THANKS EVA! FOR 12 YEARS EXCHANGING TO CHANGE
My last editorial

This will be my last editorial after twelve years of preparing Exchange to Change. I started this newsletter after I graduated from IOB in 2001. Studying at IOB had been a true blessing in my life because it had changed me and therefore I wanted to keep the exchanges with other alumni alive. That is how Exchange to Change was born.

I applied for the Governance and Development programme at IOB after having obtained my Master’s degree in African Studies and travelled the African continent. I felt confident that I was close to becoming an expert on Africa. IOB would be a springboard to a career as a journalist writing on Africa. Little did I know at the start of the academic year that things would turn out very differently.

Despite the fact that I criticized Europe’s paternalistic approach to Africa I started at IOB with a perception of Africa that was actually coloured by this paternalism. At secondary school we never learned about Africa’s rich history and Belgium’s colonial history was only mentioned in a footnote. Neither did we learn much about the history of other non-European countries, except for Pharaonic Egypt, the ancient South-American civilizations and the crusaders - and about Columbus’ so-called discovery, of course. All this was taught from a very western perspective, yet it attracted my attention because it all sounded so mysterious and different, like a journey back in time. And I regarded the revelation of these unknown stories as my personal mission. After all, in order to be written down they needed a white (wo)man. Did that make me paternalistic or racist? I leave you to answer this question. To me, this was the reality in which I was raised and educated.

Not until I entered IOB and for the first time in my life found myself in a minority, surrounded by students from mostly ‘Southern’ descent. Identity based on superiority. I understood all this, but did I also feel it?

When I applied for an internship at a Ugandan newspaper, as I had planned at the beginning of the academic year, this was not motivated by a need for adventure or feelings of paternalism, but by a very real and sincere interest in the region and its people. At first I refused to write articles; I only wanted to join other journalists and look at reality through their eyes. Later on I wanted to look at reality through the eyes of the interviewees and the various stakeholders involved so I entered into dialogue with a lot of people. Of course, in my role of journalist, I could not refrain from expressing my own views because silence is not an option in a dialogue. So-called journalistic neutrality does not exist. A journalist leaves his or her mark, and it is often a very obvious one. Yet the journalist’s invisible hand, his or her truth, all too often becomes almost sacred: it becomes “the” truth. I examined these insights in greater detail in my thesis: ‘An attempt towards a more human journalistic discourse: some unknown stories as my personal mission.’ It was the beginning of the end of my journalistic career.

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I still write, and I love writing. But I no longer believe in the one-dimensional approach of mainstream media. IOB and, above all, the many exchanges with fellow students have taught me that reality has many dimensions. There may be One truth, but this truth is perceived in different ways. My own way is just one of many. It is this insight that has guided me on my post-IOB path, as I found spirituality, moved to Egypt, wrote books and worked as a diversity coach. It is this insight that I would like to pass on to my children.

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I enrolled in 'African studies' at the University of Ghent in order to prepare for my great adventure. This was a first eye-opener. I was taught about the rich and diverse civilizations and the crusaders - and about Columbus’ so-called discovery, of course. All this was taught from a very western perspective, yet it attracted my attention because it all sounded so mysterious and different, like a journey back in time. And I regarded the revelation of these unknown stories as my personal mission. After all, in order to be written down they needed a white (wo)man. Did that make me paternalistic or racist? I leave you to answer this question. To me, this was the reality in which I was raised and educated.

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Eva Vergaelen
The Belgian Interfederal Centre for Equal Opportunities and Opposition to Racism

The new rule was implemented for reasons of hygiene and the hospital agrees to allow the woman to wear a hygienic cap that covers her hair. All parties are satisfied.

