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Rwanda's Women: The Key to Reconstruction

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The challenge of reconstructing the physical and social structure of Rwanda seems like an overwhelming task to most observers. The country is economically ravaged and socially divided after four years of civil war, followed by the 1994 genocide of nearly a million people. Huge refugee flows of millions of people and a continuing insurgency in the northwest have only increased the difficulty of the task of reconstruction. The international humanitarian community has been engaged in Rwanda, for better or for worse, from the first days after the end of the genocide. Academic and journalistic analyses of the conflict and reconstruction have been published and dissected. Yet somehow in the midst of all of the humanitarian assistance and debate, the women of Rwanda generally have been treated as just one of many demographic groups vying for attention. It is the purpose of this paper to demonstrate that women are central to Rwandan reconstruction, and should therefore be accorded more attention in the policy and programs of international non-governmental organizations, bilateral and intergovernmental aid agencies, and international financial institutions. As noted by a Rwandan woman working with the United Nations Population Fund, “**You can't make peace without 54% of the population**” (R. Rwabuhiri, personal interview, March 16, 1999).

The conflict literature thoroughly discusses the roles of women in conflict and reconstruction. In particular, it has been noted that the **expansion of women's roles in the public arena that frequently occurs during conflict is often followed by a decrease in women's opportunities and a retraction of women's space for public action in the post-conflict stages of reconstruction** (Aretxaga, 1997; Enloe, 1993; Sharoni, 1995). However, the Rwandan case does not fit this typical pattern. Today, **Rwandan women are taking on new roles and responsibilities out of sheer necessity**. Despite numerous challenges, the public space for women's participation has actually expanded in the past five years. Fifty-seven percent of the adult working population aged 20 to 44 is female, and women produce up to 70% of the country's agricultural output. **In the social realm, the war and genocide had a disproportionately strong impact on women, as rape and genocide survivors, widows, heads of households, and caretakers of orphans.**

After a brief description of Rwanda's demographic changes and women's role in the economy, this paper investigates the legacy of the conflict for women, as victims of and participants in the genocide, and their unique post-conflict needs. The paper then discusses the structural, cultural, and legal challenges faced by women in fulfilling their new roles and responsibilities. Women's participation in post-conflict reconstruction is then explored, with particular attention devoted to the work of Rwandan women's self-help groups and NGOs, and the efforts of aid agencies to work with these groups. This section also discusses recent political reforms that have increased the voice of women in the public arena.

Finally, the research explores the role of women in peace-building and reconciliation.

While recognizing cultural constraints to "reconciliation" as often defined by Western aid agencies and donors, and avoiding an essentialist view of women as peacemakers, the paper proposes that **women have a particularly important role to play in reconstructing the social and moral tissue of Rwandan society.** The paper concludes with a recommendation that for national reconciliation and reconstruction to succeed, third parties in Rwanda must include a strong gender component recognizing women's needs into all their programming, paying special attention to the new roles of women in Rwanda's society and economy.

Recent Demographic Changes

Shortly after the genocide, the Rwandan government publically estimated that 70% of its population was female (Women's Commission, 1997, p. 6), a statistic still quoted today by aid agencies and journalists. In 1996, this figure was revised downwards to 53.7% in the Rwandan government's Socio-Demographic Study (République du Rwanda, 1998, p. 7), conducted after the return of over a million refugees from Tanzania and Zaire. While the 1996 figure is not a huge increase over the 1991 percentage (51.8%), the 1996 figure indicates the proportion of females in the entire population of Rwanda and includes both children under 15 (47.5% of the population) and people over 65 (3.2%). Neither of these groups is able to engage substantially in economic activities and in the reconstruction of Rwanda. If we look at the adult population alone, from ages 15-64, the proportion of women rises significantly, to 56.3% women. Excluding children ages 15-19, the percentage of women rise to 57% in the 20-44 year age group, and to 58% in the 45-64 year age group. In different terms, in the 25-29 year **age** group, there are only 69 men per 100 women.

The number of women in relation to the whole population is elevated in Rwanda because of the **greater number of men killed during the genocide and wars, and absence of male groups of ex-soldiers and genocidaires who have fled to Zaire.** Accordingly, women now shoulder a greater burden of economic activity and reconstruction activities in Rwanda. Women's burdens have been augmented by the fact that many adult men are in the army, **and 150,000 men are in jail awaiting trial for genocide crimes,** and are therefore not engaged in reconstruction and other economic development activities.

