



# 2021 ANNUAL REPORT





# **2021 Annual** Report



# Foreword

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I am pleased to present this report on the impactful work of the Legal Aid Forum (LAF) in 2021. As in previous years, LAF continued to be one of the most active Civil Society Organizations in Rwanda, providing legal aid services to the indigent and vulnerable.

LAF was established in 2006 to create a platform for organizations interested in providing legal aid services to share best practices, collaborate on capacity building, research, and evidence-based advocacy. Today, we are the leading non-state legal aid provider in Rwanda, comprising 38 national and international NGOs, professional bodies, university legal aid clinics, and faith-based initiatives.

As in previous years, in 2021 LAF advocated for equitable access to justice by strengthening cooperation and complementarity among legal aid providers, improving the quality and accessibility of legal aid services, enhancing the capacity of legal aid actors, initiating research and advocacy activities on legal issues affecting vulnerable populations in Rwanda, contributing to the development of an effective and sustainable legal aid system, and mobilizing resources and technical support to improve legal aid.

This report outlines the different activities that LAF implemented throughout 2021, highlighting key achievements such as research conducted, evidence-based advocacy, professional capacity building, legal education and awareness-raising in communities and refugee camps, legal advice, legal representation, legal aid and representation, participation in international treaty body reporting cycles, provision of grants to LAF members, and more.

Through these initiatives, LAF is contributing to the development of an effective and sustainable legal aid system in Rwanda while ensuring that indigent and vulnerable populations have equitable access to justice.

We remain committed to improving the quality of justice and legal aid services in Rwanda and to supporting the country's continued recovery from the pandemic.

We are especially grateful to all our partners whose support enables us to continue expanding access to justice for the indigent and vulnerable populations.

Sincerely,

**Me Andrews Kananga**  
Executive Director

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# List of Acronyms



**A4ID:** Advocates for International Development

**ADEPE :** Action pour le Développement du Peuple

**AJPRODHO–JIJUKIRWA :** Association de la Jeunesse pour la Promotion des Droits de l'Homme et le Développement

**ARDHO :** Association Rwandaise pour La Defence des Droits de l'Homme

**ARJ :** Association Rwandaise des Journalistes.

**ATI:** Access to Information

**CLAM:** Center for Legal Aid and Mediation

**CSO<sub>s</sub>:** Civil society Organizations

**DKU:** Dufatanye Kubaka Ubutabera

**DPC:** District Police Commander

**FoE:** Freedom of Expression

**GBV:** Gender based Violence

**GOR:** Government of Rwanda

**HRF:** Human Rights First Rwanda Association

**ICT:** Information and communication technologies

**ILPD:** Institute of Legal Practice and Development

**IVR:** Interactive voice response

**LACSF:** Legal Aid Civil Society Fund

**LAF:** The Legal Aid Forum

**LAPS:** Legal Aid Performance Standard

**LAW:** Legal Aid Week

**LOH:** Lawyers of Hope

**MINEMA:** Ministry in charge of Emergency Management



**MINIJUST:** Ministry of Justice

**MLAC:** Mobile Legal Aid Clinic

**MoU:** Memorandum of Understanding

**MTN:** Mobile Telephone Network

**PIL:** Public Interest Litigation

**PSEA:** Protection from Sexual Exploitation and Abuse

**RBA:** Rwanda Bar Association

**RGB:** Rwanda Government Board

**RMC:** Rwanda Media Commission

**RNP:** Rwanda National Police

**RURA:** Rwanda Utilities and Regulations Authority

**SDG:** Sustainable Development Goals

**SGBV:** Sexual-Gender Based Violence

**TIR:** Transparency International Rwanda

**UNHCR:** United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees

**UPR:** Universal Periodic Review

**USSD:** Unstructured Supplementary Service Data



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# INTRODUCTION

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This report provides a comprehensive overview of the activities and corresponding results achieved by the Legal Aid Forum (LAF) network in 2021. The report covers both member organizations and the LAF secretariat levels.

It is worth noting that due to the measures put in place to combat Covid-19, LAF maximized the use of Information and Communication Technology (ICT), which proved to be highly impactful in the implementation of legal awareness activities.

All activities carried out in 2021 were aligned with LAF's strategic objectives categorized into four thematic areas:

<b>LEGAL EMPOWERMENT</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Legal assistance and representation</li><li>• Legal education and awareness on rights</li></ul>
<b>KNOWLEDGE BUILDING</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Researches used to generate strategies &amp; advocacy</li><li>• Capacity building to staff, members and stakeholders</li></ul>
<b>HUMAN RIGHTS PROMOTION AND PROTECTION</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• UPR Monitoring</li><li>• Engaging with human rights treaty bodies and human rights mechanism.</li></ul>
<b>INSTITUTIONAL DEVELOPMENT</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Legal Aid Civil Society Fund</li><li>• Grants making and fundraising</li></ul>

## Key highlights from 2021

- **20,912 vulnerable individuals** received free legal advice
- **499 cases** represented in Courts of Law
- **197,214 people** in communities and refugee camps educated on various rights and key laws
- **1,143,179 people** were reached by legal education through LAF ICT platforms
- **886 justice actors** trained on various legal topics and instruments
- **17 DNA** cases facilitated
- **3 research assessments published**
- **7 local CSOs** sub granted

# PART I : PERFORMANCE BY LAF SECRETARIAT

## 1. KNOWLEDGE BUILDING

LAF has leveraged its legal expertise, casework, and engagement with beneficiaries, along with the extensive reach and experience of its member organizations, to become a national knowledge hub for information on access to justice and legal aid in Rwanda.

To strengthen this role, LAF is conducting new research and using it to pursue evidence-based advocacy for legal, policy, and administrative change. Additionally, LAF is enhancing public knowledge and the expertise of its member organizations through public information and awareness activities, and by providing training to empower its members to be effective providers of legal information and legal aid services.

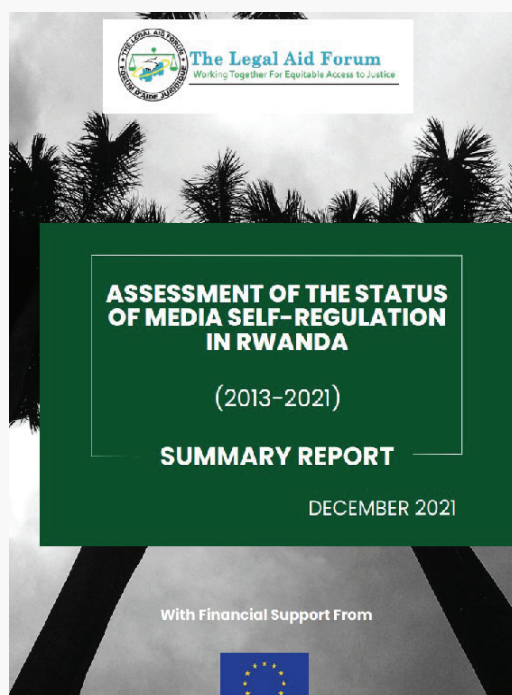
### 1.1. Research

At LAF, research has played a significant role in monitoring indicators set by state institutions in their policies on access to justice. Our targeted research projects are conducted by a team of qualified and experienced resource persons, with support from either ad hoc steering committees or external reviewers, leading to concrete and reliable findings.

Over the years, LAF has become a leading organization in research on policy issues affecting the Rwandan population. LAF applies various research approaches, and these techniques have been the main methodological approach that serves as the basis for the organization's evidence-based advocacy. Findings and recommendations from our research are presented to relevant institutions and policymakers, thereby influencing policy actions, addressing human rights concerns, reducing capacity gaps, and leading to innovative solutions to justice issues.

In 2021, LAF continued to conduct research activities. We are proud to have conducted extensive research in various areas, including Situational analysis of teen pregnancy, the Status of Media Self-Regulation, Freedom of Expression and Access to Information in Rwanda. The findings and recommendations from our research have contributed significantly to shaping policy and practice in these areas, and we remain committed to conducting research that informs evidence-based advocacy and promotes equitable access to justice for all Rwandans.

### 1.1.1 Assessment of the Status of Media Self-Regulation in Rwanda



In 2013, the government of Rwanda carried out media sector reforms meant to create a professional, responsible, pluralistic, and economically viable media sector.

The Media Law and Policy were revised to speak to the constitutional commitment to freedom of expression and of the media, and the country's development agenda as outlined in the then Vision 2020 policy documents. LAF partnered with the Rwanda Media Commission (RMC) with financial support from the European Union Delegation to Rwanda to implement a project on freedom of expression with a specific focus on promoting a favorable legal and regulatory framework for freedom of expression and access to information.

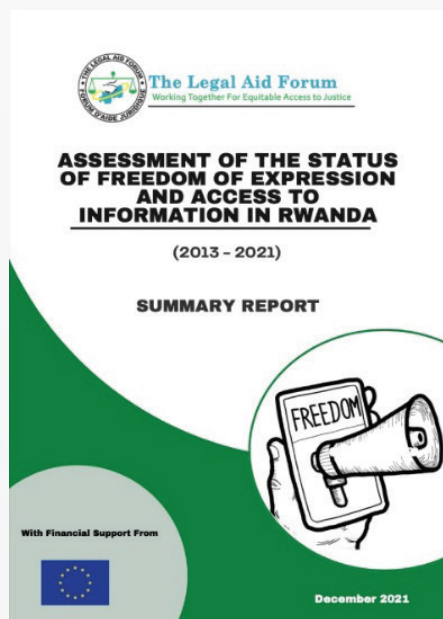
One of the activities of the project was to assess the status of media self-regulation in Rwanda since its introduction in 2013, with an interest in finding out how the following five elements have played into the self-regulation of media in Rwanda:

- The current legal and institutional framework underpinning media self-regulation in Rwanda;
- The capacity and independence of media self-regulation mechanism in Rwanda in safeguarding editorial independence to minimize state interference;
- The contribution of RMC in promoting media professionalism and quality journalism and in holding it to account as it serves the Rwandan citizenry;
- The progress and challenges within media self-regulation vis-à-vis freedom of expression and access to information in Rwanda;
- The lessons and good practices so far learnt about media self-regulation and freedom of expression practices in Rwanda.

