



Human Rights First Rwanda Association Annual Report 2024

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INTRODUCTION

Dear Friends, Partners, and Supporters,

As we reflect on the year 2024, it is clear that we are navigating a defining moment in the global human rights landscape. Widening inequality, increasing backlash against LGBTQ+ persons, shrinking civic space, and cuts in international funding have tested the resilience of human rights defenders and organizations like ours. Yet, in the face of these challenges, the unwavering spirit of our communities and the strength of our partnerships have propelled us forward.

At Human Rights First Rwanda Association (HRFRA), we remain grounded in our mission—to promote, protect, and reinforce the human rights and dignity of marginalized and vulnerable populations. Our people-centered approach continues to inform every aspect of our work, ensuring that those most affected by injustice are not only represented but actively shaping the solutions. In 2024, we saw this philosophy come to life in remarkable ways.

From offering pro-bono legal aid across rural districts and refugee camps to engaging law students in community legal outreach; from challenging discriminatory policies to standing in solidarity with LGBTQ+ refugees fleeing violence in Uganda and Burundi—we made meaningful progress. We empowered women, young mothers, persons with disabilities, and sexual and gender minorities through legal empowerment, advocacy, and training, while expanding our partnerships locally and globally.

We are particularly proud of the adoption of our 2025–2030 Strategic Plan, which charts a bold course for HRFRA in the years ahead. Our focus on linking the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) to human rights, advancing sexual and reproductive justice, and reinforcing organizational sustainability reflects our commitment to long-term systemic change.

This annual report captures the breadth of our work in 2024—our achievements, our lessons, and the stories of those we’ve walked with on the path to justice. It is also a testament to what is possible when communities, donors, and defenders unite in common purpose.

As we look to the future, the road ahead will demand even more courage, collaboration, and innovation. With your continued support, I am confident we will rise to the challenge. Together, we can build a Rwanda—and a region—where justice, equality, and human dignity are not ideals, but realities for all.

With deepest gratitude,

Abera Fridah

President
Human Rights First Rwanda Association

About Human Rights First Rwanda Association (HRFRA)

Who We Are

Human Rights First Rwanda Association (HRFRA) is a non-profit, non-governmental organization committed to the promotion, protection, and realization of human rights for all individuals—especially those who are most vulnerable, marginalized, or at risk of being left behind. Since our inception in December 10/2005, HRFRA has positioned itself as a critical voice and frontline actor within Rwanda’s legal and human rights landscape, responding to the lived realities of underserved communities with evidence-based advocacy, community-led initiatives, and accessible legal services.

Grounded in the belief that human dignity is the cornerstone of social justice, HRFRA works across rural and urban Rwanda and within refugee communities, to close gaps in justice, foster inclusion, and build local capacity. Our mandate is shaped by a deep-rooted commitment to equity, participation, and accountability, and by the recognition that systemic change is only possible when communities are empowered to know and claim their rights.

By using a people-centered and participatory approach, we translate complex legal systems into accessible support that reflects the lived experiences of our beneficiaries. Our work also involves national policy engagement, international advocacy, and research to drive systemic change and hold duty-bearers accountable.

Our Mission

To empower, promote, reinforce, and safeguard human rights, good governance, and the rule of law in Rwanda.

This mission guides our wide-ranging interventions—from grassroots legal aid and community dialogue to refugee protection and high-level policy advocacy.

Our Vision

A just and equitable Rwandan society where the rights of every individual, regardless of status, origin, gender identity, or ability, are respected and protected.

This vision includes a country where:

- Refugees and asylum seekers access justice and services without discrimination.
- LGBTQI+ individuals live free from violence and stigma.
- Rural women inherit property and lead in community development.
- Persons with disabilities are fully included in governance and policy decisions.

Organizational Structure

HRFRA operates under a participatory governance framework. The **General Assembly**—our highest decision-making body—meets annually to deliberate and adopt strategic direction. The **Executive Committee**, elected by the Assembly, oversees governance and organizational integrity, supported by committees on audit and conflict resolution.

