CULTURE WOMEN OF IMPACT

How women are stepping up to remake Rwanda

Tragedy and necessity lead to leadership opportunities that once seemed unimaginable. The challenge now: to make them last.

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Rwanda's genocide Museum is a haunting place, one of the memorials in the capital city of Kigali that commemorate a hundred days of terrifying tribal conflict in 1994.

The horror was triggered after Hutu extremists blamed Tutsi rebels for the downing of a plane carrying Rwandan President Juvenal Habyarimana and Burundian President Cyprien Ntaryamira. Habyarimana, like about 85 percent of Rwanda's population, was a Hutu. Tensions over the fatal crash exploded into a killing rampage that left up to one million Tutsi dead. Thousands of Hutu also were killed. At least a quarter of a million women were reported to have been raped, and more than 95,000 children were orphaned. When the conflict was over, Rwanda's surviving population of about six million was predominantly female.

Visitors to the Campaign Against Genocide Museum are ushered through seven galleries in near darkness, harrowing images, videos, and maps on the walls, before they emerge into the neon light of liberation in the last two rooms. The museum sits in the administrative heart of the capital, adjacent to the parliament and across the street from the supreme court, institutions that were forever altered by the atrocity.

Alice Urusaro Karekezi remembers those dark days and the daunting questions of how Rwanda would move forward. A human rights lawyer, she spearheaded an effort to have the rapes punished as a war crime in 1997, and she co-founded the Center for Conflict Management in 1999.

"You had the majority of the dead—men," she says. "The majority of the fugitives—men. The majority of the prisoners—men. Who will run the country?"

Out of tragedy, necessity, and pragmatism, women—up to 80 percent of Rwanda's surviving population—stepped in to fill the leadership void. Aided by women's civil society groups, lawmakers have introduced some of the most women-friendly policies in the world.

In 1999, overturning tradition, women officially were allowed to inherit property in the absence of a will, making landowners of rural daughters who'd been disenfranchised in favor of their brothers. Other reforms enabled women to use their land as collateral to obtain loans. Women were granted the right to open bank accounts without their husband's permission, further encouraging financial independence. Girls' education was prioritized through efforts that allowed more of them to attend college, and incentives were created for girls to study traditionally male-dominated subjects.

Rwanda has moved from a nation that treated women like property, whose chief function was to have children, to one that constitutionally mandates that at least 30 percent of government positions are occupied by women. Since 2003 Rwanda has consistently had the highest female representation, proportionally, of parliamentarians in the world—currently 61 percent in the lower house. Four of the nation's seven supreme court justices are women, including the deputy chief justice.

The presidency remains the domain of men—since 2000 the office has been held by Paul Kagame, the former military commander whose forces ended the genocide—but women occupy 13 of the 26 seats in Rwanda's cabinet. Viewed as an authoritarian by some, a visionary leader by others, Kagame, with his ruling Rwandan Patriotic Front, championed the push to form a new national identity that purged any mention of Hutu and Tutsi, and took giant leaps toward gender equality.

Born a refugee in Tanzania to a family that fled Tutsi persecution in 1959, Emma Furaha Rubagumya remembers her grandfather scolding her father for allowing her to start high school instead of getting married. Her grandfather, she says, feared that "she [was] not going to be a good woman" if she continued her studies instead of marrying and having children. The "big fight" between the two men before she entered college was another episode "that I cannot forget in my life."

Today, Rubagumya, 52, is a first-term parliamentarian. Elected in 2018, she leads parliament's Committee on Political Affairs and Gender. Her grandfather, who died in 1997, did not live to see her elected to parliament, but he did meet her husband and three daughters.

She remembers that during the battles over her education, her mother did not intercede on her behalf because "the way society was set then, she wouldn't go in front of her father-in-law to argue for me." Her mother and grandmothers were "just women in villages, cultivating lands, taking care of their children. They never went to school." But today, she says, "do you think I would not argue for my children to be educated? Do you think that my children would not argue for themselves to be educated? Even many women villagers would tell you that … they see educating their children as their first priority."

Justine Uvuza led the legal division of the Ministry of Gender and Family Promotion and was tasked with, among other things, identifying gender-discriminatory laws to be amended or repealed, such as a law that forbade women from working at night. Another law not only prohibited women from entering the diplomatic corps, but said a woman was "part of the property" of a man who became a diplomat. Changes in Rwanda's laws also established a Gender Monitoring Office to promote and oversee gender-equality initiatives. Women in parliament lobbied for laws against gender-based violence that criminalized marital rape, and amended the succession law in 2016 to allow childless widows to inherit a spouse's property.