It is important to recall that Rwanda was one of the poorest countries in the world even before the genocide. Its gross domestic product fell by 50% in 1994, and it has still not attained pre-war levels of economic activity. Poverty has increased dramatically; in 1993, 53% of households were under the poverty line, but by 1997 the percentage had risen to 70% (The World Bank, 1998, p. i). Post-conflict reconstruction in Rwanda is not only a matter of re-building the former society and economy, but also re-launching the development project. One of the often-cited causes of the conflict is Rwanda's endemic structural poverty, and the achievement of a sustainable, long-term peace will require substantial progress toward **equitable economic development**. Because women constitute the vast majority of the adult working population, they are central to economic development and reconstruction. Furthermore, the important role of women in the economy and in reconstruction is augmented by **their key role in agricultural production**. Ninety-five percent of Rwanda is rural, agriculture is by far the largest economic sector, and **women produce up to 70% of the country's total agricultural output** (Drumtra, 1997, p. 39; UNICEF, 1997, p. 106). Consequently, women are the main agents of reconstruction in Rwanda today, and any consideration of Rwanda's future must take into account both the differential needs of women and their contributions to economic and social reconstruction.

The Impact of the War and Genocide on Women

Women in Rwanda were affected differently by the war and genocide than were men, and have different post-conflict problems and needs. As so often occurs in conflict, women were targeted because of their gender, specifically because they were women. One of the most widely distributed and immensely popular Hutu propaganda tracts circulated before the genocide was the "**Hutu Ten Commandments**." Tutsi women were portrayed by the extremist Hutu media as temptresses to be avoided, and the first three commandments reflect this characterization:

- 1) Each Hutu man must know that the Tutsi woman, no matter whom, works in solidarity with her Tutsi ethnicity. In consequence, every Hutu man is a traitor:
 - who marries a Tutsi woman
 - who makes a Tutsi woman his concubine
 - who makes a Tutsi woman his secretary or protégé.
- 2) Every Hutu man must know that our Hutu girls are more dignified and more conscientious in their roles as woman, wife, and mother. Aren't they pretty, good secretaries and more honest!
- 3) Hutu women, be vigilant and bring your husbands, brothers and sons to reason! (Verdier, et. al., 1995, p. 259)

This document, which extremist community leaders throughout Rwanda regarded as doctrine and read aloud at public meetings, (Gourevitch, 1998, p. 88) also exhorted Hutus to exclude Tutsi from all public life, including business, government, education, and the military. It instructed Hutus to "stop having pity on Tutsis" and to take up the "Hutu ideology" against their "common Tutsi enemy."

Hutu men were not the only perpetrators of genocidal violence. In 1995, Africa Rights published a book called *Not so Innocent: When Women Become Killers, documenting the participation of women in Rwanda's genocide*. Women participated in the genocide in countless ways, from the provision of moral support and public exhortations to finish the genocide, to turning over Tutsi who were hiding to the militias, to actively participating in the mass murder. They participated sometimes willingly, sometimes under threat of death. In addition, some of the insurgents in the northwest who are fighting to restore the genocidal regime and its ideology are women, and the insurgents are often supported morally and financially by civilian women. There were as of 1997 over 5,500 women being held in prison (just over 5% of the total prison population), most of whom had been accused of crimes of genocide, many with dependant infants (UNICEF, 1997, p. 112). However, while it is important to recognize that not all women are innocent, it is equally important to recall that not all Hutu are guilty. Countless Hutu individuals undertook heroic efforts to save Tutsis or to oppose the genocide; many paid for their efforts with their lives.

Nonetheless, the Hutu commandments were translated into a program of *systematic rape of Tutsi women and girls during the genocide*. Many were abducted and kept as sexual slaves, raped repeatedly by their captors over a period of weeks. *Others were raped and impregnated by the very men, often neighbours, who had just murdered their entire families in front of them*. Certain women were raped and then macheted, thrown into massive pits full of dead relatives, presumed dead by their aggressors.^[1] Systematic rape was used as a tool of genocide against Tutsi woman, against her family, her community, and her honor. In many cases, the rape had its intended effect: *women were so humiliated and degraded by the acts that they preferred to commit suicide rather than continue with life*.

