



Women *Taking A* Lead

Progress Toward Empowerment and Gender Equity in

Rwanda

Women for Women International Briefing Paper

September 2004



WOMEN *for* WOMEN
International



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WOMEN FOR WOMEN INTERNATIONAL provides women survivors of war, civil strife, and other conflicts with tools and resources to move from crisis and poverty into a civil society that promotes and protects peace, stability, and self-sufficiency. The group launched its activities in Rwanda in 1997 when it started providing services to socially excluded participants aimed at addressing short-term economic needs while enhancing and building their capacity to create long-term economic solutions. In the process, an intensive training in women's economic, political, and social roles and value in society was incorporated. This strategy stems from Women for Women International's conviction that economic solutions are not sustainable if they are not paired with active participation in social and political discourse.

Since 1997, nearly 5,000 women have been served by Women for Women International's programs in Rwanda, indirectly benefiting more than 21,000 family members. In 2004, Women for Women International – Rwanda will provide services for an additional 1,000 women. Women for Women International – Rwanda has provided services to women in nearly every prefect, and has worked with women in communities near the following cities: Gisenyi, Kibuye, Gikongoro, Butara, Gitarama, and Kibungo. The field office is located in the capital city of Kigali. In addition to its operations in Rwanda, Women for Women International works in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Nigeria, Afghanistan, Iraq, Democratic Republic of Congo and Colombia.



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Introduction

Women are now visible and vocal in the political arena in Rwanda to an unprecedented degree. A series of policies to enhance their participation at all levels of governance in Rwanda has yielded dramatic results. Following the 2003 elections, Rwanda's parliament is now close to gender parity, with 49% of female members, overtaking Sweden as the country with the greatest percentage of women legislators. In itself, this is an important victory for women, altering the face of Rwandese politics. Their national gains are accompanied by multiple initiatives at the level of local government and in civil society to promote women's involvement in decision-making and development activities.

This paper traces paths of struggle, detailing the opinions of women at the frontline. It provides an insight into the hardships endured by women in Rwanda over the past decade and their determination to overcome them. It celebrates their achievements and those of the political leaders who have supported reforms. Through a discussion of the concerns of women's representatives and advocates, some of the challenges inherent in implementing gender policies are exposed.

Women's participation in public life has long been culturally and socially constrained in Rwanda as elsewhere in the world. The introduction of quotas in local and national government has now enabled many to exercise this right. The purpose of equality of opportunity has already been well served, but hopes are high that there will be wider benefits. Most Rwandese women live in extremely harsh circumstances, and therefore their immediate and primary concern is with material improvements to their everyday existence. Underlying gender policies is a general expectation that the participation of women will deliver concrete results for women across society. Reforms introducing a "critical mass" of women into decision-making positions also hold out the possibility that the character of politics itself could be altered over time. This increases the space for consideration of whether and how gender policy might serve the broader urgent demands of development and national peace and security. There are no assurances; and efforts to consolidate recent gains are essential. This paper indicates some areas for reflection and action.

As a group dedicated to working with women survivors of war, we find the Rwandese women's experience provides inspiration and substantive lessons for women in post-conflict societies. We hope that the findings of this paper will provoke debate and uncover lessons learned from the Rwandese experience, as it celebrates the accomplishments of Rwandese women.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Zainab Salbi', with a long, sweeping underline.

Zainab Salbi

Founder and CEO, Women for Women International

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Methodology

Women Taking a Lead follows the established model of research regularly conducted by Africa Rights, relying on lengthy and detailed testimonies from interviewees to serve as the foundation of the report. This qualitative method allows for an in-depth understanding of individual stories and experiences, and ideas about how to create change, as well as broader issues. Some interviewees have requested anonymity due to the extreme sensitivity of certain topics discussed. In some sections, therefore, individual comments are not directly attributed. Guaranteeing this anonymity allows for

open and frank discussion and an airing of grievances, facilitating a critical dialogue without creating unnecessary tensions.

The research was conducted from March to May 2004, in Kinyarwanda, French and English. 28 women and 4 men were interviewed from three provinces in Rwanda: Kigali, Kigali-Ngali and Butare, in both urban and rural settings. Interviewees included a wide spectrum of women in decision-making positions in parliament, civil service, law, women's structures in local government and NGOs, as well as men working directly on gender issues.



Historical Context

Past Efforts: Limited Gains

The first Ministry for Women was established in Rwanda in 1965, but neither this nor the launch of the decade of women in 1975 had a significant impact in addressing women's legal, cultural, social and educational marginalization.

By 1985, politics was still dominated by men. There was a lack of political will and a shortage of mechanisms to integrate women. Not one woman participated in the national government, or the local administration at *préfecture* [provincial] and *commune* [district] levels. Women constituted only 12% of parliamentarians and 2% in the diplomatic service. Economic opportunities were restricted for women, who lacked access to land and credit and therefore to the control of resources. They had no right to belong to an organization aimed at profit-making; no right to inherit property and were even denied the right to a bank account.

The third Global Conference of Women, held in Nairobi in 1985, encouraged Rwandese women to establish the first non-governmental women's organization, *Réseau des Femmes* (RDF). Identifying rural women as a priority, its 29 founders mobilized 330 women across the country. A social assistant for training with RDF recalled the constraints they faced in their early days.

As the majority of Rwandese women are farmers, the training addressed their direct concerns like soil, matrimonial settlements and family planning. Illustrated instruction books based upon these subjects were used as training materials. These programs were well organized and relevant, but the gender dimension wasn't underlined. Women were still sceptical and men didn't want to see their privileges curtailed.¹

The interviewee recalls her personal transformation after receiving gender training through RDF in 1988.

I wasn't very aware of gender and gender policy didn't exist at the level of national politics, only within some women's groups. I became conscious of the inequalities between the sexes and what gender means. I realized the enormous gap between the rights, values, education and roles of girls and boys.

Over time, other groups seeking to address gender imbalances emerged from the RDF, including voluntary groups specialising in legal, business or health issues and co-operatives. Conscious of the political implications of the explosion in women's groups, the ruling political party, the National Revolutionary Movement for Development (MRND), set up its own organization in 1988—the Union of Rwandese Women for Development (URAMA). Pressure from URAMA gained women the right to participate in co-operatives and profit-making businesses.

A number of global factors came together in the early 1990s that helped strengthen the role of women's groups and human rights organizations and also expanded press freedom. The world-wide movement advocating democratic reforms, following the collapse of the Berlin Wall, was a key impetus. Under intense domestic and international pressure, the Rwandan government was forced to respond to the demand for multiparty politics, and a number of political parties were established. Many of its members had been—and still were—active in civil society. The government's failure to crush the rebel movement, the Rwandese Patriotic Front

¹ Interviewed in Kigali, 21 April 2004.

(RPF), which had launched a war from Uganda in October 1990, had also weakened its position and became increasingly nervous about the prospect of collaboration among its many enemies.

By the early 1990s, mechanisms to promote women had grown in number but had not secured legal guarantees of equality and non-discrimination. On the basis of recommendations from women's organizations in the RDF, a Ministry of the Family and the Promotion of Women was created in 1992.

The Ministry had offices at the commune and préfecture levels. It was welcomed as a political opportunity by women's organizations. In the same year, women gained the right to have a bank account without their husband's authorization and 13 women's organizations united to form a collective called Pro-Femmes Twese Hamwe. They wanted a means of co-ordination, a sharing of strategies and experiences and partnership with bodies mandated to help women.

Women and children were the worst affected by the deteriorating economic climate as World Bank structural adjustment reforms and the armed conflict of 1990-94 took their toll. As well as increased poverty, women were threatened by insecurity, violence and displacement.

Zaina was a founding member of Haguruka, a nongovernmental organization (NGO) set up in 1991, which continues to defend the social, economic and legal rights of women and children today. She points out that the environment in which they now work has improved substantially since their inception, when they were subjected to threats and repression.

There was a lot of hostility because our actions were considered an interference in the private life of families. Men were the strongest opponents; they felt their advantages were under threat. We advocated an end to violence against women. To discourage us, and perhaps to make us fold up, they linked our organization to a political group recruiting young people to destabilise the regime. I had to leave the country in 1993 for my security because extreme violence was directed at anyone regarded as undesirable.²

Bernadette Kanzayire was also forced out of her role as a civil society activist and she turned to

politics in the RPF in response to the tensions of this period.

Before the war, I was a member of the Association of Peace Volunteers, a human rights group. In 1990, when the war between the former regime and the RPF began, there was a lot of ethnic and regional discrimination and human rights violations. So our association alerted the international community about attacks and what was happening in Rwanda. We were already denouncing the genocide which had begun. We were harassed and persecuted because we were identified as accomplices of the rebels.³

1994: Things Change Forever

As Bernadette had suspected, a genocide was planned, though even she could never have imagined the intensity, speed and magnitude of the killings which began within hours of the death of President Juvénal Habyarimana in April 1994. He was returning to Rwanda on the evening of April 6th from Arusha in neighboring Tanzania when his plane was shot down near Kigali airport. Within the hour, roadblocks were set up in Kigali and the men, the policies and the machinery of genocide were in place by the morning of April 7th. The crash was immediately blamed on the RPF, established by Tutsis in exile. Tutsis in Rwanda were accused of serving as an RPF fifth column. And on April 7th, all Tutsis—men, women, children, including new-born babies and the very old—became targets. They were murdered in their homes and on the street; they were hunted down in the bushes and forests and they died *en masse* in the churches, schools and hospitals where they had sought refuge. Within a hundred days, most of Rwanda's Tutsi population had perished, alongside prominent Hutu politicians who were regarded as a potential obstacle to the launch of the genocide.

Militiamen in the *interahamwe* and government soldiers were the leading genocide perpetrators, but—in fear or manufactured hatred—ordinary people, including women, also participated. While there are numerous examples of courageous women risking their lives to protect and save others, many were silent bystanders, paralysed by fear or indif-

2 Interviewed in Kigali, 14 April 2004.

3 Interviewed in Kigali, 3 May 2004.

ference. But there is no evidence that women joined together to oppose the killings; nor did women's organizations take a stand against the genocide.

Some women, as well as men, identified Tutsis to the killers, led them to their hideouts, refused them shelter and looted their belongings. The two women in the government at the time—Pauline Nyiramasuhuko, the Minister of the Family and the Promotion of Women, and Agnès Ntamabyariro the Minister of Justice—played a leading role. Nyiramasuhuko, who among other charges, is accused of complicity in rape, is in the custody of the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda (ICTR) together with her son. Agnès is currently imprisoned in Rwanda. Local government officials, among them women councillors, helped incite the population to commit acts of genocide. Female teachers, nurses, civil servants and even some nuns joined the killers and supported them in a myriad of ways.

The military victory of the RPF brought the genocide to an end in July, but a mass exodus of the Hutu population to refugee camps in neighboring countries followed. The country experienced a period of rapid demographic change, losing more than 800,000 people in the genocide and about 2 million into exile during this year.⁴ Thousands of genocide suspects who remained in Rwanda were arrested. Terrible living conditions in refugee camps, and deaths from disease, created bitter feelings. Women left in Rwanda were burdened with the trauma of the genocide and huge practical difficulties. In the immediate aftermath of the genocide, 70% of population was female, mainly widows, suffering through bereavement, injury, trauma, isolation and illness. Other women, especially those whose husbands were in prison, also struggled alone to support their families. Relations between communities in the aftermath of genocide were inevitably tense, creating a broad and complicated set of challenges for those in government and civil society intent upon building peace and development.

