



Batwa Women Under Assault

Réseau Initiative for Equality (RIFE)

A network of 18 Batwa Rights Organizations

across Burundi, Democratic Republic of Congo and Rwanda

UNPFII Side Event, UNHQ, New York – 23 April 2019

Co-sponsors of this Side Event

- African Initiative for Mankind Progress Organization (AIMPO) – Rwanda
- Agape Hauts-plateaux (AGAPE) – DRC
- Association des Jeunes Chrétiens de Développement (AJECA) – Burundi
- Association pour le Regroupement et l'Autopromotion des Pygmées (ARAP) – DRC
- Dignité Pygmée (DIPY) – DRC
- Encadrement des Femmes Indigènes et des Ménages Vulnérables (EFIM) – DRC
- Foyer de Développement pour l'Autopromotion des Pygmées et Indigènes Défavorisés (FDAPID) – DRC
- Initiatives pour la Promotion des femmes autochtones et vulnérables (IPROFAV) – DRC
- Tous en Action pour les Progrès (TAP) – DRC
- Union pour l'Émancipation de la Femme Autochtone (UEFA) – DRC
- Union des Peuples Autochtones pour le Réveil au Développement (UPARED) – Burundi
- Union des Associations des Pygmées de Mbandaka (UAPM) – DRC

Speakers

- Ange Bella Ishimwe, Vice President, Implementation Committee, *Union des Peuples Autochtones pour le Réveil au Développement* (UPARED)
- Deborah S. Rogers, President, *Initiative for Equality* (IfE)

The Situation:

- Extreme discrimination against and dehumanization of the Batwa by neighboring communities, and sometimes by governments
- Batwa women are especially discriminated against
- Women's health, education and economic needs neglected
- Frequent rapes, both individual or mass rapes
- Women do not have a voice in political decision-making

This is not just a local crisis: it's also a global crisis

Why? Because Batwa women have *traditional knowledge* about how to live, that the rest of the world urgently needs!



How to live in harmony with the natural world

- No extinctions or habitat loss
- No climate change
- Spiritual connections with the forest are acknowledged
- Way of life that protected the forest for tens of thousands of years

How to maintain harmonious social relations

- How men and women can get along well with one another, using humor to comment on problems that arise
- How conflicts can be resolved peacefully using dialogue and other social mechanisms
- How shared spiritual connections to the forest create social bonds

How to raise confident and peaceful children

- Continuous contact with babies makes them feel safe
- Shared care across extended family so no one gets tired
- Men as well as women take part in child-rearing
- Children are taught collaboration, not competition



How women are central to decision-making

- Egalitarian politics; no such thing as “kings” or “military leaders”
- Group decisions are made through dialogue and consensus
- Women’s input and needs are listened to and valued
- Women have strong, defined roles in social structure and life, and often collaborate to ensure their decisions are implemented

Now, their situation has gravely deteriorated

On a daily basis...



AIMPO: being a Batwa woman is a double jeopardy in relation to non-Batwa community

- women do not have the right to make decisions about how to spend money, and do not have property rights
- household labour is still heavily gendered, and men who are seen to be doing a woman's job, are referred to as 'ingazwa' - meaning someone who is dominated and ruled by a woman
- women are responsible for preparing food, serving food, looking after children, fetching water, begging and scavenging for crops; Batwa men deal only with labour intensive jobs, such as the construction of homes
- Batwa men agree that women are not equal to men; have ideology that women are subordinate to men, "God create a man first not a woman"; Batwa boys always consider themselves superior to girls; girls internalize this stereotype
- women lack ownership of their bodies

AIMPO: being a Batwa woman is a double jeopardy in relation to non-Batwa community

- newborn babies also belong to the father's clan, and right to name the child is reserved for a man.
- each girl is given to her brother, meaning that the girl must respond to the needs of her brother, and her brother is responsible for her wellbeing; the brother can then force his sister to marry any boy he chooses.
- girls feels weak in the family, and are not allowed to make decisions independently
- women also face disproportionately high levels of sexual violence because a woman cannot refuse sex with her partner.
- She is also at greater risk of being raped by Twa and non-Twa men because she is treated as exotic and 'a healer'; many non-Batwa men believe sex with a Batwa women will cure their backache.
- Batwa indigenous women and girls also face poverty, lack of access to education, have poor health care outcomes, and have a low socio-economic standing.

