the Intelligence Service custody known as Documentation in French. The memory of her incarceration is still fresh and painful.

The Intelligence Service custody security officers would come at night and take detainees outside. Some detainees were raped, and others executed. Beatrice was one of those set to be raped. Because of panic and fear, she immediately started to menstruate. Instead of raping her, the security officers stabbed her inside her vagina with a bayonet and tore her vagina up to her anus.

A few days later, a local NGO helped her and her children to flee to Uganda. She has lived in the Nakivale settlement for five years.

Her younger son, who was with her in Intelligence Service custody suffers from PTSD - Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. He still has nightmares and anger attacks and at times, breaks things. He does not like men in uniforms and runs away whenever he sees them.

His little arm was twisted by security officers and he has a deformed shoulder and eyes from being beaten.

The rape left Beatrice totally broken. For almost 2 years, she suffered from fistula. She underwent required surgery twice. The first surgery was paid for by a benefactor but unfortunately failed. The second surgery was paid for by The Refugee Law Project and was successful. Also, she contracted hepatitis C, for which she has never received any treatment.

Life in the camp is extremely challenging for her. She continually has sharp pains and extreme fatigue. She is unable to wash her clothes, fetch water or do any other house chores. With little physical strength, she can only cook and feed her children.

*"My children are still too young to live without me, I need medical treatment".*

**Beatrice** needs physical and mental treatment for herself and her children. She fears she will die and leave them orphans. Unfortunately, expensive medication or medical

Back in 2015, **Beatrice** was arrested with her 15-month-old son by security officers and still finds it hard to talk about what happened to her without crying uncontrollably. She was brutally sexually assaulted with a bayonet by the security officers and still suffers the consequences. She feels like an outcast because her husband, friends and family have abandoned her because of the rape. Her husband remarried and left her trying to survive and educate her three children. With little physical strength and limited medical treatment, she only manages to cook and feed her children. She fears that she will die and leave her children orphaned.

Like most mothers, **Beatrice** would like her children to get an education and have a decent life. A well-equipped and staffed school would make a world of difference for every child in the Settlement.

She would also like to see a well-equipped and staffed medical centre to attend to the numerous untreated physical and mental health issues. The necessary medications and medical tests remain inaccessible to most women.

*\*Not her real name*

tests are unaffordable and inaccessible for her.

Her dream is to have her children get an education and a decent life. They are her future.

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# ALINE NIYONKURU

One night, Aline was attacked at home by Imbonerakure looking for her husband. When she said she did not know where he was, two men brutally raped her leaving her for dead. A few days later, with her wounds, few belongings, a little money received from her brother, she sought asylum in Uganda with her husband and their two children. They have been living in the Nakivale settlement camp for five years.

Aline would like to see a school built in the settlement camp so that her children would no longer be chased from school because their parents are unable to pay for school fees regularly. Education is her children's future.

***"We want to be treated with dignity and compassion".***

Aline has never been treated for the physical consequences of her sexual assault and receives a poor response from health and social workers who have accused her of lying about her rape.

***"When we say that we were raped, they do not believe us. How can you prove you were raped after so many months?"***

She strongly requests that appropriate physical and mental health care be provided, and that health and social workers be trained to handle them with dignity and compassion to avoid adding more despair and emotional pain in their already broken lives.

*\*Not her real name*

**A**s an accountant for a commune that was supporting Imbonerakure<sup>2</sup> training in Kiriba Ondes, Aline Niyonkuru's husband knew too much. He was ordered to sign cheques which he refused to do and it cost him. He was stalked and warned to leave or be arrested and jailed.

Four days later, Aline heard a group of people banging on her door late at night. When she refused to open, they threatened to breakdown the door. Out of fear, she opened the door and they rushed in searching the whole house for her husband. When they shouted at her asking where he was, she said she did not know. One of them grabbed her saying that they will leave after killing all of them. He tore her pyjamas, and then raped her. Another man came in and took his turn to rape her. She felt like it was over, she felt like her life was finished. One of men said "the little woman is dead...let's go". When they left, Aline laid there lifeless.