A qualitative research approach was utilized to enable a deeper understanding of the context in which media self-regulation operates in Rwanda including the legal, institutional and organizational frameworks. The research team relied on both primary and secondary data. Key informant interviews and focus group discussions were crucial in clarifying issues arising from the desk research, so as to get a deeper insight into the mosaic of factors touching on the context of media self-regulation practice in Rwanda.

Among other things, findings highlight that the existing national and international legal instruments duly ratified by Rwanda offer a conducive environment for media self-regulation and freedom of expression in Rwanda. However, media self-regulation is hindered by new ethical challenges associated to the current digital age, which are not addressed by the current code of deontology and ethics.

### 1.1.2 Assessment of the Status of Freedom of Expression and Access to Information in Rwanda



LAF in partnership with RMC, with financial support from the European Union Delegation to Rwanda, implemented a project on freedom of expression with a specific focus on promoting a favorable legal and regulatory framework for freedom of expression and access to information. One of the activities of the project is to assess the status of Freedom of Expression (FoE) and Access to Information (ATI) in Rwanda, from 2013 to 2021.

This assessment aimed at assessing the current status of Freedom of Expression and Access to information in Rwanda following reforms by the Government of Rwanda in the media and information sector and efforts by different stakeholders and actors to promote freedom of expression and access to information.

#### The assessment aimed at:

- Analyzing the legal and institutional framework underpinning the media's freedom of expression and access to information,
- Analyzing the extent to which freedom of expression and related laws are respected and complied with in Rwanda,
- Assessing the progress and challenges related to freedom of expression and access to information in Rwanda,
- Exploring the contribution of FoE and ATI in Rwandan Society,
- Assessing the complaint handling mechanism related to freedom of expression and access to information,
- Assessing freedom of expression and access to Information in view of emerging trends in social media,
- Documenting lessons learned and good practices related to freedom of expression and access to information.

LAF values the input of stakeholders and media practitioners in advancing its mission and promoting equitable access to justice. After conducting the assessments, LAF organized a workshop to discuss the findings and recommendations with stakeholders, including media practitioners. The workshop aimed to engage participants in identifying actionable steps to improve the sector going forward.

During the workshop, participants had the opportunity to provide feedback on the findings and recommendations, share their experiences and perspectives, and engage in interactive discussions.



**Participants following a panel discussion during the workshop to present research findings on Freedom of Expression, Access to Information, and Media self-regulation in Rwanda**



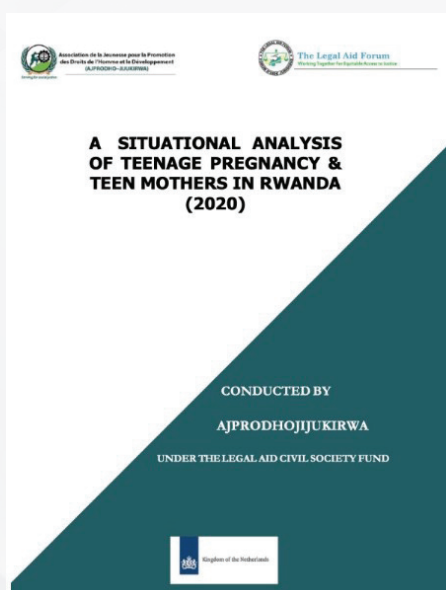
**Participants pose for a picture after the validation workshop**

The recommendations from the two assessments were instrumental in bringing about changes in the media landscape in Rwanda. As a direct result, the code of conduct for journalists has been revised to reflect new realities and emerging issues in the areas of access to information and freedom of expression in Rwanda. The Rwanda Media Commission bylaws have also been revised to align with the new code of conduct and to enhance its effectiveness in regulating the media sector.

Furthermore, the assessment recommendations are being used to inform a new media policy that is currently under development. The policy is expected to address various issues, including media ownership, regulation, and ethical conduct, and to create an enabling environment for the media to operate freely while upholding ethical standards.

LAF is proud to have played a role in bringing about these positive changes in the media landscape in Rwanda. We remain committed to working with stakeholders to ensure that the media sector continues to promote access to information, freedom of expression, and the protection of human rights.

### 1.1.3. Situational analysis of teen pregnancy



AJPRODHO-JIJUKIRWA, with support from LAF, conducted a research study to provide a situational analysis of teenage pregnancy and teen mothers in four provinces of Rwanda. The study had three main objectives, which were (1) to investigate the causes of teenage pregnancy, (2) to analyze the effects of teenage pregnancy, and (3) to assess the access to justice needs of teenage mothers. Qualitative data was collected through questionnaires, focus group discussions (FGDs), and interviews with key informants, as well as through observation techniques. Secondary data was also gathered from various national and international policy and legal documents.

The findings of the study revealed that the leading cause of teenage pregnancy was defilement, which was expressed by 49% of the respondents. Peer influence was the second leading cause at 33%. Other factors such as technological development, the quest for material needs, lack of parenting, and knowledge on sexual and reproductive health were also presented as causes. The study also revealed that there have been significant improvements compared to previous studies conducted by CLADHO in 2016, where sexual violence was the leading cause of teenage pregnancy at 75%, followed by peer influence at 49%. The study further found that car and moto drivers constituted the biggest percentage of suspects at 18%.

Following the research, AJPRODHO-JIJUKIRWA organized a roundtable discussion with government institutions, civil society organizations, and other stakeholders to discuss their findings and advocate for the following recommendations:

- 
- School teachers should play a key role in preventing and finding solutions to problems of teenage pregnancy by putting more emphasis on explaining sexual and reproductive health to students through clubs, music, and other creative methods.
  - Emphasis should be given to the prevention of adolescent pregnancy through the improvement of access to contraceptives and adolescent-friendly health services, among other measures.
  - Strategies should be developed to economically empower adolescents, especially girls from poor families, since poverty has been identified as a major factor leading to teen pregnancy.
  - Initiatives like the promotion of vocational training (TVET) and savings groups would help to improve their livelihoods.
  - Community mobilization should be strengthened, especially through community assemblies (inteko z'abaturage) and parents' evenings (umugoroba w'ababyeyi), to prevent teen pregnancies. This would encourage sex education and discussions between parents and children.

The findings from this study are crucial for informing policies and interventions aimed at reducing teenage pregnancy rates and addressing the access to justice needs of teenage mothers.


[Click here to read more on the assessment](#)

## 1.2. Evidence-based advocacy

Since its establishment, LAF has had significant success with its advocacy for changes in law, regulations, policy, and practice in the provision of legal aid services, access to Justice and the respect and protection of human rights. This success is a result of advocacy based on sound qualitative and quantitative research, and expert legal analysis.

Our advocacy seeks to ensure that all people in society especially the poor and vulnerable are able to have their voices heard on issues that are important to them, protect and promote their rights, and have their views and opinions genuinely considered when decisions are being made about their lives and ensure that they have access to justice without any discrimination or hindrances.

Throughout 2021, LAF developed different position papers and submitted them to parliament and ministries aiming to convince and push them to address some legal matters in the public interest. LAF has also used media to recast legal issues that affect the community, deal out viewpoints, and encourage the government and other actors to find solutions for the best of the community. Additionally, LAF has conducted various strategic meetings in that regard with different government entities and stakeholders.



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For example, LAF has advocated for policy change by submitting position papers on the following laws among others:

- a. Law N°32/2016 of 28/08/2016 governing persons and families.
  - o LAF presented various comments and suggestions that advocate for the well-being of people in a family and called for amendments to some provisions in this law. LAF criticized article 82 of the law for discriminating against people with disability. LAF suggested that the cost of an interpreter for a person living with a disability should be covered by the state to eliminate the imbalance caused when the disabled person cannot afford to hire an interpreter. The recommendation was submitted to the Ministry of Gender and Family planning regarding amending this law and we eagerly await a new law governing persons and families that is favorable to all people.
- b. LAF participated in parliament sessions discussing Land law of 20221.