UPARED: Batwa women have always been victims of discrimination based on stereotypes

- many Batwa women are begging in urban centers, with no alternative to assist them
- women are often raped during the night when they are in the streets, and when they are back in their villages
- rape leaves indelible marks such as incurable diseases or unwanted children
- the victim is stigmatized within her society; it is difficult for a raped woman to marry
- these women are most often rejected and excluded; it may not be a physical death but certainly a psychological death.
- because of the shame and humiliation, victims have a hard time reporting such crimes
- Also, it is the Batwa women in rural areas who feed the family, and Batwa women may suffer domestic violence when they ask husbands for family help
- Batwa women are respectful of their culture, and do not dare to speak, which pushes their oppressors to continue their bad deeds

AGAPE: Problems confronting Batwa women

- Non-indigenous communities think that Batwa women have special powers, and having sex with a Batwa woman gives a man this power and helps him become wealthy
- Batwa women are confronted with sexual and gender-based violence by armed groups and militias, by non-Indigenous people, by the national armed forces and by local authorities.
- These women lack legal support; they have nowhere to complain because they are not heard in the community. They are neglected by the non-Batwa communities.

Sexual fetishization of Batwa women

Neighboring communities say that they believe raping a Batwa girl or woman...

- “will cure my back” or “will prevent HIV/AIDS”
- “will protect me in battle” or “will stop bullets”
- “will make me rich”

This leads to both individual rapes and mass rapes.



ASODEQ: The situation and problems of Batwa women

The lack of a clearly defined social protection policy and socio-economic reintegration measures for Batwa populations results in deficiencies, manifested by:

- A great fragility of vulnerable people facing various risks;
- Poor access to basic social services;
- An increasing number of Batwa girls and women in difficult situations;
- A large number of victims of sexual violence who have not been taken care of;
- The marginalization of women and young people in the management of public affairs and in the debate for the development of the environment;
- Discrimination and exclusion of a large part of the population – especially Batwa women and youth;

ASODEQ: The situation and problems of Batwa women

- To a certain extent, lack of knowledge of rights and obligations;
- Early marriages and unwanted pregnancies
- Illiteracy;
- Prostitution;
- The absence of intermediary financial structures for women