After that painful and frightening night, Aline sought asylum in Uganda with her husband and their two children. They have been living in the Nakivale settlement camp for five years. It was hard for Aline to accept her new reality. They rented a muddy one room for the four of them for 25,000



Aline Niyonkuru is 40 years old, married with two children.

Ugx (\$7) using their meagre savings.

***"Misunderstood by her husband and poorly treated by health and social workers."***

She started feeling emotionally traumatized and continued to experience abdominal pains as a result of the gang rape. As if it was not enough, serious issues arose with her husband. She was unable to have sexual intercourse and he would not understand her.

***"He would come home drunk and start arguing that I did not bear enough children. And yet he knew what had happened to me and that it was not my fault. I would beg him but to keep my family together I gave in and had sexual intercourse with him".***

She forced herself to sleep with him out of fear of losing him. After few months, her menstruations stopped, which became one more source of psychological trauma from her husband who insulted her repeatedly, especially when he was drunk, for not bearing more children.

Her children started to complain about eating the same food (maize meal) everyday and started crying for nice food. Her husband finally got a job fetching water for other refugees. With the little payment, he can pay rent as well as school fees for the children.

Unfortunately, Aline was never treated for the physical or mental trauma following her sexual assault. She receives very poor care from health and social workers. She waits for things to change.

<sup>2</sup>The Imbonerakure (the Kirundi word for "those that see far") is the youth wing of the Burundi ruling party, the National Council for the Defence of Democracy-Forces for Defence and Democracy (Conseil national pour la défense de la démocratie-Forces de défense et de la démocratie - CNDD-FDD). Imbonerakure members are accused of beatings and injuries, extrajudicial killings, banditry as well as political killings

# MARIE- CLAUDETTE KWIZERA

Marie-Claudette was a married mother of two who worked for the National Telecommunications Company (ONATEL). She was passionate about Human Rights from an early age. She joined Ligue Iteka (the oldest and biggest Human Rights organization in Burundi) while she was still in secondary school and was elected its treasurer on May 24, 2014.

Later, as the treasurer of Ligue Burundaise des Droits de l'Homme ITEKA, Marie-Claudette was targeted for her work of defending Human Rights. She was eventually arrested and taken to an unknown location to be executed. She is presumed dead.

While Marie-Claudette is no longer with us, repairing the lives of refugee women and women rights defenders, particularly victims of violence is one way of honoring her life and work. There is an urgent need for programs and mental health care for women and children to deal with these life-altering experiences.

*\*Not her real name*

## Marie-Claudette KWIZERA

It was around 6pm local time (GMT-2) in Bujumbura on December 10, 2015 (International Human Rights Day), that Marie-Claudette KWIZERA was kidnapped and driven away in a vehicle thought to belong to the National Intelligence Service (SNR). The vehicle with tinted windows took her to an unknown location, leaving her colleagues and family expecting the worse.

Two days later, Dieudonné BIGIRIMANA a.k.a "Tyson", an officer from the National Intelligence Service (SNR) told her family that she was being detained at the SNR office and could be released if the family paid 3,500,000 BIF (about 2,000 US dollars) as ransom. The ransom was paid but she was not released. Marie-Claudette's family then filed a complaint with the authorities. On January 4, 2016, the SNR officer was arrested and later released.

In its report released on September 13, 2019; the UN Commission of Inquiry on Burundi said that there were reasonable grounds to fear that Marie-Claudette KWIZERA, Treasurer of Ligue ITEKA, was indeed a victim of enforced disappearance.

According to information received by the Commission, Marie-Claudette was taken to one of the Intelligence Service premises where she was detained for a few days before being transferred to an unknown place where she was presumed executed. Burundian authorities have remained silent over the case. The spokesperson for the police at the time, Pierre NKURIKIYE said that their side of investigation was closed, and the case has handed over to the prosecutor.

On January 22, 2016, the International Federation of Human Rights (FIDH) contacted the UN Working Group on Enforced and Involuntary Disappearances about Marie-Claudette's case. A notice was sent by the Working Group to the Government of Burundi. No answer has been received.

