

Cycles of War, Ripples of Peace

By Rachel Fretz

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Walk across this dusty courtyard. Look up at the large sign with blue and red letters: Friends Women's Association (FWA). Enter the whitewashed, cement-block building and walk into the waiting room of the FWA clinic. As you sit down on a folding chair, you notice a frail, thin woman leaning against the wall, her sleeping baby tied in a cloth on her back. Sitting on the floor near the one small window, another much older woman dozes, her head dropped on her chest. To the right, a door opens into the clinic office where a nurse talks kindly to a crying child and her mother. To the left, the door stands ajar to a bare room where a man is measuring brown, dried beans into a folded newspaper and hands them to a hungry-looking young girl, who smiles and says "thank you." This center, run by the Burundi Friends Women's Association and staffed by one nurse, an assistant/accountant, and a receptionist/guard, offers hope for a more peaceful life in the war-torn remains of Kamenge, a poverty-stricken section of Bujumbura, the capital city of Burundi. Especially those war victims of AIDS/HIV turn to this clinic for counseling, pain relief, and/or a small gift of beans.

Burundi, the country just south of Rwanda in Central Africa (see map), has been ravaged by war for more than three decades. The two primary ethnic groups, the Tutsi and Hutu, have been killing each other, at first in response to colonial repression and later through the reflexive actions that perpetuate cycles of violence. Newspapers in the West broadly announced the genocide that took place ten years ago in neighboring Rwanda, when the Hutu majority indiscriminately slaughtered Tutsis by the hundreds of thousands. But the mirror image of that carnage in Burundi remains largely unknown.

The people of Burundi have experienced just as much dislocation and trauma as Rwandans. For example, there is hardly a Hutu family in Burundi that has not suffered the "disappearance" of family members and loved ones. After the 1972 killing of most Hutu leaders and educated persons, many parents have been afraid to let their children pursue professional careers or become visible through education or church leadership. As a result, since most of the 30,000 Quakers in Burundi are Hutu, the Friends Yearly Meeting was left leaderless for a time. More recently, during the 1993 war, both Hutu and Tutsi were killed. Repeatedly, both Hutu and Tutsi civilians were tortured and slain by angry soldiers and/or by enraged rebels from the opposing groups. All Burundians continue to suffer the aftermath of war.

Fortunately, a ceasefire has been declared, United Nations peacekeepers are in the country, and the government of Burundi now includes both Tutsi and Hutu. However, the painful memories, the loss of loved ones, and the deep personal suffering and trauma still linger to haunt people's lives.

Burundi Women, Caught as Silent Partners in War

In the cycle of war and violence, Burundi women have been silent. They say, and it is true, that they have not fed the war, either by taking stances in public decisions about the Hutu-Tutsi conflict, or by joining the military. But through their compliant silence, they indirectly contributed to the wars that killed their own children, their brothers, and husbands, and friends. In turn, they suffer deeply because their inaction shapes them into silent victims. Again and again, women have bowed to the cyclic wars occurring around them in 1965, 1972, 1978, 1988, and 1993. Now many children, young girls, and widows wander alone in refugee camps or through the city streets. The married women too live with un-cried tears for those they have lost.

All of these women live with trauma, whether by one or several of the following consequences of war. They fled their homes. While escaping, many became the target of sexual violence. On the road, traveling with other exiles, they saw babies sucking dead mothers, but overwhelmed by tragedy they couldn't help. In their hiding places, they saw their sisters and mothers die during difficult childbirths. Some were forced to throw their babies into rivers, in desperate hopes that they would cross to a safer place on the other side. For months or years, women lived alone, separated from their children and husbands in different refugee camps, not knowing whether the rest of the family was injured, dead, or alive.

To survive in this patriarchal society, women often must turn to men and yield to their commands and desires. As a result, these already grief-stricken women often continue to suffer the more hidden traumas of war: through sexual abuse and rape; through diseases from multiple sexual partners as one after another spouse died or fled; through poverty and its consequential ill health; and from diseases brought on by repressed fear and rage.

Listen to the life story that one Burundi woman tells. An older woman, a mother who suffers from AIDS, expresses her worries. "I feel bad. I've lost weight. All of my body aches and I suspect why. There was this terrible time during the war, when my son was captured by soldiers and taken to jail. I felt there was no way I could live without him. So I tried every scheme I knew to have him back with me. He was released, but I paid with my life. I knew that otherwise he was going to die, so I did it.-Look at me. I used to weigh 105 kg (231 lbs), but now I weigh 54 kg now. I have six children at home. The first girl is in eighth grade, the second is in sixth grade. We live in a destroyed house, that has no walls, no doors.-My greatest problem is that I'm going to die because I tried to save my son. But my girls won't survive after my death. I hope they don't get AIDS."