Another example. A couple of African descent is looking for an apartment to rent. When they pay a visit to one the owner declares that he has just let the apartment to the people who arrived before them. However, a week later they find out that the apartment is still for rent. They feel discriminated against based on race or nationality and ask the Centre for assistance. The Centre asks them to carry out a “reality test”. The couple has to make a new appointment and others – in this case a white middle class people – have to visit the same apartment right after them. If the owner rejects the ‘African’ couple again and accepts the ‘white’ couple, there is evidence of discrimination. What happens next depends on the parties involved. In a best-case scenario the owner apologizes, attends a number of classes on anti-discrimination law, adds an anti-discrimination clause to his contract and rents the apartment to the black couple. If the owner continues to exhibit a discriminatory attitude the case will go to court and he is likely to be fined and lose his right to rent.

A third example deals with a child in a wheelchair who goes to a regular school. The child is not allowed to take part in a field trip because the teacher finds this too complicated. The child is devastated. The mother calls the Centre to ask whether the school is entitled to take such measures. The Centre uses the UN Mandate to inform the school about the child’s rights to inclusive education and reasonable adaptation to ensure full access to education. All parties agree to the solution that the mother will come on the field trip too so as to be able to help

What?
The Interfederal Centre for Equal Opportunities and Opposition to Racism is an independent institution that operates at both the national and international level. Nationally, the Centre administers Belgian laws against racism and discrimination and aims to create a context in which these laws can be applied. Belgian law explicitly combats discrimination based on age, gender, sexual orientation, civil status, birth, wealth, religious or philosophical beliefs, political beliefs, trade union membership, disability, physical or genetic characteristics, social background, language, alleged race, ancestry, skin colour, nation or ethnic origin. The Centre is allowed to deal with all of these aspects, except for gender and language. Discrimination means that someone is treated differently on the basis of one of the above criteria, without there being sufficient justification for such treatment.

Thus, the Centre participates in the activities of the Office for Human Rights of the Commission on Human Rights of the United Nations (UNCHR), the European Committee for the prevention of Torture and Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (ECHR), the Committee of Social Rights of the International Labour Organization (ILO), the Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (CERD), the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) and the International Labour Office (ILO). The Centre also collaborates with the Belgian social partners as a member of the Consultative Committee on Protection and Participation (CCPP), the Consultative Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (CCERD), the Consultative Committee on the Labour Force (CCWF), the Consultative Committee on the Social Protection (CCPS), the Consultative Committee on the Right of Persons with Disabilities (CCRDP), the Consultative Committee on the Right of Women (CCRW) and the Consultative Committee on Youth (CCJY).

How?
All Belgian residents can contact the Centre when they feel discriminated against. This can happen in several societal domains, such as housing, the labour market, education, public transport, or even when applying for a loan or giving out for a drink. Whether the person is a victim or a witness, in both cases he or she can contact the Centre to make a complaint and ask for assistance. The Centre then analyses whether this discrimination is based on one of the criteria within its remit. If this is the case, it will, with the approval of the complainant, contact the other stakeholders and try to mediate with a view to finding a solution. If the other party is not open to mediation and if there is strong evidence of discrimination, the Centre can take the case to court.

In practice
To clarify the above some day-to-day examples will be given. One case is that of a veiled Muslim woman who works in a hospital. Without any notification a change is made to the regulations and she is no longer allowed to wear her veil, allegedly for hygienic reasons. She feels discriminated against, based on religious belief and practice, and calls the Centre for assistance. The Centre contacts the hospital and tries to understand the management’s arguments.

The Belgian Interfederal Centre for Equal Opportunities and Opposition to Racism

Eva Vergaelen, IOB alumna and editor of this newsletter, is currently working as a local representative for the Interfederal Centre for Equal Opportunities and Opposition to Racism. She is interested in finding out how other countries deal with discrimination and racism at the judicial and policy level and hopes that this article will stimulate international discussions.