The full number of women and girls raped in Rwanda is unknown. Victims are often *reluctant to admit to having been raped in fear of social stigma and shame*, or because of the extreme mental, physical and emotional stresses they face in *a society which rejects rape victims* (Africa Rights, 1995, p. 749; Angelucci, 1997, p. 44; Women's Commission, 1997, p. 8). Emotional stress and shame is often compounded by feelings of guilt about having survived by being raped (UNICEF, 1997, p. 106). Many of the women who were raped were subsequently killed, and remain unaccounted for. Not surprisingly, given the difficulties in collecting accurate dates, estimations of the total number raped vary widely. The U.S. Committee for Refugees states that "thousands of female survivors, including young girls, were raped during the genocide" (Drumtra, 1997, p. 39), and Africa Rights (1995b) also puts the number in the thousands. However, the Director of the Clinic of Hope, a Rwandan NGO providing medical services, psycho-social counseling, economic empowerment activities and shelter to women, estimates that

250,000 to 500,000 women were raped and often mutilated during the 1994 genocide (Balikungeri, 1999). A 1997 UNICEF report, *Children and Women of Rwanda*, states that, "Witness, medical and victims' accounts confirm that women, numbering in the hundreds of thousands, were **subject to sexual cruelty**. Most women who were directly threatened with death were spared only to be raped" (p. 105). Furthermore, not only Tutsi women were raped; **rape was common in the Hutu refugee camps in Tanzania and Zaire, and many of the female returnees from 1996-1997 share many of the same problems and traumas as Tutsi rape victims.**

Regardless of the total number of women raped, systematic rape has resulted in a number of lasting problems for the raped women and for Rwandan society. The Rwandan Population Office estimates the number of war pregnancies to be between 2,000 and 5,000, and a study by the Ministry of the Family and Women's Promotion conducted after the war in just two cities found 716 cases of rape, 472 of which resulted in pregnancies, and of these, 282 were ended in abortion (Angelucci, 1997, p. 44). **Abortion is illegal in Rwanda, but many raped women desired it nonetheless.** A UNIFEM/African Women in Crisis (AFWIC) report states:

By January 1995, eight months after the genocide killings started in Rwanda, at least four pregnant women were showing up daily at Kigali maternity hospital requesting abortion, which is illegal in Rwanda. These women had been raped during the war. Two had by then given birth, prematurely, and did not want to see the babies. **One of these women had been raped and impregnated by the very man who had murdered her husband and four children** (Hagengimana, p. 13).

Children of rape were often abandoned, and cases of infanticide and suicide were also widely reported (Angelucci, 1997, p. 44).

Raped women also face severe psycho-social trauma and health problems. In addition to shame, ostracism, and survivor's guilt, women must contend with the fact that their rapists were often neighbours, who may still live nearby, undenounced (UNICEF, 1997, p. 106). A UNIFEM/AFWIC study in two health centers in Rwanda conducted in November 1994 found that women as a group -- not just rape survivors -- had been subjected to severe physical and psychological atrocities resulting in severe trauma. A subsequent psychological study of 100 of the women revealed that 70% of them were suffering from "severe post-traumatic stress disorders," while the rest were suffering from reactive depression, grief reaction and anxiety disorders (Kofi, p. 13). **Women's psychological trauma is often compounded by the physical trauma of rape, including injuries to the genitals and reproductive organs resulting from brutal and frequent rape, which may have resulted in permanent disabilities or infertility. In addition, many victims of rape were infected with the AIDS virus and have passed it on to their children.**

However, sexual violence is not the only way in which women were adversely affected by the war and genocide. Even women who were not raped have had to deal with the consequences of the genocide and war. Rose Rwabuhiri, a professional Rwandan

woman working with the United Nations remarked, "When you have to live with memories, it's atrocious. Most women were confronted by the genocide . . . rape, children, AIDS, loss of shelter, loss of family support networks. Life is extremely hard." She pointed out that often **men can re-construct their lives; they can re-marry, for example. Often, the women survivors cannot: if they have been raped and/or sexually mutilated, they are not desirable in marriage any more** (personal interview, March 16, 1999). One of Rwanda's most pressing social problems today is the increased number of **women-headed households**. Thirty-four percent of households are women-headed today, an increase of 50% over 1991 (The World Bank, 1998, p. 6). Of these, the vast majority (60.8%) are widows, mostly from the genocide and war (République du Rwanda, 1998, p. 29). Widows often find themselves alone, trying to provide not only for their families, but for multiple war orphans as well. Some are elderly women who have lost their whole families and are caring for the few young relatives that remain. Other women must provide for their families in the absence of their husbands who are in the army or who are in jail for crimes of genocide. Women whose husbands are in jail must also spend large amounts of time preparing food and taking it to their spouses, a time-consuming task that leaves little time for other household and agricultural duties. A 1998 World Bank study on poverty in Rwanda indicates that female-headed households are more likely to be poor than their male-headed counterparts:

Whilst the 1993 poverty assessment noted no discernable difference in income levels between male and female-headed households, wealth-ranking exercises undertaken by the PPA (participatory poverty assessment) show that after the genocide female-headed households are more likely to be poor than male. This is primarily due to labor constraints: in all areas covered by the PPA, the female-headed households in the "poor" category are those without husband, adult children, or other family labor. Children in female-headed households also have a higher probability of malnutrition, which is a close proxy for income poverty, than children in male-headed households (p. 6).