Since 1994, about 800,000 refugees who left the country in 1959, and also in the 1960s and

1970s, have been repatriated, and more recently more than half of the 1994 exiles have returned. The gender ratio has improved with the return of significant numbers of male refugees, but women remain in the majority, constituting some 54% of population. 20% of the population is under five, and almost half the population is under 20. 95% of people in Rwanda live in rural areas; 61% of women live below the poverty line (compared with 59.3 % of men); and women head 34% of the households.

⁴ The statistics in this paper are drawn from a range of authoritative sources; see the bibliography for details. They are cited here merely as general indicators, and the difficulties of compiling accurate statistical data in post conflict situations should be borne in mind.



A Participatory Process

Agents of Change

Women pursue gender equality at various levels in politics and society, and those we interviewed came from diverse social and educational backgrounds. In this chapter, women evoke the different impulses prompting them to become more vocal, interested in collaborating, politically aware, and active in rebuilding their communities. Many spoke of the personal experiences which motivated their participation. Others identified the women whose leadership has been an inspiration or spoke of a sense of female solidarity strengthening their resolve. Interestingly, women give credit to men in positions of authority for their support, in particular President Paul Kagame. Some men work alongside women in gender promotion and those whom we interviewed willingly discussed why they are committed to the advancement of women.

Marie-Thérèse Mukamulisa, a Supreme Court judge, was a member of the commission which drafted Rwanda's new constitution. She is one of many professional women whose contribution has driven the campaign for women's equality. She spoke of two female political leaders who help sustain this cause.

We at the Supreme Court are fortunate to have a woman president as our head. We hope that through her, and also through the Ministry of Justice [also headed by a woman], that the population will see the accomplishments of women leaders for themselves. Little by little, women will benefit from the reputation of women who have proven that they are just as capable as men in leading successful political careers.

Bernadette is a lawyer and a parliamentarian, whose interest in the women's movement dates back to her student days. Her aim is to bring about a situ-

ation in which women "never have to depend on men." Active in Rwandese civil society since before 1990, when her group became a target for government oppression, Bernadette decided to join the RPF.

I became a member of the national executive committee of the RPF in 1998 and I led commissions on political and social affairs. I was also part of the association of genocide survivors and I always sat on the committee for human rights. On the political front, being a member of the RPF gives me a lot of opportunities to defend women's rights because the party provides space for women.

In common with thousands of Rwandese women who once had led sheltered lives, Berthe Mukamusoni's life was shattered by the 1994 genocide. Overnight, she became a breadwinner, and both mother and a father to her children who were themselves traumatised. Once a manager in a secondary school, she was appointed a deputy governor in 1995. She then became president of the National Women's Council in 2000 and is currently a parliamentarian.

After the genocide, women had no choice. They had killed my husband. I had to earn a living and rebuild my life. How long could I remain traumatised? I have eight children, six boys and two girls. If I dwelt on death, it would mean the death of my children as well. I had to wake up and get to work for their well being and survival.

She stretched herself to the limit and her attitude to all aspects of life altered dramatically.

I had to double my efforts. I decided to be like a man. At my age, I didn't want to find another

husband and I didn't want to be led by men. I also wanted to earn the confidence of other women. In this culture, being a widow has a negative connotation. They ask why you are alone. It upset me, but I didn't want to depend on a man. I wanted to affirm myself, to show that a widow can be productive and gain the respect of others. Solidarity among women has been a great advantage.

Berthe acknowledged the strong support women have received from men in the RPF and offered an explanation.

Men and women both took part in the fight against the genocide, even at the front. When the men saw how tough the women were, healing the sick and cooking the food, as well as their presence at the front, they saw what women were capable of and the value of collaborating with them. Women here didn't have to fight for the rights they have today like women had to in European countries. The President, among other men in senior positions, knows that women are strong, intelligent and make good leaders.⁵

Nathalie Mukashyaka, a widow and a member of a widows' group in Save, Butare, was similarly compelled to call upon her own resources and has found strength and confidence she could not have imagined.

We widows have been forced by our post-genocide reality to look after ourselves and to take full responsibility for our families. Gender reforms have given us self-confidence. We are no longer ashamed to do things that previously only men did. We do all kinds of jobs without worrying about what people will say. It is not uncommon to find households run by widows which are better off than those run by a man and a woman together.⁶

Consolée, coordinator of the national genocide widow's association, Avega, echoed this view.

We don't ask ourselves whether it's possible for women to do a particular thing; we do it

because we must for our survival and because there's no one else to do it in our place.⁷

As a member of the Commune Development Committee (CDC) in sector Kaburemera, Butare, Agnès Musabyimana is in charge of education and is also deputy coordinator of women's structures in her sector. Her interest in gender came from watching those who joined women's organizations.

I noticed that these women had flourished in a way that others had not.⁸

Eugénie in Kigali-Nali confirmed that poverty lay behind her decision to join a local women's group. Her life as a widow "has gotten considerably better" in comparison with her situation before the war and genocide, when her status as a widow meant struggling in isolation, without the support she now receives from other women.

Female solidarity is a key factor in the smooth functioning and success of our collective endeavours. Once we understood that there is strength in unity, widows and non-widows came together to overcome our common problems—chronic poverty accentuated by war, genocide and the loss of relatives. With the gender reforms and the creation of women's structures, our associations began to receive money from the Women's Fund, which has enabled our associations to progress.⁹

Zaina, a gender consultant, has focused on the welfare of women and children for a long time. A member of Haguruka's council, her experience has taught her the importance of securing legal protection.

I have always been outraged by the absence of laws to protect children, particularly young girls, and women in general.

Solange Umutoni, director of Global Network for Education and Economic Development (NEED), an NGO that provides assistance to

5 Interviewed in Kigali, 10 May 2004.

6 Interviewed in Save, Butare, 30 April 2004.

7 Interviewed in Kigali, 27 April 2004.

8 Interviewed in Butare, 29 April 2004.

9 Interviewed in Kigali-Ngali, 12 May 2004.

women and children in Rwanda, agreed that women in desperate circumstances were forced into independence to make ends meet and hold their families together. From this experience came the recognition that they “were playing a big part in reconstruction,” which increased their confidence. Another important element was the contribution made by returnees, women who had been living in exile for years. They brought back new ideas, prompting women in Rwanda to question their assumptions and the norms of their society.

Many of these women who came from Uganda, Kenya, Congo, Belgium, etc. after the genocide were more independent. For instance, no woman would work in a petrol station before because they were shy and it was, after all, a man’s job. Now you see them there and in the construction sites, as well as driving taxis without any complex. They saw other women looking for opportunities, and it gave them a boost when they saw what women could do.

Women’s life as refugees had taught the returnees the importance of education in advancing individuals and nations.

Before the genocide, women were going to school but they really didn’t see education as a means to elevate their status, to become independent and have financial stability. The returnees pushed the others to appreciate the connection.¹⁰

A member of RDF singled out two individuals as having shown exceptional leadership in advancing the campaign for women’s rights: Aloisea Inyumba, former Minister for Gender and the current préfet of Kigali-Ngali, and Angeline Muganza, who succeeded Aloisea Inyumba as Minister for Gender.

Significantly, Angeline too spoke of the critical role played by returning exiles, not just in contributing ideas but as mediators in defusing the politically and socially tense atmosphere immediately following the genocide.

They had the energy and the will to rebuild the country. And as they hadn’t been there during the war and the genocide, they had a detached

view of the fraught relations between female genocide survivors and their families and those who had husbands or relatives accused of taking part in the killings.

They acted as catalysts in resolving conflicts, urging women to explore their common interests rather than emphasising the topics that divided them. The idea of the women’s collective came from them. They made women aware of the need to overcome the poverty, ignorance and violence which left them at a disadvantage in times of peace, and even more so during conflict, and of their role in establishing and maintaining a culture of peace. Women joined in large numbers and put their differences aside.

Faustin Vuningoma of the Ministry of Gender and the Promotion of Women (MIGEPROFE) was formerly an NGO employee in Uganda. He believes the Ministry can—and must—make a real difference in the development of Rwanda, given the demands on women and the needs of the country. He discussed some factors that have influenced the government’s strong commitment to placing women at the heart of its development strategy.

I asked myself what would be the best entry point to reach the people, particularly the most vulnerable? I thought that perhaps through the Ministry, I could make a difference, change things and the way people think. And that has happened. The Ministry has also given me the chance to collaborate with other organizations and NGOs.

As a man, I would prefer it if my wife has a better paid job than I do because men tend to spend their money on things that don’t always benefit the family. I think countries where women participate more fully have developed further. We have to utilise women’s abilities and talents, not because of a political agenda but as a way of making development more sustainable. It’s really a matter of being practical.¹¹

Jacqueline Ashimwe, an assistant at the permanent office responsible for gender in Butare town, was the only interviewee who had become involved in gender issues for purely professional reasons, but is now beginning to appreciate the broader significance of her job.

¹⁰ Interviewed in Kigali, 9 June 2004

¹¹ Interviewed in Kigali, 16 June 2004

It made it possible for me to understand the problems of women, and as a woman I feel obliged to look for solutions.¹²

Institutionalisation of Gender Policies

The Ministry of Gender and the Promotion of Women (MIGEPROFE), established in 1995, has been the key government institution advocating for women's empowerment and gender-sensitive policymaking within the government. Starting from scratch in 1995, "when we didn't have chairs or documents," in the words of Faustin, it has compiled information on the status of women and launched a series of important initiatives to address women's representation.

Initially, the Ministry was confronted by the urgent needs of this emergency period, including massive displacement, homelessness, poverty, disease and the destruction of infrastructure. With the country's rapid demographic change in the midst of these difficult circumstances, improving the status of women became essential to the reconstruction of the country, as Faustin pointed out.

Without the development of women, it is as though you have only one arm. Here, our women are the majority, so leaving them redundant does not make sense. Many men perished in Rwanda, so who else would carry out their jobs? If you don't develop the status of women, you are under-developing the country, and that is something the government understood. Women do a lot at home, including raising the children, and if they are not trained either formally or informally, then what happens to the children?

Under the stewardship of its former Minister, Aloisea Inyumba, the Ministry of Gender succeeded in mobilizing resources and moving towards a more long-term strategy. Faustin explained how the idea arose to establish women's committees, an innovative policy which has dramatically increased women's participation in politics.

As time went on there were other development initiatives like community capacity building programs. We visited some villages to sit down with women to find out their problems. That is

how the idea of women structures came about. They would form a link from the grassroots up to the top levels.

Rwanda's local government functions through a pyramid system, with administrative units divided first into groups of ten houses, then cellules, sectors, districts and finally provinces, each with elected government representatives. The women's structures sit in parallel to this system, starting at the cellule level.¹³ Colette Businge, coordinator of gender in the province of Kigali-Ngali, explained the system.

Ten candidates are elected by the cellule, and all the women elected in each cellule choose ten women amongst them to represent them at sector level. The same process takes place within the sector where women choose ten representatives who in turn make up the district committee. They then select ten women to sit on the provincial committee.

This decentralisation policy makes it possible to reach women at the grassroots. They allow women to assume positions and organize at their own pace, giving them responsibilities according to their abilities. The women who are elected are those who already enjoy a measure of credibility in their communities and who are appreciated there, for example, school teachers or headmistresses, employees of social and health services—socially active women who are sufficiently educated to mobilize others for targeted action.¹⁴

One member of the women's committee is appointed to sit on the corresponding local government council to facilitate coordination between the two structures, and to ensure that women have a voice in the local administration. The final tier of leadership is at the national level. Women elected to the local committees are all members of the National Women's Council (CNF), which was established in 1996. The president and vice-president of this body are elected by women on the provincial committees, and an executive secretary is appointed.