### **1.3. Professional Capacity Development**

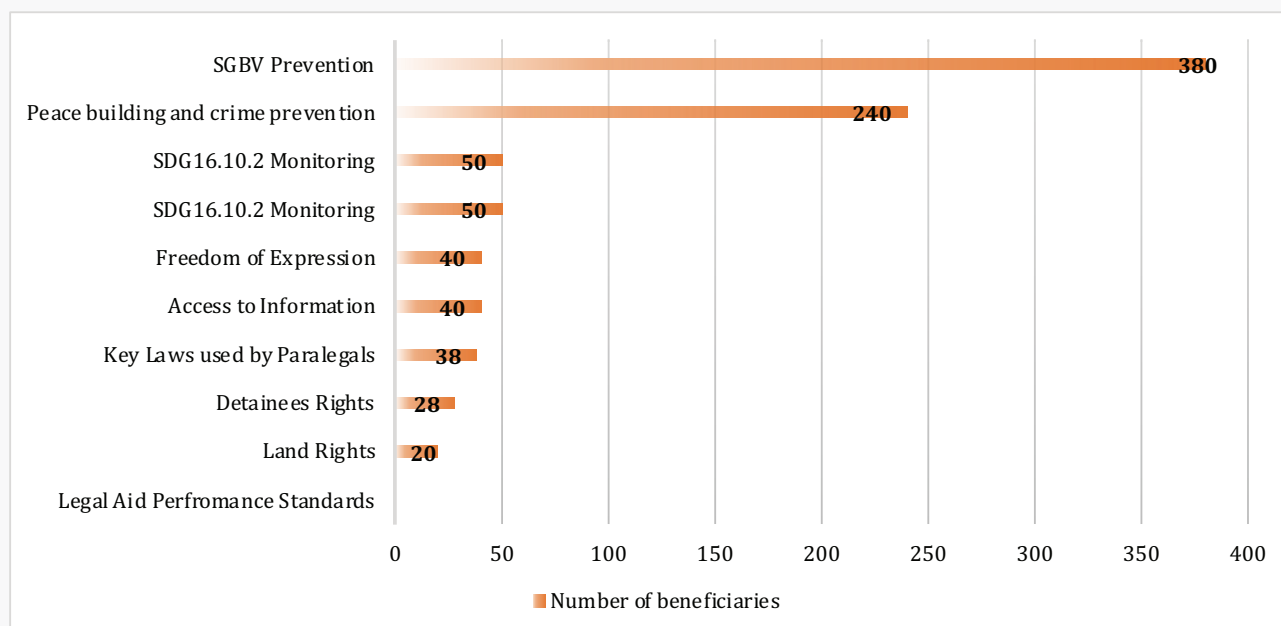
Capacity development is a fundamental aspect of LAF's strategic priority on knowledge building, and it has remained a crucial element of our work for many years. Our focus has been on enhancing skills, professionalism, and respect for human rights, resulting in tangible achievements in access to justice and positively impacting the quality of legal services provided to Rwandan citizens.

LAF has taken a proactive approach in building and strengthening the capacity of legal aid service providers in Rwanda, in a bid to ensure that every citizen who seeks legal aid services receives quality legal services from capable service providers. Through our capacity-building initiatives, justice actors and legal aid providers have significantly improved their professional capacity to deliver quality justice services. We design our training content to align with the expertise and experience of the targeted groups.

Our efforts towards capacity building continued in 2021 for Legal Aid Providers and other justice actors including Rwanda Investigation Bureau staff, advocates, local leaders, information officers, paralegals, and refugee representatives to empower them to provide quality legal aid services. In total, LAF trained 886 individuals on different legal topics as illustrated in the graph below.



Below are a few examples of some of the trainings undertaken



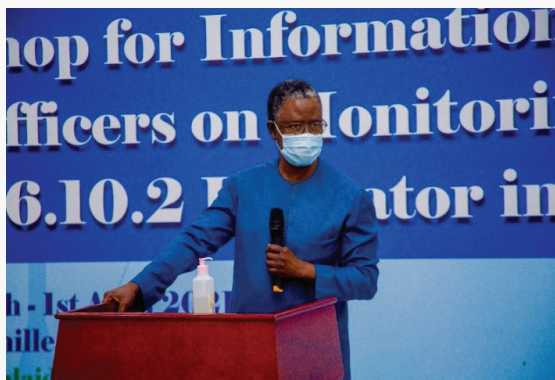
### 1.3.1. Training on Monitoring and reporting of SDG 16.10.2 indicator in Rwanda



Participants during the training session

LAF collaborated with UNESCO to advance human rights in Rwanda, particularly the freedom of expression, by conducting training sessions for Information and Communication Officers (ICOs) from public and private institutions. The goal of the training was to enhance the capabilities of national ICOs to monitor and report on access to information, which is a crucial SDG indicator (16.10.2) in Rwanda. The 2-day training was attended by over 40 participants.

At the commencement of the training, the United Nations Resident Coordinator for Rwanda, Fodé Ndiaye, emphasized the importance of access to information and how informed citizens can drive sustainable development, aligning with the UN philosophy on this subject.



*“We believe that access to information must be recognized as a norm in sustainable development and a prerequisite to countries because it informs and engages citizens into public life to monitor and make public authorities accountable,” he said.*

**Fodé Ndiaye, The United Nations Resident Coordinator for Rwanda**

At the conclusion of the training, Mr. Richard Ndayambaje, the Public Relations Officer at the Rwanda Investigation Bureau (RIB), expressed his satisfaction with the training, stating that his expectations had been met. He mentioned that the training had helped him understand the relationship between Goal 16 and access to information law in Rwanda, as well as exposed existing gaps in his knowledge. Mr. Ndayambaje also highlighted the importance of the training in educating participants about the details of the law, which was a topic that many were not familiar with prior to the training, stating

*“Especially understanding the relationship of Goal 16 in connection with access to information law, locally, and also understanding other experiences and existing gaps. It was also discovered that most of us don’t understand the details of the law and this was a good platform for us to educate each other about this law”*

### **1.3.2. Training workshop on freedom of expression and media offences for judges and prosecutors**

LAF conducted training sessions for duty bearers from various government institutions, including investigators from the Rwanda Investigation Bureau (RIB), judges, and prosecutors. The main topics covered were Freedom of Expression and Media Offences. The training was designed for 40 participants, and during the sessions, participants expressed their keen interest in gaining a deeper understanding of how to deal with media-related offences.

They also discussed the challenges they face, which are primarily due to a lack of skills in matters related to freedom of expression. Based on the positive feedback received, additional training sessions were recommended to increase the number of beneficiaries with improved skills in this area.



Pictures from the opening of training of Judges, investigators and journalists

### 1.3.3. Training of community-based paralegals

In 2021, we remained committed to grassroots legal empowerment in Rwanda by supporting paralegals to scale up access to justice at the community level. As part of this initiative, we organized a training program for community-based paralegals, aimed at improving their knowledge and skills in key areas of law to ensure they provide effective and quality legal services to their communities.

In 2021, we trained 38 community-based paralegals on land law and legal aid performance standards, equipping them with the necessary tools to effectively address legal challenges in land-related disputes. The training also emphasized the importance of up-to-date knowledge and the need for ongoing professional development.



Community-based paralegals during the training

### 1.3.4. Training for partners on key laws and procedures

LAF partnered with UNHCR to provide comprehensive training to 82 partners actively working in refugee camps. The primary objective of the training was to equip participants with essential knowledge and skills pertaining to criminal procedures, crime prevention, and protection against sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV).

The training covered various topics related to family law and civil procedures, enabling participants to better understand the legal framework governing their work. The training also facilitated open discussions among participants to identify and address the legal challenges encountered while providing assistance to refugees. By enhancing the capacity of these partners, the initiative aimed to improve the quality and effectiveness of services provided to refugees.



Training participants from Kigeme Refugee Camp

*“I appreciated the knowledge gained during this training. I am now more empowered to orient and advise Refugees and Asylum seekers who come to us seeking legal services”. -Joseph Bizimana, LAF Legal Officer.*

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## 2. LEGAL EMPOWERMENT

Since its establishment, LAF works to empower vulnerable and indigent individuals to use both formal and informal justice mechanisms to claim and assert their rights. Our legal empowerment efforts focus on equipping people with the knowledge, confidence, and skills necessary to access the benefits and rights they are entitled to under the law. We also strive to improve access to justice in communities by providing high-quality legal aid for vulnerable groups.

Our legal empowerment approaches include a range of strategies, such as community-based paralegals, Legal Aid Week, ICT, Mobile Legal Aid Clinics, Media, University Legal Aid Clinics, Posters, and more. By implementing these approaches, we are working to strengthen the capacity of the people of Rwanda to use legal mechanisms to pursue transformative improvements to laws and systems.

The Legal Aid Forum is proud to play a role in promoting legal empowerment in Rwanda and working towards a more just society for all.

### 2.1. Legal education/awareness

LAF conducts legal awareness programs to educate people about their legal rights, responsibilities, and available legal services as well as empower them to make informed decisions about legal matters.

Legal awareness promotes the rule of law and equal access to justice in that when people understand their legal rights and how to access legal services, they are more likely to seek justice when they need it, which is critical for building a fair and just society.



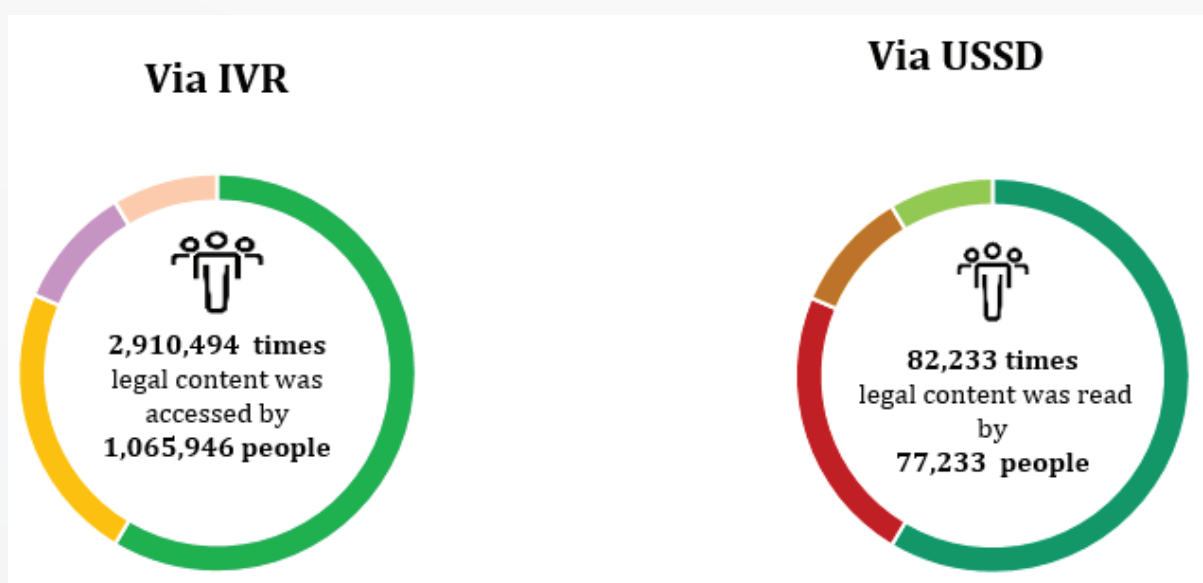
LAF community-based paralegal conducting awareness session in Gatsibo District

In 2021, LAF conducted a number of legal education/awareness activities in communities, including refugee camps, educating **197,214 people** on various rights, legal provisions, procedures and key laws.