The **Secretariat**, led by the Executive Director, handles implementation. It comprises dedicated legal officers, administrative staff, refugee caseworkers, research associates, and a vibrant network of **community paralegals** and **law students** from partner universities. These teams operate legal aid clinics in districts and refugee communities and ensure HRFRA’s work is deeply rooted in the realities of the people we serve.

Our organizational culture is inclusive and representative, with strong involvement of young people, women, refugees, persons living with HIV/Aids, LGBTQI+ individuals, and persons with disabilities at all levels.



Key Notes:

- **General Assembly:** Supreme decision-making body—meets annually, adopts strategy and policy.
- **Executive Committee:** Elected oversight body managing governance and compliance.
- **Audit and Conflict Resolution Committees:** Ensure transparency and internal resolution mechanisms.
- **Secretariat:** Led by the Executive Director, oversees all operations and implementation.
- **Departments/Units** include:
 - **Programs:** Oversees thematic programming and strategic implementation.

- **Legal Aid:** Handles pro-bono legal services, paralegal coordination, refugee legal support.
- **Research & Policy:** Leads policy development and evidence-based advocacy.
- **Advocacy & Communications:** Coordinates campaigns, media, publications, and external relations.
- **Finance & HR:** Ensure sustainability, compliance, human resource development.



“Board member making a presentation during the Annual Assembly”

Strategic Plan 2025–2030

In December 2024, HRFRA’s General Assembly adopted an ambitious and forward-looking **Five-Year Strategic Plan (2025–2030)**. This roadmap builds on the lessons of past years and addresses the emerging human rights landscape in Rwanda and the Great Lakes region. It is shaped by the

need for sustainability, responsiveness to vulnerable communities, and deep collaboration across sectors.

This plan focuses on five strategic pillars that will guide HRFRA’s work across all areas of intervention:

1. Educating and Empowering Vulnerable Groups to Claim Their Rights

HRFRA will expand legal literacy, paralegal training, and community engagement programs for groups most often excluded from justice systems, including rural women, persons with disabilities, sexual minorities, refugees, and adolescents. Our legal empowerment approach centers on building knowledge, skills, and confidence within communities to enable them to demand accountability and defend their rights.



2. Ensuring No One Is Left Behind in Achieving the SDGs

Our programming will intentionally link all 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) to the realities of vulnerable and marginalized groups. Whether it is Goal 5 on gender equality, Goal 10 on reduced inequalities, or Goal 16 on peace, justice, and strong institutions—HRFRA will mainstream SDG localization through a human rights lens, ensuring that refugee communities, LGBTQI+ persons, and persons with disabilities are fully integrated into national development conversations.

3. Conducting Evidence-Based Research for Advocacy



“UNILAK University law students during field visits with supervising lawyers and lecturers”

HRFRA recognizes that sustainable change must be rooted in credible data and lived experience. To that end, we will strengthen our capacity for rigorous, community-led, and policy-relevant research. This includes:

- Conducting baseline and follow-up studies on legal access, gender-based violence, SRHR, disability rights, and refugee protection.
- Analyzing the impact of national laws, such as the NGO Law and legal aid frameworks, on marginalized communities.
- Documenting lived experiences through case studies, legal clinic reports, and testimonies to inform human rights campaigns.
- Partnering with **university law clinics** (such as our ongoing collaboration with **UNILAK**) to engage students in field-based legal research, rights awareness, and direct service provision.

- Working in alliance with **like-minded civil society organizations** to jointly produce shadow reports, policy briefs, and submissions to mechanisms such as the **Universal Periodic Review (UPR)** and treaty bodies like the Human Rights Committee and CEDAW Committee.

These partnerships will ensure that our advocacy is not only informed by solid research but is also intersectional, participatory, and grounded in local realities.