The post-genocide changes came about in large part because of the absence of men, but as human rights lawyer Karekezi says, also "because of a political vision." Women were rewarded for refusing to shelter men, including kinsmen, who were involved in the genocide, and for testifying against their rapists. The pro-women policies, Karekezi says, also recognized a woman's precolonial role in decision-making, when the country's kings were counseled by their mothers and when rural women held communities together while men were away with grazing livestock.

Rwanda's values and expectations for women, at least in the public realm, have changed in a generation. As more women like Rubagumya have entered the government's ranks, their impact has been inspirational in addition to shaping laws and policies. Agnes Nyinawumuntu, 39, is president of a 160-member women's coffee-growing cooperative high in the lush hills of the eastern Kayonza district. Before the genocide, she says, the list of things women couldn't do, including coffee growing, was long. "There was only one

activity for us: to be pregnant and have kids." Nyinawumuntu has five, and although her husband also works in agriculture, she's the primary breadwinner. Seeing women in parliament, she says, "gives us confidence and pride. I see that if I work, I can get far. That's why some of us became local leaders."

Rwanda's gender-sensitive legal and policy framework and number of women in power are impressive, but the data also conceal a deeper, messier truth about the limits of legislating change.

Rwandan women didn't fight for their rights in the streets; they achieved them through legislative action, expecting that reform would trickle down and permeate society. Yet neither Rubagumya, the parliamentarian, nor Uvuza, former head of the Ministry of Gender and Family Promotion's legal division, believe society has changed so much that the 30 percent quota is no longer necessary to ensure a robust female parliamentary presence.

"We are not yet there 100 percent," Rubagumya says. "Mind-set changing is not something that happens overnight." That much is clear in gender relations within families, which Uvuza says have not changed as much as the government policies. Uvuza, whose doctoral dissertation examined the public and private lives of Rwanda's female parliamentarians, says a Rwandan woman's power, no matter how vast in public, still stops at her front door: "The men are not changing from the old ways."

Even the husbands of female parliamentarians, Uvuza says, expect their wives to "make sure his shoes are polished, his shirts are ironed, and his water is in the bathtub. These are the kinds of things that most women were telling me."

The next step in Rwanda's gender evolution, says Mary Balikungeri, director and founder of the Rwanda Women's Network, is focusing on men and "how we transform our own families, our own husbands."

"We cannot change much if these men don't change the way they look at things, so we need to bring them into a dialogue," she says.

Minister of Gender and Family Promotion Solina Nyirahabimana agrees that in 25 years of breaking gender stereotypes by telling women what they can do, "men have been left behind" in the conversation. She says her ministry has a more ambitious plan: It intends to prevent discrimination from being seeded, starting with instilling gender-equality principles in children.

In an after-school club in the southern Kamonyi district, teenage girls and boys act out plays based on what they've learned about combating gender stereotypes. In one, a boy questions his mother's decision to prioritize his education over his sister's, saying he can help with the housework and that the task shouldn't fall solely to his sister.

For Redempter Batete, 39, a gender specialist with UNICEF, teaching boys about women's rights is the logical next step. "If we don't target those little ones now, then we risk to lose out on opportunities when they grow up."

Rwanda is many years into an experiment whose inception—the genocide—will hopefully never be repeated anywhere. Kigali created the legislative scaffolding to help women rise, and is now working on empowering women and girls within their homes, but can change be achieved without robust top-down implementation and enforcement?

Rubagumya, the parliamentarian, knows the pain of feeling disenfranchised and powerless. "As a young girl, as a refugee, wherever you go, they look at you as somebody who doesn't belong there," she says, describing herself as part of "the first generation to come from nowhere" and enter power in Rwanda. Her family returned to Rwanda in 1997. Armed with a college degree and the zeal of a woman who finally felt at home, she set about changing her country, first as an administrator working on gender equality in the Ministry of Education and on girls' access to education, and now as a parliamentarian. She's proud of how far Rwanda and its women have come and is looking ahead to where she wants the country to be: "We have the frameworks, we have policies, we have laws, we have enforcement mechanisms … We've walked a journey, we've registered good achievements, but we still need to go further to make sure that at some point we shall be totally free of all imbalances."

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