In addition to people reached through community awareness campaigns, LAF also reached over a million Rwandan through its ICT platform (845). The platform hosts pre-recorded legal content in the local language, easily accessible through simple mobile phone technology.

The content was accessed in audio format (IVR<sup>1</sup>) by 1,065,946 people and 77,233 people accessed it via text format (USSD<sup>2</sup>).

### Accessibility of Legal content on ICT Platform in 2021



## 2.2. Legal assistance and representation

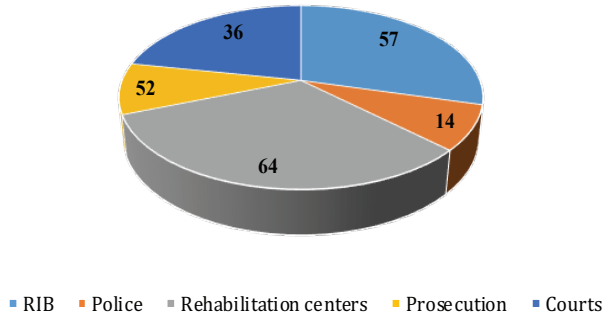
### 2.2.1. Legal assistance at pre-trial phase

The Pre-Trial phase of a criminal case commences when an individual is under investigation by law enforcement or prosecutors. It is a critical stage where legal assistance is necessary to ensure that the suspect's rights are not infringed upon and to bolster their defense. The provision of legal aid at this stage by organizations such as LAF is essential to guarantee access to fair justice. LAF provides legal aid to individuals from the moment they are suspected, arrested, or detained and throughout the period leading up to their first appearance before a judge to determine whether they will be held in detention or released pending trial.

<sup>1</sup>IVR is an Interactive Voice Response mostly used for Call Centers. It is a technology that allows humans to interact with a computer-operated phone system through the use of voice and DTMF tones input via a keypad

<sup>2</sup>USSD (Unstructured Supplementary Service Data) is a Global System for Mobile (GSM) communication technology that is used to send text between a mobile phone and an application program in the network. Applications may include prepaid roaming or mobile chatting.

### Number of released beneficiaries after legal assistance at pre-trial phase

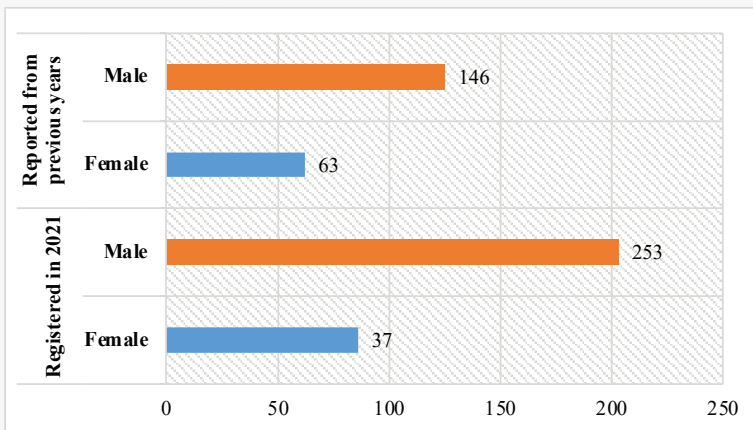


In 2021, LAF supported the release of 223 individuals during the Pre-Trial phase from various institutions, including the Rwanda Investigation Bureau, Rwanda National Police, rehabilitation centers, prosecution, and different courts. This achievement underscores the importance of legal aid in the criminal justice system and the need to ensure that every individual's rights are protected, irrespective of their circumstances.

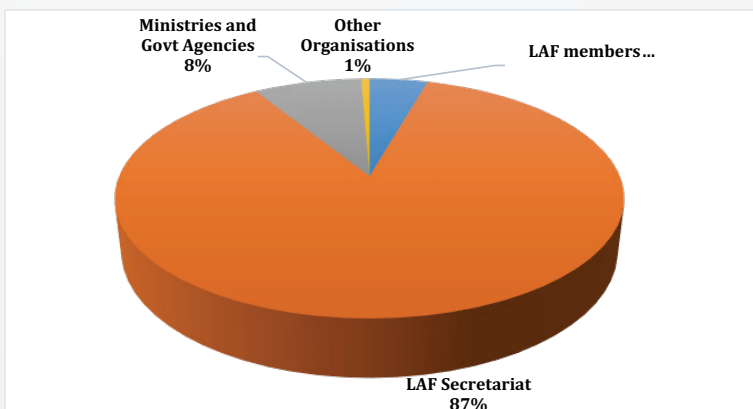
### 2.2.2. Legal representation in courts

The right to legal representation is a fundamental right guaranteed by the Constitution of the Republic of Rwanda of 2003, as revised in 2015. The constitution provides that everyone has the right to due process of law, including the right to be informed of the nature and cause of the charges, as well as the right to defense and legal representation.

In 2021, LAF provided legal representation to a total of 499 individuals in courts of law. Out of this total, 290 cases were received in 2021 while 209 cases were carried over from previous years but completed in 2021. Among the beneficiaries, 307 were male and 192 were female.



LAF has adopted various approaches to receive requests for legal aid. The majority, 87%, were received directly by LAF's secretariat through walk-ins at their offices, toll-free legal aid helpline (1022), paralegal services, and Legal Aid Week. Additionally, 8% of cases were referred to LAF by different government entities and institutions, while 4% were referred by LAF members.

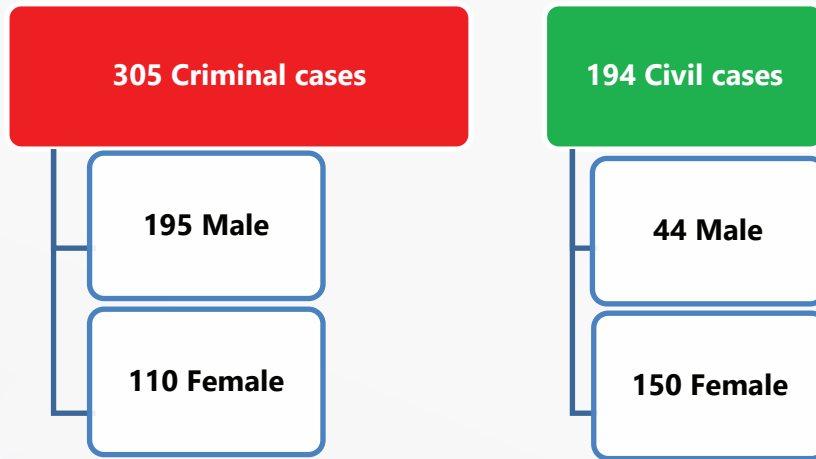


The remaining 1% of cases were referred to LAF by other organizations.

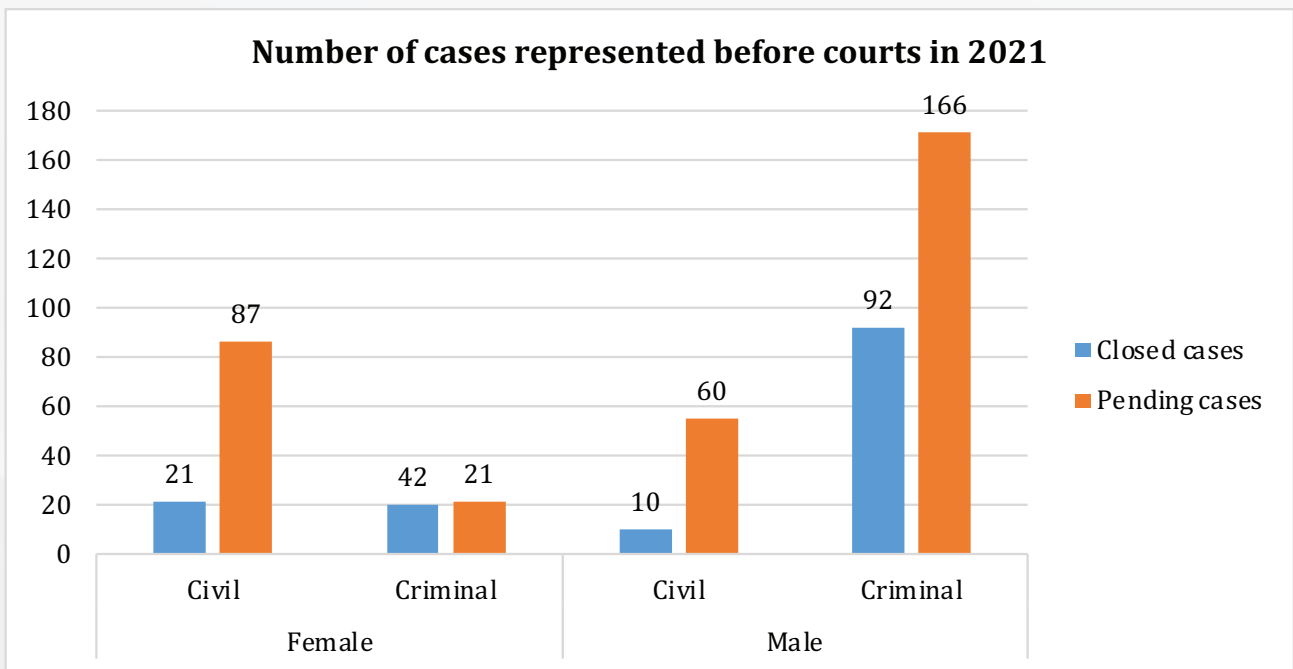
This diverse range of referral sources highlights the vital role that LAF plays in providing legal aid to individuals in need. It also demonstrates the trust and confidence that government

institutions and other organizations have in LAF's ability to deliver effective legal assistance.