The CNF is essentially a consultative body whose members engage in advocacy—both educating ordinary women about their rights and providing a channel through which information from

¹² Interviewed in Butare, 29 April 2004.

¹³ It should be noted that committees are not yet operating at every level across the country.

¹⁴ Interviewed in Kigali-Ngali, 9 May 2004.

women at the grassroots can be brought to the attention of policymakers at the top. Originally the focus was upon the women affected by war and genocide, but the Council's mandate now includes all women, identifying their needs and constraints so that they become actors in and beneficiaries of the development process. The CNF has been an important engine of change at the grassroots, among other national initiatives.

A Point of Departure

The Fourth World Conference on Women was held in Beijing in September 1995, just as Rwandese women were facing the immense demands of post-genocide and war reconstruction. It was a moment at which upheaval and uncertainty left spaces into which new ideas could be inserted. The Rwandese delegation to the conference returned with a plan of action which has guided women activists in the country ever since. Through interaction with women across the world, Rwandans were able to share their experiences and build confidence. Bernadette was among those who attended the conference. She described the contribution of Rwandan women and how much they gained from interaction with other women.

We made a plea for women in post-genocide Rwanda. Rwanda was then considered a recent example of what happens to women in conflict, including the use of rape as a weapon of war.

She explained why she felt it was the responsibility of women to contribute to the search for peace in the period after the genocide.

Women were implicated, directly or indirectly in the genocide, or were passive and did nothing to discourage or stop their relatives from committing barbaric and extremely violent acts against their neighbors. So they should be in the forefront of the fight for peace.

One of the recommendations discussed the role of women in preventing armed conflicts, especially since they were the primary victims. Women from various international associations are now working together, with the result that women are more prominent in the attempts to establish a culture of peace.

Espérance Mwiza is vice-president of the Women's Council and a member of parliament. She returned to Rwanda shortly after the genocide and began her career in Rwanda at MIGEPROFE. She found that there was no way to escape the strong emotions unleashed by the genocide.

The heads of the majority of families were women. Vulnerable and with no resources, they were exhausted by war and drained by poverty. But what was very worrying were the divisions at the heart of Rwandese society. It was a monumental task to organize the population so that it could take care of itself. Widows of the genocide had to live, as best as they could, alongside women whose husbands were in prison, accused of genocide crimes. Then there were women like me, back from exile, returning to a country they didn't know, but who were very enthusiastic about having a country at last, and who wanted to buckle down to rebuilding it. It was not easy to reconcile the realities of these women who were all Rwandese but who were separated from each other by history.

Suzanne Ruboneka is responsible for peace programs within Pro-Femmes, an umbrella organization for 48 women's groups. Started just after the genocide, it immediately had to confront the social consequences of the genocide, as Suzanne acknowledged.

We urged the women to come together in spite of their differences in where they had been living or their motivations, in order to build our collective on what we had in common as mothers and citizens, rather than looking at what kept us apart. This way we could rebuild the country for our children. We had to find long-term solutions together. It was a difficult stage because Rwandese society had been torn apart by ethnic divisions and the genocide which was a huge blow for every effort aimed at reconciliation and unity.

We formed a committee of women named Kalisimbi after the volcano, as a symbol of something that transcends all ethnic and cultural divisions and barriers, which was going to represent Rwandese women at the Beijing conference. It was humiliating to watch women from other countries talk about

development while we talked about conflict, genocide, widows, orphans and rape. We felt it was our duty to work together to give a better image of our country. On our return, we created the movement of women for peace. It was high time for women to help put the country back on its feet. The movement is associated with other African women's groups to form a network in the Great Lakes.

Many of the reforms which have taken place in Rwanda since 1995, reflect the themes of the Beijing conference, in particular demands for equal power sharing, legal reforms and reinforcing the mechanisms for gender promotion. In 1997, a National Committee and Permanent Secretariat was created to track the implementation of the Beijing Platform of Action.¹⁵

A Window of Opportunity: Constitutional Reforms

The process of developing Rwanda's constitution was seized upon by women in political and civic groups as an opportunity to consolidate and improve women's rights. Berthe, who was a member of parliament at the time and remains so today, participated in a mission funded by the UK's Department for International Development (DFID) to include the views of ordinary women in the constitution. After drawing up a memorandum of their concerns, she recalls, the 16 women then in parliament, for the most part prevailed at getting their priorities included.

We got almost everything we asked for, including the 30% quota for women. When writing the constitution, gender started off as a separate chapter. We refused and said that it had to be integrated. We got through to the people preparing the Constitution by telling them that the women we were talking about were their wives and sisters. We didn't shout and demand but moved slowly. We asked them: "Don't you want your daughter to have rights? Don't you want your wife to have rights? We appealed to them.

As a result, the 2003 Constitution of the Republic of Rwanda provides for a series of institutional mechanisms whereby women's political participation is a permanent feature of Rwanda's political landscape. Notably 24 of the 80 seats (30%) in the legislature are reserved for women, combined with a target of 30% women for local government posts.

Article 76 of the new Constitution sets out the terms upon which the 24 women parliamentary candidates are to be elected, two from each Province and the City of Kigali.

These shall be elected by a joint assembly composed of members of the respective District, Municipality, Town or Kigali City Councils and members of the Executive Committees of women's organizations at the Province, Kigali City, District, Municipalities, Towns and Sector levels.

The Constitution also ensures the equal status of women. An independent Gender Monitoring Office is provided for as well, but has yet to begin operations. The office is responsible for monitoring, supervising and making recommendations on the program for gender equality and complementarity. It also "serves as a reference point on matters relating to gender equality and non-discrimination for equal opportunity and fairness."¹⁶ Several interviewees expressed the urgency of getting this institution off the ground in order to increase the impact of initiatives by MIGEPROFE and the National Women's Council.

Working in Partnership

From the outset, MIGEPROFE has worked closely with civil society groups, international donors and NGOs in formulating gender policies and measures to empower women. It is the principal actor in the implementation of a strategic plan which emerged from consultations with these and other players, and it coordinates all interventions. In collaboration with the Ministry of Economics and Finance, it has encouraged "gender budgeting" as one

15 The Platform for Action is an agenda for women's empowerment. It aims at accelerating the implementation of specific strategies for the advancement of women and at removing all the obstacles to women's active participation in all spheres of public and private life through a full and equal share in economic, social, cultural and political decision-making.

16 See the Constitution of the Republic of Rwanda, May 2003.

of the instruments serving to integrate gender concerns into the budgets of Ministries and provinces, and to ensure that they take account of gender differences. The general aim is the full integration of gender issues into all areas of development and all Ministries.

Civil society groups trying to advance gender awareness recognize that cooperation with each other and with government is the key to their success. Relations between civil society groups and MIGEPROFE, for example, have been strong and productive. The Ministry, Pro-Femmes and the Forum for Women Parliamentarians, which brings together both women members of parliament (MP) and senators, have collaborated in the formulation and implementation of initiatives aimed at gender awareness and women's empowerment. The willingness of women within each of these sectors to work in partnership towards their common interests of political and economic development has been a tremendous strength. The reality that many female political representatives emerged from civil society and have retained their grassroots connections underscores this alliance. Programs for women integrate government (both national and local), civil society and international donors in a participatory spirit; relationships appear collaborative and fluid, with participants conscious that developments in one arena may stimulate progress in another.

John Mutamba of the Ministry of Gender summed up its connections with civil society as "a partnership based on the exchange of information and skills."

When there is research to be carried out, or training to be given, we call on civil society and we provide them with policies and recommendations which could guide them in their actions. We help to co-ordinate their activities and recommend them to donors.

Berthe, president of the Forum for Women Parliamentarians, praised Pro-Femmes as "a source of strength for us" and also mentioned the Women Leaders Caucus which brings together female decision-makers. She commented on the rationale behind the collaborative approach.

After the genocide, women were on their own as heads of households. Now, there are associations so they can live and work together.

Collaborative Spirit: Civil Society and Government

Madeleine Mukarwigema's account of the progress of the association Duhozanye in Save district, Butare, of which she is a member, does well at illustrating this intersection between women in civil society and the political sphere.

Our members belong to many of the decision-making organs. We have co-ordinators within the sectors and cellules. The first mayor of Save was one of our members, and today she is an MP. And we also have representatives in the committees of women at all levels.¹⁷

Madeleine also reveals that an awareness of gender discrimination followed more practical concerns. Set up in November 1994, a few months after the end of the genocide, Duhozanye sought to respond to the urgent problems facing 330 widows and widowers of the genocide: appalling living conditions, loneliness and the absence of social networks, trauma, poverty and a shortage of housing.

Madeleine said that they "never thought about gender" at the time. She pointed out that initially meetings were dominated by the strong emotions people felt, making it difficult to get much done. Tense relations with their neighbors was another obstacle, but they persisted. They also succeeded in building homes for their members with funds from a Canadian donor. Realization of the gendered nature of their struggles came only later through training.

We never took gender into consideration. We saw ourselves as widows who were trying to get by. We hired one man as a technician. We started a lot of income-generating activities. We even took responsibility for orphans of the genocide. We made it possible for those who were still at school to continue their education, and others were sent to vocational training centres.

Before we received training in gender, we thought that we had arrived at the summit of sexual equality because we were doing jobs and tasks which had previously been reserved

17 Interviewed in Save, 28 April 2004.

for men only, like masonry, milking cows etc... After the training, we saw that we had an incomplete understanding of gender.

The new confidence women gained through Duhozanye enabled some members to win seats as political representatives on the women's committees. According to the example cited by Madeleine, women have made efforts to mainstream gender considerations into local level decision-making.

We have fought to have representatives to talk about our needs. For example, widows had to take part in night patrols like all the other inhabitants, and our representatives explained to officials that this was impossible for us. We couldn't leave the children alone in the house during the night. Instead, widows now pay towards the purchase of batteries for torches.

Similarly, Consolée from Avega, the widow's organization, pointed out that two members of parliament are also members of Avega.

A key figure in Sevota, an association for widows and genocide orphans in Taba, Gitarama feels the group has been a source of "solidarity and mutual aid. She feels the group has been a source of "solidarity and mutual aid." She is convinced that the work of the RDF network in general, focusing on the development of rural women, is helping to bridge social divisions as well as tackle poverty. She acknowledged the valuable support of donors for "gender matters," especially from SNV, a Dutch development organization.

The Government has also assisted women's groups financially in their efforts to address gender imbalances. FAWE Rwanda (Forum for African Women's Education) encourages the education of women and girls in Rwanda. It is supported by the Ministry of Education, and its objectives are to help girls gain better access to education and encourage them to study science and technology. They run a model girls' school in Gisozi, Kigali, specialising in math and science and plan to create five others.

Jane Umutoni, a representative of FAWE, said they want to facilitate good governance by contributing to the availability and quality of future female political leadership.

