



Dear Readers,

Welcome to the 20th Issue of the Legal Aid Forum's Newsletter!

This issue highlights some of the activities of LAF for the period January to July 2021.

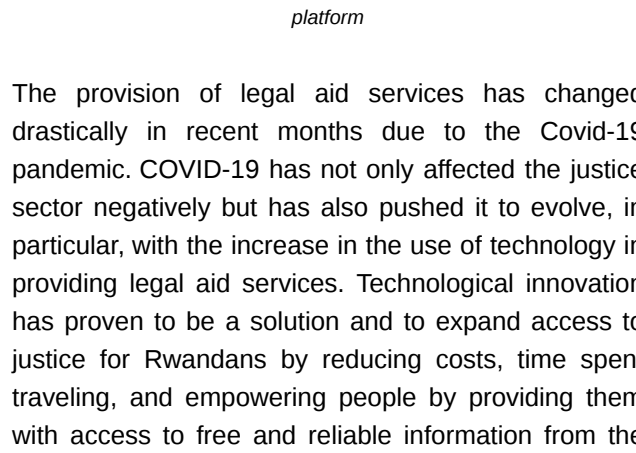
Between January and July, the Legal Aid Forum has been able to carry out various activities including training sessions, awareness-raising activities, legal representation and assistance. Legal advice and orientation, birth registration, as well as dialogue sessions aimed to strengthen access to justice for all Rwandans. These interventions targeted various groups including information and communication officers, refugees, local leaders, as well as men and girls with disabilities. Keeping in line with measures to prevent the spread of COVID-19, a variety of platforms were used in the delivery of services, including the 845 Platform, our toll-free line 1022, as well as video conferencing platforms. Now more than ever, it is important to adapt and be innovative to ensure that Rwandans continue to receive quality and accessible justice they need and deserve.

We hope you will enjoy reading this newsletter!

In This Issue:

- Legal Aid during COVID-19
- Training Workshop for Information and Communication Officers on Monitoring and Reporting on SDG 16.10.2 Indicator in Rwanda
- Local Grant-Making: The Legal Aid Civil Society Fund 2021
- Legal Awareness Campaigns in the Eastern Province
- CSOs reflection on Human Rights in Rwanda - 25 years of Rwanda - Netherlands Justice Cooperation: Support to the Legal Aid Forum
- Access to Justice for Girls and Women with Disabilities
- 2021 World Refugee Day: Together we heal, learn and shine
- The Legal Aid Week 2021

1. Legal Aid during COVID-19



LAF's Legal Officer in the Call Centre assisting a client through the 845 platform

The provision of legal aid services has changed drastically in recent months due to the Covid-19 pandemic. COVID-19 has not only affected the justice sector negatively but has also pushed it to evolve, in particular, with the increase in the use of technology in providing legal aid services. Technological innovation has proven to be a solution and to expand access to justice for Rwandans by reducing costs, time spent traveling, and empowering people by providing them with access to free and reliable information from the comfort of their homes. One of such innovations is the 845 Platform by the Legal Aid Forum (LAF), a telephone-based system (845 platform) that allows Rwandans to access legal information, get advice from Legal Officers in the LAF call Centre and if further assistance is needed, some are referred to relevant institutions or get lawyers without having to leave their homes. All that is needed is a simple mobile phone. Between January and June 2021, LAF Legal officers in the call center have assisted 12,366 people, in addition, the Legal content on the 845 platform has been accessed 850,059 times via IVR(audio recordings) and 39,335 times via USSD (text format). LAF's Legal Aid unit has also continued to provide legal aid to the Rwandan People through the toll-free line 1022 and through office visits while observing covid-19 preventative measures. Between January and June 2021, LAF lawyers have assisted 540 people in courts of law. In addition, LAF has also been providing legal aid services to refugees and host communities in Mahama, Kigeme, Mugombwa camps, and Huye urban. From January and June 2021, Legal Officers in the Camps have facilitated the birth registration of 1693 children, provided legal assistance to 595 refugees, assisted 338 detainees, as well as educated 27,417 refugees and asylum seekers on Gender-Based Violence (GBV) laws and national laws.

Since Jean-Paul could still not walk and had no means of getting to and from the hospital, he opted to continue receiving 20 sessions of physiotherapy per month and paid for the sessions himself and wrote numerous letters to RSSB requesting that they look into the issue and they responded saying they are reviewing his complaint. In the end, RSSB refused to reimburse him, saying that they don't pay for medical care done at home.