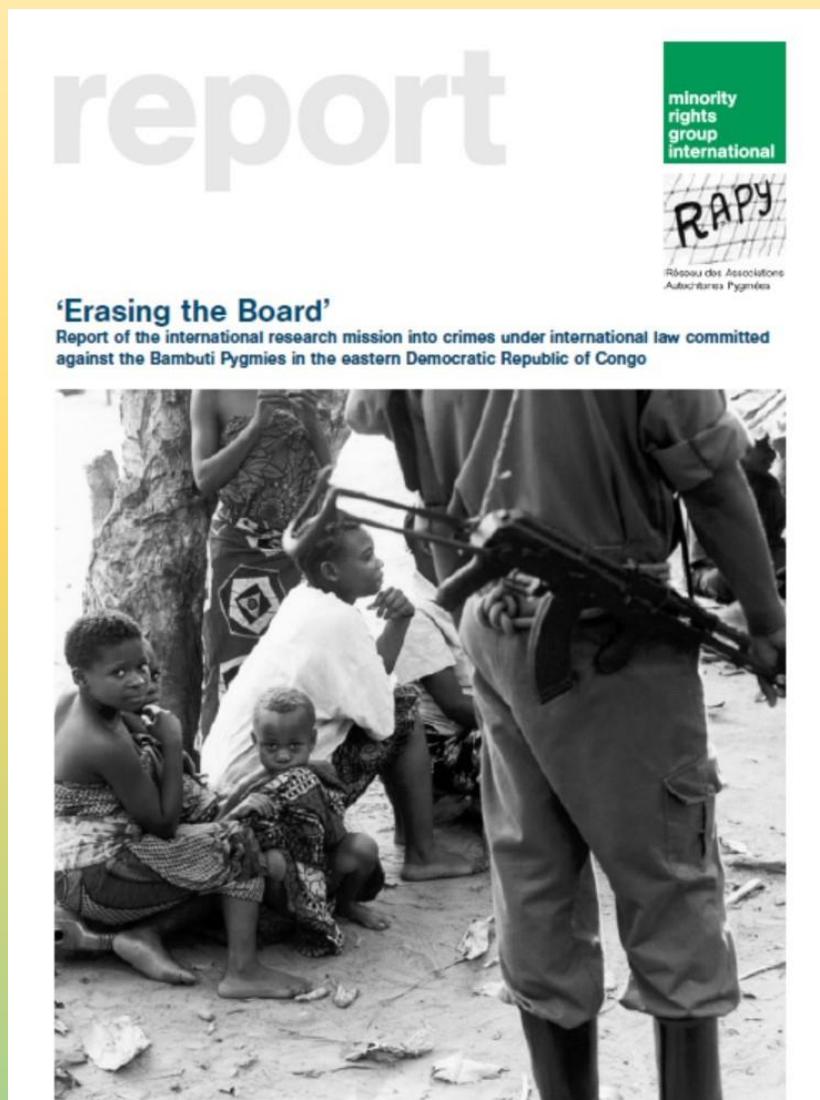


Now, their situation has gravely deteriorated

During conflict ...

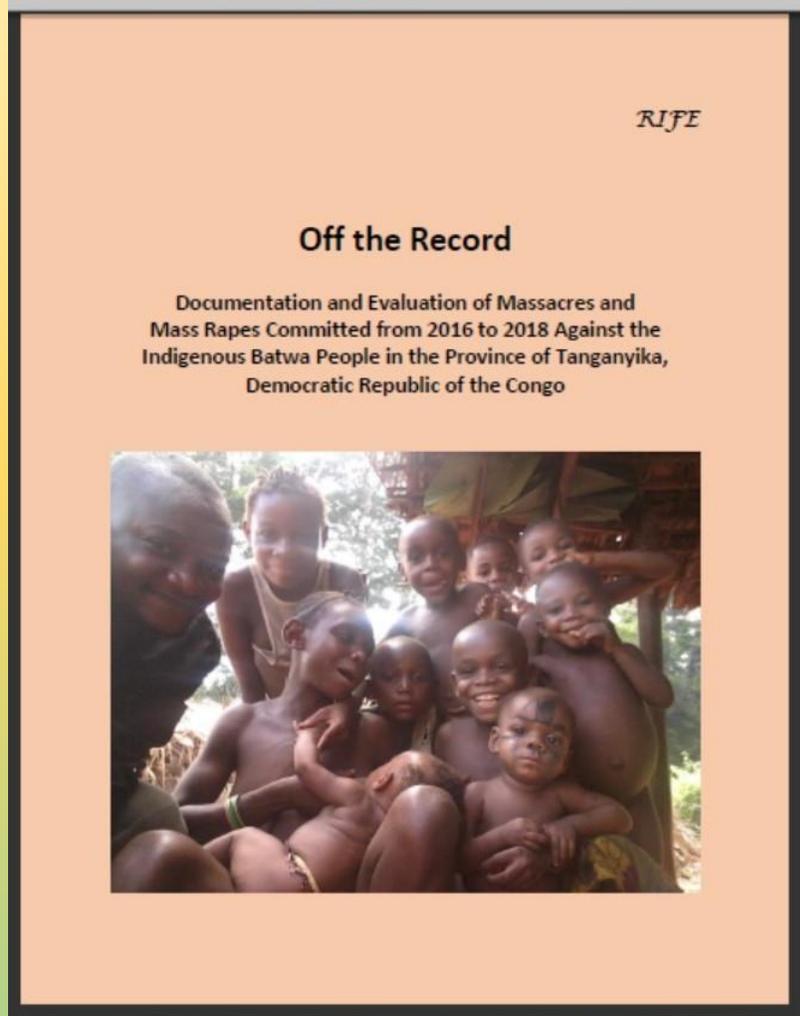


'Erasing the Board' campaign (2002-2003)