The mandate from the Ministry gives us enough latitude in the field of education. Education of young girls is key to women's rights. It will allow us to fulfil the quotas of at least 30% of women in all the areas of development and at all levels. At the moment, the grassroots authorities don't have women to occupy leadership positions because they're still hesitant to present their candidatures, either out of timidity, because they don't have confidence in them or because they think they don't have the qualifications and competence.¹⁸

18 Interviewed in Kigali, 23 April 2004.



Delivering the Goods

Legal Reforms

Women parliamentarians have sought to end gender discrimination through legislation, confirming that political representation is a path towards improving women's legal rights. Women parliamentarians lobbied for changes before the 2003 elections in the family law to secure rights for women in matrimony and inheritance. Bernadette was among those parliamentarians determined to introduce reforms and for her, this law underscores the importance of women in parliament.

The law defends equality between girls and boys from the same family and between spouses. Traditionally, boys inherited the family property, leaving out widows and orphans. Men wanted to keep the status quo, but fortunately reason prevailed.

The reforms in family law are welcomed by Rwandan women at all levels of society. Zaina paid tribute to the parliamentarians.

Because of their influence, there have been legislative and political reforms beneficial to women, for example the new laws protecting the family.

Gender advocates, like Colette in Kigali Ngali, in the provinces and among rural communities, also expressed a profound appreciation for the legal reforms.

Before, the laws were ambiguous, confusing and rarely observed. They didn't define the rights of women in a clear manner. But the laws punishing women were very precise and extremely severe. For example, a man had the right to a divorce in the case of adultery, but women didn't have this right if the man was the

guilty party. Women lost their children to men in divorce cases and didn't have the right to share family property. Now the new Constitution gives more rights to women, equal to those of men, especially in family law.

An NGO employee in Kigali also underlined the significance of legislative reforms addressing sexual violence.

Certain rights have been won, thanks to the presence of women in prominent positions who lobbied hard. Female MPs and women who took part in writing the new Constitution made the laws more favourable to women and generally did a lot in advancing their rights. The law of marriage settlements and the categorisation of rape as a crime punishable by death are concrete examples.

In Save, Butare, Nathalie commented how the legislation has affected violence against women.

Today, women enjoy a measure of respect in the family and the law gives her the same rights as her brothers. Before, when a girl got married, she lost all her rights in her parents' home. The abuse of women by their husbands is no longer as common, but it's not because men have understood the relevance of gender promotion, but because of their respect for, and fear of, the law.

Léoncie Mugabekazi, president of the CDC in sector Kaburemera and vice coordinator of women's groups in Butare town, agrees that the family law has had real benefits for ordinary women and children, deepening their "respect and value within the family." She acknowledged, however, that a wide gap remains between legislation and practice.

The laws which discriminated against girls and women have been revised, but gender remains

largely subservient to a culture which demands that a woman should always be inferior to a man.¹⁹

Reality Check: Persistent Prejudices

Women involved in policy-making and implementation recognize the difficulties of ensuring that the legislation actually serves women. As a Supreme Court judge, Marie-Thérèse Mukamulisa's account of the obstacles facing victims of violence is particularly insightful. She points out that although violence against women is now roundly condemned, and more women are denouncing abuses, justice continues to elude them.

The judicial process is very slow and inefficient. This is disheartening to the women who have dared to lodge complaints.

Moreover, in relation to child abuse, she notes that cultural factors dissuade women from pursuing claims.

It's not easy to accuse a husband, a brother or a friend who has committed a physical or sexual offence against a woman or a little girl. Rwandese families, especially the women themselves, discourage these accusations out of concern for the family's reputation. A girl who has been raped brings shame on the family and may never get married if the whole world knows what happened to her. People go out of their way to hide incest, and it becomes a family secret which is often settled within the family. In this case, the culprit is called before the family and he is denounced and sanctioned by the family's council of elders. The punishment is sometimes to compensate the girl's family if he is an outsider, or to confess and demand pardon if it's a member of the family.

Despite the legislation to protect women's rights enshrined in the new Constitution, women are understandably nervous about giving testimony in court. Marie-Thérèse observes that:

Proving beyond all doubt that she has been raped is not an easy thing for a Rwandese

woman who is expected to be modest. The women who have found the strength to bring a complaint about rape lose heart and abandon their case at the first interrogation they undergo.

Similar to other countries, there are no adequate structures in place to enforce legal reforms. For instance, Marie-Thérèse points out, that men "receive the complaints" and sometimes make their disapproval clear. There are few doctors with the expertise necessary to provide medical evidence to substantiate a rape charge, and even fewer female doctors. Those living in rural areas are unlikely to have access to doctors and nurses suitably qualified for this task, and because they are not well informed about the procedures, victims sometimes "destroy the proof by taking baths" before they have been examined. Finally, going to court and obtaining medical expertise is a financial burden that deters many women.

The expenses related to filling out the forms have been abolished, but the victims have to bear the other medical expenses.

Bernadette was aware of opposition from men to the legislation on family law. She noted the resultant fear among women that by demanding their rights, they may become "the source of conflict in families."

Her fellow parliamentarian, Espérance Mwiza, also the vice president of the CNF, noted the progress to date, but warned against complacency in a country where more than 90% of the population is rural.

You can't ignore the major obstacles like people's mentality and culture. Although men are the most hostile, there are still some women who remain sceptical and suspicious about reforms which, they argue, destroy harmony between men and women and within the family. They believe they are naturally inferior to men, and especially to their husbands. You come across this way of looking at things particularly with elderly women, women deprived of education and especially women in the rural areas. The way young Rwandese girls are socialised has a lot to do with the way they

¹⁹ Interviewed in Kaburemera, 29 April 2004.

think because the young girl is taught to respect, submit and remain loyal to the men in her family and to her husband. So the idea of becoming a man's equal and having the same rights, obligations and duties is very new and utopian for the majority of Rwandese women. Even the educated ones see it as a dream but don't yet believe in it.

Women are discouraged by the attitudes, reactions and prejudices inherent in Rwandese society which marginalise women who demand equal rights with men. A woman who is educated, qualified and independent is not seen as a model for women. Rather, she inspires fear and suspicion among women and makes men feel aggressive and gives them a complex.

Women's rights are now protected by laws which are gender friendly, but the era of application is still a long way off. For example, in the north of the country, the man is king in his home. Polygamy is tolerated and even accepted, women are sent away, disinherited and abused in all manner of ways despite the new family laws. We put a lot of effort into making men accept these laws, but it's not easy. There's a mental block and habits which have evolved into traditions take time to uproot. Some women don't even condemn the abuses committed against them because it has become a way of life for them.

To break down these barriers, we are looking towards State organs which must incorporate gender into all their programs for civic education, good governance and development. Women's groups within the Nation Women's Council are ideal partners for facilitating and transmitting gender policies to the population, but they don't have resources.

Spéciose Mukandutiye entered parliament in 2003 after working for a women's group and serving as a mayor. She paid a warm tribute to the women who made it possible for her to complete her degree by helping to look after her children, then gave her a job, and encouraged her to broaden her horizons and experience by becoming a mayor and a member of parliament. Nevertheless, she is aware of the guarded attitude by many toward women in the political arena.

To be a woman in politics, you must have a very strong personality. Women are key allies,

but sometimes they can discourage and marginalise you because you've transgressed the norms that society has established for women. A woman who imposes herself, and who has a certain authority over men is not looked upon kindly; she's regarded as denying her femininity. As for the men, they simply will not accept the authority of a woman, and they even despise her. A woman in a position of authority must therefore have enormous confidence in herself, not be afraid of taking up complicated assignments, heed advice but be able to make a clear choice because there are so many traps to disqualify her. You have to analyse everything before making a decision.

Zaina argued that "cultural barriers and an antiquated mentality" stand in the way of women's well-being.

They are still insecure because they are threatened by male relatives and in-laws who don't want to share their inheritance with women. Men don't see how their daughter or sister, married into another family, could come back and demand part of the family inheritance and allow strangers [the in-laws] who have their own property, to take advantage of it. They forget that if their daughter doesn't remain married, or if she never has been, she has no right to the property of her husband or the man she lives with. If this person unfortunately dies, she could simply be dismissed and lose her children to her in-laws because the children belong to them.

According to Agnès, rural women in Butare province are still too powerless to make use of legislative protection.

They are still subject to all sorts of violence. Men interpret equality and equity between the sexes as an instrument to ensure that women have more rights than men. Rural women still remain silent and secretive about abuses committed against them within the family. For example, if women have been beaten by their husbands, they hide the fact that it was their husbands who hit them, even if they have been wounded. Others don't know who to go to to report abuses.

Agnès often attends meetings in Butare town to talk about gender, but finds it more difficult to convey the messages to women who are scattered in the outlying villages.

When we call ordinary women to meetings, only a handful come.

In Jane's view, despite the legislation, violence against women, particularly within the family, does not appear to be subsiding.

Physical and psychological violence against women has become widespread. Women are beaten, disfigured, raped, harassed, but this violence which is often within the family is not even denounced to the public authorities. Family violence is considered to be a private matter which should be settled within the family. So, if a woman is abused by a relative or by her husband, there is very little chance that the guilty party will be called even if a complaint has been made.

People aren't aware of women's rights. The laws protecting these rights exist, but breaches are not punished in a convincing manner, or are simply not punished.

John Gasana is in charge of youth, sports and culture in the provincial office of Kigali-Ngali. Noting that "every revolution passes through a process," like all the men interviewed for this report and many other women, he made a plea for a cautious, informed and consultative approach.

Because women have been denied influence and the right to make decisions in society for so long, they must make strategic choices. Women who come across as aggressors demanding rights will meet with opposition.

You also have to take into account the social, economic, cultural and educational background of your audience. You can't afford to forget that culture is a reference for every type of behaviour in a society. Among the educated, gender is part of their everyday life since it's not unusual to see a husband and wife with a comparable education, a similar salary and the same responsibilities. But once in their home, it's possible that the husband will act as if he's superior and the woman, because that's how she's been brought up, will not contest this. And it doesn't mean that there's discord in the family.

But there are men who have a superiority complex and who demoralise their female colleagues with their sexist language. And some women fall into the trap and abandon their struggle, or over-react to any criticism from men, even if it's constructive criticism. This defensive response shows a certain lack of self-confidence in themselves and their careers. They're waiting for men to show that they're not ignoring them. They absolutely must have their appreciation when in fact their productivity is sufficient to prove their capacity to make headway in areas traditionally reserved for men.

Without raising the status of women, John argued that Rwanda cannot progress because women are necessary "partners for development." Legislative and political reforms were the first steps, but it is also imperative "to jettison the old culture and values that underpin sexual discrimination, just as it is necessary to break with other forms of discrimination." He called on both men and women to set an example to avoid delays, recriminations and setbacks.

The fate of these reforms will depend on the contribution everyone makes within their social/cultural environment, in their work and in their everyday life. Socialisation has a big part to play. If I'm able to integrate gender into my life, it's easy for me to pass on these values to my children and to the people around me, by the way I act and live. Future generations will live in a more equitable society, depending on their education and socialisation.²⁰

Rural Communities: Hostility to Reforms

Wilson Rugundana, responsible for economic affairs in the district of Ndera, Kigali-Ngali, drew a sharp distinction between the attitudes towards gender in urban areas and in rural communities. Sharing a viewpoint with other interviewees who serve rural constituencies, he offered his opinion on what holds rural residents back from welcoming the promises inherent in the reform program.