4. Advocating for Inclusive Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights (SRHR)

HRFRA will amplify efforts to ensure that SRHR services and policies are inclusive of adolescent girls, LGBTQI+ individuals, women living with disabilities, and young mothers. This includes advocacy for rights-based health services, removal of policy barriers, and awareness-raising campaigns to eliminate stigma and discrimination in healthcare settings.

5. Strengthening Organizational Capacity and Sustainability

To deliver on this bold agenda, HRFRA will invest in its own resilience. We will enhance financial management, staff development, monitoring and evaluation systems, digital infrastructure, and donor engagement. We will also broaden our funding base through partnerships with international donors, diaspora communities, and regional development networks.

This five-year strategy will ensure that HRFRA remains a leader in people-centered justice, regional human rights leadership, and inclusive development. By combining **community empowerment, legal aid, research, and policy advocacy**, we aim to influence not just change—but transformation.



“Participating in the open week in Kigali for Civil society to interact with the populace”

2024 Highlights

Key Achievements

In 2024, Human Rights First Rwanda Association (HRFRA) continued to advance its mission of legal empowerment, human rights protection, and inclusive advocacy in a complex and shifting global environment. Despite immense challenges—including rising hostility toward LGBTQ+ communities and declining donor support—our team and partners made critical strides in defending human dignity and expanding access to justice for those most at risk.

A major achievement this year was the **expansion of pro-bono legal aid services to refugee camps and urban refugee communities**, particularly those from the Democratic Republic of Congo, Burundi, and Uganda. In response to the grave threats posed by Uganda’s Homosexuality Act 2023 and discriminatory rhetoric from Burundian leadership, HRFRA mobilized legal teams,

caseworkers, and paralegals to support LGBTQ+ refugees—ensuring access to protection, justice, and essential services.

At the national level, HRFRA continued its leadership within Rwanda’s justice sector by **chairing the District Justice Working Groups in Kamonyi and Ruhango**. Through this platform, we worked hand-in-hand with local authorities, the judiciary, and civil society to expedite case resolution and strengthen the rights of rural communities who often face insurmountable barriers to justice.

HRFRA also remained a **strong voice in regional advocacy**, publicly condemning harmful and regressive policies such as Uganda’s anti-LGBTQ+ law and the Burundian president’s incitement to violence. We issued public communiqués, engaged the media, and stood in solidarity with grassroots movements and international allies, reaffirming our role as a protector of human rights across borders.

Challenges and Responses

The human rights sector globally faced growing headwinds in 2024, with **shrinking civic space, heightened repression, and significant reductions in donor funding**. HRFRA was not immune to these pressures. However, we responded proactively by:

- **Strengthening partnerships** with like-minded organizations, international foundations, Crowd funding through Global Giving and grassroots networks;
- **Increasing our investment in community-led initiatives**, including the training of paralegals and law students, to reduce dependency and enhance sustainability;
- **Amplifying local voices** in national policy spaces, ensuring that our advocacy remained grounded in the lived experiences of those we serve.

While the challenges remain formidable, 2024 reaffirmed HRFRA’s resilience, adaptability, and enduring commitment to justice. With continued collaboration and support, we remain confident in our ability to meet the moment and drive transformative change in the years ahead.

Programmatic Activities – 2024

In 2024, HRFRA remained committed to delivering community-centered, impact-driven programming across our core thematic areas. From legal empowerment in rural Rwanda to regional advocacy for refugee and LGBTQI+ rights, our work has been guided by the lived realities of vulnerable populations and by a deep belief that justice must be accessible, inclusive, and transformative.

1. Legal Aid and Access to Justice

Legal empowerment remained a central pillar of HRFRA’s programming. In 2024, our legal aid services expanded significantly to cover underserved rural communities and **refugee populations**, particularly from the DRC, Burundi, and Uganda. These populations often face a complex intersection of vulnerabilities, including statelessness, discrimination, and language barriers when trying to access the justice system.