Jean-Paul turned to LAF for assistance and was assigned a lawyer. With the help from a LAF lawyer, in 2019, he filed a claim in court against RSSB, asking to be paid back the amount equivalent to 10,985,675 RWF for his physiotherapy bills, meals, as well as 7.3% every year for grievance redress and damages amounting to 20,000,000 RWF. In May 2021, the court ruled in his favour and ordered RSSB to pay him 4,350,000 RWF in damages as well as 20,000 RWF in court fees.

3. Training Workshop for Information and Communication Officers on Monitoring and Reporting on SDG 16.10.2 Indicator in Rwanda



A group of participants during the opening ceremony with Executive Director of the Legal Aid Forum and the UN Resident Coordinator

From 29th March to 1st April 2021, the Legal Aid Forum with the financial support from UNESCO trained 40 communication and information officers on monitoring and reporting on Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 16.10.2 Indicator in Rwanda. The training aimed to ensure public access to information and the protection of fundamental freedoms, in accordance with national legislation and international agreements. In particular, the training aimed to improve the understanding of SDG 16.10.2 indicators which seek to evaluate the existence of national legislation in reflection of the international human rights standards and the available implementation mechanisms.

The Training was attended by information and communication officers from various ministries, the private sector, media fraternity and civil society organizations. Also in attendance was the United Nations Resident Coordinator for Rwanda, Mr. Fodé Ndiaye, who reminded that SDG 16.10.2 indicator is the cornerstone for achieving access to information and safety of journalists, as well as reiterated the UN philosophy on access to information and how informed citizens can spur sustainable development.

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 hold public authorities accountable. It is against this background that LAF, with support from UNESCO organized this training workshop to strengthen national capacities of information and communication officers on monitoring and reporting SDG 16.10.2 indicator in Rwanda. The session was also an opportunity for Information and Communication Officers present to share their views on access to information, and as well as learn more about the various legal frameworks in place such as Law on access to information in Rwanda enacted in 2013. The session highlighted various needs in this area, including the need to sensitize heads of various institutions both public and private on the frameworks in place on access to information in Rwanda. [Click here to Watch Highlights of the Training](#)

2. The Story of a Wounded Soldier

Ngabonziza Jean-Paul a former soldier got injured in the line of duty in August 2004 and was hospitalized at Kanombe Hospital where his employer footed his hospital bills but the payment of his meals was left to his insurance company RSSB. The bill for his meals while in hospital amounted to 7,476,675, which he paid from his own pocket to the restaurant. Despite this, RSSB refused to pay and argued he did not have proof supporting his claim that the said amount had actually been paid to the restaurant and that the payment of meals should have gone through the hospital who would then be reimbursed by RSSB. While in hospital, he underwent Physiotherapy, when he was discharged he kept undergoing physiotherapy at home because he couldn't walk and RSSB was to foot that bill for the Physiotherapy sessions he was given. A few months after being discharged, the RSSB Consulting Doctor reduced the number of sessions he was receiving per month, from 20 to 13 then to 8.