Both widows and women with absent husbands find it difficult to find enough time simply to cultivate enough food for their families and complete their domestic and childcare tasks, thus diminishing the possibilities of the creation of surplus for sale at market for cash. Not only does this lead to household malnutrition and poverty, but also to a lower level of economic activity than would otherwise be expected.

Structural and Cultural Challenges Faced by Women

In addition to having been affected differently by the war than were men, women face numerous challenges related to their traditional position and status within Rwandan society. As in many other countries, women traditionally have restricted access to participation in the economy and public life of the country. A woman's value in Rwandan society is related to her status as wife and mother, or in other words, to her household and procreative functions. Women are expected to adopt a reserved, submissive attitude (UNICEF, 1997, p. 103).

Consequently, traditional education for girls did not include formal schooling, but instead preparation for her role as wife and mother. There was no incentive to educate a girl because the economic gains from her labor went to another family as soon as she married. As Sheikh Mussa Fazil Harelimana, Chief of the Juridical Affairs Division at the Rwandan Ministry of Gender and the Promotion of Women, remarked, "In Rwandan culture, a girl's school is in the kitchen" (personal interview, March 17, 1999). Adult women in Rwanda face difficulties finding paid employment because they have been denied the chance to pursue education. For the general population, illiteracy rates for women are higher than for men: 50.5% of women are illiterate, versus 43.6% of men. However, for the population over thirty, the difference is much larger: 67.4% of women are illiterate compared to only 43.5% of men (République du Rwanda, 1998, p. 22). The women and girls under thirty have benefitted from cultural and legal changes that have enabled more girls to go to school.

However, while institutional barriers to the education of girls have been legally removed and there is near gender parity at the primary and secondary levels, girls' dropout rates are still higher than boys, in 1992 measuring 10.8% to boys' 9.5% at the primary level. The 1997 UNICEF report notes that, "This disparity is often the result of survival strategies of poor families, which [sic] withdraw their female children first if there is not enough money to pay for the various costs associated with schooling" (p. 108). Because education is not free in Rwanda, and entails substantial other costs such as school uniforms and books, families are often faced with restrictions on the number of children they send to school. The 1996 Socio-Demographic Study carried out by the government found that, unsurprisingly for a developing country, 24% of children from ages 10-14 are economically active. The report pointed out, however, that the proportion of girls in this group is higher than expected, and the majority work in the agricultural sector (République du Rwanda, 1998, p.25). While post-genocide statistics on dropout rates are as of yet unavailable, it is not unreasonable to suspect that, in response to the pervasive economic crisis gripping the country, families faced with educating either a boy child or a girl child are choosing to educate the boys and engage the girls in subsistence agricultural work at home.

Women also face constraints to their participation in the economy and society as a result of discriminatory customary law. Because the Rwandan civil code makes no provision for regulating property in the context of marriage, women's property and inheritance rights are governed by customary law. Women have only usufructuary rights over property, be it household goods or land, while the ownership of these remains in the hands of her husband or father (Harelimana, S.M.F., personal interview, March 17, 1999; UNICEF, 1997. p. 111). In addition, women cannot inherit property or land, which frequently leaves them unable to provide for themselves and their families after the death of a father or husband. Women's access to land and property is also particularly important in the context of Rwanda's post-conflict reconstruction. Many women are widowed or orphaned, and because of customary law barriers, are unable to claim their father's or husband's land and property. This problem is exacerbated by the huge population displacements and wholesale grabbing of land plots and houses that followed the flight of people from their homes. Women returning from a refugee camp or

internally-displaced camp, often without male family-members, are left without legal channels through which to reclaim their family's property.