What kind of judicial and policy systems to enforce human rights and to fight discrimination exist in your country? How do you feel about the importance of empowerment? How would you go about empowering others? Eva Vergaelen invites you to share your views on our FB alumni page https://www.facebook.com/ioeal/

More information to be inspired by can be found on the following link: http://www.diversitybelgium.be/sites/default/files/documents/article/article_4_exchangetochange.pdf


EXCHANGE TO CHANGE - September 2014 - 5
Vida Ravazi
DEM

"Already as a child I was interested in poverty and social issues in my society. Inspired by Albert Schweitzer, my dream was to go to Africa and help the local population. I never regarded development as a way to impose one's own ideas upon others. To me development was a matter of giving and receiving. Despite my interest in literature and social sciences my parents persuaded me to study mathematics and physics, only because in my society studying social sciences is considered to be less demanding and physics, only because in my society studying social sciences is considered to be less demanding and degrees in engineering or natural sciences are greatly appreciated. However, during my bachelor studies in Physics, I became involved in volunteer work with poor people, drug addicts and people with disabilities. After having obtained my Bachelor's degree in Physics I applied to study sociology at Master's level. Initially my parents were not very pleased, but they eventually realized that I was serious about this and that it would make me happy. For the next three years I was totally fascinated by sociology, more particularly by the ways in which individuals perceive society and how this affects their behaviour within that society. Being critical was not encouraged in my home country and in fact it was getting very difficult for social scientists and students to express their opinions or analyze the situation, even in an academic context. This was exacerbated by the activities of the Iranian Green M, a political group that came into existence in the context of the 2009 presidential elections and demanded political and societal reform. As a result of my participation in green movement activities I had to take painful yet indispensable steps. Sometimes I try to visualise my future and the image I see is somewhere in Africa, preferably on the South coast of Mombasa in Kenya. I love Africa and I feel at home there. I believe this is partly because its out of the box approach and creativity make me feel so much at home in Africa: because its embrace of the unknown and creativity makes me feel more connected, both with myself and with my surroundings.

Vida Ravazi is an Iranian physicist, sociologist and poet. Although at a first glance these very diverse interests may seem difficult to combine she has successfully united these three backgrounds and blends them with her own approach to development.

Africa! The only place where I would be able to realise my childhood dreams and further my professional interests. Thanks to an internship in Thomas Bernardo House in Nairobi, Kenya my new life was about to start. The love of every single child in that house and the very generous hospitality of the Kenyan staff made those potentially difficult and sometimes long days easy and pleasant, so much so that I started to regard Africa as my home. This internship was followed by another activities and opportunities which enabled me to put my knowledge of sociology into practice and continue my research and that is why 5 years later I am still in this field and still passionate about research and development. I have been involved in research, advocacy activities, capacity building, field management and research in three different countries, Kenya, Zambia and Ethiopia. Both these activities and my studies at IOB have helped me to reach the conclusion that we absolutely need to change our perspective regarding development and poverty. For this kind of change to be realised we need a new perspective on the politics of development.

I came to IOB to earn a ‘European degree’ and then go back and work in Africa. The reason is simple: African organisations appreciate European degrees more. However, IOB has turned out to be much more than merely a place to obtain a much-desired degree. It has changed my perspective of my own future. Working as a researcher in the dominant system of research and development from 9 to 5 every day is no longer what I want. I would prefer to stay in the academic world and contribute to development from a different side. Studying Evaluation and Management at IOB has been most useful to me because I have learnt about the many different political, economic and social dimensions of development and I have been able to update and upgrade my knowledge and skills in the field. The central point is that, like any other social phenomenon, development is complex and “fluid”. My task in this field could be to study a very small part in relation to other aspects as well as the complexity of the whole phenomenon. I am specifically interested in studying institutions and how institutional arrangements play a role in development. But my goal is to combine theories of macro and micro levels in institutional analysis. I hope to be able to embark on a PhD soon. As for the present, I am currently evaluating a project in Ethiopia for the World Orphans Organization and I can apply most of the knowledge and skills that I have acquired this year.