Our legal interventions included:

- Operating **legal aid offices in Kamonyi, Ruhango, and Kicukiro**, where staff lawyers, community paralegals, and interns provided direct services;
- Deploying **mobile legal clinics** to reach refugee camps, informal settlements, and remote communities;
- Handling over **13,000 individual legal aid cases**, covering land and property disputes, GBV, child custody, criminal defense, and violations based on sexual orientation or disability;
- Offering legal support to **youth in conflict with the law**, including cases of criminalized abortion and sexual violence;
- Participating in **legal aid week** and **community-based justice outreach programs** in partnership with district authorities.

Our leadership in the **District Justice Working Groups of Kamonyi and Ruhango** significantly improved coordination between community leaders, prosecutors, and judicial actors, allowing vulnerable individuals—including many **refugees and stateless persons**—to have their cases heard and resolved efficiently.

2. Human Rights Promotion and Education



“Participants from Law firms at a Pro-bono and Human Rights legal awareness workshop”

HRFRA believes that access to justice must be matched by **human rights education** that builds awareness, agency, and accountability. In 2024, we conducted more than **24 human rights outreach sessions** in three districts, targeting communities with limited exposure to legal information.

Key achievements included:

- Continued partnership with **UNILAK University Law Clinic**, where third-year students, under the supervision of lecturers and HRFRA lawyers, carried out monthly legal education and rights awareness drives in rural areas and refugee-hosting communities;
- Training sessions on **disability rights, GBV prevention, land law, and succession rights**;
- Rights-awareness campaigns in refugee camps focused on the **Rwandan legal system, sexual and reproductive health rights, and available support mechanisms for LGBTQI+ refugees**;

- Use of mass media, especially **community radio** (e.g., **Radio Huguka**), to broadcast human rights content, with refugee representatives and parents of LGBTQI+ individuals participating in live discussions to foster inclusion and social acceptance.

This combination of grassroots engagement and academic partnership ensured our human rights promotion efforts were both **theoretically sound** and **practically responsive** to community needs.

3. Gender Equality Initiatives (SDG 5)



In line with **Sustainable Development Goal 5**, HRFRA delivered transformative gender justice initiatives that advanced the rights of women, girls, and gender minorities—especially those from **displaced and refugee backgrounds**.

2024 milestones included:

- Training **120 women and girls as community paralegals**, equipping them to handle property, land, and inheritance cases;
- Hosting five-day **SRHR workshops for 150 adolescent girls**, with special sessions tailored for **girls in refugee camps and urban informal settlements**;
- Supporting **60 young mothers**, many of whom were displaced or formerly homeless, to access legal advice and be referred to economic empowerment initiatives;
- Contributing to national advocacy on **sexual harassment prevention**, including active involvement in the push for a harassment clause in Rwanda’s Media Policy;
- Participating in regional efforts such as **Raising Voices’ Sister to Sister Initiative**, which enabled peer learning on GBV prevention across the East African region.

HRFRA also worked with women living with HIV, including **refugee women**, to ensure their **land and inheritance rights** were protected—countering the common discriminatory practices that occur after the death of a spouse.

4. Disability Rights Advocacy



“Disability Women's Empowerment trainings”

HRFRA deepened its commitment to disability rights by integrating **disability inclusion** into all program areas. We amplified the voices of persons with disabilities—especially women and girls—and ensured their full participation in our legal empowerment efforts.

Key activities in 2024:

- Recruiting and training **community paralegals with disabilities**, especially in Kamonyi and Ruhango;
- Signing an MoU with the **Rwanda Organization of Lawyers with Disabilities (ROLD)** to provide coordinated legal aid and advocacy;
- Sustained partnerships with **UNABU, NUSPOR, Special Olympics Rwanda**, and the **Rwanda National Union of the Deaf (RNUD)**;
- Delivering focused advocacy on **SRHR access for women with psychosocial or communication disabilities**, including those living in refugee settings.