Women's economic activity is also circumscribed by their lack of knowledge about recent changes in the law. A royal (pre-colonial) law denying women the right to engage in any commerce without her husband's permission was repealed in 1992. However, Rwanda was in the midst of a civil war and multi-party reforms at that time, and there was no educational campaign undertaken to inform people of the change. Today, women in Kigali regularly engage in commerce, but in rural areas, women often do not know that the law was modified and are therefore unwilling to do so (Harelimana, S.M.F., personal interview, March 17, 1999). It is clear from this experience that changes in customary or official law must be accompanied by educational campaigns in order to be effective.

Women also face official legal discrimination in Rwanda. In the Civil Code and the Family Code, the husband is identified as the legal head of household, and in the case of disagreements over parental authority, the father's will prevails. In addition, a foreign woman married to a Rwandan man may take Rwandan nationality, but not visa-versa. The Penal Code states that a woman found guilty of adultery should be imprisoned for a year, while a man found guilty is imprisoned for one to six months and/or will be fined 1000 Rwandan francs (about three dollars at the time of writing) (Harelimana, S.M.F., personal interview, March 17, 1999; UNICEF, 1997. p. 111).

Women's role in governance, particularly at the local levels, is still minimal despite constitutional protection of their right to participate. As noted by UNICEF's 1997 report, "Female representation at a peripheral level is practically non-existent" (p. 109).^[ii] At the national level, the Ministry charged with the promotion of women is not simply the ceremonial organ that parallel institutions are in other countries, but it still suffers from a lack of funds and skilled staff. The number of women in government is increasing, and reforms are being undertaken (see below), but there are still barriers to women's participation in national politics.

While Rwandan women face enormous challenges in recovering from the war and genocide and reconstructing their country, they also have certain advantages. Two of the Rwandan women interviewed for this paper were quick to point out that, particularly within the household sphere, women have a certain authority to control the actions of male members of the household and to determine events (Ruboneka, S., personal interview, March 18, 1999; Rwabuhiri, R., personal interview, March 16, 1999). In addition, women now constitute the overwhelming majority of the adult working population, and are taking on new roles and responsibilities out of sheer necessity. Most importantly, there is a concerted effort among women's groups and in the government to address the needs of Rwandan women and engage them in the reconstruction and reconciliation processes.

Women's Participation in Post-Conflict Reconstruction

As the large majority of the working adult population, women are shouldering most of the tasks of physical reconstruction. A widow's association in the commune of Save, near Butare, states that reconstruction activities in their commune are almost exclusively carried out by women. (Ngendahayo. 1997). Much of this work is carried out by women's communal groups and associations.

Since independence, Rwandan women have organized themselves into socio-professional associations, cooperative groups, and development associations (UNICEF, 1997, p. 109). However, women's associations have taken on new importance in the post-conflict society, as they attempt to address both women's specific post-conflict problems and the lack of social services normally provided by the state.

At the local level, women are creating or re-constituting self-help groups, or cooperatives, to assist survivors, widows or returned refugees, or simply to meet the everyday needs of providing for their families. There are over one hundred of these groups in each commune, and they may be informal or formally registered with the government (p. 110). NGOs and donors have recognized the potential benefits of these groups in reconstruction and development, and have assisted these groups or helped to form new groups. One such development effort is the Women in Transition (WIT) Program. WIT was established as a partnership between the Rwandan Government Ministry of Family, Gender and Social Affairs (MIGEFASO) and USAID in 1996 in response to the sharp increase in women heads of households. During its first two years, the program identified genuine women's associations and provided assistance in the form of shelter development, agricultural inputs, livestock or microcredit (Shanks, B., personal interview, March 18, 1999). Another major development project targeting women, the UN High Commissioner for Refugees' Rwandan Women's Initiative, works with numerous women's associations as its implementing partners. According to UNICEF (1997), women's groups have become "authentic and operational relays for development projects at the grassroots level" because they

favor direct and participatory management, facilitate the participation of women in training and income-generating projects and enable access to inputs supplies. They are also and above all solidarity groups, enabling women in a difficult situation to organize into pressure groups that put women's needs more firmly on the agenda. Finally, they facilitate the integration of returnees, by directly intervening in reinstallation projects . . . (p. 110)

Buddy Shanks of the USAid Women in Transition Project noted that the women they have worked with went through a gradual improvement in demeanor as a result of working in associations. He said, "At the beginning, they said, 'Tell us what our priorities are.' On our last visit, they had spirit, initiative, enthusiasm" (personal interview, March 18, 1999).