Though Burundi life stories contain different details, they point to a common theme of grief, worry, and lingering pain. Educated or illiterate, well-fed or starving, dressed in bright cloth or in tatters, all women-both Hutu and Tutsi-have experienced the repeated loss of sons, brothers, and husbands, their anchors in a patriarchal world. And they have lost their allies too, their daughters, sisters, and mothers. The silent grief has burrowed itself into their bodies and hearts, trapped there by the necessity to repress their pain, anguish, and frustration, to stifle their cries of fear and rage. War destroys all, especially in this decades-long conflict that has turned former friends against each other. The

traditional networks of neighboring women, those ties that helped them in difficult moments over the years, have been shattered by suspicion and bitterness. Thus, many women have no voice, no means of sharing and unburdening themselves of their trauma. Many stories remain untold.

American Quakers Respond to African Friends

The African Great Lakes Initiative (AGLI) of Friends Peace Teams is a direct response to the cries for help in Central Africa. In particular, AGLI projects began in answer to requests from Friends in the African Great Lakes region (Uganda, Rwanda, Burundi, Eastern Congo, Tanzania, and Kenya). David Zarembka, the coordinator of AGLI, first traveled with other American Quakers through this region, in January 1999, simply to find out if African Friends needed any assistance in the face of, and in the aftermath of, war. The answer was: Please help. African Friends felt as if the rest of the world—including Quakers from other countries—had forgotten them. They pleaded for assistance in dealing with the effects of war, and in learning methods of peace-making. Thus, AGLI initiated several projects aimed at healing trauma and building a world based on equality and peace. AGLI has conducted "Alternatives to Violence" (AVP) workshops, and also has initiated community trauma healing workshops, called "Healing and Rebuilding our Communities." And, AGLI is now sponsoring the "Friends Women's Association" (FWA) in Burundi.

For several years now, the Friends of Santa Monica Meeting have supported—actively and directly—this AGLI work, in particular the yearnings for peace among Burundi women. The plight of women is taking a new turn, in part through the prayers and financial contributions of Santa Monica Meeting. In particular SMM Friends have supported—both spiritually and financially—my leadings to work with African women. And so, through my work, SMM has helped start two women's projects in Burundi.

First, in 2001, I traveled to Burundi to do healing workshops with women. Drawing on several resources—my training in various forms of energy healing in California, my academic research on African storytelling, and my years of living closely with the women of several African villages—I developed a healing process that combines healing touch activities with storytelling about traumatic experiences. Through telling stories and doing silent touch and meditation, women begin to transform their repressed memories. And the Burundi women still continue to meet in "Circles of Sisters" that I began. In these volunteer, non-funded workshops held in Friends churches, women gather to share what they're learning about creating peace. They do healing touch, they tell personal stories, they offer basic nutritional and health lessons, and they talk. Always they eat a simple meal together. In these everyday womanly ways, they encourage each other to continue healing their trauma and to envision a Burundi at peace.

Second, in 2002, I initiated a new AGLI pilot program: "A Reciprocal Ministry." Santa Monica Friends became the first meeting to explore this exchange between a Burundi Friend and an American Friend. The program aims to create deep bonds between Burundi and American Friends, as both participate in each other's cultural and spiritual

lives. (See "Reciprocal Ministry" in Friends Bulletin, January 2003.) Once again, SMM meeting supported my leading to work with women. We invited Cassilde Ntamamiro, a Burundi nurse and Friend, to be the guest of Santa Monica Meeting, to live among us, and to share in the daily activities of our lives. She also visited AIDS clinics and audited an ethnography course I taught at UCLA. After her six weeks here, I returned with her to Burundi where I gave a talk at a national conference on trauma as well as offered workshops on healing touch for Quaker women. But most significantly, I witnessed the birth of an innovative women's project: "The Friends Women's Association."

