

**INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS**

PJW-19  
The Women's Decade: A Bururi Postscript

Bururi, Burundi  
15 April 1986

Mr. Peter Bird Martin  
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Dear Peter,

Ultimately, we have to wonder, do world conferences, such as the conferences for the UN Decade for Women (PJW-18) affect the average woman in a developing country? It is, perhaps, too early to tell. But the repercussions of such conferences stretch far and wide.

On Saturday, 31 August 1985, a celebration was held in Bururi to mark the end of the UN Decade for Women. This celebration, and some of my subsequent observations of life in Bururi, provided some indications of women's lives here.

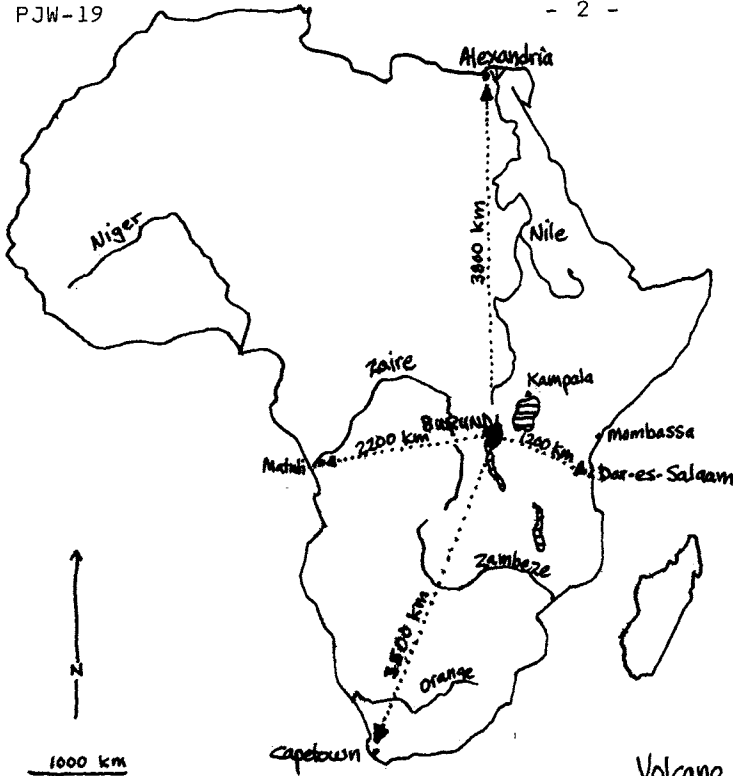
Bururi is where I currently live -- a small, but important, town in southern Burundi (see Map, page 2). Bururi is located at an elevation of 1900 meters (6300 feet), on the southern end of the Zaire-Nile Crest, the divide that separates the drainages of the Nile River, which flows over 3800 kilometers (2350 miles) north to the Mediterranean, and the Zaire (formerly Congo) River, which flows over 2200 kilometers (1360 miles) east to the Atlantic Ocean.

Bururi is located about 60 miles (100 km) southeast of the capital city of Bujumbura. To get to Bururi from Bujumbura involves driving one-hour south along the shores of Lake Tanganyika on a nice paved road, then taking a steep, curvy, rocky dirt road east into the mountains for another hour. In Bururi temperatures average 10-15°C. (50-60°F.) and yearly rainfall is about 1500 mm (60 in). The dry season occurs from June through September, and the heaviest rains fall in December and April.

Bururi is a provincial capital, equipped with a military base, hospital and pharmacy, primary and secondary schools, a Catholic mission, a post office, and a generator that supplies electricity from 6PM to 11 PM (most nights). Twice a week there is a small open-air market, selling dried fish, fresh meat, palm oil, plastic sandals, enamel bowls, batteries, and produce, such as bananas, carrots, potatoes, onions, cabbage, and avocados. Recently a full-time bakery and the town's second gas station opened up for business. A national medical school, for nurses and medical technicians, is being built by Chinese contractors. The Chinese are also building a hydroelectric dam nearby, which will eventually furnish Bururi with 24-hour-a-day electricity. The population of Bururi is around 5,000 people: many residents are educated, middle-class government employees, working in provincial offices, the hospital, and schools.

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Map adapted from:  
 Cazenave-Piarrot *et al.*, 1979,  
Geographie du Burundi: le pays  
et les hommes. Paris, p. 7.



Map adapted from:  
 Michelin, 1978, Africa, Central and  
South, Map 155. Paris: Pneu Michelin.

Map. Location of Bururi, Burundi, in East Central Africa.