Overall, I am very satisfied with my decision to study at IOB. Although one year is short, it is a very productive programme. In fact, it is so packed that I sometimes feel lost. There was not much time to truly reflect upon, adopt and put into practice the new information and insights that I acquired during my time there, both via the curriculum and exchanges with fellow students. I have realised that my interest in the development field had always been rather intuitive. Thanks to my IOB experience it has become more fact-based and rational and I have become much more critical. My one year at IOB has actually catapulted me ten years ahead in my personal development. It has triggered a strong academic interest and I would love to do more research to impact development policy. I now believe that the dominant approach to development is wrong because it does not look at the whole picture. It holds one aspect without understanding how it affects other aspects. What I have learned both as a physicist and a sociologist has once again been confirmed by my studies at IOB: we need a holistic approach if we really want to change something profoundly.

My future plans are very much dependent on my next step. Sometimes I try to visualise my future and the image I see is somewhere in Africa, preferably on the South coast of Mombasa in Kenya. I love Africa and I feel at home there. I believe this is partly because of African music. In terms of richness African music is just amazing. It has a close connection with language and you can find music in every aspect of African life. The roots of the human race lie in Africa and in my opinion you can always find originality and freshness in Africa, which is very important for me. I believe we can learn a lot from Africa’s capacity to constantly adapt to new contexts. I would call this creativity. Africans are more creative in dealing with new situations. They have to be in order to survive. As long as you are fine with your situation you do not feel the need to look outside of your own box. If only escape can guarantee survival this opens new perspectives. No wonder that Africa has so many great artists in every corner of the continent! Artists reflect on the individual and societal dimensions from which they want to escape. They become creative because they want to overcome their difficulties. As such they become critics of society and generate new ideas. As a poet and musician I feel very much inspired by African music and lyrics. That is what makes me feel so much at home in Africa: because its embrace of the unknown and creativity make me feel more connected, both with myself and with my surroundings.
Debriefing session of the Young Professionals Summit

The Young Professionals Summit is part of the Brussels Forum, an annual event organised by the German Marshall Fund, and was held this year on March 21-22. The Brussels Forum is a think-tank for foreign policy, which is dedicated to promoting better understanding and cooperation between North America and Europe on transatlantic and global issues. At the Brussels Forum some of the most influential North American and European leaders meet to discuss pressing challenges on foreign policy. At the Young Professionals Summit, 90 young leaders meet with these key figures with the goal of encouraging dialogue and knowledge exchange between generations and of building new connections across borders. Since this time the World Bank also intended to invite future leaders from the South it consulted IOB about potential profiles among its alumni: a out of the 7 Southern young leaders came from IOB, namely Andrea Azevedo Pinho from Brazil and Adiam Hagos from Ethiopia. I didn’t understand what is a debriefing on how they experienced the event.

The summit focused mainly on foreign policy from a US and EU perspective. The participants from the South were asked about their own perspectives on the South and to raise broader issues. It might have been very relevant to explore some of these issues, for example corruption, gender and energy, from a Southern perspective, but unfortunately the Southern participants were not given much opportunity to do so. It was only during the closing session on poverty reduction that there was a brief opening for (necessarily general) contributions by the participants from the South. The World Bank announced its campaign to reduce poverty to less than 3% and the Southern young leaders were asked to share their ideas on how this should be achieved. This question could not be answered without taking into account the specific contexts of the countries that were represented by the young leaders. They actually felt rather disappointed about the event, because the context did not allow an in-depth answer to this one question and, secondly, because they felt that their input was limited to proposing solutions regarding the problem of poverty.

In general, both IOB alumni regretted the Eurocentric focus of the whole summit, but at the same time they acknowledged the importance of bringing together potential leaders from different backgrounds. The event was a great networking exercise. Moreover, since the focus was on North American and European relations, inviting professionals from the South was already an important first step. After all, US and EU foreign policy directly affects developing countries. Both Andrea and Adiam Hagos hope that next year the summit will allow more input from the South. If IOB is again asked to propose alumni to attend next year’s Young Professionals Summit, the profile would be carefully chosen.