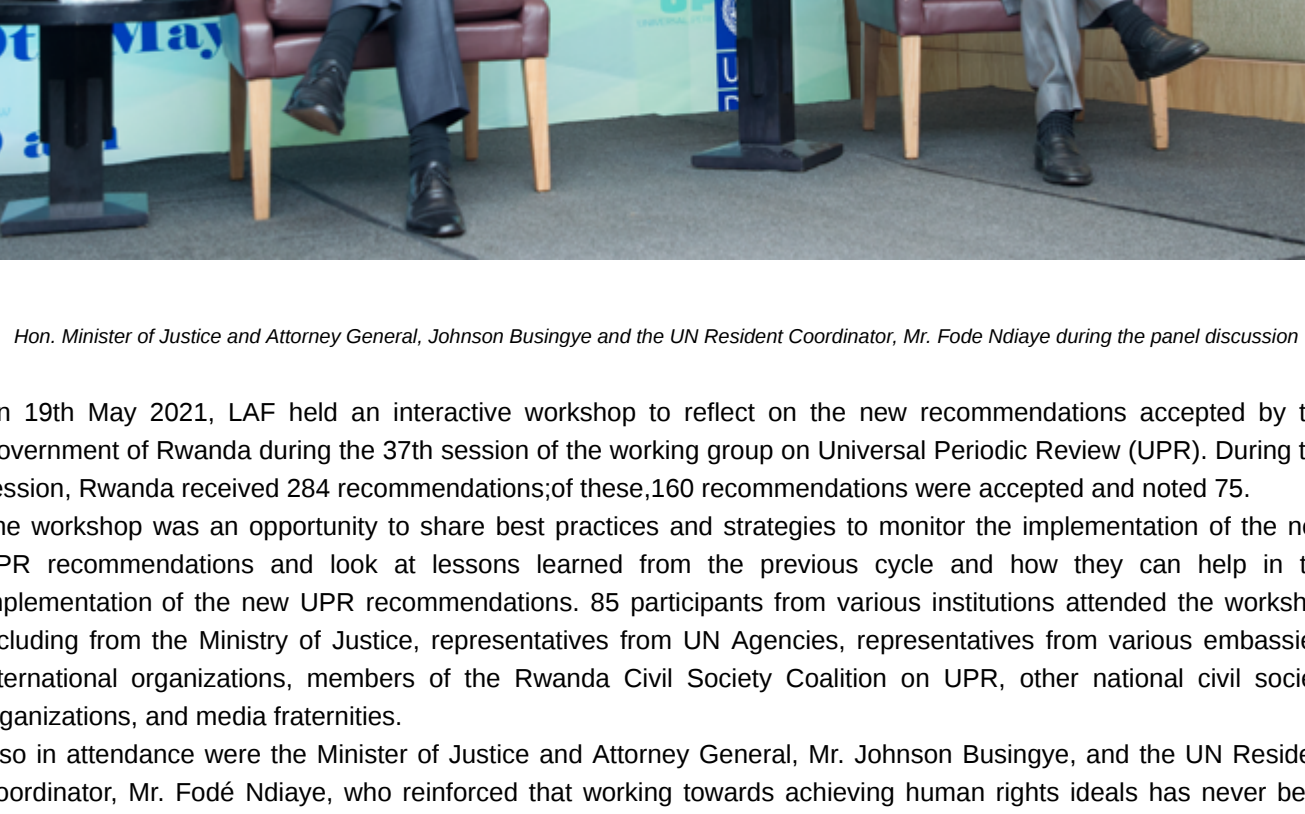
4. Local Grant - Making: The Legal Aid Civil Society Fund 2021

Following 11 projects implemented by member organizations since 2019, the Legal Aid Forum launched its third round of Legal Aid Civil Society Fund (LACSF) initiative on 9th of April 2021. LACSF is a grant-making initiative that aims to support projects by LAF members that are innovative and forward-looking, which focus on the quality and accessibility of legal aid services in Rwanda. The call for applications was sent out to all LAF members and a total of 14 applications were received.

After the pre-selection process that included the assessment of the financial capacity of each applicant, the Youth Association for Human Rights Promotion and Development (AJPRODHO- JIUKIRWA), Lawyer of Hope, Transparency International Rwanda, and Action pour le Développement du Peuple (ADEPE) were selected by the Independent Selection and Monitoring Committee (ISMC) for funding and Implementation following the signing the Cooperation Agreements to start implementation soon.

Since the initiation of the LACSF in 2008, 38 independent projects were implemented by LAF members, which offered a range of services including; legal education and awareness, capacity building, legal advice and orientation, up to legal representation at all levels. So far, around 140,000 indigent and vulnerable Rwandans have benefited from services offered under these projects.

5. CSOs Reflection on Human Rights in Rwanda



Hon. Minister of Justice and Attorney General, Johnson Bushingye and the UN Resident Coordinator, Mr. Fodé Ndiaye during the panel discussion

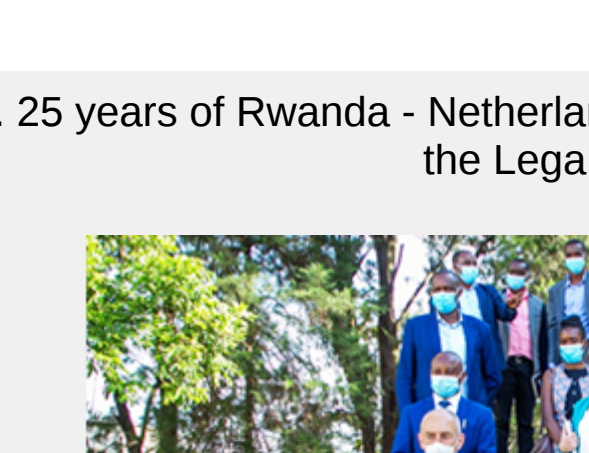
On 19th May 2021, LAF held an interactive workshop to reflect on the new recommendations accepted by the Government of Rwanda during the 37th session of the working group on Universal Periodic Review (UPR). During the session, Rwanda received 284 recommendations of these 160 recommendations were accepted and noted 75.