As I learned of the Women's Decade event only half an hour before it was to start, I quickly grabbed my camera, stuffed it in my bag, and walked over to the stadium. When I arrived at 9:30AM, the scheduled starting time, few people were yet in sight. Soon people began to assemble...a few soldiers, lots of young boys, a dance group practicing out its routine. I watched with interest as one group members -- a man dressed up as a woman -- acted out various activities that women engage in -- hoeing a field, carrying firewood, lighting a fire and cooking, going to school, being a medical doctor. As the group went through its practice routine, I decided to photograph the scene where "she" carries the firewood on her head. My camera attracted a lot of attention. What surprised me, however, was that in the next and subsequent practices of the group's pantomime, the actor added a scene depicting a woman coming out with a camera and taking pictures of people -- pointing the camera directly in my direction. With that I decided that perhaps it would be most prudent to put the camera away out of sight.

Gradually more people began to arrive. I was rather dismayed, however, that most of the attendees filling up the viewing stand were men. Where were the women? Then a few women arrived and came up to greet me. One was a neighbor of mine, whom I will call Ernestine, who quickly took me under her wing. She explained that many women were to be in the parade. Eventually about six hundred people arrived -- half of whom marched in the parade. The crowd was half women and half men. Many local civil servants sat in chairs in the covered viewing stand to watch the proceedings, while the ordinary folk sat on the bleachers on the other side of the stadium or stood around the edges of the field.

The ceremony consisted of a variety of singing and dance performances. A couple of all-male groups and several groups composed of both women and men danced and sang, and two women sang a duet. The performances were quite varied, providing a good introduction to Burundi culture. (The group with the pantomime scenes did keep in the scene with the photographer -- which the audience found very amusing. Perhaps, I wondered, were they expanding the set of women's roles to include photographer?) In addition, the woman who is the regional secretary of the national political party, UPRONA (Union pour le Progres National, or Union for National Progress), gave a long speech, and the provincial governor for Bururi, a short speech. The ceremony ran from 10:45AM until 1:15 PM.

Although I did not understand a word of the ceremony, as it was conducted entirely in Kirundi, I was able to observe the respect being paid to the women of Bururi Province. I hoped, indeed, that the Decade for Women was not marking an ending, but rather signified that efforts here would continue towards improving women's lives.

Afterwards, some attendees went to the Social Center for a reception. The reception was sponsored by the local women's organization, a chapter of Union des Femmes Burundaises (Union of Burundian Women), which is a branch of UPRONA. At the reception about forty men sat on one side of a courtyard, while about sixty women sat along the other two sides. The only woman

to sit with the men was the regional UPRONA party secretary, whom had given the speech. Other women went back and forth serving beer and soda, stewed meat and fried bananas. More speeches were delivered in Kirundi (mercifully brief).

The reception attendees were all middle-class, dressed in their best attire. Most women wore traditional long skirts with matching lengths of fabric draped over one shoulder, usually of fancy, shimmery, flimsy fabric. A few wore Western-style knee-length dresses. The men were generally wearing shirts and slacks, although the governor and a few other dignitaries were dressed in dark suits and ties. None of the "ordinary folk" that I had seen at the ceremony, the peasant farmers -- attired in bright outfits of solid or patterned printed cotton and headscarves, or worn shirts and pants, had come to the reception.

People began to leave the reception around 3 PM. As another neighbor, whom I will call Colette, and I walked home, I asked her about what types of activities the Bururi women's group undertakes. Last year they started some sports activities, but as many women became pregnant and stopped coming, this activity had fallen by the wayside. Some women currently were interested in learning how to cook new, "Western", dishes, but this activity had not yet begun due to a lack of contributions to pay for the ingredients.

I also learned that the Union des Femmes Burundaises is the only women's organization in town. Traditionally Burundian society has focused on the family, living in scattered "rugos", or homesteads, in the mountains. Villages and towns are relatively recent developments, dating primarily from the late 1800's, while the arrival of missionaries and colonial administrators. Although Burundian society was ruled by a monarchy until 1966, it was much less centralized than many societies elsewhere in Africa. The development of larger social groups, particularly those for women, is a relatively recent phenomenon. Consequently, it is not surprising that most of the group members are educated, middle-class women who have the time and money for such activities. This situation differs considerably from that in either the West African Sahel or Eastern African countries, such as Kenya, where all kinds of women's groups are quite active, and in some cases, politically powerful.

In the subsequent months, I have gotten to know some of these middle-class women better. As they have been to school, they can speak French -- although they all prefer to speak Kirundi. Their lives are certainly easier than those of women farmers here, but nonetheless still pose some real constraints. Colette's situation serves as an example.

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It is now April. The blue sky and strong winds...bright puffy clouds...a breath of sanity...the gray lining of the clouds underscores the temporary nature of this reprieve. It will rain again today, that is sure. Meanwhile, leaves of the banana plants dance in the breeze.