Awareness raising is no trouble in the urban areas because both men and women are more or

20 Interviewed in Kigali-Ngali, 9 May 2004

less educated, have access to information and are exposed to different mentalities. They don't hesitate, for example, to take advantage of the microcredit schemes which are very popular with women's associations. Their life-style in the towns is compatible with income-generating projects. Because women who live in and near towns don't have land to farm, they earn their living through petty trade. Men married to women entrepreneurs have no choice but to take care of some domestic responsibilities because the woman must work and reimburse the loan. So the issue of gender is made easier by force of circumstances.

But the reality is very different in the villages, where life revolves around the routine and hardship of farming, as Wilson pointed out.

Here people spend their time tilling the fields. The division of tasks between the sexes is so deeply ingrained that it's difficult to modify the daily life of a peasant. To make this population sensitive to gender, you must know the details about their way of life and their mentality. Peasant women are poor and have no education. They are overwhelmed by work and their men rarely give them a hand. So they don't have the time to create associations, or for economic activities other than cultivating their land. In regions like Ruhengeri and Gisenyi, people are scattered in villages. They're not going to take the trouble to come down from their hills to go to sensitisation meetings unless they're compulsory. And the advocates of gender don't have the means, or the motivation, to go to inaccessible areas to talk to people who are not inclined to listen to them. Women's structures must be consolidated and used in the rural areas which still lag far behind not only in gender, but also in education and more generally in development.

Wilson maintains that "men and women in senior positions must narrow the gap which separates them from people at the grassroots."

Because gender is understood in their milieu, they take it for granted that it can be easily transmitted to the mass of the population. Those who represent the people, like parliamentarians, should go to the field to assess progress.

If we want to have peace, and to inspire and lead the Rwandese people toward a better future, State organs must encourage people to identify their needs. They must also place resources in the right places and for the right reasons. Genuine development should start from the bottom up, and not vice versa.

Gender policy should be viewed through a similar lens. Neither can people's values and traditions be altered overnight. A peasant needs to know why he must adapt his way of life so that he can make a clear and informed choice. Otherwise, he will resist or worse still, pretend that he has embraced the cause.

Women will not draw benefits from gender reforms as long as they don't have the backing of their family and entourage. The community is necessary for the emotional and physical security of women who have to seek their approval whenever they want to take a new step which transgresses social norms. These standards are more severe for women than for men. If a woman takes part in an activity outside the home without her husband's approval, even if it was for a good reason, she might be accused of being a bad mother and wife who neglects her home. Awareness raising must therefore be part of a popular process of education and consultation.²¹

John Gasana also noted that in urban areas, because of the high cost of living, both men and women increasingly see the need for women to join the labour force, not only to support themselves, but for their families to enjoy a decent standard of living.

It's no longer only girls who look for men with a bright future. Women have understood this and know that they must strive for education and qualifications. For the younger generation, especially the urban young, respecting gender equity is a necessity.

In contrast, John argued that changing attitudes toward gender equity in rural areas is far more difficult.

They live according to tradition, are not educated, don't have access to information, and

21 Interviewed in Kigali-Ngali, 26 April 2004.

because of the way they live, they have no contact with foreign ideas and values which influence urban people. They are the people who are, above all, hostile to any alterations to their tradition and values. So they are the ones who need, more than any others, to be made aware of gender.

John discussed the importance of culturally appropriate strategies needed to change rural attitudes.

If the message is badly interpreted, as often happens, there will be more negative effects than positive ones. I already know of couples who have broken up because of misunderstandings about gender. People responsible for carrying out gender policies must first learn how to talk to people, and take their level of comprehension into consideration.

Making equality and equity between men and women a concrete reality will take time. Men don't want to lose their status as head of the family and the right to make all the decisions in the house. Certain tasks have traditionally been done by women, like fetching the water and wood, cooking and domestic chores which men never do without feeling diminished. Some do it, but only if they have no choice.

Men are not alone in pointing to the reluctance of rural people to adjust to the new possibilities. Thérèse Uwayezu, the deputy mayor responsible for gender in Butare town, offers a similar assessment.

Rural women live a life of abject poverty. There are a lot of widows and households headed by women who find it nearly impossible to manage on their own. The credit given by the Fund for Women is still insufficient. Only two women per sector are benefitting. Women's right are still not recognized, either by the men or by the women themselves. The social norms and tradition which impose an inferior status on women and make her dependent on men are still in place. You see the inequality of the sexes in the rural domain by comparing access to basic services, to resources and participation in decision-making.²²

Agnès in Butare has not found rural women "audacious enough" to take loans for small projects.

When they do so as individuals, the results have not been encouraging.

Very often the loans are badly used and produce zero profits. Because of ignorance, the projects haven't been put together very well. It's rare to find women who are running successful projects and reimburse the loan. Things are better when the women come together as a group. Rural women are hesitant to take a loan because their husbands often interfere and the women then worry about paying it back.

Despite the difficulties and challenges discussed above, securing legal rights for women is an important step forward. However, as Faustin points out, "most problems are associated with money" and only through measures to address deprivation, will the majority of women's lives improve, allowing them to enjoy their new political opportunities.

Tackling Poverty: The District Fund for Women

Gender mainstreaming is an important goal of governance in Rwanda. Gender is integrated into the broader poverty reduction strategy amongst other policy areas. MIGEPROFE has established a Gender Monitoring Office to ensure gender issues are fully integrated into all programs.

In the area of poverty alleviation, the government has developed a specific program aimed at women, mentioned by several interviewees. The Women's District Fund is one initiative, established in 1998, to boost women's economic capacities through microcredit lending. It is accompanied by a Women's Guarantee Fund that helps those women who have no collateral for their loans. These funds have direct positive benefits and are also an incentive for women to become members of the local structures.

Espérance coordinates income-generating activities for women's groups in Ndera, Kigali-Ngali. She teaches women how to use funds and turn their ideas into profitable ventures.

Women receive a loan for six months and the total of this loan depends upon the capacity of

²² Interviewed in Butare, 21 April 2004.

each woman to repay it. We organize the women into groups of four. One of them monitors the enterprises financed by the loan and the repayment. Microcredit has been a success here in our district. Women get together more and more to obtain credit because they've seen that the projects they've invested in are profitable.

Espérance pointed out that the women's associations which have emerged are increasing opportunities and productivity.

They get together to cultivate their fields, to sew clothes or make crafts, and club together to carry out a costly project. These groupings are very useful to women because they also serve them as a meeting place for socialising and solidarity. They meet regularly once a week, not only to organize economic activities, but also to talk about their problems, their successes and to give each other advice. They also try to resolve conflicts between members and within families, and to facilitate membership for women in isolated villages.

Their enthusiasm and mutual dependence is inspiring. Here in Ndera, women respond to appeals. It's easier to collaborate with people when they're positive and there's good faith.

Chantal Kawema, now a coordinator for Kigali-Ngali province, observed during her time as an employee of the Fund for Women that "women have proven to be good managers."

Daring to borrow money, and making good use of it, has great benefits for women and their households.²³

Eugénie from Ndera, is among the women who have benefited from the microcredit lending program.

We received training to manage income generating projects and to save. Because of that, we were then able to start with small projects and develop bigger ones later. At the moment I'm the organizer of my savings and credit group of four women. I started from nothing and now I've been able to pay back the credit I got from the Women's Fund. And today

I've just paid in more than 150,000 francs of profits into the savings account. The women in my group are in a similar position. We're very proud of ourselves, and we take every opportunity to make women appreciate self-confidence, and to urge them to do as we have done.

I feel privileged to live in Ndera because I know that in other sectors women aren't as mobilized and aware as we are. It's a pity for them because true development depends on the solidarity of a population who have joined hands. There's no point in waiting for external intervention if the community doesn't first organize itself to find its own solutions. Women's associations have made me realize this, and now I live a better life with my children.

Faustin explained, however, that it has taken some time for women to adjust to the system.

During the Transition Period women thought the loans were grants that they didn't have to reimburse, but now they're very careful. They are exposed, through training exercises, to fund management, microfinance and how to prepare proposals. Women should have more varied economic opportunities. Money is power, and it is necessary for the empowerment of women. Otherwise, it can come down to something as simple as not having anything to wear, and therefore not attending meetings and missing out on information. If her children have slept on an empty stomach, it's unlikely that a woman can give her full attention to meetings and training.

Women should not just depend on their husbands. The tasks women accomplish in their homes are invaluable, but men don't generally give them much consideration. And they will not be judged as significant until it is shown that they contribute to poverty eradication.

Opening Minds: Gender Training and Education

Both government and civil society recognize that awareness-raising campaigns to educate women about their rights and how to exercise them, are essential. Education is viewed as the key to ensuring that legal reforms become meaningful in practice. It is also crucial to address the economic dimension

²³ Interviewed in Masaka, 12 May 2004.

and set up successful income-generating projects. Numerous groups and women's local representatives are now spreading messages about women's rights to communities across the country. Women's committees are at the forefront of this campaign. Alongside the gender training, is a broader campaign to promote education, including the establishment of new institutes and courses for adults. This applies to all groups, but it is worth noting that only 47.8% of women are literate (compared with 58.1% of men).

Madeleine from Duhozanye is among the gender trainers who believes they are making significant inroads. She described the past experiences of women in rural areas as "characterized by strong oppression." Today there is a growing determination among women to "fight for justice."

Widows who have children are taught in the context of gender training, that all children are equal and that they should have the same opportunities. We teach them that boys and girls all have the right to the same education, that the girl should not always be the one who is sacrificed for the sake of the boy.

According to Colette in Kigali-Ngali, because the government has made gender a priority, it has been easier to encourage popular acceptance.

Nathalie from Save sees gender promotion as integral to sustainable development and is convinced that it has brought about "a positive shift in the thinking of Rwandese people."

Women and men now know their rights as human rights. It consolidates social justice and the sense of solidarity among different communities.

Espérance has been to Kigali for training and has had positive experiences in taking the message back to people in Ndera, although she is concerned that information is not reaching women in the more isolated villages.

Gender policy is beginning to take root in our district without much opposition, even if there's still a lot to do.

Women who are active on the local committees in Gashora district are convinced their efforts are bearing fruit.

Before they put the gender policy in place, women didn't even dare come to the district office to seek justice for a violation of their rights. With these committees, women have become conscious and aware of their rights, through training and meetings. When they are subject to an injustice, they know where to go and who to make a complaint to in defence of their rights.

In particular, they highlighted the growing participation of uneducated women, who initially "felt sidelined" and "afraid to come forward."

Even uneducated women are elected to the women's committees within the cellules, sectors and districts and they bring convincing and constructive ideas. They feel alert; they know they have to be there if women are to achieve equality. They have freed themselves of the idea that educated women and those who are already in the decision-making arena are the only ones who should guide and defend women's rights. They benefit from training courses about their rights and roles and their responsibilities.²⁴

There are, inevitably, differences throughout the country. Sitting on the commune development committee in Butare town, Léoncie, also a vice coordinator of women's committees, struggles to convince women that they have equal rights to men and should assert them, but it is uphill battle.

In the countryside, gender becomes a theory that is hard to put into practice, all the more so because the women themselves aren't fully committed and the leaders who represent them in decision-making organs don't approach ordinary women.

Léoncie points out that it is not only gender-awareness that is lacking, but also the skills and education needed to make women's projects succeed.

Women in the rural areas are no longer afraid to take loans. Without activities that bring in money, they know that they cannot hope for a better standard of living. And these require some start-up funds. They are beginning to

24 Interviewed in Gashora, 21 April 2004.

comprehend the gender policy, but there are still huge hurdles to overcome, like ignorance and male opposition. Ignorance in particular is an obstacle for rural women. They use the money badly because they don't have the experience and the skills to come up with profitable projects. When the loan is not paid back in time, other women lose out because there are no additional funds to give out.

