

THE ROLE OF WOMEN IN RECONSTRUCTION: EXPERIENCE OF RWANDA

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Background

Rwanda ranks amongst the nine poorest countries in the world. It is a landlocked country, located approximately 2,000 km from the Atlantic Ocean and 1,200 km from the Indian Ocean. Its surface is 26,338 sq. km of which 11% is covered with lakes and marshes, and 6% with natural forests. Rwanda has a population of 8,128,553 inhabitants of whom 52.3% are women; the average population density is 400 inhabitants per square kilometre. Women heads of household comprise 34% of the population and the country has an annual growth rate of 2.9%. In 2000 the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) was estimated at US \$ 237 (about Rwf 123,240) per capita¹, and more than 60% of the population live below the poverty line. Rwanda is a republic that is governed by a multiparty presidential system. .

In order to have a clear and realistic insight into the role that women in Rwanda have played in the peace building efforts, it is useful to look at the events of the 1994 genocide and their aftermath. The war and genocide affected men and women differently. It is estimated that more than 250,000 Rwandan women and girls were victims of some form of sexual violence². Most of those who died, who never returned to Rwanda after fleeing, or who were imprisoned on charges of genocide were men. Thus, many war widows and other single women who survived were saddled with the responsibility for caring for families single-handedly, taking care of orphans, and assuming duties traditionally carried out in patriarchal Rwanda by men. The 1994 genocide and its aftermath have had tremendous effects, with ramifications felt both in and outside the country.

An important issue for the government of Rwanda is the promotion of gender equality and women's empowerment as a prerequisite for sustainable peace and development. This is echoed in the words of President Paul Kagame during the official opening of a gender –training workshop for Parliamentarians in 1999.

“The abrupt shift to monetary economy, formal education and modern technology played a key role in restructuring gender relations to the disadvantage of women. These imbalances are not only an obstacle to the country's development but constitute a form of social injustice. It is imperative to our lawmakers, policy makers and implementers to have an objective and correct analysis of the gender question in order to design appropriate corrective policies and programmes. The

¹ MINECOFIN, Rwanda in figures, 2003.

² AVEGA Agahozo, 1999, Etude sur les violences faites aux femmes au Rwanda

question of gender equality in our society needs a clear and critical evaluation in order to come up with concrete strategies to map the future development in which men and women are true partners and beneficiaries. My understanding of gender is that it is an issue of good governance, good economic management and respect of human rights”³

Consequences of the 1994 genocide

There are thousands of women who are victims of rape, trauma, and physical injuries in Rwanda. Abject poverty is still high and it is affecting mainly women from the rural areas. There are high rates of HIV/AIDS as more than 250,000 women were raped, (66% of women who were raped have tested positive for the disease⁴. Incidences of other infectious diseases remain high in a situation of limited health facilities. This situation has had an impact not only on the mental health of women but also on their physical well-being. Most of the survivors of the genocide, the majority of them women, experience serious economic deprivation. The level of mistrust between the families of those who survived the genocide and those whose relatives are suspected to have committed genocide is still high and deeply rooted.

The contribution of women in peace building and reconciliation efforts can become most effective by increasing their participation in decision-making organs and in the implementation of policies at institutional and community levels. In the last 11 years, significant steps have been made to bridge the gender gap and this is mainly attributed to government’s commitment to gender equity, the promotion of equal opportunities, and measures taken to address the post-genocide consequences. For instance, the government with the support of the international community managed to resettle internally displaced persons as well as old and new caseload refugees. It is important to note the critical role played by women, particularly at the community level, in these resettlement initiatives. Women have been equally engaged in helping to address the problem of orphans and other non-accompanied children, and it is estimated that between 400,000 and 500,000 children were fostered or adopted by families and women headed households.

Peace building during the post genocide period

The post genocide period can be divided into three main phases with each phase having specific peace building approaches.

Right from the start of the reconstruction programmes the Government of National Unity (GNU) put in place a national mechanism to ensure that women play an active role in post genocide and construction processes. Besides the emergency programmes, the ministry in charge of Family and Women’s Affairs was established and among its priority programmes was the birth of women committees or structures that ran from community cells up to the national level. The overall objective of these committees

³ Paul KAGAME 1999 official speech.

⁴ AVEGA AGAHOZO. 1999: “ Etudes sur les violences faites aux femmes au Rwanda”

was to provide Rwandese women with a forum through which their views, interests, and concerns on national reconstruction could be expressed, and in so doing contribute to shaping the country's recovery and reconstruction processes.

The Government of National Unity began a process which ten years later, led to the reaffirmation of the important role of women in the prevention and resolution of conflicts and in peace-building, and their equal participation and full involvement in all efforts for the maintenance and promotion of peace and security, as well as the need to increase their role in decision-making with regard to conflict prevention and resolution.⁵

Women in decision-making

Historically, women's participation in politics and decision-making in Rwanda has been insignificant, specifically at the higher echelons. This is despite efforts during the pre-colonial period where women in Rwanda played an important role in the country's governance through the institution of the queen mother.