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# CHARLOTTE UMUGWANEZA

Charlotte Umugwaneza's senseless and tragic death in 2015 created an incredible void in the lives of her family, her friends and her community. Her Mother, Agnes Mpinganzima remembers Charlotte as a brave, courageous, and healthy daughter who abhorred botched work and bad manners. Charlotte's husband remembers her as a loving wife and caring mother for their three children. Her community remembers her for her commitment to justice and good governance.

Had Charlotte lived, she would not be sitting idle. She would be fighting for the justice and wellbeing for hundreds of brave women living in refugee settlements in neighboring countries. We honor Charlotte's life by asking for safe communities to be created to help repair the lives of women like her who were sexually assaulted and unlike her can escape death.

**C**harlotte Umugwaneza was born on October 20, 1969, one of eight children born to Rwandan parents who had sought refuge in Burundi in 1959. She loved studying and became a teacher in primary schools. She married in 1993 and was the mother of three beautiful children.

**Charlotte's** character pushed her to join the local anti-corruption organization, OLUCOME which fought for good governance in Burundi. When the MSD<sup>3</sup> political party was founded, Charlotte stepped away from her duties at OLUCOME and became a militant with the newly created party. Her commitment and ideas within the party were greatly appreciated. She rapidly climbed the ladder to the position of Vice Chair representing the Cibitoke urban zone.

## Her Fate

In 2015, MSD party members mobilized protesters for peaceful demonstrations against the third mandate of the President of the Republic. MSD militants were targeted during the crackdown by security forces and the ruling party's youth wing "imbonerakure". To be safe, Charlotte and her children moved to Rwanda for few months and her husband stayed behind to work. Later, thinking that the security situation had improved, Charlotte and her children came back home. They would soon regret this decision because **Charlotte** started to receive death threats. When the local office of MSD party in Cibitoke was attacked by the imbonerakure, the family made plans to leave Cibitoke for neighboring Ngagara.

## Charlotte Umugwaneza

On October 16, 2015 around 10:00 AM, **Charlotte** went to "COTEBU Market Park" to rent a utility vehicle in order to relocate her family from Cibitoke to Ngagara. Witnesses reported that upon her arrival at the park, **Charlotte** was arrested by intelligence service agents and forcibly shoved into a pickup truck for an unknown destination. Despite an early alert given through social media platforms shortly after the kidnapping, her family remained in the dark about **Charlotte's** whereabouts.

On October 17, 2015, a picture of the lifeless body of a woman was widely shared via the same social media platforms. A partially naked female body laid among the pebbles, her swollen face turned towards the sky and her uncovered belly showed marks of violence. There were reasonable grounds to believe that **Charlotte** was raped before being killed. The picture quickly spread, and relatives recognized the woman's body. It was **Charlotte**. Her family plunged into disbelief and is still traumatized today.

**Charlotte Umugwaneza** will not be forgotten.

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<sup>3</sup>Mouvement pour la Solidarite et la Democratie.

# MARIE-GORETH NIYONZIMA

Marie-Goreth Niyonzima is a 50 years old mother of five children. She is a living example of how women political leaders are affected by bad governance and human rights violations prevailing in Burundi. Before her exile, Marie-Goreth was a Member of Parliament. Currently, she is an urban refugee in Kampala.

*“Certainly, we have many problems here, but we fled with our intellect, our hands and our health. It does not mean that because we are refugees, we are unable to empower ourselves and become successful. Unfortunately, we cannot reach far because we are hindered by limited resources”.*

Marie-Goreth's biggest dream is to work and be economically self-reliant. She believes that access to startup capital would make a big difference in the lives of refugees. They would be able to send their children to school, pay for health care needs and share their talents and skills with others.

Marie-Goreth Niyonzima

**M**arie-Goreth Niyonzima was elected a Member of Parliament in the 2005 General Election. She was on the CNDD-FDD list in Ruyigi constituency (East of Burundi). Her political engagement and rise were backed by the provision of Arusha Peace and Reconciliation Agreement,<sup>4</sup> which stipulated that at least 30% of members of decision-making institutions must be women.