The drive to ensure that young girls receive a primary education is an important dimension of Rwanda's gender policy. A project led by the women on the Gashora district committee offers incentives of cooking oil to parents who continue to send their primary school-age daughters to school. They also visit schools to urge girls to keep up their attendance. The problem of gender imbalances in education is not simply related to finance, but has roots in culture, as Colette explained.

Women are responsible for not educating their daughters. They keep them at home for domestic work and prefer to send boys to school. Unfortunately, some women still believe that women are educated to become a good wife and mother and that doesn't require them to study.

Chantal emphasizes the need to engage more young people through training.

Young women don't know anything about gender policy and don't take an interest in it at all, although they will educate future generations. If young people are drawn in, sensitisation and training in gender will hopefully not be an eternal task. Women's structures exclude young women and they find themselves more in youth structures than in those for women.

As Chantal mentions, there are structures for youth representatives at all levels of government, but as John Gasana from the Ministry of Youth, Sports and Culture, commented, in order to influence future generations, it is necessary to instill the notion of gender into how the young think and relate to one another.

If youth organizations make gender one of their priorities, it will make the future of young people more promising. Of course that

will depend on how it's put to them, but in general young people easily practice what they're taught.

Jane, a gender specialist from FAWE, recommended that teachers be more attentive to gender discrimination.

Teachers don't encourage young girls to pursue unusual careers. Boys are given priority in access to education and to promising careers.

She argued that if women are to make a difference, they must become more active in local government, and for that training will be necessary.

There are still very few women préfets, mayors, councillors and heads of cellules; they are even absent within the local administration. A solution must come from the grassroots because they constitute the majority. We must have a sufficient number of women elected as local representatives and into positions of influence. The gender advisors who are currently in these structures have no real power. It's necessary to train women who occupy positions as councillors, mayors and préfets. If not, the quotas of 30% are only going to benefit the elite.

The entry of women into key sectors of public life, including politics, will encourage women and girls to raise their aspirations, with women leaders serving as role models. Colette points out that many adult women are now returning to school to finish their education. Nevertheless, in some rural areas, there is a shortage of women with the necessary skills for the posts available to them. However, Jacqueline points out that in urban areas where there are "smart and educated women who easily see the advantages of gender politics," yet she is conscious of "illiteracy in the rural areas." In Gashora, women have noticed that since 1998 when the women's structures were formed, education has become a priority.

Women are going to school. Those who had abandoned their studies are taking them up again. Others sit for State exams to get a diploma in the humanities. The percentage of educated women is increasing and that will make it easier to find more educated women to fill the places reserved for them in the political sphere.

Another factor positively influencing social attitudes is the success of women's income-generating schemes. As Colette explained, microcredit is delivering both economic and social benefits.

Women are good with microcredit; they're conscientious and don't socialise, drinking beer like men, so they don't run the risk of getting into debt or falling into bankruptcy. They've earned credibility with the institutions which provide the loans, and with their husbands who are now more amenable to lend a hand in the home so that their wives can continue to make a profit. This creates a good atmosphere between couples and women are more and more valued in society. Little by little, the culture which treats women like infants will be transformed, first by making women value themselves, and then by informing people in general about the realities of gender in our society.

In contrast, Jacqueline, who is responsible for administering gender training in Butare town, discusses the limitations of training. She has to confront the legacy of the genocide as she talks to women about the *gacaca* process.²⁵ This discussion can lead to disagreements and "shows how much women are still affected by the genocide." She is concerned that the attempt to hand down the culture of equality through parents to their children is not making headway.

As the parents themselves still haven't understood what gender is, they cannot educate their children accordingly.

We still have a long road to travel. People are busy trying to deal with their poverty and don't give much time to gender politics. Poverty is an obstacle to women's rights.

Another woman in Butare has also found it impossible to unite women around the issue of genocide justice.

Women saw a lot during the genocide, but like the men, they don't want to reveal the truth. Only the survivors want to talk about everything they saw and heard. As far as the geno-

cide is concerned, women don't want to fight for a common cause as women. They just simply want to protect their relatives who took part in the genocide. Even the women who are ready to speak up are dissuaded by the others. This dilemma is far from being solved by the gender policy because the tendency exists even among the leaders who are supposed to train others.

"When it comes to the genocide, women don't have a common cause," lamented two local officials working on gender in Kigali-Ngali who requested anonymity. They spoke of their disappointment in women's attitudes to justice for genocide crimes.

Not much has yet been achieved in spreading the culture of peace. During *gacaca* proceedings, women are reluctant to expose the truth. We try to speak about it to them, but this hasn't yielded results to date. If we had the resources to follow them closely, that might make a difference because when a woman leader comes to one of the sessions, they speak out more. The genocide is complicated. Women don't think they have interests to protect as women. They look at the interests of the extended family and want to keep relatives out of prison and to shield them from other punishments.

²⁵ In 2001, the Rwandan government established the *Gacaca* jurisdictions, a new system of participatory justice based upon a traditional community conflict resolution system, in which the whole society would take part in the process of justice for the genocide. Opinions are mixed on success of this system to date.



On the Agenda

Male Resistance

Despite evidence of positive outcomes in both the legal and economic spheres, the process of empowering women and tackling gender imbalances has only just begun. However, for reforms to be effective, it is essential that men as well as women give their backing. Many of those interviewed mentioned the difficulty of gaining cooperation and support from men.

Léoncie agrees that women's economic achievement enables men to see them in a different light. However, she is conscious of a tendency among men to resent gender education programs, regarding them as an attempt to "deprive them of their authority over women."

In many households, there is no equality between the sexes, and even less consideration for the rights of women. Men are beginning to let women associate with other women and go to meetings because they see a benefit to the family. They're not bothered about improving the status of women, but with the fact that women are bringing money into the household, thereby easing the burden on men. You still find men who prevent their women from participating in meetings even though they're members of committees within women's groups. We are then obliged to replace them with others.

Men don't want to hear anything about equal rights to inheritance.

The political landscape has visibly altered as far as gender is concerned. But in daily family life, women's status is still determined by culture. The mentality of people must change, and this is not going to take place in the very near future.

Léoncie is not discouraged. She feels there has been a shift towards greater understanding of the illegal and immoral nature of wife beating, and men who continue this practice may now be "marginalized" by their peers. She commends women for their development activities and foreign donors for their assistance. She believes, however, that the practical aspects of the gender policy, those which sponsor "development work," are helping women the most, and a shift in attitudes will take a long time. At home, she points out, women remain subservient.

Within the home, the mentalities remain the same: the woman follows the man's authority blindly. Her rights are virtually unrecognized, and she is not sufficiently engaged in defending them.

Members of women's committees are willing to confront male hesitancy about gender reforms, but as the representatives in Gashora know, unless they can engage men's participation, men will remain antagonistic. They have gained support among some educated men, but many "male peasants fail to understand."

As long as gender equity means simply that women will contribute to the family's economy, men are in favour because this is to their personal benefit. But they don't want to hear about laws protecting women for fear they will lose part of their control over the ownership and use of the family inheritance.

Colette pointed out that women's progress may be dismissed by men from any level of society.

Even educated men still make light of women's performance, mocking the gender

policy and making trite remarks about women in positions of influence.

Jacqueline is disappointed by the response from men in Butare, where women are sometimes forced to hand over the proceeds of their labour.

Women are still subjected to many forms of violence. Every day I receive complaints from women about abuses and aggression from their husbands. For instance, they may deprive women of goats which their association gave them or even the proceeds of the harvest they produced alone. Men feel they have the right to everything that belongs to the family and the woman can't say anything about the way their income is allocated.

Eugénie and her colleagues address the problem of male hostility directly by visiting men at home to explain their position. Their strategy appears to be winning men over.

If we know that a woman could not join our association because of her husband, we send a committee to go and talk to her husband about the advantages of joining. We tell him about our achievements and solidarity, and we offer to look for practical solutions to their problems. In general, this way of doing things has an influence on men who don't want to appear like failures who oppress their wives. When there are social events like births, baptisms, marriages, we are there for the families.

More and more men let their wives join us, and at the same time women learn some other skills taught by the association. Women have now integrated the work of the association into their schedules, and men have also come to know about us. They even remind their wives not to miss meetings and offer to stand in for them at home! We don't invite them to meetings because they feel ill at ease and their wives can't share their worries in their presence. We do that between women and we look for solutions together.

Madeleine confronts similar concerns of men that they will "lose the advantages they have enjoyed from the way society has kept women down and given them little value." She remains hopeful that men will eventually see the mutual benefits which will accrue from women's empowerment. Nevertheless, she acknowledges male resistance.

In Save, we still have men who view gender simply as the material benefits that the woman brings to the family. And for the most part, the man takes over the responsibility for managing the money which the woman has earned in order to use it for his own interests which may have nothing to do with what is best for the family. You often hear men telling their wives: "You want to be free like those widows of Duhozanye who don't have anyone to ask them where they spent the day?" to imply that widows give themselves the right to do whatever they want because they don't have husbands.

According to Chantal, some men have gone further and abandoned their traditional responsibilities.

Since women have shown proof of their autonomy and independence from men, some men no longer see why they must look after their wives. So, instead of equality and complementarity in the family, women are now taking on all the responsibilities in the home. Men respect their wives because they bring something to the family, and not because they have the right to be treated with respect. They only look after their own interests and don't care about the rights of women.

Chantal suggests that men are disparaging toward women who are the most active and assertive. They accuse women of neglecting their households and "spending all their time in meetings." She believes that on some issues men and women should receive training together in gender awareness.

Men also need training, especially where the decisions require the consent of both spouses, and women often suggest this. In this culture where men are masters within the family, they are allowed to take decisions without the consent of their spouse. When it comes to decisions like having children, spacing out and limiting births, training women alone is not at all useful. Women are often in favour because they are the ones who suffer the consequences. But a man should learn to respect his wife, to protect her and to care about the well-being of his wife and children.

Spéciose Mukandutiye, a member of the political commission in parliament, said that "women

risked losing the little they had gained if they did not bring men on board.”

Gender promotion requires the engagement of both women and men. That’s how our society has been conceived: you must have the men on your side. What we must do is go forward alongside men.

Gender is relevant, but like every new policy it requires time for people to absorb it and to put it into practice. Local government must be totally decentralised and we must eradicate the mentality which makes it easier to oppress women. Women must try to persuade people through the examples they set. But men’s support is indispensable.

Alongside poverty and the absence of education, Jacqueline blames the cultural attitudes which sideline women for inhibiting the progress of rural women. She attempts to deal with the common problems of polygamy and cohabitation which allow men to evade their responsibilities to their children.

The barriers imposed by culture are still in force in rural communities. They don’t participate in meetings about gender politics and women’s rights, and so these women don’t know where to go and aren’t aware that people willing to defend their rights exist.

Sylvestre Nsabimana of the Ministry of Education in Kigali-Ngali agrees that training for men is “urgent,” noting that “Men feel excluded. This is a huge mistake which will hold things back.”²⁶

Faustin made a similar appeal and underscored the importance of making sure that men did not feel alienated and under siege.

When you tell a man the benefit he would get if his wife works, it’s easy to influence him because people tend to be selfish. If you just tell him that he should allow his wife to study, he will ask, “What next? Why?” We explain that should he get ill and die, his wife would already be used to handling various aspects of their lives in the interests of the family. This helps.