The workshop was an opportunity to share best practices and strategies to monitor the implementation of the new UPR recommendations and look at lessons learned from the previous cycle and how they can help in the implementation of the new UPR recommendations. 85 participants from various institutions attended the workshop including from the Ministry of Justice, representatives from UN Agencies, representatives from various embassies, international organizations, members of the Rwanda Civil Society Coalition on UPR, other national civil society organizations, and media fraternities.

Also in attendance was the Minister of Justice and Attorney General, Mr. Johnson Bushingye, and the UN Resident Coordinator, Mr. Fodé Ndiaye, who reinforced that working towards achieving human rights ideals has never been individualistic, but rather a host of collaborative efforts amongst different actors at all stages. As such, close collaboration between the state and CSOs is of paramount importance in the UPR process and in strengthening human rights in Rwanda.

The workshop also highlighted the need to decentralize the UPR process to ensure that the public is aware and involved in the process, especially since they are at the heart of what the UPR process stands for. The workshop was also an opportunity to discuss the status of various human rights in the country including civil, political, social, and economic rights, as well as women and Children rights and rights of other specific groups in relation to 2021 UPR recommendations.

6. Legal Awareness Campaign in the Eastern Province



Paralegals during the awareness campaign in Kinsho

From 20th to 22nd April 2021, LAF in collaboration with the Eastern Province through paralegals, organized awareness campaigns in three (3) districts: Nyagaratare, Kirehe and Bugesera. The campaigns aimed to educate local leaders on laws governing the prevention and punishment of Gender-Based Violence (GBV) in Rwanda, crime prevention as well as increase their involvement in cracking down on GBV related crimes, which have negatively affected Rwandan society.

Lack of knowledge in relation to GBV and related crimes, not only affects victims but also society as a whole because the perpetrator goes unpunished leaving him/her the chance to commit the crime again. The awareness campaigns will serve a first step to mitigate this and ensure Local Leaders are better equipped to help their communities fight against GBV. In total, 1,050 local leaders participated in the awareness sessions; among them, 35% were women.

7. 25 years of Rwanda - Netherlands Justice Cooperation: Support to the Legal Aid Forum



The Dutch delegation of AVEGA

In celebration of 25 years of Rwanda - Netherlands Cooperation, a Dutch Delegation spearheaded by the Ambassador of the Kingdom of the Netherlands in Rwanda, H.E Matthijs Wolters visited members of the Legal Aid Forum on 1st June 2021, namely the Association of Genocide Widows Agahozo (AVEGA), the Youth Association for Human Rights Promotion and Development (AJPRODHO- JIUKIRWA) and HAGURUKA NGO. Also part of the delegation were the Ambassador of Sweden to Rwanda, H.E Johanna Teague, and the Permanent Secretary in the Ministry of Justice, Mr. Theophilie Nibhera.

In the last 25 years, the Netherlands has supported the Rwandan Government through sharing knowledge and expertise, providing budget support to the Ministry of Justice, training prosecutors, setting up legal aid clinics, construction of justice sector institutions, supporting trauma healing and community based socio-therapy initiatives, basically contributing to building and strengthening the entire justice sector. The Legal Aid Forum is amongst the organizations supported by the Embassy of the Kingdom of the Netherlands in Rwanda.

Since 2007, the Embassy of the Kingdom of the Netherlands in Rwanda has been supporting LAF in various interventions, including the Legal Aid Civil Society Fund (LACSF). LACSF is a grant-making initiative by LAF, started in 2008, aimed to support projects by LAF members that are innovative and forward-looking. Projects implemented under LACSF provide legal aid services to indigent and vulnerable Rwandans, including legal representation in courts, legal assistance, legal advice, mediation, and legal education.

Among projects funded under LACSF is the "Tubasindagize" project, implemented by AVEGA the one of the organizations visited by the delegation, that works to ensure the reintroduction of widows of the 1994 Genocide against Tutsi, back into the Rwandan Society following the trauma they face. The Tubasindagize project aims to provide legal assistance to childless elderly widows such as writing a will.

