



The Legal Aid Forum

working together for equitable access to justice in Rwanda

NEWSLETTER

Issue 19, May 2021

Dear Readers,

Welcome back to our quarterly newsletter! This issue highlights some of the Legal Aid Forum's activities throughout the year of 2020.

COVID-19 has tremendously affected access justice for many Rwandans, especially during the hard lockdown. The Legal Aid Forum mitigated the impact through the use ICT innovations, such as, the 845 Platform and our toll freeline 1022, for our beneficiaries to be able to reach us during these unprecedented times. More about this on page 1 and 2.

Despite the constraints of the Covid-19 pandemic, which has effectively limited the implementation of activities, a number of planned activities were carried out including research, advocacy and capacity building workshops.

We hope you will enjoy reading this newsletter.

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1. Workshop to Present Observations and New recommendations Accepted by the Government of Rwanda during the Third Circle of UPR
2. Workshop on Barriers to Effective Access to Justice for Girls and Women with Disabilities in Rwanda

I. Legal Empowerment

The Year of 2020 has particularly been challenging for LAF's Legal Aid Unit due to COVID-19 constraints that halted almost all work for over three months. Despite this, with the use of the toll free line 1022, legal services continued to be provided during and after the hard lockdown and 4,355 benefited from this technological innovation. The Legal Aid Unit has also assisted 725 people both male and female in courts of law and, paid for 29 DNA test for vulnerable and indigent individuals.

Legal proceedings can be difficult due long duration. This is especially true for people with disabilities who continues to face challenges accessing justice.

Click to watch: Access to Justice , a Hurdle for People with Disabilities : The Story of Twizeyimana Felicien



LAF Legal Aid Officer providing legal assistance to beneficiaries at LAF's Office

Legal Aid to Refugees



The Legal Aid Forum Project Coordinator providing legal assistance to a refugee in Kiziba Camp in Karongi

After fleeing and leaving everything behind, rights and freedoms can seem like a myth. Due to their vulnerability, refugees and asylum seekers often have most to lose when the system is place is inefficient, and are least able to effectively challenge it. Therefore, educating community leaders in camps about their rights can be impactful and a road to equal rights for all under the law.

In 2020, the Legal Aid Forum in partnership with the United Nations High Commission for Refugees in Rwanda (UNHCR) provided legal representation/assistance to 1,050 refugees and asylum seekers, educated 21,491 refugees and asylum seekers on SGBV laws and national laws, as well as, facilitated birth registration of 3,630 refugee children in Mahama ,Kigeme, Mugombwa and Huye urban.

Preventing the Impact of COVID-19 in Camps and Host Communities

The COVID-19 pandemic has taken all nations in the world by surprise and has put those already at a disadvantage in an even more vulnerable state. In particular, refugees who are trying to restart their lives in their host countries.

In an effort to alleviate this , LAF with support from the Embassy of the Federal Republic of Germany in Kigali, provided Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) as well as food items to a hundred vulnerable families in three camps: Kigeme, Mugombwa, Mahama and in Huye urban area. Of the 100 families, 60 were unemployed refugees and 40 were vulnerable Rwandans from Huye District.



The Executive Director of the Legal Aid Forum and the UNHCR project coordinator at Huye Stadium handing out PPE and food items to refugees

Using ICT to Provide Legal Aid (845)

Nyirazuba Chantal

Chantal a mother of two had been trying to prove the paternity of her two children, since 2014, when she first lodged a case before TB Cyeru. Due to lack of supporting evidence (DNA results), she lost her case.

In 2015, she lodged the same case again, this time around, requesting the court to order the alleged father of her children to pay DNA tests of her two children. However, her request was denied because the burden of proof was on her.

It was not until 2017, when the court finally ordered the DNA test but the cost of paying for it was on Chantal. Due to the lack of means to pay for the DNA test, Chantal abandoned her case.