In addition to policy advocacy, we ensured that our mobile legal aid materials were accessible (e.g., using sign language interpreters or simplified formats) to accommodate clients with disabilities.

5. LGBTQI+ Rights and Inclusion

As one of the few organizations in Rwanda explicitly defending **LGBTQI+ rights**, HRFRA remained on the frontlines of this critical struggle in 2024. This year saw increased threats to the safety of LGBTQI+ persons—particularly refugees fleeing persecution in Uganda and Burundi.



“An activist on Transgender Rights- Mailly Isaro presenting during a workshop”

HRFRA's key interventions included:

- Issuing public **condemnations of Uganda's 2023 Homosexuality Act** and **Burundi's incitement to violence**, mobilizing solidarity across civil society and media;
- Training LGBTQI+ community members, including refugees, as **paralegals and human rights defenders**, equipping them to handle community cases and provide first-line support;
- Organizing **inclusive media and civil society workshops** on SOGIE-sensitive reporting, reaching actors across the Great Lakes Region;
- Promoting acceptance through radio shows, awareness brochures, and family storytelling, where **parents of LGBTQI+ children** shared their journeys publicly.

We also facilitated **HIV awareness events for LGBTQI+ refugees**, including World AIDS Day commemorations, to challenge health-related stigma and promote inclusive service delivery.



“LGBTIQ+ Leaders celebrating the Pride Month Workshop”

6. Environmental Advocacy

Recognizing that environmental injustices disproportionately affect vulnerable communities, HRFRA expanded its focus on **environmental advocacy** in 2024. We advocated for the inclusion of marginalized groups in Rwanda's environmental policy processes, particularly in areas affected by **climate-induced displacement**.

We achieved this by:

- Hosting **dialogue sessions between government officials and refugee leaders** on the intersection of climate change and human rights;
- Broadcasting environment-related programming that addressed the link between **ecosystem fragility and displaced populations**;
- Launching a pilot initiative to document the **climate experiences of persons with disabilities and refugees**, informing national resilience strategies.

7. Universal Periodic Review (UPR) Engagement

As a **steering committee member of Rwanda’s UPR Civil Society Coalition**, HRFRA took an active role in shaping Rwanda’s mid-term UPR review process. Our focus was to ensure the inclusion of issues affecting **LGBTQI+ persons, women, and persons with disabilities**.

Highlights included:

- Monitoring government implementation of prior UPR recommendations;
- Facilitating **community consultations**, including gathering grassroots perspectives on legal and policy gaps;
- Providing legal and policy analysis of the **NGO Law**, the **SRHR framework**, and the lack of specific protections for **sexual minorities**

Through these programmatic efforts, HRFRA not only addressed immediate injustices but also laid the groundwork for long-term structural change. By centering the voices of **refugees and other marginalized groups**, we ensured that our human rights work remained truly inclusive, intersectional, and transformative.

8. Research and Policy Advocacy

In 2024, HRFRA strengthened its evidence-based approach to advocacy by investing in applied research, legal analysis, and grassroots data collection. Our objective has been to ensure that policy decisions—whether at the local, national, or international level—are informed by real-world experiences, particularly those of vulnerable and marginalized communities. Research and advocacy are not stand-alone pillars for HRFRA; they are tools for systems change and accountability.

Evidence-Based Research

This year, we completed targeted research aimed at understanding the effectiveness and accessibility of justice mechanisms for rural and displaced populations:

- **Dispute Resolution and IECMS:** We conducted a critical review of Rwanda’s *Integrated Electronic Case Management System (IECMS)*, with a focus on how rural users interact with the system. The findings revealed persistent digital barriers, lack of legal literacy, and limited infrastructure in rural areas that hamper access to timely justice. Our

recommendations proposed localized adaptations, legal navigators, and simplified case tracking tools for vulnerable users.