During 2021, among 499 cases represented before courts 305 were criminal cases while 194 were civil cases.



In 2021, LAF Lawyers successfully closed 499 cases. The following chart provides a breakdown of this data:





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## Impact beyond numbers

### The Legal Battle for Property Rights – KABAYUNDO Phoebe’s Story

KABAYUNDO Phoebe’s life took a dramatic turn when her partner, Murenzi Justin, initiated a case against her at the Intermediate Court of Gasabo. The case involved a bitter dispute over the division of property between the two, and it was enough to cause Phoebe to seek legal representation from the Legal Aid Forum (after being referred by Rwanda Women Network).

Phoebe had endured a tough life with Murenzi, whom she lived with as partners in Tanzania from 1981 to 1996. Upon returning to Rwanda with their five children, they faced financial difficulties and had to work hard to provide for their family. However, things went from bad to worse when Murenzi became abusive towards Phoebe and had relationships with other women.

Phoebe sought help from their family to resolve their issues, but no resolution was reached. Murenzi, on the other hand, took matters into his own hands and requested that Phoebe vacate the property they owned together since they were never legally married. He claimed sole ownership of the property he and this sparked the legal battle.

The Intermediate Court of Gasabo reviewed their case and determined that, despite not being legally married, they jointly owned the property and land they acquired during their relationship, and it should be divided equally between them. However, Murenzi wasn’t satisfied and appealed to the High Court, which upheld the previous decision. He also appealed again to the Court of Appeal, but the outcome remained the same.

Thanks to the Legal Aid Forum’s assistance, Phoebe was able to obtain legal representation and get a fair outcome from the courts.

#### DNA testing

Over the course its work, LAF has realized that several vulnerable women and girls are unable to afford to pay for scientific evidence such as DNA services that are key to access to justice, especially in search for paternity cases. In order to bridge this gap, LAF entered into partnership with the Rwanda Forensic Laboratory (RFL) to provide DNA services to LAF beneficiaries in need.

In total, **17 cases** benefited from DNA testing services this year. However, sometimes, beneficiaries, particularly men, have been unwilling to collect DNA test results. To address this, LAF tries to collect the results on behalf of the client and takes them to respective courts that ordered the tests so that justice is not delayed.

## Justice for the Innocent: Claudine's Fight for Her Child's Rights

Jean Claude NZEYIMANA fathered a child with Claudine Uwamahoro while she was in secondary school and then he refused to acknowledge the child or provide any financial support despite Claudine's pleas over the years. Even when the local authorities got involved, he refused to budge.

But Claudine didn't give up. She approached the Legal Aid Forum seeking legal representation and was assigned a lawyer to fight for her and her child's rights. The case was filed in court and a DNA test was ordered to establish paternity. LAF paid for the test on behalf of Claudine.

Finally, justice was served. The court confirmed that the child was in fact Jean Claude's and ordered that the child be registered as such in the civil registrar of Jabana sector. Not only that, but the court also granted the child rights to Jean Claude's property as his legal heir.

This victory for Claudine and her child is a reminder of the power of legal aid services in securing justice for the most vulnerable members of society. DNA testing has proven to be a powerful tool in establishing paternity, securing financial support, determining custody arrangements, providing emotional closure, and ensuring legal rights for children, especially those born out of wedlock.

### 2.2.3. Legal advice

Legal advice is guidance or oral counsel offered by a professional lawyer regarding the substance or procedure of the law in relation to a particular factual situation. The provision of legal advice often involves analyzing a set of facts and advising a person to take a specific course of action based on the applicable law. Legal advice involves negotiations or the settlement of disputes amicably. LAF has set up various mechanisms through which it provides legal advice to beneficiaries, mainly the following.

#### 2.2.3.1. Legal aid through call center and legal aid line

Legal advice is a vital service that provides individuals with professional guidance and counsel from a lawyer to help individuals navigate the complex legal system and protect their rights. Legal advice typically involves mediation, orientation, and referral.

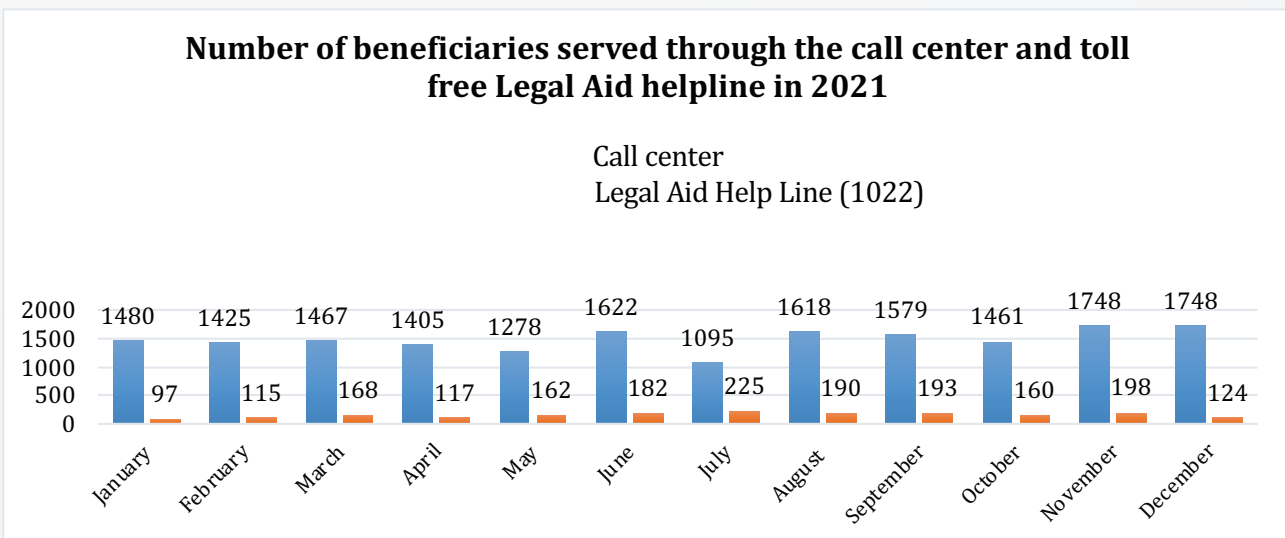
LAF has established various mechanisms to provide legal advice to its beneficiaries. One of the most effective methods is through its call center, which has been in operation since 2018. LAF also has a toll-free legal aid helpline (1022) that allows beneficiaries to contact lawyers directly for assistance and to follow up on their cases.



**LAF Legal Officers in the Call Center assisting legal aid seekers**

In 2021, LAF provided legal advice to 19,857 people. The call center assisted 90.28% of these individuals, while 9.72% were helped through the toll-free legal aid helpline.

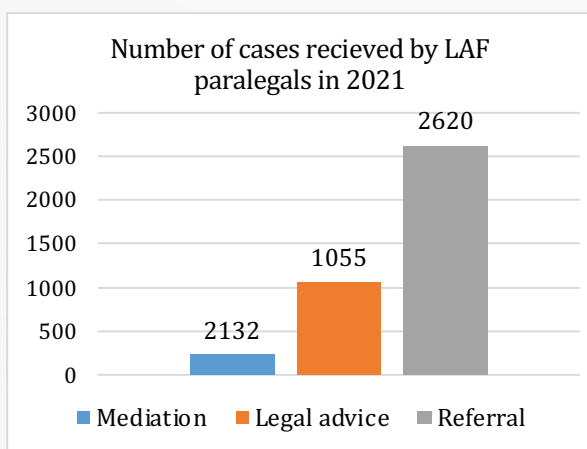
The following chart disaggregates figures by month.



### 2.2.3.2. Legal advice by community-based paralegals

LAF recognizes the importance of providing accessible and effective legal services to communities in need. To bridge the gap between the formal justice system and the communities it serves, LAF works with community-based paralegals who are equipped with the necessary skills and knowledge to be grassroots advocates.

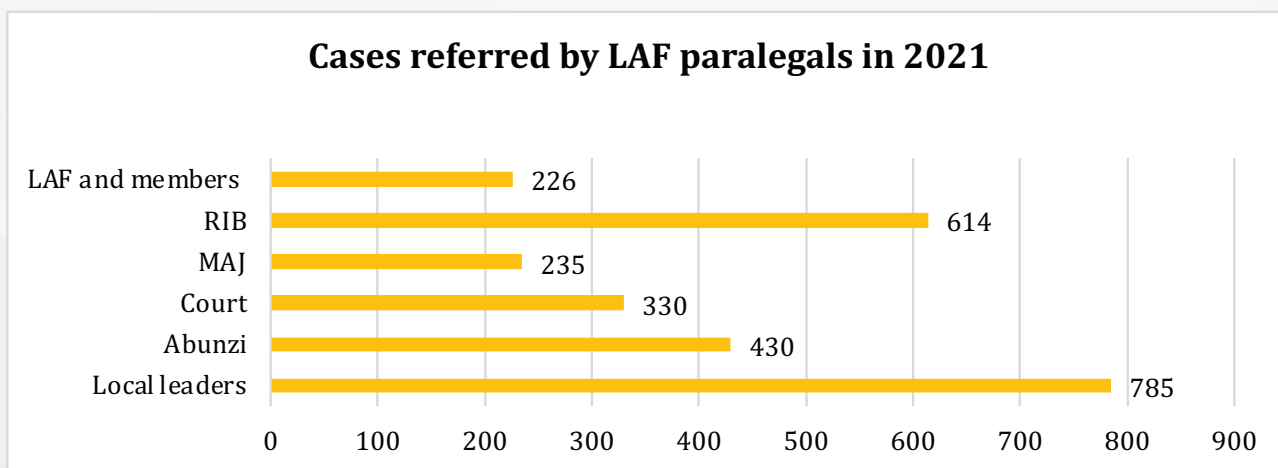
LAF invests in building the capacities of paralegals and empowering them to seek practical solutions to legal issues in their communities. As community members, paralegals receive various inquiries from their neighbors, and they provide legal advice, mediation, and orientation to those in need.