In June 2020, her case was referred to LAF from MAJ in Burera and after 6 years, DNA results proved that the alleged father is indeed the father of her two children. In addition to paying for Chantal's children DNA tests, LAF has assigned a lawyer to her case, who will help her apply for a case review"



Legal Aid Officers in the call centre at the Legal Aid Forum Offices

Traveling 5 hours to speak to a lawyer or legal officer about something that can easily be handled over the phone, is tedious for citizens in need of access to justice, however, a large portion of the Rwandan population have no option but to travel the 5 hours to get legal advice. For some , it means taking time off work thus losing their daily income.

After conducting a study , which highlighted the accessibility issue due to long distance and a lack of legal knowledge within the Rwandan population, the Legal Aid Forum with the financial support from the Embassy of the Kingdom of the Netherlands in Rwanda, put in place a telephone based system (the Platform 845). Through this platform(845), the Rwandan Population has access to information on the most commonly used laws both in text and audio format, and if further assistance is required, a call back request can be made to LAF's lawyers in the call center based at the Legal Aid Forum's office in Kimihurura.

To date, 1,225,381 people have accessed the Platform (845), 3,412,970 times. Of the 1,225,381 people who accessed the Platform, 99,638 required further assistance and so far, LAF lawyers have taken 161 critical cases to court.

**[click to watch testimonies from beneficiaries of the Platform\(845\):
Using ICT to Provide Legal Aid Through 845](#)**

Scaling up Grassroots Legal Empowerment in Rwanda through paralegal interventions

Access to justice should not depend on wealth or education levels, rather, it should be an equal right for all. However, not everyone can afford a lawyer or understands the law. This particularly disadvantages poor people in rural areas because in addition to being unable to afford legal services, they are located too far away from legal aid providers.

Paralegals have helped bridge this gap, by providing legal education, mediation, advocacy, as well as legal advice to communities they live. Their first-hand knowledge of the circumstances, challenges and issues faced by the community, allows them to come up with concrete solutions to their beneficiaries' problems.



Legal Aid Forum's Paralegal during a consultation with a beneficiary

more on the following page

They are also able to engage both the formal and traditional institutions in their work unlike lawyer whose work is predominantly in formal settings.

LAF with the support from various partners has trained 224 paralegal in the last two years on various laws. Who have in turn raised awareness of 17582 people on various rights and assisted in 5358 cases between January and December 2020.

Promoting Freedom of Expression and its Favorable Legal Framework in Rwanda



The Executive Director of the Legal Aid Forum, The Ambassador of the Delegation of the European Union in Rwanda, the Chief Justice and the Chairperson of the Rwanda Media Commission during the opening ceremony of the three days Training of journalists on Human Rights and



Participants during the focus group discussions for the Assessment of the Status of Media Self-regulation System in Rwanda.

Niyibizi Didace and Flash Broadcasting Agency

Niyibizi, a journalist and Flash Television were sued by Gabanyirizwa Ltd, alleging that Flash Television and its journalist slandered it and as a result incurred loss due to losing their customers.

With the assistance of Legal Aid Forum's lawyers, Nibizi and Flash Broadcasting Agency went to court, where, Gabanyirizwa Ltd demanded 84.251.800 RWF in civil damages. The commercial court ruled that Gabanyirizwa's complaint was unfounded and thus could not award damages.

Freedom of expression and access to information is not a favour but a constitutional right that every Rwandan is entitled to. In the last year, LAF with the financial support from the Delegation of the European Union has been working to improve the status of access to information and freedom of expression in Rwanda through the implementation of the project "Promoting freedom of expression and its favorable legal framework in Rwanda (Ndisanzuye mu gutanga ibitekerezo)". This project has contributed to the increase in understanding of freedom of expression and access to information in Rwanda through capacity building, research and the publication of content on freedom of expression and access to information on the 845 platform.

56 journalists were trained to better equipped to perform their function within the bounds of the law, while also being able to exercise their rights. 166 judicial actors including judges, prosecutors and investigators) trained to enable them to effectively safeguard press freedom and safety of journalists. These efforts were also extend to Rwanda Media Commission, which was empowered to monitor the status of freedom of expression and access to information. Moreover, Legal Aid Forum has also been providing legal representation and assistance to journalists and anyone else who needs it. In 2020, five cases related to freedom of express and access to information like that of Niyibizi and Flash Broadcasting Agency have been taken before courts of law by LAF lawyers.