Women's associations are also active at the national level, working on meeting the special needs of women survivors and returnees, empowering women politically and economically, and reconstructing Rwandan society. Thirty-five women's organizations

who work in women's rights, development or peace have organized themselves into a collective called Pro-Femmes Twese Hamwe (Pro-Women All Together). The Pro-Femmes Triennial Action Plan (1998) states that the organization works for "the structural transformation of Rwandan society by putting in place the political, material, juridical, economic and moral conditions favorable to the rehabilitation of social justice and equal opportunity, to build a real, durable peace." In addition to their programmatic activities in peace and reconstruction, Pro-Femmes also provides its members capacity-building support and assists them with communication, information and education.

Women's participation at the local level is also being increased by the recent creation of "Women Committees" at each level of government administration. A joint initiative of the MIGEFASO and women's organizations, these grassroots structures consist of 10 women who are elected in women-only elections to represent women's concerns at each level of government.^[iii] The lowest level of representation is that of the cellule, where the committee is elected by individual women from a population of 2000-5000 people. The committee members at the cellule level elect the committee members at the next administrative level, the sector, and so on up to each of the 12 prefectures in Rwanda.

Suzanne Ruboneka of Pro-Femmes Twese Hamwe, who helped to organize the committees, stressed the need for women-only fora for women to become involved in public decision-making. She said:

In our culture, there are still barriers for women to express themselves in public. Women still don't dare express themselves publicly, especially when there are men present. Consequently, there are no places for women to think, to look for solutions, to play a real role. Many women are illiterate, and their point of view is never considered. How can we motivate women, give them the chance to get together to express themselves, without fear? (personal interview, March 18, 1999)

At the time of writing, cellule-level elections had taken place throughout Rwanda, and some areas had already had elections at the sector level. One additional benefit of the creation of the Women Committees is that the education campaigns carried out by the Ministry and women's organizations got women engaged in the political process at the most local levels *before* general cellule-level elections in March 1999.

The Women Committees have already been targeted by the donor and NGO community as conduits for development assistance. The government gave each committee the responsibility for setting up, contributing to and managing Women Communal Funds (WCF), still in the nascent stages of development. The WCF are intended to help start economic activities at the commune and sector level while allowing grassroots women to participate in funding decisions affecting their lives (WIT/MIGEFASO/USAID, 1999). This is accomplished in part through micro-credit activities, in which the WCF provide small loans at minimal interest rates to women who might otherwise not be able to secure credit. The USAID/MIGEFASO Women and Transition Program has reoriented many of its activities to work with the Women Committees at the commune level through the

provision of funds for their activities and with training and guidance to the WCF Women Committees.

Efforts to increase the representation of women are not only taking place at local levels, but at the national level as well. In a significant government reshuffling of Ministers in February 1999, the Ministry of Gender, Family and Social Affairs (MIGEFASO) was split, and there are now two ministries: the Ministry of Family and Social Affairs, and the Ministry of Gender and the Promotion of Women (MIGEPROFE). MIGEPROFE officials state that the split is a positive development that will serve to strengthen their position in government and will lead to the reinforcement of both ministries (Harelimana, S.M.F, personal interview, March 17, 1999). The Ministry was charged by the government to develop projects to reform all laws discriminating against women, and has started projects to change many of the discriminatory laws. After analyzing discriminatory laws and drafting suggested revisions, the Ministry works with parliamentarians to introduce the draft laws and work for their passage. Of particular importance to their efforts is the establishment in February 1998 of a strong Forum of Parliamentary Women who assist the Ministry in their education programs for parliamentarians. Of the 70 Members of Parliament, 12 are women, and the Vice-President of the Parliament is also a woman (Mukasine, M.C., personal interview, March 18, 1999).

The Ministry has been working for over a year on the introduction and passage of a new law on women's inheritance rights that would enable women to inherit land and property. The Draft Law to Supplement Book 1 of the Civil Code and to Institute Part 5 Regarding Matrimonial Regimes, Liberalities and Successions is currently in committee, and could be voted on as early as June or October of this year. However, there is currently a project to revise the entire legal code concerning the land regime. This is a much broader, more sensitive and more complicated issue, one that is central to efforts to achieve long-term peace and reconciliation. There is some concern that certain members of the parliament and the government may be reluctant to work on the succession law because they want to wait until the entire issue of the land regime can be settled. In addition, even if the succession law is passed and women gain the right to inherit property, women's rights to land and property must also be assured in the land reform bill.

The Ministry of Gender and the Promotion of Women also has projects to educate people about the concept of gender and women's rights, and programs that work to defend women's and children's rights. They are preparing educational campaigns about the proposed changes in inheritance and other discriminatory laws, and are participating in efforts to educate the populace on the need to change these laws at the current time.

