

BUILDING A STRONG PARTICIPATION OF WOMEN IN LAND MEDIATION & CONFLICT RESOLUTION IN THE GREAT LAKES



In the Great Lakes region of Africa, land is at the center of people's livelihoods and identity. Land scarcity and ownership are key drivers of violent conflict in the area, often mitigated by local mediation mechanisms.

Traditionally, women's participation in the mediation of land conflict has been very limited. Lately, they have been playing a growing role, thanks to the support of governments and traditional institutions.

To further increase the participation of women in land mediation, Search for Common Ground is partnering with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Netherlands on the project *Strengthen Citizen Participation on Critical Social Issues to Prevent Land Conflict* in the Great Lakes Region of Africa. To achieve the project's goals, we are organizing exchanges between key land stakeholders – including government representatives, traditional leaders, and civil society organizations – from Burundi, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and Rwanda; building the skills of land actors in each country; and leading media initiatives.

As part of the project, we conducted 4 case studies focusing on the role of women in the mediation of local land conflict and its impact on peacebuilding in the Great Lakes.

1. EVOLVING TRADITION

Cultural traditions in the Great Lakes region are changing. As local communities become more inclusive towards women, their participation in the social and political sphere is increasing – and so is their role in conflict mediation. In our training sessions, we brought together male and female mediators and collectively built their skills. This has raised the confidence of female mediators, who feel more comfortable speaking in front of men; increased their credibility in the eyes of their male counterparts; and established mutual trust. In North Kivu, we used successful preliminary sessions highlighting the evolving role of women in mediation; in Rwanda and Burundi, women mediators are being equated with men.

“Women are like men, they are **courageous** and **capable.**”

– a male mediator from the Mamba Sector, Rwanda

2. NEW SKILLS, NEW SUCCESSES

Land disputes are often intertwined with conflicts within families or between them. Because they are at the heart of family life, women are uniquely poised to lessen these tensions. Women’s experience in the mediation of family conflicts has progressively evolved into deeper expertise on land issues across the three countries we observed.

Today, thanks to the skills they gained through our training, women mediators are going beyond the effects of conflict and seeking to address its underlying causes. Through effective communication, active listening, impartiality, and empathy, they can now solve complex, long-standing family and land diatribes.

In Rumonge, Burundi, Chantal successfully mediated a conflict between a resident, Sylvestre and a returnee, Balthazar after attending Search’s training. The family who had returned from Tanzania did not have anywhere to stay or land to cultivate after finding their plot occupied. Thanks to Chantal’s new skills in conflict analysis and negotiation, Sylvestre agreed to compensate Balthazar for his loss so that he could buy a piece of land elsewhere.

The communities’ level of satisfaction with the female mediators has increased, reaching 85% in the Gisagara District of Rwanda; and the number of unsuccessful women-led mediations considerably diminished since our project started, decreasing by 22% in the Masisi territory, DRC.

3. WOMEN'S INVOLVEMENT IN LAND AFFAIRS

Before our project, only male land registry officials were responsible for the management of land affairs in the DRC. Cultural barriers and lack of information on land rights prevented women from getting involved. Our training has improved women’s engagement in the management of land affairs, land ownership, and their credibility as mediators. These shifts have positively impacted gender dynamics in the broader community, but has in some cases, decreased space for other actors involved in conflict resolution. For example, in South Kivu, DRC, women’s participation resulted in a decrease of mediation activities by men. The same has not happened in Burundi and Rwanda.

4. A GROWING SPACE IN GOVERNMENT

The growing inclusion of female mediators generated genuine engagement and trust in mediation processes by the community. Women are now generally accepted as neutral actors who have overcome cultural obstacles. The majority of men have endorsed female mediators and believe that they should serve as role models for other women.

Female mediators have encouraged other women in their community to run for the 2015 Abunzi elections in Rwanda, raising the proportion of female Abunzi to 44% today, 14% higher than the established quota. Religious institutions in Rwanda have increasingly sought the support of female mediators in the resolution of conflicts. As a result, the number of court cases has considerably reduced, thanks to quicker and inexpensive informal mediation processes. However, in some rural areas of South Kivu, DRC, women still prefer seeking the help of male mediators, and local authorities sometimes perceive female mediators as rivals.

5. REMAINING CHALLENGES

Our approach built on existing mediation structures and encouraged collaboration between state and non-state actors. Certain environments, where land reform is slow or government authority is contested, posed additional challenges. This is why we ensured that our trainings involve all land stakeholders — including local mediators, local government authorities, the Department of Justice, and national administrations — and that each actor understood their role and responsibilities.

Across the Great Lakes region, household chores and low education levels still prevent many women from participating in mediation. In the DRC in particular, husbands often criticize their wives for choosing to engage in mediation, which is an unpaid activity, rather than concentrating on paid employment. Logistic hindrances, such as lack of transportation to reach rural areas and the need for appropriate clothing during the rainy season, are still an issue. The Rwandan Ministry of Justice is making an effort to improve the mediators’ working conditions, providing them with mobile phones and pre-paid phone credit.

Such commitments show how challenges can be tackled to achieve a growing role for women in mediation across the Great Lakes.