The winds and rains batter away at the house. In the past month, the southern wall has crumbled. With the roof gone and all exposed, the other exterior walls will soon follow suit. The wood-branch wattle framework is emerging from the red clay walls. Bits of tile and charred wood are strewn about the floor. The skeleton of four rooms remains visible. Nothing of value remains...all must be reconstructed from scratch.

Our neighbors' house burned one night at 3 AM when we were not home. Andre, as I will call him, had come home late from the bar with some friends. Someone had dropped a cigarette underneath the wardrobe...which caught on fire. Andre, Colette, their daughters, and the guests all rushed out of the burning house. All they were able to save was the children's mattress. Neighbors who heard the cries for help ignored them, thinking that Andre was just drunk and beating Colette again.

Colette and Andre are a young, educated, middle-class Burundian couple, employed by the government in salaried white-collar jobs. She works as a secretary. With their combined monthly salaries of 26,000 francs (\$260), they live relatively comfortably. [The per capita income for Burundi was estimated at \$260 per annum in 1982]. They had bought land and built their house two years ago. While they are at work, a middle-aged male housekeeper takes care of the children, prepares the meals over a charcoal or wood fire, goes to the market to shop for food, washes the clothes and bedding and hangs them out over the back fence to dry, and hauls water from a nearby public faucet.

Colette gives the impression of being a strong woman. She has a solid and large frame, filled out with soft curves and a fuzzy Afro hairdo framing her face. She is fairly soft-spoken, yet seems sure of herself in the world. She is very open, curious, and interested in improving her life.

Her husband Andre is slighter in build. When he is sober, he can be quite charming. His young daughters clearly adore him, and come running when he returns from work.

Their eldest daughter, Andrea, is a bright, energetic, and curious child of four, always zooming around, coming to see what I was doing. Her two-year-old sister Maria trails along...gradually overcoming her shyness vis-a-vis the "abazungu" (whites) living next door.

When I had first arrived in Bururi, Colette and the little girls were eager to meet me. My husband had arrived a few months earlier, so they had been wondering what his wife would be like. The little girls were curious about us, and seemed surprised to learn that we didn't understand any Kirundi. So they started learning greetings in French, so as to communicate with us.

Occasionally, when I was working in my garden, Colette would wander over to chat. She asked how my strange vegetables -- such as basil and zucchini squash -- could be used and recommended that I try cooking bean leaves. I explained that I had eaten sauces made of bean leaves in West Africa, and recommended that she try basil in tomato sauces. She wanted to

try out new recipes, to have some variety in her diet. I suggested learning new ways of preparing the locally-available foods, but that many "Western recipes" called for exotic, imported foods that would be too expensive here.

This past fall, Colette had lots of free time. She was pregnant, and thus entitled to 6 weeks of pre-natal leave, 6 weeks of post-natal leave, plus her two weeks of annual leave. The baby actually arrived a month after the predicted due date, so Colette was away from work for four and a half months.

We talked a bit about her situation. She admitted wishing that she could choose when to have her children as I could...but said that Burundian husbands expects lots of children. Colette is also, like most others here, Catholic. Another neighbor, Ernestine -- also a salaried bureaucrat, working as a secretary -- had just had her third baby as well. Her older two children -- a four-year-old boy and two-year-old girl -- play with Colette's children, Andrea and Maria.

Salaried employees in Burundi (and elsewhere in Africa) not only receive generous maternity rights, but also monthly cash allowances in addition to their base pay for each dependent (spouse or child). These benefits are pro-natal, encouraging educated women to have children every year or two. These benefits are also quite expensive for poor developing countries, benefiting only a small section of society, which is already advantaged in comparison with average subsistence farmers. Currently most African governments, however, are unlikely to limit such benefits to only one or two children per family -- as has been done in China and Singapore -- in order to discourage large families. Yet in a country like Burundi, with a population density estimated in 1982 to be 154 people per square kilometer (400 people per square mile) and a population growth rate of 2.2 percent per year, such restraint seems needed. (Burundi and neighboring Rwanda are the most densely-populated countries in Africa).

During her time off, Colette accompanied us on a trip to the capital city, Bujumbura. She wanted to visit some friends and shop for some items unavailable in the interior. Although Bujumbura is not far from Bururi, she rarely has a chance to travel there. In our truck, the trip takes two hours, but by public buses and vans, the trip can easily take an entire day. Public transit is also quite hazardous -- last year a government bus went off the curvy mountain road that lies between Bururi and Lake Tanganyika, en route to Bujumbura, killing all sixty persons aboard.

We went to Bujumbura on a Friday and had planned to return to Bururi the following day. When we arrived in Bujumbura, however, we discovered that there was no gasoline, and none would be available until Monday. Colette was just as glad to have her holiday extended, and to be able to visit longer with her friends. Her family, however, had no idea what had happened, as there was no way to contact them.