Women's representation has also been increased in other areas of national government. While official representation at the Ministerial level is still feeble, with only 2 of 23 ministries headed by women (both newly created: the Ministry of Gender and the Promotion of Women, and the Ministry of Lands, Resettlement, and Environmental Protection), it is significant that 7 Secretaries-General of ministries are women. The Secretary-General of a ministry is tasked with the more technical aspects of running the

ministry, while the Minister has a more public and political role; Secretary-General is a position of considerable power and influence. There are now women Secretaries-General in the ministries of gender, land, social affairs, agriculture, finance, foreign affairs and justice. In addition, the former Minister of Family, Gender and Social Affairs, Alosie Inyumba, has been appointed to head up the newly created national Committee of Unity and Reconciliation, and will hold the same rank as a minister. In short, there are a number of women in influential positions in Rwanda's most important ministries, which bodes well for a continuation of positive governmental measures towards the promotion and protection of women.

Women, Peace-Building, and Reconciliation

Establishing a sustainable peace in Rwanda is not simply a matter of re-building the physical infrastructure and economy, but also requires the reconstruction of the social and moral tissue of the nation. Five years after the genocide, Rwanda remains a deeply divided society. Divisions exist not only between Hutu and Tutsi, but also between different groups within the society. For example, old conflicts persist between moderate Hutu and extremist Hutu who still support the genocidal ideology, and new conflicts have arisen between "old refugees" (Tutsi who returned to Rwanda in 1994 after decades of exile) and "new refugees" (Hutu who returned in 1996-97 from the camps in Tanzania and Zaire). There is even tension between some genocide survivors who feel as if they are being asked to forget and forgive too quickly, and some recent Tutsi returnees who maintain that Rwanda should focus more on the future than the past. Some divisions even transcend ethnic identity; for example, urban/rural and intellectual/grassroots divisions arise in policy formulation and implementation by in the government and in NGOs. It is important to recognize the multiple divisions present in Rwandan society, and not simplify the matter to one of Hutu versus Tutsi.

While most international organizations and NGOs list national reconciliation as one of their goals, and even the government has established the National Committee of Unity and Reconciliation, this terminology often falls flat with many Rwandans, particularly with genocide survivors. In Rwandan culture, reconciliation has a specific meaning that is not necessarily the meaning implied by outsiders using the term. To most Rwandans, reconciliation is something that occurs between two individuals, a process by which the wronged individual physically takes the hand of the person who committed the wrongdoing, and, as an individual, forgives her/him for her/his action (Rwabuhiri, R. personal interview, March 16, 1999; Ruboneka, S., personal interview, March 18, 1999). When speaking of reconciliation, international organizations and NGOs sometimes give the impression that they expect survivors of the genocide to directly forgive the individuals who murdered their families and loved ones, even if this is not their intended message. Genocide survivors speak of the need for justice before reconciliation, for prosecution of the crimes of genocide that took the lives of nearly a million people. They stress that forgiveness is only possible if the author of the crime is willing to admit that there was a crime, whereas many of the perpetrators of the genocide who are still at large deny the existence of the genocide and their participation in it. Rose Rwabuhiri, a Rwandan woman working with the UN, asked the question, "Reconcile whom? The

author of the crime and the victim?" She continued, stressing that this type of reconciliation was impossible, and that the question that must instead be asked is, "Is there a way such that we can live together?" (personal interview, March 16, 1999). Suzanne Ruboneka of Pro-Femmes Twese Hamwe had many of the same reservations about reconciliation as conceived by the foreign aid donors and NGOs, and proposed a different conceptualization of reconciliation for Rwandan women. She said:

We have to ask ourselves how things arrived here. Each Rwandan must ask herself this question. Each Rwandan must ask herself, "What did I do to stop it?" Because this small group of Rwandans that killed were our brothers, our husbands, our children. And as women, what did we do, what was our role in the whole thing? Each person must take a position for the future. What must I do so that tomorrow will be better, that there will not be another genocide, that our children can inherit a country of peace? Each person holds a responsibility to be reconciled with *herself* (personal interview, March 18, 1999).

Simply finding a way to live together in peace is perhaps the key to national reconciliation, and women have a special role to play in this process. As Rose Rwabuhiri pointed out, women share common problems in the realms of health, nutrition, water, caring for children, all of which are more difficult in the economic and social crises that have followed the genocide. They also share the lack of formal power within the system to influence decisions affecting their lives. Rose said, "They share these problems; they could maybe look for peace together," recognizing that, "the crisis is killing me as it is killing her" (personal interview, March 16, 1999).