Wilson shares this opinion. Acknowledging the joint efforts to raise the gender profile that have been made by the government and women’s organiza-

tions, he pointed out that Rwandese society is not homogenous and that gender training must account for this diversity.

If you try to apply the same formula everywhere, there’s a risk that you won’t achieve your objectives. You have to know what’s at stake and what your goals are. If you put things across badly, there could be damaging consequences, including conflicts between couples and within families.

There is already a polemic between men who don’t feel concerned about gender because they think it’s directed entirely at the interests of women and is intended to make them feel that they’re oppressing women, and women who feel they must reclaim rights and seize opportunities as a way out of their precarious living conditions. If you don’t establish consensus at the outset, men will respond by putting up resistance and women will resort to rebellion. It therefore makes sense to collaborate with men so that men and women have the same ideas about gender.

Political Distance

Several women expressed disappointment with the performance of women elected to parliament in 2003. This may seem unfair because these women have not yet been in post for even a year, but constituents appear more troubled by the lack of communication with, and access to, their representatives, than by an absence of substantial gains in the policy arena. High expectations and the recognition that the conduct of female parliamentarians may be seen as an overall measure of women’s potential, may underlie this criticism. One interviewee spoke of the need for women to demonstrate their abilities.

Women don’t see that there is a big battle ahead. It’s not enough just to fill the positions. We still have to show men that we deserve to be there and that it is not a favour, but our right.

I don’t want to imply that female ministers and MPs are not doing their jobs, but they don’t seem to comprehend the broader significance

26 Interviewed in Kigali-Ngali, May 2004.

of their positions. As women in Africa, they have to do a lot to prove their worth. As women ministers and parliamentarians, they ought to ask themselves what they are doing for other women with fewer opportunities. We have achieved our quota but are we able to live up to the challenges these positions pose? So far women are enjoying occupying their posts. It was also very sudden so you have some women, even educated ones, who are excited because they had never dreamt about such positions.

Josiane is in favour of gender reforms in principle but feels that they have yet to function adequately in practice.

If the State has appointed women to decision-making positions, it should monitor what these women, who are appointed on behalf of others, are doing. We don't yet see tangible gains. Rural women are the worst off, and they haven't realized the benefits from gender politics. No law related to women's rights has been passed since they were elected. The law which protects women by abolishing polygamy is in the Constitution.

One member of an NGO in Butare is still waiting for the opportunity to inform her representative about local developments.

The women we sent to parliament haven't come back to consult us or to meet ordinary women and the structures set up by women. Only one woman, who was not elected to represent women specifically, comes to visit us often. She's always in touch with us, and we are sure that she transmits our wishes to parliament. Otherwise, we don't know if the others really represent us or their personal interests.

A similar criticism was voiced by a colleague.

The women parliamentarians we elected have not made a single trip down here. I often hear them talking on the radio defending the rights of women in general, but they don't consult us about the specific rights we are seeking or where they could be an asset to us.

Another woman in Butare finds the lack of communication between the parliamentarians and women responsible for gender in the field, inexplicable.

We don't know what the parliamentarians we elected to represent women are doing. We are not informed about their plan of action and we don't know where to find them so that we can speak to them. They are in parliament, and we stay in the districts like two elements that are detached from each other. We have no meeting point even though we are pursuing the same cause and share a constituency.

One local official contrasted the fact that they could not entice enough women to apply for a range of positions within their province with the enthusiasm to run for parliament.

Everyone wants to go to parliament for personal interests, especially the salaries and advantages.

This civil servant in Kigali-Ngali feels fortunate to have the leadership of Aloisea Inyumba as préfet. She wishes other women representatives were as actively engaged with local concerns.

MPs elected by women have yet to put forward proposals relevant to their mandate. They've forgotten their duty to consult women at the grassroots. Otherwise, how can they intervene on their behalf? Although they don't have the resources, it's been left to the women in the field to gather the opinions of women in the villages.

Two other women from Kigali-Ngali were surprised at the dearth of contacts with their parliamentarians.

We knew the women we had elected, their histories, what they had done for women's rights. That's why they were regarded as credible. They came once at the invitation of the office of the province, but they haven't yet themselves come down to talk with women in the villages.²⁷

This interviewee is all too aware of the demands on women in decision-making positions, juggling

27 Interviewed in Kigali-Ngali, 13 May 2004.

their family and professional lives, as well as the particular scrutiny their actions receive. Overall she felt women in parliament were “doing a good job.” However, on the subject of the parliamentary elections, she expressed concern about the quality of the leadership and the rationale behind their selection, commenting:

Some of the women don’t have the education or competence that their posts require. What are these women going to do in the midst of other members who bring with them a considerable degree of culture, academic and professional qualifications? They must feel intimidated. They don’t have the self-confidence to express their point of view and to defend it. This makes it easier to manipulate and influence them. It’s a weakness in the system that I personally really deplore because women’s competence and qualifications must be taken into account and fully exploited so that they can train and increase the capacity of women who have little education and limited competence.

There are women who had political ambitions and who were waiting for these opportunities. They wanted to build on the programs which they had already developed within civil society and which had brought results. But they were disappointed and frustrated by what happened with the candidatures. The political aspect was given more consideration than the effectiveness and competence of the candidates.

As a parliamentarian, Berthe feels it is her duty to remain in touch with rural women. However, she offered an explanation as to why they got off to a slow start.

It’s still early. We hope that the strength of the numbers [of women in parliament] will influence the population and will be reflected in our resolutions and interventions. We haven’t as yet come up with plans that integrate the views of the rural woman. We still have to get used to our positions. We are currently undergoing training and participating in seminars on budgets and using the internet, etc.

One thing we didn’t manage to get into the Constitution is the rights of women who live with men without legalising their relationship. Despite our efforts, it didn’t get through. So we’re thinking of bringing it up, maybe after we’ve settled in, perhaps by revising the family code.

Women need more training. Most of us are French-speaking and we’re trying to become proficient in English as well. We send some women on missions to encourage them.

Her colleague, Spéciose, is also aware of the expectations and the tasks that await them.

The work hasn’t, so far, produced results for grassroots organizations. More has to be done and we have to show greater determination in order to make a difference to ordinary people. Women in the rural areas don’t yet see why they must fight for their rights. They are blocked by social and cultural norms. They don’t want to disrupt their routine because they don’t see short-term advantages. On the contrary, those who attend meetings and training sessions get into trouble; they are accused of neglecting their household duties.

She described women’s organizations as “vehicles which are waking women up and helping to make them independent.” At the same time, she knows that the absence of resources hampers their effectiveness and has also sharpened their expectations of their representatives. She was forthright about the “gap between women in the higher echelons and women in the field,” but also feels that the obstacles are not given full recognition.

They are waiting for us to lift them out of their chronic poverty. We have begun to go to the field to sensitise the population, and we also use the media and the newspapers. But the majority of the people don’t read and don’t have a radio or a TV, even though they should know what their leaders are doing. We try to work with women’s groups at the grassroots, but they don’t have the resources to get to everyone because they are in the same economic situation as their neighbors. They’re full of good-will and could do an excellent job about raising awareness, but they’re not paid for their time.

A staff member of one NGO called on parliamentarians to get “closer to the population which has given them a mandate and to be accountable to them.” She argued that “getting into the field is essential and indispensable” if reforms are to touch the lives of ordinary women.

It is crucial that the “gulf” between women representatives at the national tier and those at the

grassroots is swiftly bridged. The structures of the National Women's Council were designed to pre-empt such a situation, yet the comments on this question may reflect shortcomings within women's structures. While cellule committees and many district committees are functioning, not all the levels of the women's structures are operational. The lack of financial resources is hindering their development and activity.

A Matter of Resources

Interviewees generally agree that the innovative system of structures of the Women's Council are potentially effective, yet their significance has been undermined by the fact that all but the highest level positions are voluntary. Women are expected to spend a considerable amount of time, and sometimes even their own resources, to fulfill their advocacy role. John Mutamba, director of gender at MIGEPROFE, acknowledged the problem.

We must motivate people and make sure that the mechanisms are functioning well. These structures are deprived of resources and the means to transmit the information to local people. The Ministry doesn't have a budget to assist them materially and financially, and the donors don't consider them as an element of civil society, but as part of the organs of the State. So they receive nothing from the donors. What we have been able to do for women economically is to find the funds for microcredit schemes so that women can initiate small-scale projects. We are developing partnerships with big development projects, and we're asking them to hire women in large numbers.

Expanding such interventions into the more isolated districts will be a battle, as John admits.

The programs remain centred on the towns. Some women's collectives have just one representative for each province and don't have adequate financial and human resources to make contact with families in remote areas. This is a matter that affects both the Ministry and civil society.

A woman who appreciates the work of civic organizations worries about the sustainability of their longer-term dependence on foreign aid.

Civil society is closer to the population and does a good job, but they don't deal with the real problems because they are too dependent on donors, and therefore don't decide their own priorities.

Women are all too aware of resource limitations. Zaina feels that the structures ought to be more than just consultative mechanisms and could be involved in practical programs. She recognizes that there is little prospect for success while women "lack resources." "Their needs should be identified and their capacities strengthened."

An activist from Butare discussed the difficulties of inadequate funding for the structures.

We aren't able to look after ordinary women adequately and assist them because there's no budget in place for this. The motivation is not there, nor the financial means to go to the field. We cannot sacrifice the jobs which allow us to feed our families for unpaid voluntary positions. We know that gender advocacy is for our benefit, but the impact is not immediate. In the meantime, we must take care of our families. Both are priorities, but the choice is obvious. I can only give the women's structures my free time, but that's not much because I have all my duties to fulfil.

As this interviewee noted, one of the consequences is to rule out attempts to reach women in remote areas, even in a province like Kigali-Ngali with a *préfet* entirely committed to women.

In the distant villages women are still living in isolation, poverty and ignorance. I'm one of the representatives in the district, but we don't have the means to go to these women. We talk to those who are accessible like those in Ndera. The district office is in their zone and has become a place of reference and meeting.

Women from sectors far from the office come very rarely and then for official reasons like a summons, or demands for district services. They don't have the time to stay for awareness-raising meetings or to socialise. As we can't go to their villages and call them together, we use the authorities in the sectors and cellules, but they also don't have the money or the transport to come for training. And when we happen to go there at our own expense, we don't meet enough women.

If the Ministry invites us for training, they should pay us transport and accommodation expenses.

She also referred to the fact that in some areas the women's structures are not fully established or are barely functioning. She concluded:

Gender policy is well set out, but its application is still confined to senior officials and urban environments and their surroundings. As long as people at the grassroots are left out, it will remain theoretical. And the funds will be used largely to finance conferences, meetings and International Women's Day in order to make the policy more visible. This may serve to justify the work of officials in the higher echelons, but it does little to help the country attain the stated objective of making the entire population aware of gender politics.

A similar assessment was made by Colette who is hoping for future improvements.

There aren't enough resources to finance women's committees in their awareness-raising activities and make it possible to get to all the women and families. So irrespective of good will, their effectiveness is limited.

We would like the budget for these positions to be separate from MIGEPROFE and that is in the process of happening. These committees are going to become autonomous and will manage their own budget. We hope that they will strengthen the capacity of an increasing number of women because they are the pillars of the gender policy and can serve as the link between women at the grassroots and those in higher positions.

An example of the dilemmas women activists face in the current circumstances was given by women in Gashora.

We try to go into the field, but that doesn't happen often because money is scarce.