Two years later, the former rebel movement, which became the ruling party, underwent a serious leadership change triggering a division within it. Party militants who protested against 'unlawful decisions' were expelled from the party. In 2008, the decision to exclude twenty MPs from Parliament was made by the Supreme Court. Marie-Goreth was one of them.

*“Police officers broke into our home to arrest me. I saw them coming and managed to escape before they apprehended me. My children remained in the house terrified. The police officers told them to go to their respective bedrooms where they were searched and beaten”.*

The harassment went on and their belongings were seized. This was not the first time. In 2012, Marie-Goreth was afraid she would be imprisoned, kidnapped or killed. The threats became unbearable for her because five of the twenty-two excluded MPs were already incarcerated. To be safe, Marie-Goreth chose to leave the country with her five children.

Leaving everything behind and wondering how she would feed five children without an income became a constant source of intense stress for Marie Goreth. As she puts it:

*“You look at the life you once had before and the life you have now and wonder how you are going to continue to feed your children? How are they going to go to school? We left with nothing. What will we do when our clothes and shoes wear out?”*

The move to Uganda has been particularly hard for her children. They had to get used to little food and a tiny one-

bedroom house and they are starting to have health issues.

When her daughter started to menstruate, her periods never stopped. She kept bleeding until she had to be hospitalized which proved difficult without money. She was eventually discharged from the hospital because Marie-Goreth could afford neither the medical bills nor the medication.

At home, her daughter started to lose weight. Even a medical specialist could not find anything wrong. Marie-Goreth started to wonder if her daughter had been raped during the police search at home. She tried her best to seek the truth from her daughter, but she said that she was only beaten. Even now, Marie-Goreth still has doubts that weigh heavy on her mind and heart. Her daughter has lost a degree of hearing as well. With no money for hearing aids, it is hard for her daughter to follow lessons at school.

Everyday, Marie-Goreth hustles to earn enough money to put food on the table. Some days, she can afford to provide one meal for the day but young children under 18 need to eat at least twice a day. Sadly, she cannot afford education for her children and health care. Despite her ordeals, Marie-Goreth is striving to be resilient.

<sup>4</sup>The Arusha Agreement was signed on August 28th, 2000 by Burundi crisis stakeholders in Arusha (Tanzania). It enshrines power sharing between the two main ethnic groups in Burundi.



# FRANCINE KAMIKAZI

**Francine Kamikazi** is 40 years old, married and mother of four children. She fled her home in Burundi because her life was in danger and she eventually settled in Bombo town, in the outskirts of Kampala in Uganda. Her husband remained in Burundi with their four children until it was safe for her children to join her in Uganda.

Fighting a chronic disease in the precarious life of a refugee has become a nightmare for Francine. Without income, she quickly exhausted her savings. The mild diabetes she once suffered has become acute. While she was able to control her illness back home with an appropriate diet, she can no longer afford to buy the recommended fresh vegetables and fruits she needs. Unfortunately, the medical assistance provided by UNHCR does not cover expensive medical exams and medicine and Francine struggles to obtain her daily dose of insulin

***"My health is deteriorating. Thinking about how my illness is impacting my life and that I might die leaving behind my children alone at such a young age, has taken a heavy toll on me. The effects of diabetes are real. I recently had eye surgery due to diabetes. Sometimes my legs swell, and I am told that it might lead to amputation in the future".***

Francine believes that financial support would benefit refugees in Uganda. It would allow them to start a business and earn a living to pay school fees for their children and health care expenses and live a decent life. Refugees with chronic illnesses are particularly at risk. If they do not work, they cannot pay for expensive medication and exams that they need.

*\*Not her real name*

**B**ack in Burundi, Francine Kamikazi owned a restaurant in Cibitoke. When the campaign against the third illegal mandate of President Peter Nkurunziza was launched, Cibitoke was among the most active. As a businesswoman, she served food to all her clients including protestors. Selling food to protestors against the third mandate almost cost Francine her life. The Intelligence Service spies were everywhere in Cibitoke. Luckily, she got word that her safety and security were threatened, and she was advised to flee the country immediately.