Suzanne Ruboneka also believes that women's common struggles give them a special role in national efforts at peacebuilding. She remarked, "It was women and children who were the victims of all these wars -- widowhood, rape, pregnancy . . . are we going to continue to be the victims of future wars? It is men who make war. Women are saying, 'Stop the war. We want peace'" (personal interview, March 18, 1999).

However, it is important in the author's view to avoid an essentialist view of women's roles in peacebuilding and reconstruction. That is to say, it is not the purpose of this paper to propose that women are by their nature, or essence, more peaceful than men and are therefore more natural peacemakers. As mentioned above, some women were victims of the genocide while others participated actively, even led in the killing. Women are not necessarily innocents or victims, and should not be identified as peacemakers simply by nature of their gender. However, in Rwanda, it is women who, often without the assistance of men, are left to rebuild the society, and they do face many similar problems regardless today, problems that transcend ethnicity and politics. By tackling these problems together, women may be able to build bridges to the future.

This is the strategy used by Pro-Femmes Twese Hamwe in its efforts to build peace among Rwandan women. Suzanne noted that their strategy is to make women:

see the reality of things. We are all here, in the same country, we must live here, all of us, and we must live in peace . . . We are all women, and as women, that's something that

unites us, whether we are survivors or refugees (old or new), professionals or grassroots women, intellectuals or illiterates. We have the opportunity to work together, to tell the truth. We have realized that we need to get past all these differences to find the real problems (personal interview, March 18, 1999).

Pro-Femmes Twese Hamwe's Action Peace Campaign is designed to enable women to recognize the need to live in peace, and give them the tools necessary to live together at the local level. They are organizing "dialogue clubs" in as many of the cellule-level Women Committees as possible, in which the elected representatives bring together women from the community to discuss the conflict on a regular basis. The first discussions in each club is about the causes of the genocide, and discussions proceed from a document on this subject prepared by a Pro-Femmes Twese Hamwe member organization. Pro-Femmes Twese Hamwe hopes to have a dialogue club in every cellule-level Women Committee in Rwanda, which could be a remarkable force for women's peace and reconciliation efforts. Suzanne commented that the creation of the Women Committees was very important to all of their efforts to better women's lives and to build peace: "The Minister gave us the field, and we are going to plant seedlings and then we will harvest the results" (personal interview, March 18, 1999).

Conclusion

While the field has been plowed and the seedlings planted, Rwanda will need a great deal of care and attention to bring reconstruction and reconciliation efforts to harvest. Eighty percent of the Rwandan government's budget consists of foreign aid donations; the role that international organizations, NGOs and bilateral foreign aid play is immense. However, assistance that does not take into consideration the special needs of Rwandan women and their contributions to reconstruction runs the risk of ignoring the very people who are rebuilding Rwanda, physically and morally. International aid donors and NGOs should include a strong gender component in all of their programming, paying special attention to the new roles that women are playing in Rwandan society and designing both development projects and reconciliation programs accordingly. Likewise, the Ministry of Gender and the Promotion of Women's initiatives to reform discriminatory laws and improve the status of women should continue to be supported, even prioritized, by the government of Rwanda and the international community. Women's position in Rwandan society is rapidly changing in response to the new roles they must adopt to survive. While social change is always slow, the post-conflict crisis in Rwanda has ironically resulted in a situation not only of great challenges but also of great opportunity for Rwandan women. If national efforts for reconstruction and reconciliation are to succeed, women will need to be supported and encouraged in their new roles as heads of households, as public representatives, as agents of reconstruction, and as peacebuilders.

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[\[i\]](#) For more information on gender-specific violence during the genocide, see Africa Rights, 1995b, pp. 748-797; Angelucci, et al., 1997.

[\[ii\]](#) Articles 6 and 9 of the constitution guarantee equal participation in political life to all citizens, without discrimination, whether as electors or candidates for office (UNICEF, 1997, p. 109).

[\[iii\]](#) Rwanda has four levels of administrative units: the cellule, the sector, the commune and the prefecture (smallest to largest). There are 8,987 cellules in Rwanda, 1,531 administrative sectors, 154 communes, and 12 prefectures. A cellule consists of approximately 1000 families, and prefectures range in population from 184,000 residents to 800,900 residents (“Rwanda Mourns,” 1999).