- Atrocities against Batwa/Bambutu in Ituri region of DRC were documented by Réseau des Associations Autochtones Pygmées (RAPY) and Minority Rights Group International (MRGI)
- Information was provided to International Criminal Court

Massacres & Mass Rapes in Tanganyika Province (2016 – 2018)



- Atrocities against Batwa/Bambutu in Tanganyika Province of DRC were documented by RIFE partners.
- Report was published last week.
- Information being provided to agencies across the UN system, including Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights.

AGAPE: How can Batwa women be supported?

- **MOST URGENT: STOP THE MASSACRES AND OTHER ATROCITIES!**
- Provide medical care for injuries experienced during atrocities
- Provide psychosocial support to victims who have experienced severe trauma
- Provide socio-economic reintegration to victims to restore their dignity
- Ensure awareness of the victims and denounce the perpetrators
- Prosecute perpetrators of these violations against women

AIMPO: What are the most essential gender gaps that should be addressed?

Activities must be implemented in a culturally sensitive manner to promote equality between Batwa men and women without destroying Batwa Indigenous culture –

- to challenge stereotypes related to women's sexuality and stigmatization of victims of gender-based sexual violence
- to raise awareness of women's rights and body ownership in Batwa communities
- to encourage conceptions of masculinity and femininity that empower both sexes
- to mobilize community leaders to counsel victims and report cases of abuse
- to enhance the livelihood of Batwa women to reduce dependency on men.

ASODEQ: Priority areas for strengthening gender equality and women's empowerment

- The adoption of legal reforms
- Strengthening national capacities to accelerate women's involvement in decision-making
- The adoption of multisectoral approaches to promote gender equality and women's empowerment
- Accelerating women's access to property rights and resource management;
- The popularization of legal and regulatory texts on the management of natural resources (water, forests, minerals, wildlife, land) for the benefit of Batwa women;
- Sensitization of Batwa women on regulations regarding habitat and sanitation
- Support for income-generating activities for Batwa women

ASODEQ: Priority areas for strengthening gender equality and women's empowerment

- Promotion of primary health care, reproductive health and voluntary testing for HIV / AIDS among Batwa women;
- Improving Batwa women's access to essential social services and contributing to the promotion of gender and the reduction of poverty;
- Improving the enrollment rate: build, rehabilitate and equip school infrastructure, and provide free primary and secondary education;
- The creation of associative and cooperative movements between Batwa women to strengthen their activities;
- The promotion of the pharmacopoeia or ethnobotany among Batwa women, which constitutes an economic resource recognized by others;

UPARED: Recommendations to the government

- To equalize Batwa women as full Burundians;
- Avoid attitudes of rejection and discrimination towards members of this community who are human beings worthy of the name;
- To grant Batwa health insurance cards;
- To place special emphasis on promoting Batwa awareness activities so that they can have the courage to make known their injustice, agree to be tested HIV / AIDS, and complain to the legal authorities as needed
- To be sensitive to the suffering endured by members of the Batwa community by reserving special assistance for the Batwa community

UPARED: Recommendations to NGOs and Foundations

- To support the initiatives of the Batwa organizations



Why is it essential to empower Batwa women?

- It is their human right!
- Solidarity between women and men is essential to strength and success in Indigenous people's movements.
- Women's contributions are essential to the success of rebuilding –
 - traditional Indigenous social relationships
 - education of the next generation
 - healing and health
 - feeding the people
 - raising the children
 - spiritual connections
 - stopping violence

Thank you!

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Initiative for Equality (IfE)

A global network of activists working in their own local communities
towards social, economic and political equality

<https://www.initiativeforequality.org/>