Chantal suggested that the strategy employed by the préfet of Kigali-Ngali should be emulated elsewhere.

The préfet has set up a permanent secretariat responsible for grassroots women's structures, and there are technicians in the districts.

Things are going very well in our district because of the attention from our préfet.

Nevertheless, the women most in need of information and assistance are still at a disadvantage.

The préfet tries to find sponsors to give things like bicycles to the women volunteers. And they get a lot of gender training, but they don't have the means to make contact with ordinary women.

If these structures are to achieve their goals, they must be assisted and advised by people in more senior positions. In our province, the deputy mayors responsible for gender are motivated. This is because we have a female préfet. And so mayors don't dare stop their deputies from presenting the wishes and opinions of women when decisions are made. To facilitate gender training, the préfet often personally contacts sponsors to ask for funds.

According to two officials from the same province, the lack of resources is so fundamental that "when the next mandate rolls around, there is a risk that we will not find a single volunteer to come forward."

Faustin confirmed that MIGEPROFE is undoubtedly aware of this predicament and is exploring potential solutions.

Although we have a 30% quota in parliament, what about the women at the grassroots? People in the villages must be assisted socially and economically. It's really vital to strengthen these women. Many of the women in the structures are not paid and this causes some friction. Some of them complain and ask why the co-ordinator receives a salary, and they don't.

But when they require loans, the fact that they belong to, and participate in, these structures gives them access. But we have to look for other incentives since the government can't pay all of them. If it were possible, it would be good to set up a microfinance program for their benefit, along the lines of the Banque Populaire.



In Conclusion: Widening the Agenda

The moves made by the Government of Rwanda towards gender mainstreaming and women's empowerment are very positive and for this it should be congratulated. There are indications that some women are already benefiting directly from the combined efforts of government and civil society. This is welcome. But for progress to be sustained there must be an increase in resources devoted to gender policies and specific programs aimed at integrating and educating men.

Concern has been expressed that the seats for women may be politically manipulated. It is beyond the scope of this study to examine the identities of either leaders or the grassroots activists, based on a small sample of women across a range of activities. Equally, because reforms are so recent, and both democratization and a culture of political engagement for women take time to establish, it may be premature to rush to a judgement. If women are to make a difference in the course of Rwandese politics, it will be important to monitor whether a particular group is dominating the political sphere in order to ensure that gender equality measures do not obscure other inequalities.

There is good reason to hope that promoting women's rights and opportunities will help to address critical long-term problems such as poverty, insecurity, a lack of education and democracy-building. In common with many other African countries, Rwanda is still plagued by these issues and other economic and social problems. These are in addition to the unique afflictions of Rwanda's genocide. Zaina expressed the hope shared by many women that they will make a substantial contribution to the future of the country.

Women are sensitive to social problems. If they gain the power to make decisions, they will treat them as a priority. We must give people a

sense of social well-being and security, otherwise there'll be conflicts.

Women must do much more to fight the hatred and ethnic divisions which led to the 1994 genocide. If women achieve a better status, and they have more influence and authority over children, they could be more dynamic as advocates for the culture of peace in their own families, since women are generally the guardians of their children's education.

Rwanda faces enormous challenges, and these can only be resolved in the long-term. Nevertheless, it is appropriate for women now in positions of authority to continue to reflect upon the ways in which they, as a group, might unite to contribute to these wider goals.



Summary and Recommendations

In the initial aftermath of the 1994 genocide, Rwandese women were traumatized and deeply divided.

In the course of 100 days, approximately 800,000 Rwandese were killed and 2 million fled into exile. Most genocide survivors were women, and many were widows who suffered through bereavement, injury, trauma, isolation and illness. Women whose husbands were in prison, charged with committing the genocide, also struggled to raise their families alone. Women were represented in every category—victims, perpetrators and bystanders—and their communities were deeply divided.

In the ten years since the genocide, Rwandese women have worked together to rebuild their nation, turning catastrophe into opportunity.

In a society that previously undervalued the contributions of women, genocide survivors were thrust into new roles through necessity. In the immediate aftermath, 70% of the population was women. In order to survive and feed their families, they began working without concern for traditional roles. The great upheaval and uncertainty produced by the genocide also left empty spaces in the society, into which new ideas could be inserted. Inspired by their delegates to the 1995 Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing, Rwandese women united to create organizations that were not defined by ethnic or cultural divisions or barriers. They began to re-build the country based on what they had in common as mothers and citizens, and have defined the past decade by their dedication to peace, education and progress.

Rwanda now has an unprecedented level of women parliamentarians.

After the 2003 elections, Rwanda reached 49% female representation, surpassing Sweden as the country with the highest percentage of women in elected office. Introducing this “critical mass” of

women into decision-making positions holds out the possibility that the character of politics itself could be altered over time.

Rwanda has an innovative system of women’s councils that reach from the grassroots to the national level, creating a pipeline for women to participate in government.

This pyramid system has successfully filled many of the 30% of seats set aside for women in government and has tremendous organizing potential. When it is operational, this system brings women into the political process and provides a ladder by which women can rise.

The quota system alone will not ensure advances for women in government or society as a whole.

The 30% of leadership positions set aside for women will not automatically create gender equity for women. In addition to filling those quotas, elected women need training that builds governing skills and personal confidence. As their leadership skills expand, women parliamentarians will gain the influence needed to ensure advancement and social protection for women.

Women have shown a commitment to work together across all sectors of society.

Rwandese women have made the effort to work collaboratively whether they are government employees, elected officials or members of non-governmental organizations. This accounts for many of the recent gains in gender equality.

Women parliamentarians should work to improve communication with ordinary women.

Rural and uneducated women assert that they are not informed and that those who have risen to political leadership do not consult with them. Only 48% of Rwandese women are literate. Rural women are especially isolated and place a high

value on hearing directly from their representatives. Parliamentarians need to maintain links to these women, and resources need to be developed to allow more convening and consultation at the local level. It is crucial that the “gulf” between women representatives at the national tier and those at the grassroots is swiftly bridged.

Until recently, women had no access to the fundamentals of economic independence.

By law, women couldn't belong to profit-making organizations. Until 1992, women needed their husband's authorization to open a bank account. Now urban and rural women engage in microcredit programs that support small business ventures. The Women's District Fund is one initiative, established in 1998, to boost women's economic capacities through microcredit lending. A Women's Guarantee Fund that helps women who have no collateral for their loans accompanies it. These funds have direct positive benefits and are also an incentive for women to become members of the local structures.

There have been significant advances in the legal status of women, spurred on by the process of writing the new constitution for the Republic of Rwanda (2003).

Formerly, when a man died, his widow and children had no right to inherit his property, which was transferred to the man's male relatives. Women now have the right to inheritance, polygamy is illegal and family law is under scrutiny and reform.

Women head both the Supreme Court and the Ministry of Justice.

In a system that has just recently granted fundamental legal rights to women, it is remarkable that individual women have risen to such prominence in the administration of the law. Women in positions of authority have the power to lead by example, create confidence and inspire other women to break barriers.

Enforcement of the law is uneven and attitudinal changes need to match legal advances.

Women are hesitant to claim their rights, particularly with regard to family violence and abuse. For example, although rape is now an offense punishable by death, abuses are not reported out of concern for the family's reputation. Rights-based education is needed for both women and men.

Economic development programs need to meet the different needs of urban and rural women.

Women in urban areas see minimal barriers to engaging in microenterprise and are eager to apply for credit. In order to succeed, they need assistance in the selection of appropriate business ventures, education on the regulations and credit counseling. However, nearly 95% of Rwandans live in rural areas and require services geared to their needs. Generally, rural women need more training, encouragement, the support of family and group business ventures based on successful communal effort.

Rural women live in extreme poverty and the division of labor according to gender is inflexible and limits the advancement of women.

In rural areas “women's work” is physically punishing and unrelenting. Women do all of the domestic chores including fetching food and water, cooking, laundry and childcare. Women who attend community meetings or engage in commerce are routinely accused of shirking their duties or are labeled as bad wives and mothers. Women need support for challenging gender norms as much as they need legal rights.

Men must become partners in the advancement of women.

Persuasive economic arguments should be made clear—if women can generate income, the entire family benefits. Education programs, including media campaigns, are needed to promote the benefits of entrepreneurship and expanded roles for women. Personal meetings are arranged to persuade hesitant husbands, but programs are needed to directly address ignorance and opposition. More men must be encouraged to come forward to signal support for women's development. Women risk losing the progress they have gained if men are not brought on board.

Creative policies, incentives and oversight are needed to further lift the status of women.

The Rwandan government should be encouraged to further utilize innovative management tools such as “gender budgeting” that quantify the impact policies have on women. At the grassroots level, innovative incentives include the “grant” of cooking oil for women who continue to send their girls to school, or bicycles donated to women who are community organizers. The Rwandan constitution calls for an independent Gender Monitoring Office, but it has not yet begun to operate.

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- Association of the Widows of the Genocide (Avega)
- Commune Development Committee (CDC)
- Duhozanye
- Forum for African Women's Education (FAWE)
- Forum for Women Parliamentarians
- Gender Monitoring Office
- Global Network for Education and Economic Development (NEED)
- Haguruka
- International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda (ICTR)
- Ministry of Economics and Finance, Government of Rwanda
- Ministry of Education, Government of Rwanda
- Ministry of Gender and the Promotion of Women, Government of Rwanda (MIGEPROFE)
- National Revolutionary Movement for Development (1975-1991) MRND
- National Republican Movement for Democracy and Development (1991-1994)
- National Women's Council (CNF)
- Pro-Femmes Twese Hamwe
- Réseau des Femmes (Network of Women) (RDF)
- Rwandese Patriotic Front (RPF)
- Sevota
- SNV
- Union of Rwandese Women for Development (URAMA)
- United Kingdom's Department for International Development (DFID)
- Women for Women International
- Women's Fund
- Women Leaders Caucus

Individuals Interviewed in this Report

- Zaina, founder of Huguruka
- Bernadette Kanzayire, lawyer, gender consultant, and member of RPF
- Marie-Thérèse Mukamulisa, Supreme Court judge
- Berthe Mukamusoni, president of CNF and president of Forum for Women Parliamentarians
- Nathalie Mukashyaka, member of widow's group in Butare
- Consolee, coordinator of Avega
- Agnès Musabyimana, member of CDC
- Eugénie, a widow and microcredit association member from Kigali-Nali
- Solange Umutoni, director of NEED
- Angeline Muganza, Minister for Gender
- Faustin Vuningoma, MIGEPROFE
- Jacqueline Ashimwe, assistant responsible for gender in Butare
- Colette Businge, coordinator of gender in Kigali-Ngali
- Espérance Mwiza, vice-president of CNF
- Suzanne Ruboneka, responsible for peace programs in Pro-Femmes
- John Mutamba, Ministry of Gender
- Madeleine Mukarwigema, member of Duhozanye
- Jane Umutoni, representative of FAWE
- Léoncie Mugabekazi, president of CDC
- Spéciose Mukandutiye, parliamentarian
- John Gasana, responsible for youth, sports, and culture in Kigali-Ngali
- Wilson Rugundana, responsible for economic affairs in Kigali-Ngali
- Thérèse Uwayezu, deputy mayor for gender in Butare
- Chantal Kawema, coordinator for Kigali-Ngali
- Sylvestre Nsabimana, Ministry of Education in Kigali-Ngali
- Josiane, a Rwandan professional

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