Also amongst the recipients of the LACSF and one of the organizations visited by the delegation is AJPRODHO- JIUKIRWA a non-profit organization that works to improve the rights of disadvantaged youth, women, and children in Rwanda through human rights promotion, protection, research, advocacy, economic empowerment, and strengthening the capacity of civil society organization. AJPRODHO- JIUKIRWA benefited from the LACSF in their project "Access to Justice for Teen Mothers in Gasabo District" which aimed to provide legal assistance to teen mothers, raise awareness of teenagers, and community members on rights and access to justice processes, and enhance prevention mechanisms. The delegation also visited HAGURUKA NGO, an organization that works to combat Gender-Based violence (GBV) and promoting gender equality using national and international human rights frameworks. HAGURUKA works closely with the LAF through a referral system.

The visit served as an opportunity for those present to learn more about LAF and its members as well as get firsthand testimonies of the impact of the LAF and its members on their beneficiaries. During the visit, those present heard testimonies from Genocide Widows, Gender-based Violence Survivors, and Teen Mothers who have received legal aid from LAF and its members. [click here to watch the highlights of the visit](#)

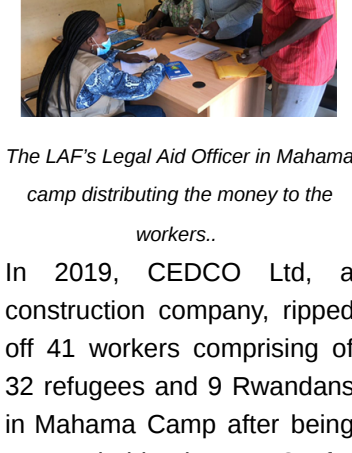
8. 2021 World Refugee Day : Together we heal, learn and shine



Couples during civil marriage ceremony in Mahama Camp

In celebration of World Refugee Day, an international day organized every year on the 20th of June to celebrate and honor the strength and courage of people who have been forced to flee their home country to escape conflict or persecution. Since 2006, the Legal Aid Forum in partnership with the ministry of emergency management, various sectors, and with support from the UNHCR Rwanda have been organizing numerous activities on this day in celebration of refugees in camps and urban areas. On this day, LAF facilitates legal marriage for refugees who want to get married, including payment of marriage certificates and providing facilitation to sector staff. This year, the Legal Aid Forum facilitated 91 couples composed of 182 refugees from Mahama, Kigeme and Huye get legally married.

9. CEDCO Ltd leaves its workers unpaid



The LAF's Legal Aid Officer in Mahama camp distributing the money to the workers.

In 2019, CEDCO Ltd, a construction company, ripped off 41 workers comprising of 32 refugees and 9 Rwandans in Mahama Camp after being suspended by the UNHCR for unsatisfactory work. CEDCO Ltd had been contracted by the UNHCR for the construction of various structures in camps and the kitchen at Playannat L School. When CEDCO Ltd left Mahama Camp they left without paying their casual laborers (the 41 workers) the amount equivalent to 6,038,380 RWF.

The 41 workers approached LAF requesting assistance in getting their payment. LAF wrote letters to CEDCO Ltd as well as conducted numerous advocacy initiatives before various institutions including MINEMA and UNHCR. Through mediation between CEDCO Ltd and the grievred workers, CEDCO Ltd agreed to pay the worker their money and in March 2020, LAF distributed the money to all the workers.