- **Access to Justice for Rural Populations:** Building on our legal aid data, we assessed how various legal and policy frameworks—particularly land and succession laws—impact access to justice for rural women, widows, and persons with disabilities. The research highlighted the unintended consequences of formal legal reforms when not accompanied by sufficient grassroots education and enforcement.

These findings are now being used to inform both internal programming and external advocacy efforts. Our approach ensures that community experiences are documented, analyzed, and translated into actionable policy proposals.

Policy Influence and Development

HRFRA’s policy advocacy in 2024 focused on closing legal and regulatory gaps that perpetuate inequality, exclusion, and impunity. Through coalition building, legal briefings, and direct engagement with policymakers, we pushed for reforms that center the rights of women, LGBTQI+ individuals, persons with disabilities, and refugees.

Key achievements included:

- Enactment of a sexual harassment clause in the proposed media policy of Rwanda

Recognizing the alarming rise in sexual harassment within Rwanda’s media sector, particularly affecting female journalists and young professionals, **Human Rights First Rwanda Association (HRFRA)** played a key role in initiating and leading a comprehensive advocacy campaign that successfully influenced the inclusion of a sexual harassment clause in the proposed national media policy.

- **Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights (SRHR):** HRFRA played a critical role in advocating for inclusive SRHR policies, especially for adolescent girls, women with disabilities, and LGBTQI+ refugees. We contributed evidence and testimonies to national consultations, and developed legal arguments to support anti-discrimination protections within the health system.
- **International Advocacy Forums:** Our research and rights monitoring fed directly into **advocacy position papers** submitted to global platforms such as the *United Nations Universal Periodic Review (UPR)*, *CEDAW*, and the *High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development*. In collaboration with like-minded CSOs and global justice networks, we ensured that the voices of marginalized Rwandans—including stateless persons and displaced populations—were represented in global rights monitoring processes.

As we move into the implementation phase of our 2025–2030 Strategic Plan, HRFRA will continue to champion policies that reflect empirical evidence, center lived experience, and dismantle structural inequalities in the justice system and beyond.

9. Partnerships and Collaborations

At Human Rights First Rwanda Association (HRFRA), we believe that sustainable human rights progress is only possible through strong, strategic, and principled partnerships. In 2024, we deepened our collaborative work with national, regional, and international allies to amplify impact, share expertise, and build resilient support systems for marginalized communities.

National Collaborations

As the **chair of the Rwanda Legal Aid Forum**, HRFRA coordinated efforts with over **38 member organizations**, including legal aid providers, academic institutions, bar associations, and civil society groups. Together, we worked to expand legal services, harmonize referral systems, and monitor the implementation of justice policies. Our leadership in this space has strengthened Rwanda’s legal aid ecosystem and ensured that vulnerable populations—especially women, youth, persons with disabilities, and refugees—can access justice more effectively.

We also worked closely with **district-level authorities**, particularly through the Justice Working Groups in Kamonyi and Ruhango, helping to integrate civil society expertise into local governance structures and justice delivery.

International Partnerships



In 2024, HRFRA advanced its international collaborations to better respond to the increasing repression of rights and shrinking civic space in the region:

- With **Frontline AIDS**, we advocated for the protection and inclusion of LGBTQI+ persons and people living with HIV in Rwanda’s health and legal systems, contributing to regional policy dialogues and emergency support mechanisms.
- Our partnership with **Rainbow Railroad**, a global organization that supports LGBTQI+ persons fleeing persecution, enabled HRFRA to strengthen legal and psychosocial support for **LGBTQI+ refugees from Uganda and Burundi**, particularly in the wake of Uganda’s draconian Homosexuality Act.

These collaborations ensured that HRFRA could offer both **local intervention and international solidarity**, bridging grassroots needs with global human rights resources.