The summit could be a meaningful experience for the young professionals with a keen interest in US-EU foreign policy relations. For those alumni who are interested, please check out the Facebook page of our alumni group for further information.

Interview with Andrea Azevedo Pinho

Exchange to Change interviewed Andrea after her participation in the Brussels Forum. As the World Bank calls her one of the future leaders of the South, we were interested in getting to know her a little better. Andrea obtained her Master’s degree in Monitoring and Evaluation at IOB in 2013 and now works as a consultant and monitor of gender projects in Brazil.

ETC: Could you please tell us a bit more about your background?
Andrea: I have a Master’s degree in Gender and Political Participation from the University of Brasilia. In 2010, in the middle of my Master’s, I started working for UN Women to promote gender, inclusion and racial equality in Brazil. After that I got an internship at Europe Aid in Brussels and a training on development capacity and knowledge management.

ETC: What brought you to IOB?
Andrea: I was looking for a more specialised programme on Monitoring and Evaluation and that is how I got to know IOB, which has a unique programme on Monitoring and Evaluation applied to development. Fortunately I won the VLIR scholarship. It was a very rewarding programme for me. I acquired a very thorough theoretical and practical understanding of Monitoring and Evaluation and I was able to relate it to my interest in gender equality. After IOB I went back to Brazil to work for UN Women again, evaluating a project on gender. Then I started as an independent consultant, monitoring gender projects.

ETC: Where does your interest in gender come from?
Andrea: I studied Gender and Political Participation at university. In Brazil, lots of the women population is feminised and women are the majority of the Members of the House of Representatives are women. I wanted to continue to work for women away from political representation. There are many social constraints; the political arena is not still perceived to be a place for women. There are also practical constraints, such as too little support for childcare and family arrangements. And of course there are also political constraints, such as the application of quota. We cannot wait for social reality to change by itself, change needs political support.

ETC: How does this happen in Brazil?
Andrea: In Brazil there is now a strong political will to promote the representation of women at all levels. Symbolic representation, for example, having a black woman as a Member of Parliament, can change social perceptions. Irrespective of whether they are black or indigenous or women with a disability, women’s development is high on the political agenda. However, there is still a stigma in terms of poverty. Poverty has a face and it is a woman’s face. There is a clear link between gender and many issues of inclusion. This concept of intersectionality is crucial to understanding gender equality. There may be a strong representation of women in politics, but they may all come from the dominant middle class.

ETC: So gender development is all about equal rights and opportunities?
Andrea: Of course it is. But it is also about practical opportunities. IOB has made me realize that the debate about gender also needs a more evidence-based approach. Only then do you know who you are targeting and can you change accessibility and policies more effectively. You also need to talk the language of all those involved. In the context of Brazil you have to work with black women because they are the poorest of the poor. At IOB I learned to work with these very practical issues that are sometimes overlooked by people working on gender. After all, you can have great policies, but the difficulties with regard to opportunities, accessibility and inclusion may still be huge.

ETC: Women need to be their own agents of change?
Andrea: Yes. The core issue of gender movements is voice. Middle class women cannot represent poor black women. These women’s voices need to be heard. If you work in gender, the main challenge is how to promote development for certain groups with the help of the voice of others. Working in gender and development is a very reflective job. You always have to ask yourself: “Who am I in this discussion and what can I promote?” There are no manuals to be followed, it is about real women in all their diversity.

ETC: And although it is a global challenge?
Andrea: Definitely. The best part of my work, that what keeps me motivated, is the fact that I get to know amazing women from different backgrounds and cultures. I was raised with a lot of opportunities, and it is a privilege to get to know women who really had to fight for their development. We miss these human/female stories, and I spent five months doing research in general. Although I believe that we need bottom-up change, we also have to unite with the women on the global level. We can learn so much from each other. Global exchanges do contribute to change!