10. Access to Justice for Girls and Women with Disabilities



Participants during the Dialogue

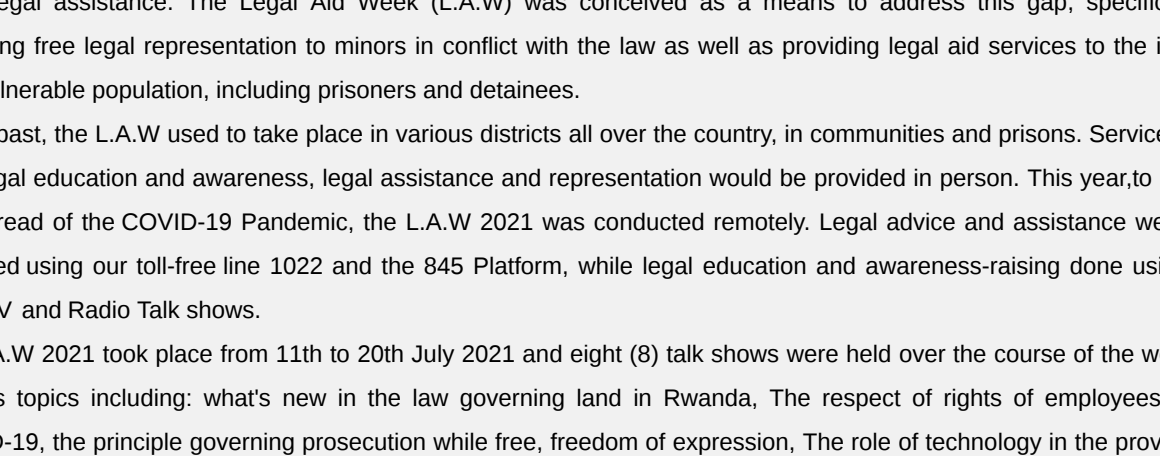
Following " the Assessment on the Barriers to Effective Access to Justice for Girls and Women with Disabilities in Rwanda" (Bead, Muro) conducted by LAF in collaboration with UNABU, a Dialogue was held on 11th June 2021 to discuss progress made to ensure access to justice for women and girls with disabilities in light of the findings from the assessment. The Dialogue was attended by 20 participants from various institutions including Government, Development Partners, Civil Society Organizations, various disability rights institutions, gender, and human rights stakeholders.

The dialogue accentuated the continued need to ensure access justice for people with disabilities, especially for women and girls who are faced with double discrimination due to the intersectionality of their disability and gender. Amongst obstacles to access to justice for women and girls with disabilities identified in the assessments includes; limited physical access to justice premises such as court buildings, denial of legal capacity, and unequal recognition before the law for girls and women with mental and intellectual impairments. People with mental and intellectual impairments are not allowed to testify in courts which sometimes means that they can't speak in court about abuses they may have suffered.

Further, lack of knowledge of sign language for justice actors was also highlighted to be an obstacle to access to justice for women and girls with disabilities, which leads to unjust convictions because the defendant is unable to defend themselves in courts because they do not understand what is happening. Limited access to information and communication for girls and women with hearing and visual impairments is also an obstacle because most court documents are not in a format that is accessible such as braille.

Despite various barriers still faced by women and girls with disabilities, the Government of Rwanda has made tremendous efforts to ensure the protection of people with disabilities including women and girls. In particular, the Cabinet has recently adopted the National Policy for Persons with Disabilities, which is expected to address some of the barriers faced by persons with disabilities women and girls included.

11. The Legal Aid Week 2021



Guests in the Studio during the Talk Shows

In 2020, the Legal Aid Forum and the Ministry of Justice conducted a groundbreaking baseline study on legal aid in Rwanda, which surveyed and analysed the ability of the population to access justice and legal services. One of the key findings from the study was that many communities, in particular, indigent and vulnerable populations were not aware of the law or the availability of legal aid services and how to access them. This lack of knowledge affected people's decision to seek legal assistance. The Legal Aid Week (LAW) was conceived as a means to address this gap, specifically by providing free legal representation to minors in conflict with the law as well as providing legal aid services to the indigent and vulnerable population, including prisoners and detainees.

In the past, the L.A.W used to take place in various districts all over the country, in communities and prisons. Services such as, Legal education and awareness, legal assistance and representation would be provided in person. This year to prevent the spread of the COVID-19 Pandemic, the L.A.W 2021 was conducted remotely. Legal advice and assistance were provided using our toll-free line 1022 and the 845 Platform, while legal education and awareness-raising done using Live TV and Radio Talk shows.

The L.A.W 2021 took place from 11th to 20th July 2021 and eight (8) talk shows were held over the course of the week, on various topics including: what's new in the law governing land in Rwanda, the respect of rights of employees during COVID-19, the principle governing prosecution while free, freedom of expression, the role of technology in the provision of justice and legal aid services during Covid-19, the role of Legal Aid Clinics in the provision of legal aid services, the role of paralegals in the delivery of justice to the Rwandan people and the contribution of forensic evidence in the delivery of justice. Three broadcasting stations were used during the L.A.W 2021, namely radio stations: TV and Radio 10, Radio and TV Rwanda and a total of 3,035,643 people were reached through Radio stations, while 1,842,657 people were reached through TV stations. In addition, 35,916 people were reached through social media, specifically Twitter, Facebook, and Youtube.