Regional and Global Networks

HRFRA continued its engagement with regional and global coalitions working toward inclusive development and accountability:

- Through our long-standing role in the **TAP Network (Transparency, Accountability and Participation)**, we co-authored global **advocacy toolkits** and **position papers** on **SDG 16**—focusing on access to justice, anti-corruption, and civic participation.
- We collaborated with **fellow African and international CSOs** to submit joint shadow reports to UN mechanisms and raise collective concerns on systemic discrimination, especially in areas impacting refugees, LGBTQI+ communities, and stateless persons.

These partnerships have reinforced HRFRA’s capacity to influence not just policy but global norms—anchoring Rwanda’s human rights voice in both continental and international platforms.

10. Community Engagement

HRFRA’s commitment to justice goes beyond legal aid—it is rooted in mobilizing communities to become agents of their own rights. In 2024, we prioritized deep, meaningful community engagement that empowered individuals with knowledge, built grassroots leadership, and fostered solidarity across social divides. Our outreach model is inclusive, participatory, and adapted to the local context, especially in hard-to-reach areas and refugee-hosting communities.

Outreach Programs

Throughout 2024, HRFRA conducted **over 24 human rights awareness sessions** in the districts of **Kamonyi, Ruhango, and Kicukiro**, targeting communities with limited access to legal information and justice mechanisms. These sessions covered a range of issues including land rights, succession law, gender-based violence (GBV), rights of persons with disabilities (PWDs), and protection for sexual and gender minorities.

In partnership with **UNILAK University**, third-year law students participated in monthly **community legal outreach initiatives**, supervised by HRFRA’s legal team and faculty advisors. These students engaged directly with residents, provided legal guidance, recorded urgent cases for legal aid follow-up, and conducted legal literacy sessions. This model not only extended our reach but also nurtured the next generation of rights defenders.

We further amplified our outreach through **interactive radio programs** hosted in collaboration with **Radio Huguka**, which reaches a wide rural audience. These programs featured **HRFRA’s legal advocacy team**, human rights activists, and community paralegals discussing practical human rights topics—from accessing legal aid to understanding LGBTQI+ rights, SRHR, and GBV prevention. Refugees and parents of LGBTQI+ individuals also participated in on-air discussions, encouraging greater community acceptance and reducing stigma.

11. Training and Capacity Building

HRFRA delivered targeted training programs designed to empower rights-holders and frontline defenders. In 2024, we trained:

- **Women and girls** as community paralegals and legal focal points,
- **LGBTQI+ Refugee individuals** as peer legal navigators and human rights monitors,
- **Persons with disabilities**, including those with psychosocial conditions, to understand and claim their legal protections,
- **Community leaders and mediators** on laws related to GBV, land rights, and discrimination.

These interventions not only increased legal knowledge but also strengthened the resilience and voice of those most excluded from traditional justice systems.

Through this people-powered approach, HRFRA reaffirmed its belief that when communities are empowered with tools, knowledge, and support, lasting human rights change becomes not just possible—but inevitable.

Organizational Development

As the human rights landscape in Rwanda and the region grows more complex, **Human Rights First Rwanda Association (HRFRA)** continues to invest in strengthening its internal systems, staff competencies, and institutional resilience. In 2024, we prioritized **organizational development** as a foundation for effective, sustainable, and scalable impact.

Capacity Building

Over the course of the year, HRFRA undertook a series of strategic initiatives aimed at improving internal capacity and enhancing the quality of service delivery across all program areas:

- **Staff Training and Development:** We provided targeted training for legal officers, program managers, community paralegals, and administrative staff on emerging human rights issues, digital case management, trauma-informed legal aid, and results-based reporting. This included modules on **LGBTQI+ inclusion, disability rights, and refugee protection frameworks**, ensuring that all staff are equipped to serve diverse populations with professionalism and empathy.
- **Internal Systems Strengthening:** HRFRA upgraded its internal documentation and case tracking systems, including improvements to our **Case Management Database**, allowing for more accurate reporting, monitoring, and referral coordination. These systems now enable real-time tracking of over 13,000 legal aid cases annually, improving our responsiveness and accountability to both clients and partners.
- **Digital Infrastructure:** Recognizing the increasing importance of secure data and communication tools, we enhanced our digital security protocols and staff capacity in digital literacy. This was particularly critical for protecting sensitive information from vulnerable groups such as LGBTQI+ refugees and GBV survivors.
- **Organizational Policies:** We finalized and implemented updated policies on **safeguarding, staff welfare, financial management, and anti-discrimination**, ensuring alignment with international human rights standards and donor compliance requirements.