In 2021, LAF’s paralegals received a total of 5,807 cases. By the end of the year 34% of them already closed and 66% are ongoing. Out of these cases, 2,132 were successfully mediated, 1,055 received legal advice, and 2,620 beneficiaries were referred to different services

LAF’s community-based paralegal program has proven to be an effective way of providing legal services to communities in need.

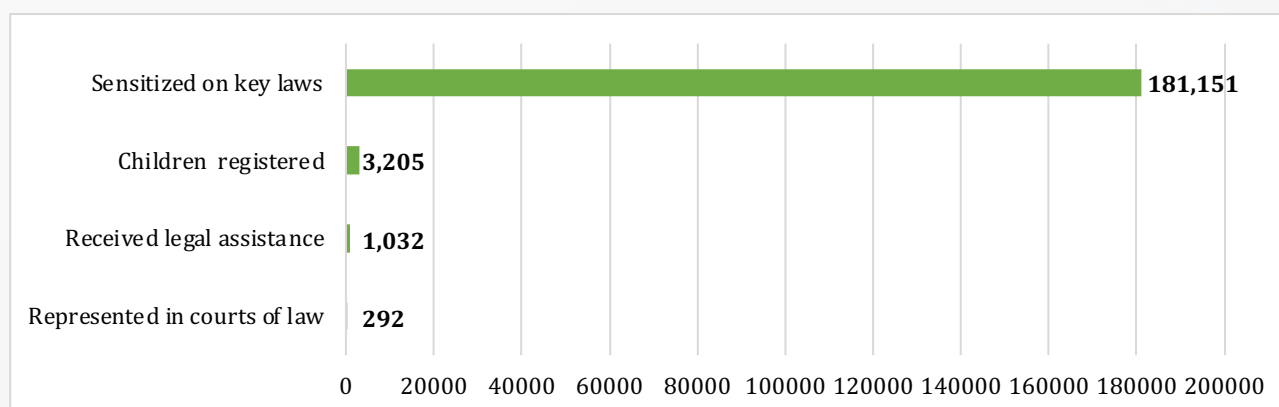
By empowering the grassroots justice defenders with legal knowledge and skills, LAF is promoting access to justice and ensuring that vulnerable populations have the support they need to protect their rights.



### 2.2.3.3. Legal Assistance to refugees and Asylum Seekers in Rwanda

Since 2016, the Legal Aid Forum (LAF) has been a leading provider of legal aid services for refugees and asylum seekers in Rwanda. In addition to facilitating civil documentation (birth registration and marriages), vital statistics, and identity management as part of a durable solution, LAF offers a range of free legal services, including legal advice, representation before courts and administrative authorities, detention monitoring, mediation, legal education, and awareness.

LAF was able to continue this work in 2021 and provided legal aid services to 1,324 refugees and asylum seekers including 292 individuals who were represented in courts of law. LAF also sensitized 181,151 people from refugee camps and host communities on key laws, including laws related to gender-based violence, and the importance of birth registration. Additionally, 3,205 refugee children were registered, and 230 couples from the refugee camps and host communities were facilitated in civil marriage after being sensitized on the importance of legal marriage as shown in the chart below



These achievements reflect LAF's commitment to ensuring that refugees and asylum seekers have access to legal services and protection.

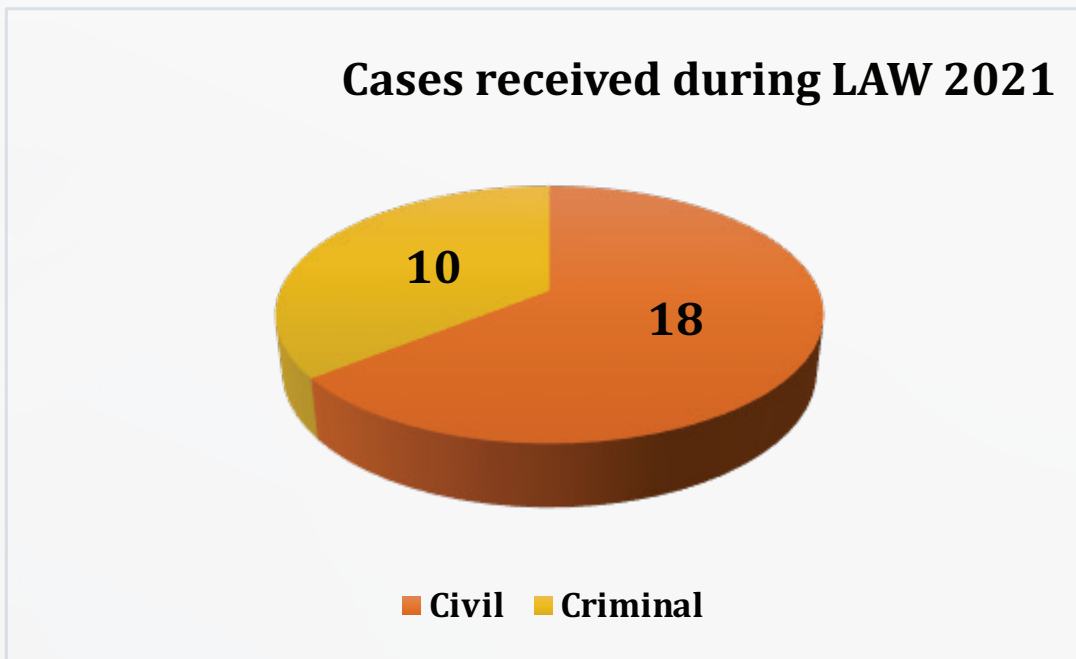
### 2.3. The Legal Aid Week

In 2009, LAF, in collaboration with the Ministry of Justice (MINIJUST), Rwanda Bar Association (RBA), and other Justice Sector Institutions launched the Legal Aid Week (LAW) initiative. The primary objective was to provide legal assistance to vulnerable individuals by educating them about their rights, available legal services, how to access them, and promoting Alternative Dispute Resolutions (ADR).

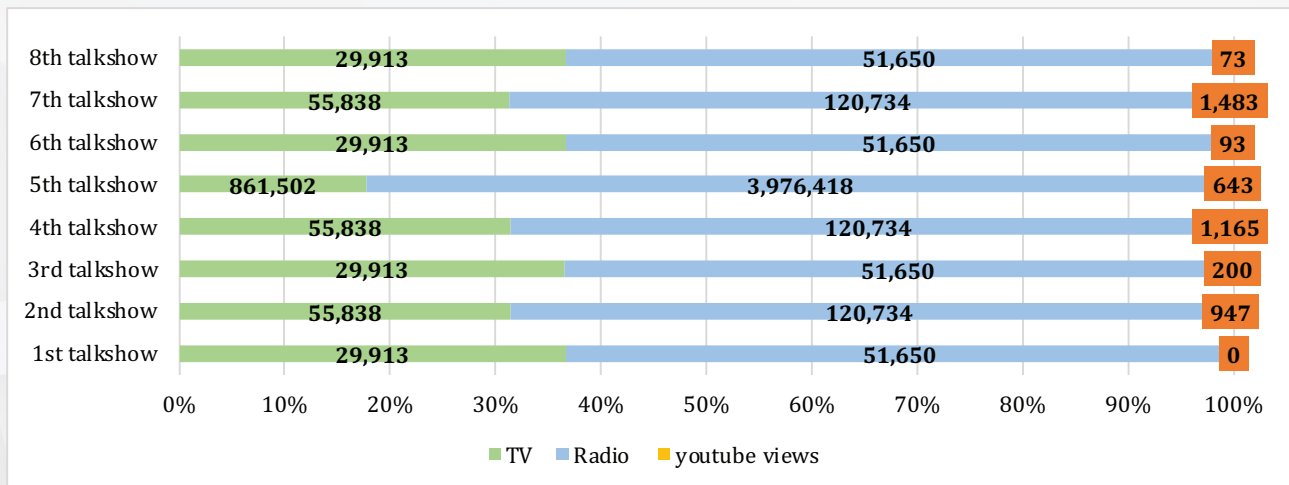
Since then, the Legal Aid Week has been held annually. During the week, particular attention is paid to pending cases of vulnerable groups such as minors in conflict with the law, nursing mothers in detention, the sick and elderly, and women. By providing legal aid services to the population, particularly the poor and vulnerable, the Legal Aid Week initiative aims to ensure that everyone has equal access to justice.