Burundi Women Speak and Act for Peace

What is now the Friends Women's Association grew out of the vision of a group of women from the Evangelical Friends Church in Burundi. In the summer of 2002, when Cassilde and I returned to Burundi, we were invited to participate in their meetings. As these Friends discussed what to do about AIDS/HIV crisis, they not only voiced the yearning of Burundi women for peaceful and healthful ways of living, but they also united-in an animated and Spirit-led meeting-to address immediately these effects of war on women. They talked openly about the AIDS/HIV epidemic in the Great Lakes region. They expressed their anguish about the incessant war and social unrest that has aggravated the situation. They worried that returning soldiers might contribute to the spread of the disease. And they wondered how to mend the disrupted family and other social networks that used to provide support for the ill. Yes, they said, being infected carries social stigma. Women feel alone and ashamed as they deal with the disease.

That very weekend, in a lively and miraculously inspired meeting, these Burundi Friends formed a committee to deal with war-ravaged women, particularly those affected with AIDS/HIV. Subsequently, in the fall of 2002, the Friends Women's Association was formed with a governing board of eight women. The association has the specific purpose of empowering women. It intends to break the silence around AIDS/HIV and other war traumas, to create a space for support and healing, and to form those bond that nurture peace. The FWA has two primary activities on which it focuses its resources: treatment of HIV/AIDS and health education workshops, both linked to discussion of peace. The health clinic was established in September 2003 in Kamenge, a poor area in Bujumbura. The clinic is open every weekday morning and serves women and men of all ages with a wide range of illnesses and injuries, not just AIDS/HIV. The clinic staff includes the nurse, an accountant who also works as an assistant counselor, and a young man who functions as receptionist and guard. Currently, Cassilde Ntamamiro works in the clinic and leads some workshops there, with the assistance of other women from FWA. The clinic provides AIDS/HIV education, counseling, and treatment of symptoms, and encourages and provides testing. Because the clinic population is very poor and suffers from trauma and a wide range of illnesses, the staff spends much time in counseling.

In addition to helping these women who arrive at the clinic, FWA expands its outreach through workshops in other parts of the city and throughout the countryside. Members of FWA have conducted educational workshops for women in Gitega, Mutaho, Rohero,

Nyarurambi, Buterere, and Kabuguzo. In these sessions, women gather in a circle to share their hopes, fears, experiences, and questions about AIDS/HIV. The work of transformation begins by trusting each other as they tell their stories about friends, family, and neighbors whose lives have become painful and secretive due to this illness. Then the women are invited to ask questions: Where does AIDS/HIV come from? What are its symptoms? What can we do about this illness? Sometimes a woman in the group confides that she is HIV positive.

FWA is already achieving re-markable results and is having a profound effect on people's lives. Women say they feel more hopeful about preparing their children for life in postwar Burundi. They are reclaiming their traditional roles as inspired older sisters, mothers, grandmothers and elders who teach the next generation of women about sexuality and women's responsibilities. With more open talk about AIDS/HIV, some women say they are allaying their fears, both about getting AIDS and also about providing care for victims of this disease. FWA envisions a reunited community of Hutu and Tutsi women, living side by side and working together to create a healthful and peaceful country.

Western Friends and African Friends: a Call-and-Response Song of Peace

The Friends Women's Associations wants to expand its work. Clearly these FWA women have heard the call to heal and educate others. They answer that call every day, moment by moment, through one small gesture or word at a time. And thus they join the increasing number of Burundians who are transforming the decades-long cycle of violence into an ever-widening ripple of peace. Led by the Spirit, FWA plans to increase the staff in order to keep the clinic open more hours each day and to treat many more people. The board also has decided to add many more health education workshops this coming year, to be conducted through-out the countryside. To do so, FWA must train additional women as caregivers and counselors for the clinic, as well as train leaders for the workshops in the countryside.

In keeping with this call, AGLI of Friends Peace Teams sends out an invitation to you to enter this dialogue of peace between American and African Friends. How? You can pray. You can send funds. You can contribute your expertise. FWA is seeking at least \$27,000 to finance its work and planned expansion during the twelve-month period beginning in September 2004. Thus far, in response to Cassilde Ntamamiro's recent tour on the United States, AGLI has received several thousand dollars. Though AGLI is abundantly grateful for these funds, the Friends Women's Association clearly needs much more. Donations of every size, no matter how large or small, are welcome-and vital. Ten dollars finances one woman's participation in a two-day HIV/AIDS workshop. Twenty-five dollars pays for food supplements for patients for one week. Fifty dollars provides medicine for the clinic for one week. A hundred dollars pays the clinic's rent for one month.

The dialogue of peace between African and American Friends seems to me like a call-and-response chorus. As one group sings more clearly and enthusiastically, the other one

responds more heartily. After awhile, it's no longer clear who leads and who answers. It doesn't matter, because together we swell our voices in God's song of peace.