These developments form part of our broader effort to ensure that HRFRA remains a resilient, transparent, and high-impact organization, capable of adapting to new challenges while remaining grounded in community-led justice.

As we enter our next strategic phase (2025–2030), organizational development will remain central to our success, allowing us to scale our work, deepen our partnerships, and protect the integrity of our mission.

12. Case Studies and Testimonials

Throughout 2024, HRFRA’s work reached over 13,000 individuals through legal aid, training, and advocacy. Behind every number is a human story—a life impacted, a right defended, a voice empowered. The following case studies and testimonials highlight the real-world impact of our community-centered approach.

Case Study 1: Legal Justice for a Persecuted LGBTQI+ Refugee

Joseph, a 19-year-old gay man from Uganda, fled to Rwanda after the enactment of the 2023 Homosexuality Act criminalized his identity and put his life at risk. Isolated and traumatized, he faced the threat of detention and lacked legal documentation. HRFRA’s legal aid team intervened immediately, securing him temporary protection status and access to psychosocial support. With assistance from our partner Rainbow Railroad, Joseph was referred to safe housing and is now part of our peer support group for LGBTQI+ refugees. “HRFRA saved my life,” Joseph shared. “Now I’m helping others feel safe too.”

Case Study 2: A Widow Reclaims Her Land Rights

Jeannette, a 47-year-old widow from Kamonyi District, was forced off her family land by in-laws after her husband’s passing. As a woman living with HIV, she faced stigma, economic hardship, and legal exclusion. Through HRFRA’s legal clinic and support from trained paralegals, her case was brought before a local mediator and later to court. She regained her land, secured her children’s inheritance rights, and now serves as a community paralegal, helping other widows assert their rights. “I found my voice because HRFRA stood by me,” she said.

Testimonial: Empowering the Next Generation of Lawyers

Through our partnership with UNILAK University, third-year law student *Diane Umutoni* joined HRFRA’s legal outreach initiative. She participated in mobile legal clinics, assisted survivors of GBV, and helped educate rural communities on succession law. “Working with HRFRA gave real meaning to my legal training,” Diane reflected. “It taught me how the law can be a tool for justice—not just in courtrooms, but in everyday lives.”

These stories represent just a few of the many lives touched by HRFRA in 2024. They reflect the power of justice when it is community-driven, inclusive, and grounded in the lived experiences of those most often left behind.

13. Legal Aid Statistics

Event/Occasion	Issue/Type of Case	Female	Male	Total
Kamonyi Legal Office and Paralegal	Land, succession, matrimonial, GBV, SOGI	324	482	806
Ruhango Legal Office and Paralegal	Land, succession, matrimonial, GBV, SOGI	520	220	740
Kicukiro Office, Law Student Clinics	Land, succession, matrimonial, GBV, SOGI	390	234	624
Mobile Legal Aid Clinics	Land, matrimonial, probate cases	3,540	2,600	6,140
Legal Aid for Youth in Conflict	Theft, abortion, GBV, rape	347	254	601
Legal Aid Week	Various	2,900	1,700	4,600
Total		8,021	5,490	13,511

14. Media and Public Relations

- Featured in various media outlets, raising awareness on human rights issues.
- Utilized social media platforms for advocacy and information dissemination.

Future Outlook

- Plans to expand legal aid services to more districts.
- Focus on strengthening partnerships and securing sustainable funding.
- Continued advocacy for the rights of marginalized and vulnerable populations.

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