Francine Kamikazi

A few days later, police officers and Intelligence Service agents came to her home to arrest her. Francine hid in a compound with other people. Police officers, under the command of anti-riot brigade Chief Colonel Désiré UWAMAHORO, entered the compound and threatened to kill everyone if they did not reveal Francine's whereabouts. Since the Security agents did not know who Francine was apart from her name, they were told that she had gone to the market. When they left, she jumped over a backyard fence using a ladder and fled.

Francine had no other option than to leave the country. This was a very risky move because her picture was widely displayed across Burundian border points. A kind-hearted person from the ruling party's youth wing "Imbonerakure" came to her rescue. He told her to wear a hijab when he escorted her. He became her spokesperson at numerous roadblocks and told policemen that he was taking his sister to school in Uganda. After she fled to Uganda leaving her husband and her four children behind in Burundi, Francine spent 6 months in hiding because she feared that every police truck that went by was looking for her.

Francine was relieved when her children joined her in Uganda, but life has been tough. With no income coming in, she can no longer pay school fees for her children. Since she is unable to rent a house, she and her children share a house with 22 other people. The house is rented by a benefactor. The lack of a proper diet combined with mental stress has aggravated her diabetes.

Francine is very thankful to the Government of Uganda for welcoming and protecting her family. To overcome her ordeal, she wants to work and earn an income to take care of herself and her children and give back to her community.

# INÈS IRADUKUNDA

**Inès Iradukunda** is 36 years old and a mother of two children. Her husband was abducted five years ago and since then she has no news of his whereabouts.

Inès would like to see a multi purposed community center built for refugee women to learn new skills, like sewing, tailoring etc to help support their families. Refugee women have the intelligence and strength to work, to become self-reliant and support one another.

*“When we encourage each other, we realize that we are capable of starting and building something new and together we uplift each other”.*

The community center would house much needed medical care - people are dying due to inadequate healthcare and shortages of medicines. It could also house vocational schools. Inès' dream is to see all refugee children go to school and secure their future.

*“After all the trauma, we are still alive and we want to work. That is our dignity.”*

It was painful to see her children sitting idle at home. Her children were constantly asking how they were going live.

Inès Iradukunda

**Inès Iradukunda** and her family lived in Cibitoke in Bujumbura, one of the epicenters of the protests against the third illegal mandate of Pierre Nkurunziza. Her family's safety was seriously threatened by the role her husband played in the anti-third mandate demonstrations. Police and Intelligence agents eventually hunted her husband down and abducted him. Five years later, she still does not know where he is.

After her husband's disappearance, Inès and her children fled and settled in the Nakivale settlement camp. Her first days were unsettling. She was in a foreign country with no income and life was extremely hard. They lived in a tiny cramped room with no utilities and school was not available for her children. It was painful to see her children sitting idle at home. Her children were constantly asking how they were going to manage. Some days they would eat and other days they would not. They saw no way out.

Even though she has faced immense challenges, Inès refused to be disheartened about her future. Together with other women and young men, she went outside the refugee camp and rented a farmland to grow maize and beans. With the small income she earned from the crops, she was able to send one of her children back to school. Later, they began to make bricks to build houses for one another.

Inès came to the settlement camp in 2015 and has had enough time to accept her circumstances and move on.

*“After 2 years, I thought of starting an association to help other women to accept their ordeal and new living conditions in Nakivale refugee settlement.”*

**“Restore Dignity”** is a Community Based Organisation (CBO) that she cofounded in October 2017 that Light4All is working with to support SGBV victims. They offer social support including counselling to victims of SGBV and vulnerable members of the community, micro loans, savings and farm together. They have set up a small-scale business - a shop that sells food and other items.

# Eulalie NIBIZI

Eulalie Nibizi was born on May 24, 1960 and is one of the leading women Human Rights Defenders in Burundi. Although a young widow raising her four children alone, she did not stop defending workers' rights, especially teachers' rights and "education for all" through a trade union she was leading until her exile. She truly is a symbol of Resistance and Resilience.