With the fighting that was going on in Uganda at the time (October 1985), the major supply route for petroleum products -- the Trans-African Highway going from the Kenyan port of Mombassa across Kenya, Uganda, and Rwanda, to Burundi -- had been cut off. This 1900 km (1200 mi) route is the customary means of transporting imported goods from the Indian Ocean to Burundi. The Burundian government had just concluded negotiations with the Tanzanian government to bring fuel from Dar-Es-Salam across Tanzania on the train to Kigoma, and from there up Lake Tanganyika via steamer to Bujumbura. Although this route is shorter -- only 1200 km (750 mi) -- it is generally more problematic than the alternative through Uganda, as the goods must travel by a combination of rail and ship. Consequently, the Burundian government was rationing gasoline until new supplies began arriving.

A few weeks later, when I was away traveling, my husband returned home at 1 AM to find Colette, Andrea, and Maria camped out in front of our house. Andre had been drinking heavily and had become abusive, so she had taken the children and left. Several times he came over to the edge of our property, to try to persuade her to return, but she refused. Our night guard prevented Andre from approaching the house, thus protecting Colette from any bodily harm. Finally Andre went to sleep around 3:30 AM, and she went home shortly thereafter.

After the baby was born, Andre invited us over one evening. In honor of the baby's birth, Andre's mother had come for a visit from her village 20 kilometers (12 miles) away, and had brought a pot of banana beer that she had brewed. We sat in the living room, sipping beer out of the communal pot with reed straws, and inquired about the baby. Had they chosen a name yet? This question surprised our hosts and they asked why we wanted to know. We explained that in our country people usually choose a baby's name before, or immediately after, the birth, and hence this question is one that is commonly asked, out of politeness, to new parents.

Choosing a name in Burundi, we learned, is not as simple a process. Traditionally all individuals were given their own names, often based on the circumstances of the birth, and rarely were they given names of their parents or other family members. With the introduction of Christianity, many individuals acquired both a "Christian [first] name" and a traditional name. Increasingly, children are being given the traditional name of their father, as a "family name". This had been done for Andre and Colette's oldest two daughters.

The third daughter, however, posed a problem. Colette wanted the little girl to carry her husband's name, just like her two other daughters. This, she felt, would make it easier in the future, in dealing with the authorities at school and other government agencies, as the children would have the same family name. Andre, however, was adamant that this could not be. The baby had been born under different circumstances than the first two -- born at home instead of the hospital -- so she needed to have a different name to commemorate the circumstances of her birth. Andre said that Colette would name the baby -- but that he was just waiting for her to come around to his way of thinking on the subject. Later on that evening, when we returned home, we heard them arguing further about it.

Since the house burned, three months ago, Andre, Colette, their three daughters, and the housekeeper have been living in a rented two-room apartment at the Catholic Mission. Colette dropped by the other day to see me. Friends have given them contributions to rebuild their home, as it was uninsured. But, she explained, they still lack the money to buy seventeen pieces of corrugated metal roofing. In addition, they will have to obtain more wood for the framework of the house, as some neighbors' housekeepers taken poles from the house remains, to use for firewood (cooking fuel). Not only did they have to rebuild the house, but also acquire new clothes, new furniture, new pots and dishes, as virtually all -- including the items she acquired on her shopping trip to Bujumbura -- had been lost in the fire.

Colette's hopes of rebuilding her house seem to be eroding away. Andre has been drinking more and more heavily, and she has been unable to persuade him to "economize", so that they can save money to rebuild. At 100 francs per 72 cl (3/4 quart) bottle of Primus beer, plus his cigarettes, Andre is spending most of his monthly salary. Colette's salary barely covers the rent and the housekeeper's salary, let alone buy the food.

There is little here to help Colette. Beer-drinking is the major form of socializing among men, and is not generally frowned upon. Historically, in fact, it was considered a sign of wealth to be able to afford to drink. But Andre has gone so far, other friends tell me, that he is now endangering his job, occasionally failing to show up for work. Similarly, although wife-beating is not encouraged here, it is an established part of local tradition, and is certainly not, in itself, socially-accepted as grounds for divorce. (Legally, however, women's divorce rights have been improving.) Colette has, however, recently started to fight back. Friends really can do little more -- and are reluctant to give them any more money, lest Andre just drink it up.

Colette, meanwhile, continues to hope...that she will be able to rebuild her house, furnish it again, provide herself and the children with nice clothes. She has other dreams, as well, such as one day having running water and electricity in her house or having transportation, but knows they are even remoter still.

As time goes by, neighbors bring their cows to graze on the weeds invading Colette's abandoned yard. Soon the heavy rainy season will end. The three-month dry season would be a good time to rebuild. The question, of course, is whether or not Colette can manage to obtain the money in time, to begin to rebuild the future for her and her daughters.

Sincerely,



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Received in Hanover 5/16/86