ETC: Exchange to Change! This brings me back to Andrea’s question about global perspectives on gender capacities?
Andrea: I must have been very boring and predictable to my colleagues because all I ever talked about was gender. Monitoring and Evaluation was sort of a way to escape from gender, but I managed to link them again. After all, feminist political theory is not just about gender, it is a great theoretical framework for exclusion in general. Why do certain social, economic and political structures allow some people to evolve in society and not others? Understanding this is crucial to understanding development. Monitoring and Evaluation has excluded women as it has always adopted a male Western perspective. In order to really understand the power of what we are doing and to be ready to take the next step forward, we need to understand that social structure, we are facing with this but it is not clear that we are doing our job. I have to remind myself of this quote whenever I feel frustrated. The fight for change needs strong women!

ETC: And of those women is you, Andrea?

Andrea: Definitely. The best part of my work, that what keeps me motivated, is the fact that I get to know amazing women from different backgrounds and cultures. I was raised with a lot of opportunities, and it is a privilege to get to know women who really had to fight for their development. We miss these human/female stories, and I spent five months doing research in general. Although I believe that we need bottom-up change, we also have to unite with the women on the global level. We can learn so much from each other. Global exchanges do contribute to change!

...
I leave IOB with fond memories of my sojourn in Antwerp and surely the memories will linger in the recesses of my heart and mind, knowing that I have been a part of a great diverse legacy. Permit me to thank my colleagues for enriching my life and for reaffirming my faith in the practical notion of a common humanity. At IOB, I also met friends for life but also brothers and sisters from another mother.”

Shanjida Shahab Uddin (Bangladesh)

My master program days in IOB was full of new experiences. Teachers and office staffs were so friendly. Though class schedule were so tight, I tried to go to the second module but still it was enjoyable. We had lots of parties, study trips in and outside Antwerp. Visiting two international places - OECD and UNESCO headquarters were a lifetime experience of mine that I will cherish always. Shubhra, (Shubhra Udai (Bangladesh))
Nina Wilén has joined IOB as a post-doctoral researcher on peace-building. She worked as a post-doc fellow at the Royal Military Academy in Brussels before and prior to that she completed her PhD thesis in Political Science at the ULB (Brussels). At IOB she will be focusing on how gender is integrated into post-conflict armies in Burundi and Rwanda. IOB looks like the perfect place to her since her research overlaps with a lot of IOB’s expertise, for example, politics in the Great-Lakes Region, gender in development and post-conflict theories. Exchange to Change (EiC) managed to interview Nina Wilén (NW).

EiC: Why gender in relation to peace-building?
NW: Traditionally peace-building policies focus on gender in softer areas, such as reconciliation and reintegration. In 2000 UN Security Council Resolution 1325 put women’s roles in both conflict and peace on the agenda with regard to four specific areas: protection, prevention, relief and recovery, and participation. Participation was a new aspect. Also, peace-building goes hand in hand with security sector reform. Over the past decade security sector reform has attracted the attention of peace builders, especially in post-conflict areas. More recently, the gender aspect has been added. Since this is relatively new I feel that I can contribute to a new discipline, which makes it very exciting.

EiC: Can you briefly explain where your interest in gender comes from?
NW: I never had a real interest in gender until I interviewed several high-ranking women in the Burundian army. These narratives triggered my interest and made me realize that security sector reform can be interpreted as a window of opportunity for wide-ranging change, not only with regard to dysfunctional security forces but also existing gender hierarchies in society. Security sector reform can hence trigger more general societal change, but only if it is anchored in local minds.