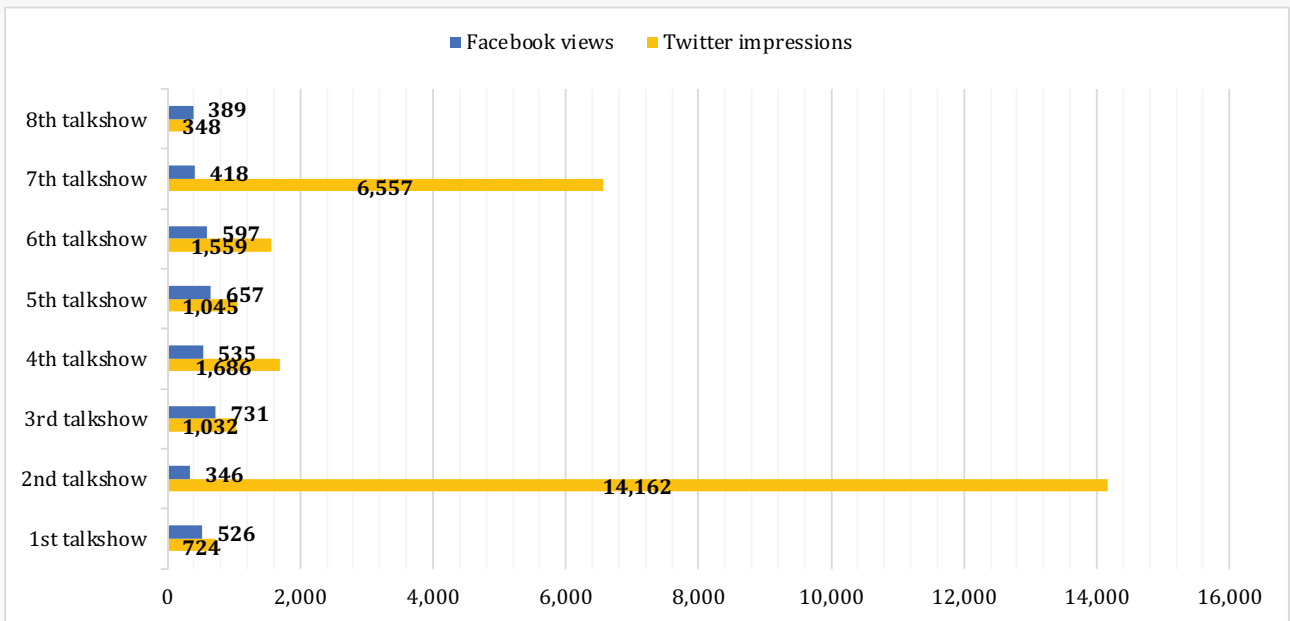
Despite the challenges posed by the Covid-19 pandemic, LAF adapted its approach in 2021 to continue providing legal aid services to those in need. This was achieved by using various media platforms including TV, radio, social media, and a dedicated ICT platform that provided 24/7 access to legal content. Additionally, LAF legal aid call center continued to offer legal assistance to citizens, ensuring that they could still obtain legal advice/information and representation in court as they would have during a typical Legal Aid Week.

In 2021 Legal Aid Week, LAF represented 28 individuals in courts of law during the legal aid week, including 14 male and 14 female.

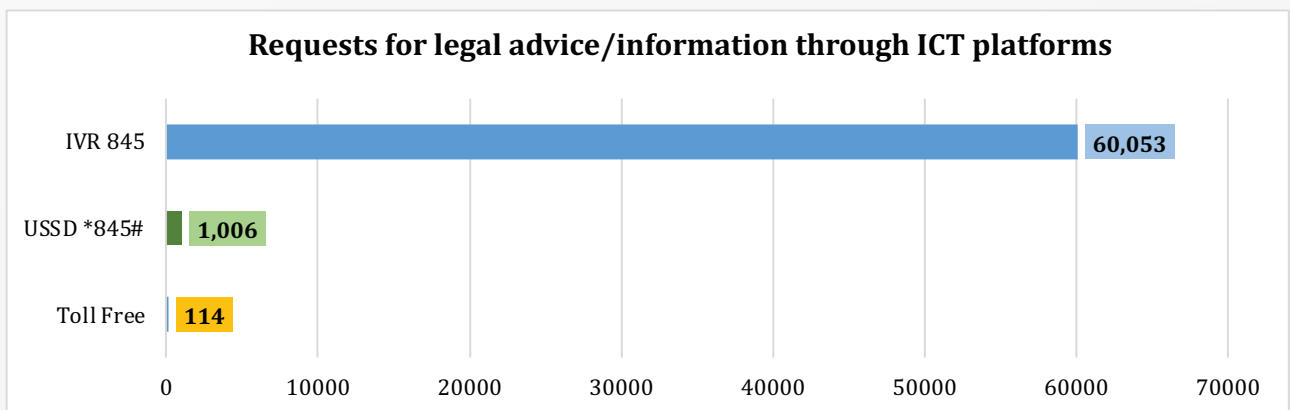


LAF also conducted legal awareness activities through digital media platforms reaching an estimate of 1,148,668 people as shown in the charts below:





During the Legal Aid Week, as intensive awareness was done through talk shows, the use of ICT tools to seek legal information increased to 61,173 people, including 114 calls to the Toll Free Legal Aid Helpline (1022), 60,053 searches via IVR and 1,006 searches through USSD code.



### 3. HUMAN RIGHTS PROMOTION AND PROTECTION

#### Universal periodic review

LAF has been a leading force since 2014 in mobilizing and organizing civil society to participate in the Universal Periodic Review (UPR). By leading a coalition of organizations focused on catalyzing civil society participation in the UPR process for improved human rights in Rwanda, LAF has played an instrumental role in strengthening civil society's engagement with relevant government institutions and citizens around the UPR process.

One of the significant strengths of the coalition is its broad base, and LAF has been working tirelessly to build the capacity of its members on how to engage the government within the framework of the UPR and monitor the implementation of UPR recommendations.

On May 19<sup>th</sup>, 2021, LAF held a workshop to reflect on the human rights situation in Rwanda through UPR, in light of recommendations given during the country's third review by the working group on UPR.



**Hon. Minister of Justice and Attorney General, Johnston Busingye delivering opening remarks**

In his opening remarks, the Minister of Justice/ Attorney General Hon. Busingye Johnston commended the improved relationship between the state and civil society in the UPR process, emphasizing inclusivity, complementarity, and a focus on Rwandans' lives as opportunities they now enjoy.

*He stated “For the last five years or so, we have witnessed more cooperation and less individualistic and confrontational tendencies among actors. Inclusivity, complementarity, and a focus on Rwandans' lives are other opportunities we now enjoy.”*

<sup>3</sup>Members of the coalition are as of today: CHRD (Center for Human Rights and Development), CERULAR (Center for Rule of Law Rwanda), FIYO (Fight Illiteracy Youth Organization), Strive Foundation Rwanda, Rwanda NGO Forum on HIV/AIDS, Never Again Rwanda (NAR), National Union of Disability Organizations of Rwanda (NUDOR), Faith Victory Association (FVA), Hope for Community Development Organization (HCDO), IMRO (Ihorere Munyarwanda Organization), LAF (Legal Aid Forum) Secretariat and some members of LAF namely : AJAR (Association des Jeunes Avocats du Rwanda), ADEPE (Action pour le Développement du Peuple), ADL (Association Rwandaise pour la Défense des Droits de la Personne et des Libertés Publiques), AJPRODHO-JJUKIRWA (Association de la Jeunesse pour la Promotion des Droits de l'Homme et du développement), ARDHO (Association Rwandaise pour la Défense des Droits de l'Homme), COPORWA (Communauté des Potiers du Rwanda), HRFRA (Human Rights First Rwanda Association), INALAS (Inara Legal Aid Services), INILAK-LAC (Independent Institute of Lay Adventists of Kigali- Legal Aid Clinic), LIPRODHOR (Ligue Rwandaise pour la Promotion et la Défense des Droits de l'Homme), LOH (The Network of Lawyers of Hope Rwanda), MPEDH (Mouvement des Peuples pour l'Education aux Droits Humains) and NCR (Non Crime Rwanda); Newspaper publications and Media Associations namely; UMUSANZU, IMPAMO, IMANZI, RUGALI, AMAHORO Newspaper, PAX PRESSE, MPH and Media Press House.





The UN Resident Coordinator for Rwanda Fodé Ndiaye also praised the government for working with civil society to reflect on the overall UPR roadmap design and how to implement it collaboratively. He highlighted that Rwanda is among the four countries globally and the only two in Africa that pioneered the Sustainable Development Goal 16 (SDG16), demonstrating that this coalition approach can work.

As a direct result of LAF's work with the coalition around UPR, the impact has been observed in several areas. For instance, LAF and the Rwanda Civil Society Coalition on UPR have been commended as the responsible organization for implementing various specific actions in the roadmap for implementing Rwanda's UPR recommendations. Collaboration between the state and CSO has improved, and there is an increased involvement of both national and international organizations in the UPR process in Rwanda.

## 4. INSTITUTIONAL DEVELOPMENT

### Local Grant Making

LAF has been a champion in supporting access to justice through local grant-making since 2008, by providing grants to local civil society organizations to implement impactful legal aid projects. To further empower its members and promote access to justice, LAF established the Legal Aid Civil Society Fund (LACSF), which has financed over 44 legal aid projects to date, benefiting more than 100,000 indigent individuals.

In 2021, LAF continued to support its members by sub-granting three projects through the LACSF.

Transparency International Rwanda (TIR) received funding to conduct policy research on the implementation of alternatives to imprisonment in Rwanda, the Network of Lawyers of Hope Rwanda (LOH) received support to implement a project that increases access to legal aid for detainees and prisoners in Muhanga and Musanze prisons, and AJPRODHO-JIJUKIRWA received funding to promote access to legal aid for youth.



**Signing ceremony between LAF and 2021 LACSF implementing partners AJPRODHO, LoH and TI-R**

In addition to the LACSF, LAF also provided sub-grants to five civil society organizations and the Rwanda Bar Association to co-implement projects in 2021.