After the destructive genocide of 1994, there was a great need to mobilize and assist the population in reconstructing their lives as well as their communities and the country as a whole. Rwandese women in different leadership positions played critical roles in mobilizing fellow women to live together and to find common solutions to their own problems and those of their country.

The Government of National Unity demonstrated its goodwill towards women and gave them a stake in the rebuilding process by appointing them to different leadership positions. For example, women began serving in the executive, legislative and judiciary arms of the government.

- In the last 11 years many women have shown themselves to be exemplary leaders at the policy level as well as the community level. The mere presence of women in cabinet, parliament, the judiciary, and all spheres of life served as role models and also helped to develop confidence among other women. This opened up possibilities for increasing women's role in decision making.
- Women worked together to forge solidarity, and unity among themselves as a first step forward. For example the Unity Club was formed as a forum of top women leaders and spouses of top leaders in government and is aimed at creating unity among these top women who are able to spread a message of unity and reconciliation throughout communities.
- Women conducted concrete activities such as helping orphans, fostering them, supporting victims of famine and floods.

The forum of Rwandese women leaders' caucus also started as a gathering of women parliamentarians from different backgrounds. Together they were able to lobby and influence the enactment of laws that protect and promote the rights of women.

⁵ UN Security Council Resolution 1325 of October 31, 2000

Examples of laws on which they worked include the inheritance law, the law on the rights of the child, and the rights of women at the place of work.

Additionally, the caucus of women parliamentarians was able to advocate for women rights and gender equality and also mobilized grassroots women to contribute to the making of the constitution. This permitted issues of gender equality to take centre stage. It also facilitated monitoring of the budget to ensure that it addresses the needs and concerns of women and men.

Women leadership was also visible in structures which later on came to be known as National women councils. These National women councils provided a platform that enables women to gain visibility, contribute to national debates and to influence policy development and democratic processes in the country. For example, the Councils mobilized fellow women to participate in *Gacaca* courts, decentralization, poverty reduction processes, programs for fighting the HIV/AIDS pandemic and dealing with the consequences of the 1994 genocide.

The government has also put in place a legal framework that facilitates the national women councils providing a forum through which women may exchange ideas and opinions on national issues and the overall development of the country. They have been able to contribute to national policies such as Vision 2020, PRSP, the decentralization policy, the national gender policy and many other areas of critical importance, including the new constitution.

- It is worth noting that the decentralization policy favours the representation of women at the various administrative levels: a department in charge of gender issues has been set up at the district and provincial level; likewise, women's representatives become automatic members of the consultative committees at the level of the *secteur* and *cellule*.
- The Constitution of Rwanda stipulates a minimum representation of at least 30% of women in decision-making bodies;
- Sensitisation campaigns have been organized to encourage the high participation of women in decision making bodies;
- Private universities offering evening classes are attended by a significant number of women, thereby enabling them to acquire the skills that will facilitate them competing for decision-making posts;
- An association for the promotion of the Rwandan women participation in decision-making organs, the Rwanda Women Leaders Caucus was created in July 2002.⁶

It is worth noting that the President of the Supreme Court of Rwanda and the Minister of Justice are both women, as is the Executive Secretary of the *Gacaca* courts. Of the 12 judges on the Supreme Court, 5 are women giving a representation of 41.7%. Further, at the local administration level, under the decentralization arrangement, women occupy 26% of the posts on the executive councils of each province.

⁶ Republic of Rwanda: A Beijing (1994-2004) conference ten-year evaluation report, 2004

Social and cultural context

The Rwandan society is characterized by a patriarchal social structure that underlies the unequal power relations between men and women, boys and girls. These unequal power relations are translated in male's dominance and women's subordination.

The gender-based discrimination and consequent inequalities were exacerbated by changes in the economic and social structures that were ushered in with the advent of colonial rule. The abrupt shift from a subsistence to a monetary economy based on paid employment and a formal education system, weakened women's position relative to that of men. In particular, it weakened their bargaining position on matters concerning their access to, and control over resources and the degree of their level of participation in the development process.

The 1994 genocide left behind unprecedented distortions in social relations and exacerbated the already existing gender imbalances and inequalities. However, one of the most far-reaching effects of genocide and war is a change in gender roles. This is illustrated by the fact that today, women head 34% of households in Rwanda, a relatively new trend in the Rwandan society. The post-genocide period has been also characterized by women performing non-traditional roles such as decision-making, managing financial resources, building households and roads, with minimum capacities to take on those roles.