As a Chair of STEB (Syndicat des Travailleurs de l'Enseignement du Burundi), a Teachers' Trade Union, Eulalie was also Vice-President of COSYBU (Confédération des Syndicats du Burundi), an umbrella of trade unions in Burundi. She is also the co-founder of the Burundi Human Rights Defenders Coalition and many more national and international networks.

Her work of challenging injustices towards teachers at the policy level cost her dearly. Although she was arrested multiple times in the 90s and early 2000s, this did not stop her dedication to defending Human Rights in Burundi.

***"May we live to see a day when a refugee is no longer saying 'please help me' but rather say, 'I am able to contribute'. That way, the host country would gain. If UNHCR really wants to carry out efficient and sustainable work, it should help refugees become financially independent and support others."***

Eulalie requests UNHCR and other humanitarian institutions to support refugees to become self-reliant, and self-sufficient through startup capital so that they can take care of themselves, integrate in their host country and stop begging for food and healthcare.

Like many Human Rights Defenders (HRDs), Eulalie Nibizi was a member of the popular campaign "Halte au 3ème Mandat", launched in 2015 by organizations opposed to the third illegal mandate of Pierre Nkurunziza. It was a movement repressed in blood forcing the majority of Human Rights Defenders into exile.

In the aftermath of a failed military coup attempt to oust the late President on May 13, 2015, the Burundi regime labelled all human rights activists (HRD) as accomplices linked to the coup. State Security Agents began to hunt down HRDs, opposition members and those who were perceived as being involved.

When Eulalie was on a work trip in Europe, she received reliable information that she was on the list of people to be arrested. She was not afraid of being arrested but this time things had changed. She knew that any woman criticizing the government faced the possibility of being kidnapped, tortured, raped and subjected to all sorts of atrocities



Eulalie NIBIZI

before dying an agonizing death. Leaving her nine children behind in Burundi, Eulalie sought asylum in Uganda. She knew she would be useful outside her country if she is alive.

Like all refugees, Eulalie was not prepared to flee her native country, leaving behind loved ones, belongings, and her career. How could she move from fear, stress and trauma to radical acceptance and livelihood? Severe trauma and stress started to build up not knowing how she would handle her new status or take care of her children. Even in exile, she continued to receive threats and intimidation from the Burundi ruling party members and Intelligence Service agents. As a result, she started to experience signs of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). She lost sleep completely and developed high blood pressure.

"My heart was full of sorrow", she recalls. Having spent all her life defending "education for all" and knowing her children were on the verge of being out of school, her situation was hard to swallow. She felt helpless. Hearing this, trade unions all over the world banded together and collected money to pay for her children's school fees for a year and half.

After a few months, Eulalie started to meet other Human Rights Defenders who like her sought asylum in Uganda. They accepted their fate and with the support of DefendDefenders (a network of Human Rights Defenders), they opened an office in Kampala for the Burundian Coalition, CBDDH (Coalition Burundaise des Défenseurs des Droits Humains), for which she became the Executive Director. Under her leadership, CBDDH continues to conduct advocacy activities in Burundi remotely as well as support Human Rights Defenders, particularly those in exile.

Thanks to Defend Defenders, Eulalie has an income. Her life changed as soon as she started working and knew that she was under Defend Defender's protection.

"Uwugukingiyе ubuzima aba akurinze y'amaganya yo mwijoro risa n'umurango" – when someone is protecting your life, they are saving you from sorrowful sleepless nights, where you no longer see the difference between night and day. Receiving employment as a support makes me feel empowered. I am not only contributing; I have an income as well."

Together with other refugees, Eulalie has set up a saving and loan association to help others and start income generating activities.

Not all women Human Rights Defenders and women refugees are lucky to obtain such support. Eulalie adamantly advocates for women economic empowerment. As she puts it: "As a pillar of the society, when a woman is broken, the whole social fabric is broken".

Women need financial support in the form of start-up capital. As she puts it: "Women may have great ideas but fail to implement them for lack funds. Women who are victims of SGBV should be prioritized. They can accomplish so much if they are alive. It does not honor UNHCR to leave refugee women abandoned and untreated while their lives worsen. We cannot let their mental health and bodies deteriorate."

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to all sorts of atrocities  
before dying an  
agonizing death.

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