



Report from Rwanda

PEACE LEADERSHIP FOR RWANDAN WOMEN

In January, Karuna Center for Peacebuilding staff members Olivia Dreier and Adin Thayer completed a two-year project in peace leadership for Rwandan women. Karuna's partner in this project was ProFemmes, an umbrella group which supports a network of 43 women's organizations working throughout the country. Members of ProFemmes work in many sectors, including health, law, media, micro-lending, and education, and serve a broad range of constituencies.

Today, eleven years after the genocide that took the lives of nearly one million Rwandans, communities are continually living with the after-effects of this event. Rwandan women, like women in many societies, are faced with the many challenges of rebuilding and restoring the livelihoods of their children, families, and communities after the genocide. Women need skills and confidence to address the daily conflicts resulting from the violence, such as conflicts over land and property, inter-marriage between Hutu and Tutsi families, and problems facing single-parent or child-headed households. Karuna Center and ProFemmes have worked with them on developing their own approach to resolving conflicts in the context of their families, communities, churches, and organizations.

The participants worked hard throughout the trainings, particularly benefiting from the



more experiential aspects: exercises which embodied the concepts we were working with, role plays which allowed them to exemplify the conflicts they face daily but one step removed by the "play" so that they were able to express feelings which otherwise they would have held inside. Often they erupted into fierce anger and yelled at each other within the context of "playing", which showed us all how much intense feeling they carry as they manage lives in their still fractured

communities. These outbursts seemed also to serve as a means of releasing these disruptive feelings while simultaneously recognizing the power of their emotion and thinking about ways to handle them skillfully. Role plays enabled them to enhance immense their own capacities to intervene in planned and effective ways, particularly in situations which are especially emotionally charged.

During the workshops there was opportunity for the participants to reflect on, and address, some of the major obstacles facing them as women assuming leadership roles in a culture which discourages such roles for women. They were able to acknowledge their own self-doubt and hesitancy in the face of cultural reluctance to accept women's leadership on the part of men and also many women. Having acknowledged this self-doubt, they were then able to skillfully support each other in their determination to increase their individual and collective confidence.

Suzanne, the organizer for the project, exemplified some aspects of the training and its impact. She is a widow who is raising (and educating) nine children, four of her own and five orphaned by the genocide. Early on in the project, she took the role of arranging logistics, etc, but she also decided to sit in on the workshop. She grew progressively committed to her own and the group's development as peacebuilders over the course of the four trainings. Because she is central in the administration of ProFemmes, she was able to write into the organization's 5-year strategic plan - a vision for expanding and consolidating the work of this original group, including sponsoring the training of other women in their organizations. By the end, she was one of the most accomplished facilitators, relaxed and flexible and humorous, as she practice-led the group of women she will be leading from now on. She was technically skilled, but perhaps more importantly, she felt herself to be a leader in building a peaceful culture in Rwanda, both in her work and in all aspects of her life. This is the transformational dimension we are always envisioning in working with people over a period of time, the integration of a way of living as well as a way of working.

During this last workshop we focused intensively on participants' own facilitation practice, since they want to be able to provide training and guidance for others. This was fun, and very reinforcing, as they saw each other take the lead with skill and composure. By the end, these women had pulled together into a core group with a strong intention to pursue their work as conflict resolvers, and pass it forward to other women in their lives. We will follow up with them when we return to Rwanda three months from now to observe workshops they will be conducting.

[For more information about Karuna's work or to support this ongoing program, please contact:](#)

KARUNA CENTER FOR PEACEBUILDING.INC
447 West Street, Amherst, MA 01002
Telephone: (413) 256-3800

www.karunacenter.org | info@karunacenter.org