Education and literacy

The socially constructed gender roles are economically and politically structured in such a way that women are disadvantaged in all areas compared to men. Indeed, Rwandan women and girls have limited access to education as compared to men and boys.

The 2001 Household Living Conditions Survey and the Core Welfare Indicators Questionnaire estimated literacy rates at 47.8% for women as compared to 58.1% for men. Only 5.8% of women benefit from apprenticeship training as against 9.1% of men. 2.6% of women benefit from short training (vocational training) versus 7.3% of men. Furthermore, 25% of women have never attended school or literacy centre against 17% of men.

Although there is no gender difference in enrolment rates at the primary school level, various studies have highlighted higher repetition, dropout and low performance rates for girls as compared to boys. Girl's dropout rate is estimated at 15.2% compared to 7.9% for boys. Girls received only 23.5% of scholarships available for the National University, 26.6% for the Kigali Institute of Science and Technology (KIST) and 21.3%

for ISAE⁷. Due to gender stereotyping, the proportion of girls in Science and Technology is very low as compared to men.⁸

Women spearheading socio-economic initiatives

Women became a driving force of the socio-economic development of the country after the 1994 genocide. A vast network of women groups such as NGOs, associations and cooperatives at the grassroots level played a pivotal role in providing empowerment initiatives. Socio-economic development is used as an entry point for peace building and reconciliation. Since 1994, women have participated in income generating activities that contributed to building their socio-economic empowerment, which in turn paved the way for sustainable development.

It is worth noting that the socio-economic empowerment of women in post genocide Rwanda, has brought tangible changes in community perceptions of women. Specifically it has redefined roles and responsibilities for women and contributed to building lasting peace and restore reconciliation.

Resettlement initiatives

In an effort to reconstruct the economy that was shattered by the war and genocide of 1994, women contributed significantly in resettlement initiatives that were promoted by the government of Rwanda. The genocide had almost completely destroyed the agricultural base of the country as a large number of men working in agriculture were either killed, fled the country or were imprisoned. Women across the country revived numerous agricultural activities. They provided food for their families either under food for work programme or simply producing food from their own plots.

From 1997 onwards, women have contributed tremendously, especially on the issue of repatriation rights of refugees and are visible in the many documentary films that are available on this subject. Women participated massively in the national programme of *Imidugudu* settlement where they provided labour, and for the first time in the history of Rwanda, they were even involved in the construction of house roofs. Throughout the entire territory of Rwanda women were seen on building sites working side by side with men or sometimes women alone trying to cope with the difficult challenges of constructing houses. This broke the myth that if a woman constructs a house, it leaks said one female respondent in Butare.

“We are now proud that every widow now has a house of her own, a toilet and a kitchen,” said a member of Duhozanye association in Save District in Butare Province.

⁷ MINEDUC Administrative data, 2001

⁸ MIGEPROFE. The national Gender Policy. Kigali, 2003

Women contribution to restoration and maintenance of security

Immediately after the 1994 genocide, one of the immediate challenges was to restore and maintain security. The massive repatriation of refugees was followed by an insurgency waged by *Interahamwe* and *ex-FAR* combatants particularly in the Northwestern Provinces of Ruhengeri, Gisenyi and some parts of Gitarama and Kibuye provinces.

Women started a campaign of convincing their husbands and relatives to disassociate themselves from the insurgency and return peacefully to their families. Many consider what women did here as an act of heroism because it involved risks of their own lives. Women used different tactics to convince the rebels to leave the insurgency. One of the methods used was to collaborate with the government troops and negotiate a peaceful surrender on conditions that they did not fight.

Women's participation in justice and Gacaca

In creating a national institution to revive and formalize *Gacaca*, the GNU has promoted women's participation. In terms of representation, women are represented in all *Gacaca* courts. Currently the national representation of women in all these courts is 29 % and this is an important achievement as traditionally women did not serve as *Gacaca* judges, a position that was reserved for a community's wise and respected men (*inyangamugayo*).⁹ In areas where women are presidents of *Gacaca* courts, such courts have been found to be performing better.¹⁰

Conclusion

Across the country, there is overwhelming evidence that women have been involved in initiatives that promote peace and reconstruction or contribute to the process despite the fact that most of their contributions remain unknown or invisible. The driving force behind the success of women's contribution to peace building and reconstruction process has been a combination of committed leadership at different levels and the willingness of the people. Grassroots women took full responsibility to face the challenges of a post conflict period and combined their efforts to ensure the survival of their families, determined not to see their country slide back but instead move forward towards lasting peace and reconciliation. This yielded positive results because of the strong political movements towards national reconciliation, and to gender equality and women's empowerment.

⁹ Strengthening Governance: The role of women in Rwanda's Transition, 2003.

¹⁰ Interview with Anastase Balinda, advisor on *Gacaca* courts, Department of *Gacaca* courts.