EiC: And is that the case, or is the reform a result of external pressure?
NW: It is true that there is still a tendency to put women in positions related to the household and regard them as incapable of participating in high-level political and confidential negotiations. However, it should be noted that the initiative was the result of concerted lobbying and awareness-raising by local players, such as the Burundian NGO Network for Women. They found support in international human rights declarations as well as in the focus on gender in the security sector by international donors and in resolutions such as the Anasha agreements and the UN’s Security Council Resolution 1325. Local players used this resolution as an advocacy tool to push for the electoral process to mainstream gender both in the 2005 and the 2010 elections. In addition, a national steering committee for the implementation of the resolution was created and the government adopted the ‘National Action Plan on the Implementation of UNSCR 1325’. So local awareness-building and external pressure went hand in hand. However, what is written on paper does not always reflect reality.

EiC: What do you mean?
NW: In April 2001 a final report preparing a strategy for gender integration in the National Defence Force was produced by the Dutch Security Sector Development Programme, the UNDP and the Ministry of Defence. After the final strategy paper had been completed a researcher of the Dutch Security Sector Development Programme came to the conclusion that the same challenges still exist. The fact that many of the main documents equal ‘gender’ with ‘women’ or ‘feminin’ gender in the catch-all concept of discrimination means that the legislation is not updated accordingly. This leads to ambivalence as to how to practically apply these guidelines, which makes implementation arbitrary at best and a complete failure at worst. For example, the new army adopted quota for equal ethnic participation, while no quotas for women or gender were introduced with the new peace agreement, leaving this aspect as an add-on as an afterthought.

EiC: Yet there are already a few women in the security forces and you have conducted interviews with them. What, so far, appears to be interesting?
NW: I find it very interesting to see how female members of the forces have to be very creative in order to get themselves heard in an overwhelmingly masculine environment – women so far only represent 0.9%. They do so by referring to their vision of femininity, while theoretically legitimising these demands by linking them to the international human rights discourse. For example, they demanded more feminine uniforms, including a skirt, to make themselves more visible. Another example is the former regulation which forced all military officers and soldiers to shave their heads and wear skirts, to make themselves more visible. Another is the former regulation which forced all military officers and soldiers to shave their heads and wear skirts, to make themselves more visible.

EiC: Why do these women choose to join the security forces?
NW: For different reasons. All the women interviewed stressed their interest in sports as one of the major reasons for their enrolment in the army and emphasised their physical abilities as something positive. So there is the aspect of challenge, both physical and mental. Another aspect is pride; they feel proud to be part of the national army. A third one is curiosity. After having watched a military parade they wanted to know what the army is all about. There are also very idealistic reasons for joining the army. One respondent believed that an inclusive and diverse army is better prepared to defend the needs of all of society. Another one stressed that the army could be a role model as regards influencing overall mentality. There is a strong focus on human rights in all this.

EiC: Looking at their own rights within the military, do these women tend to stay in the forces?
NW: That is hard to say. Since the recruitment itself is already problematic there is a serious underrepresentation of women. Also, women are rarely promoted to higher positions, so there are only very few ‘top먹Pid, both internally and externally. The strong internal resistance to their integration and the resulting harassment also discourage women from staying. However, those who stay are really persistent in their efforts to prove that they are capable of serving in the security forces. Despite their stories about harassment and resistance, the women interviewed often emphasised that these occurred mainly in the beginning when they were new recruits, thereby distancing themselves from typical victim’s narratives. Part of the explanation for their attitude with regard to this may be found in the codes of loyalty that are prevalent in armies worldwide, which prevent soldiers from ‘talking on each other’. However, these may also be regarded as individual survival strategies in the sense that, since these women have chosen to stay in the army, it may help them to see themselves as part of a ‘whole’, by refusing the epithet of victim, rather than in a more binary relationship of ‘us’ versus the ‘others’ (i.e., the male soldiers).

EiC: Many questions remain. It sounds like a very interesting research field. We are very much looking forward to your input in this discipline. Best of luck!

For readers who already want to know more, check out Nina’s article “Security Sector Reform, Gender and Local Narratives in Burundi” in the next issue of ‘Conflict, Security and Development’.
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