II. Research and Advocacy

Fast Tracking Gender Equality in Law in Rwanda: Comprehensive Legal Analysis of Gender Compliance under Rwandan Laws

Despite the impressive efforts made by the Rwandan Government to prevent gender-based discrimination and improve equality between men and women, some areas in the national legal framework still need to be improved in order to attain full gender equality under the law, which is in line with the 2030 Agenda.

This analysis provides a comprehensive and up-to-date assessment of the status of gender compliance in Rwanda by reviewing laws in force, to identify those that may discriminate explicitly (de jure) or implicitly (de facto) on the basis of gender. [Read more](#)



The Executive Director of the Legal Aid Forum Me Andrews Kananga and The UN Women Representative in Rwanda, Fatou Aminata Lo and some of the participants, during the validation of the Fast Tracking Gender Equality in Law in Rwanda: Comprehensive Legal Analysis of Gender Compliance under Rwandan Laws

Final Assessment Report on the Implementation of 2015 UPR Recommendations by the Republic of Rwanda

This assessment focuses on the implementation of the recommendations made to Rwanda during the second Universal Period Review (UPR) on 4th November 2015.

In total, 229 recommendations were made to the Rwandan Government. Out of the 229 recommendations, 50 enjoyed the support of Rwanda, 75 were noted, while 103 enjoyed the support of Rwanda but were considered to have been implemented or in the process of being implemented.

The Rwanda Civil Society Coalition on UPR Convened by the Legal Aid Forum, assessed the implementation of recommendations that enjoyed the support of Rwanda, including those that the government considered to have been implemented or in the process of being implemented. [Read more](#).

Position papers

As part of the Legal Aid Forum's advocacy efforts, position papers on various laws are submitted to parliament.

In 2020, the Legal Aid Forum submitted two positions papers, one on the draft law determining the organization of insurance business in Rwanda indicating the provisions that need improving in order to promote the respect of human rights in Rwanda.

A second position paper on the draft law related to consumer protection was submitted, detailing which articles of the law need to be changed, added or removed in order to have equal protection for all citizens.

III. Capacity Building



The Executive Director of the Legal Aid Forum, Me Andrews Kananga, the Judicial Spokesperson, Justice Harrison MUTABAZI, The Secretary General of the National Commission for UNESCO, Mr Albert MUTESA with participants during the Training of Trainers on International and National Legal Framework on Freedom of Expression



Training of lawyers on Legal Aid Performance Standards

With inconsistencies in the quality of legal aid services provided to the Rwandan population, there will not be equitable access to justice. LAF mitigates this, by building the capacities of legal aid service providers and with the support from its partners has developed the Legal Aid Performance Standards (LAPS). LAPS aims to ensure high quality legal aid services are delivered across the board.

In 2020, 1200 justice actors were trained by LAF including lawyers, legal officers, judges, prosecutors, investigators, local leaders, etc. According to them, these trainings give them the opportunity to gain more knowledge that is useful in the performance of their daily work and a platform to share their experiences.

IV. The Legal Aid Civil Society Fund (LACSF)



Attendees of the LACSF third cycle signing of cooperation agreements between The Legal Aid Forum and Implementing partners (LAF Members).

LAF has through its Legal Aid Civil Society Fund (LACSF), in the last ten years spent over Rwf 863m in grants to its member organisations to implement projects aimed at providing legal aid services to indigent/ poor and vulnerable Rwandans. With support from the Embassy of the Netherlands in Rwanda, 32 projects have been implemented under the LACSF so far. These projects offered various services, ranging from legal education and awareness, capacity building, legal advice and orientation, up to legal representation at all levels.

Despite disruption caused by COVID-19, LAF members through the LACSF, sensitised 11,965 people on various issues, provided legal representation in 103 cases and legal assistance to 1,817 people out of court in the year of 2020.