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#### 4.1. Legal Pro bono Rwanda Project

With the aim of continuing to support civil society organizations to provide free quality legal services to the poorest and most marginalized individuals in Kigali, LAF sub-granted three organizations namely HAGURUKA, Human Rights First Rwanda, and ARDHO, to co-implement the “Legal Pro bono Rwanda (LPR)” Project.

Funded by world renowned law firm Clifford Chance, the LPR project comprises a series of interventions that are designed to increase access to justice and in so doing, improve the well-being of economically disadvantaged citizens in Kigali. Its primary interventions align with promoting a pro bono culture amongst legal practitioners in Rwanda to support grassroots Civil Society Organizations and legal aid clinics providing free legal services.



Signing ceremony Legal Pro bono Rwanda sub-awards

#### 4.2. Dufatanye Kubaka Ubutabera Activity

Since October 2021, LAF has taken the lead in a USAID-funded 5-year program called the “Dufatanye Kubaka Ubutabera (DKU) Activity.” The program is being implemented by a consortium of organizations that includes Haguruka NGO, Rwanda Bar Association, Lawyers of Hope, and Dignité en Détention, all of whom will receive sub-grants from LAF. The DKU Activity aims to increase access to quality justice for vulnerable populations in Rwanda and enhance the Rule of Law through four primary objectives.



**Participants of the DKU Activity signing ceremony**

Firstly, it aims to improve citizens' knowledge of legal rights and expand access to quality legal services. Secondly, it seeks to reinforce the capacity of justice actors to effectively use innovative ICT solutions in dispensing justice.

Thirdly, it strives to strengthen Alternative Dispute Resolution (ADR) mechanisms by promoting ADR policy. Finally, it aims to help the justice system in Rwanda identify innovations to support the provision of legal services as the country responds to and recovers from the COVID-19 pandemic.

The program will be implemented in five districts, namely Nyagatare, Rwamagana, Gicumbi, Rusizi, and Nyarugenge.


## **5. STRATEGIC COMMUNICATIONS AND PUBLIC RELATIONS**

Effective communication is crucial for the successful management of any organization. In 2021, LAF continued its strategic and proactive approach to media engagement in order to promote its activities and share information. This included publication of articles in the newspapers and newsletters, engagements on radio and TV talk shows, press conferences and participation in national, regional and international conferences, publication of reports and use of social media platforms. Through this engagement, LAF was able to do advocacy on several legal issues as well as make its pro bono legal services known to the Rwandan population.

Articles on LAF's various interventions were published in most media houses in the country including [The New Times](#), [Kigali Today](#), [IGIHE](#), [Imvaho Nshya](#) and [Partners West Africa Nigeria](#). Media coverage included: Rwanda Broadcasting Agency, Radio/TV Isango Star, and Flash FM.

As a result of the good rapport LAF has built with the Rwandan media sector, the organization has become the go-to for legal aid information by journalists. On various occasions, LAF was requested by media houses to shed light on several key laws, citizens' rights, and to discuss different aspects on the status of legal aid in Rwanda.

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In 2021, following a successful application process, LAF was admitted to be a partner in the Transparency Accountability and Participation Network (TAPNET), a broad international coalition of civil society organizations (CSOs) working together to advance SDG16+ to promote peace, Justice, and inclusive societies, and to help enhance accountability for the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Being part of the network allows LAF to further share impact of interventions and best practice on regional and international level, further boosting its visibility.

LAF also turned its social media accounts into professional pages and linked them to allow cross-posting and maintain uniform information across platforms. These efforts resulted in significant increases in reach, visits, and followers across the organization's social media platforms.

## **PART II** : PERFORMANCE BY LAF MEMBERS

### **2.1. Summary legal aid service provision by LAF member organizations**

#### **2.1.1. Legal education**

In 2021, LAF members took significant steps to promote legal awareness among the population through legal education initiatives. Various channels were utilized to reach out to the general public and educate them about their rights, new laws, and provisions. These channels included radio and television programs, social media campaigns, educational materials including leaflets and posters, public meetings, hotline services workshops and conferences, which collectively reached out to over 149,322 people.

The legal education campaigns focused on several important areas, including land law, civil law, commercial law, labor law, administrative procedure, and instructions of the President of the Supreme Court on judicial arbitration. The education initiatives also provided insights into personal and family law, the law governing matrimonial regime donation and succession, the law on Prevention and Punishment of Gender-Based Violence, child protection law, the law determining offenses and penalties in general, and awareness on the prevention of early pregnancy and poor reproductive outcomes in adolescents, as well as education on the consequences of teenage pregnancy in schools.

These legal awareness campaigns helped to enlighten the public about their rights and responsibilities and promote legal awareness, which is crucial for enhancing access to justice and advancing the rule of law. LAF members' efforts in this regard were instrumental in increasing legal literacy and knowledge among the general public, which is crucial for building a just and equitable society.

#### **2.1.2. Legal representation**

The Constitution of the Republic of Rwanda, revised in 2015, states that every person has the right to due process of law, including the right to be informed of the nature and cause of charges, the right to defense, and legal representation. The right to legal assistance is fundamental and paramount to ensuring a fair trial. LAF members are committed to improving access to justice, particularly for underprivileged individuals, by providing them with high-quality legal representation and assistance in court, free of charge. In 2021, LAF members handled 329 cases, providing legal representation in court to both men and women. Of the 329 cases, 140 were women, and 189 were men, as illustrated in the chart below.

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### 2.1.3. Legal advice and other legal assistance services

In 2021, LAF members provided legal services such as advice, mediation, conciliation, guidance, and accompaniment to a total of 4,821 individuals, including 2,365 men and 2,456 women. The legal advice provided helped individuals to navigate through complex legal issues and make informed decisions based on the law. Furthermore, legal advice can also help prevent legal problems from arising by providing guidance on how to comply with laws and regulations.

### 2.1.4. Capacity building conducted by LAF members

In 2021, LAF members made capacity development a routine process to create, build, and strengthen the capacity of staff, members, and other justice sector actors, further empowering them to provide high-quality legal services. They developed training modules as living knowledge resources and conducted capacity-building training for different categories, including paralegals, justice actors, staff of organizations, teen mothers, Clubs to fight against sexual violence, Anti-GBV Champions, and other target groups. These trainings reached 18,160 beneficiaries, including 8,786 men and 9,374 women.

## 2.2. Research

In 2021, members of LAF conducted a diverse range of research activities, covering a variety of pressing topics. These included conducting a Civic Participation Baseline Survey, exploring issues related to Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment, examining Access to Justice and Climate Resilience in Gicumbi District, carrying out a Safety Audit for Women and Girls in Public Spaces, assessing the Current Situation of Women's Cooperatives during the COVID-19 pandemic, and investigating the Impact of COVID-19 in the Workplace. These important research efforts have the potential to inform policymakers and other relevant authorities, helping them to develop effective solutions to address the legal issues identified.

## 2.3. Advocacy

In 2021, LAF members engaged in a series of advocacy efforts centered around promoting women's participation and representation in leadership roles in Rwanda. Through targeted meetings and strategic collaboration, they produced a variety of advocacy papers focused on strengthening women's capacities and challenging social norms and barriers that prevent women from accessing leadership positions.

Among the issues tackled by the LAF members was advocating for the rights of women in prisons at the national level, working closely with relevant governmental and non-governmental bodies.

Through their dedicated advocacy efforts, the LAF members played a crucial role in promoting gender equality and social justice in Rwanda, and their work is a testament to the power of collaborative action towards a shared goal.



## **PART III: ADAPTATION AND LEARNING**

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The year 2021 marked a significant change for the justice sector as it faced the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic created lockdowns and restrictions on public gatherings, making the delivery of justice more difficult at all levels. The pandemic's effects highlighted the need to accelerate the digitization of case processing, access to justice, and audio-video communication.

To address this challenge, LAF increased awareness around its Information and Communications Technology (ICT) platforms used to provide legal services to the population. The 8-4-5 platform uses IVR and USSD technologies, an automated phone system that allows incoming callers to access legal messages from their mobile phone for free.

Furthermore, LAF has a legal aid call center accessible via toll free number that facilitates beneficiaries to call and talk directly to lawyers for legal services. These ICT platforms have enabled LAF to continue providing critical legal services to the population, even in the face of the pandemic.

In addition to ICT platforms, LAF utilized social media platforms for outreach, education, and awareness. Social media is faster, more flexible, cheaper, and easier to reach community members. LAF has been active on social media, particularly Facebook and Twitter, to promote legal awareness.

In 2021, LAF sub-granted the largest number of CSOs in a single year to date. The funded projects provided a variety of legal aid services, including court representation, legal aid, legal advice, mediation, and legal information for indigenous and vulnerable Rwandans.



## PART IV. Financial report

No	Items	Consolidated expenses
1	Office costs	69,103,627
2	Personnel	232,568,709
	<b>Sub-Total running cost</b>	<b>301,672,336</b>
3	<b>Activities:</b>	
3.1	Research and Advocacy	306,418,578
3.2	Capacity development	83,012,443
3.3	<b>Legal assistance costs:</b>	
3.3.1	Legal Officers costs	148,235,924
3.3.2	Lawyers costs	43,200,000
3.2.3	Legal docs and baillif	7,268,600
3.3.4	Transportation fees for detainees	1,116,100
3.3.5	Awareness	7,365,400
3.3.6	Incentives for casual workers	128,421,433
3.3.7	Call Center set Up	103,564,020
3.3.8	LACSF	180,345,499
3.3.9	Human right promotion and protection	19,591,457
3.3.10	Legal Aid & Legal Aid Empowerment	144,969,261
	<b>Sub-Total activities</b>	<b>1,173,508,715</b>
	<b>Total</b>	<b>1,475,181,051</b>

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