RWANDAN WOMEN AND THE 1994 GENOCIDE:
THE EFFECT ON THEIR SOCIAL AND POLITICAL ROLES

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ABSTRACT

During 100 days in the spring and summer of 1994 in Rwanda a planned genocide orchestrated by extreme members of the Hutu ethnic group, the ruling faction of the government took the lives of 800,000 to 1,000,000 moderate Hutus and Tutsis. The majority of the victims of the genocide were male. This created an imbalance of the sexes in Rwanda, resulting in women rising to 70% of the total Rwandan population. This thesis explores the effect of the genocide on Rwandan women’s social and political roles. It looks at the social and political roles of Rwandan women before, during, and after the genocide and compares and contrasts these relative roles, drawing conclusions as to how the genocide changed the roles of Rwandan women.

The methodology used was to examine available literature written about the 1994 genocide and its aftermath, and its effects on women, and to compare and contrast the social and political roles of women in the pre and post-genocidal periods. The thesis is divided into chapters covering the pre-genocidal roles of women, their roles during the genocide, and finally, their social and political roles since the genocide.
Women in pre-genocidal Rwanda held limited social and political roles in the traditional patriarchal society, and were mostly poor, poorly educated and worked in subsistence agriculture. During the genocide Rwandan women were primarily the innocent victims, as hundreds of thousands of women and children were raped, murdered, and lost family members. The decimation of the male population expanded women’s social and political roles to include heads of households and organizations, as well as new educational and job opportunities. The new 2003 constitution included a 30% quota for women’s parliamentary representation and new gender-equality legislation granted women expanded rights. Despite the new laws, however, women still suffer the effects of severe poverty, poor access to education and domestic violence. The genocide devastated women physically and emotionally, but also expanded and created new social and political roles in its aftermath.
To my mother, Nancy A. Biddle Doan
1929-2009
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The thesis begins by discussing the traditional social and political role that Rwandan women held in the society leading up to the genocide. Women, whose primary roles in society were as mothers and caregivers, were seen as dependent on their male relatives during this time period and their options and basic rights were limited. Women worked primarily in subsistence farming and had few property rights, while men were in control of women’s income, and their participation in business. Women’s participation in politics during this period was very low but one role model that did emerge was the first women prime minister, Agathe Uwilingiyimana, who, unfortunately, was murdered by extremists in the opening hours of the genocide.

Poverty, poor education and poor health plagued Rwandan women, making it difficult for the average Rwandan woman to advance within society or politics.

The second chapter discusses the treatment and role of women during the genocide. Women were subjected to brutal physical and emotional violence by the extremist Hutus perpetrators of the genocide and played the role of sacrificial lambs who saw Tutsi women as the perpetuators of the Tutsi elite and the procreators of its ethnic group. A raging slanderous media campaign by the extremists against Tutsi
women incited ordinary citizens to rape and murder. The genocide shattered all the social norms that had held women, especially mothers, as sacred and to be respected, and condoned a nationwide violation of innocent women.

The third chapter discusses the period since the genocide and focuses on women’s societal and economic roles. Following the devastation wrought by the genocide and its decimation of the male population, women took on additional and expanded societal roles as heads-of-households and caregivers as well as new occupations such as house builders and reconcilers, which combined both social and economic components. With so many of the men gone, women took over the role of household heads for their families and expanded their traditional care giving role to include the care of the tens of thousands of orphaned children. New organizations such as Rwanda Women’s network provided social services, job training and income-generating projects to help women get ahead. Women also took over their late husbands’ and fathers’ businesses out of financial necessity, and some started their own. The Rwandan government focused on girls’ education and founded a new secondary school for girls in 1999. The new school was part of a nation-wide program to improve education called Rwanda’s Vision 2020. The Rwandan government began to realize the role of women in the economic development and reconciliation of the country and supported them with new gender policies. Women, in turn, took on their new roles as heads-of-households, breadwinners and reconcilers by working hard despite continued harsh conditions.
The fourth chapter concludes the body of the thesis with a discussion of women’s post-genocidal political role. It covers women’s rise in government participation from 17% to the current 56%. It discusses Rwandan women’s participation in political conferences which had an impact on Rwanda’s government gender policies. The 2003 constitution, which established a mandatory 30% quota on women’s participation in parliament, directly affected the number of women in national and local government, as well as the Supreme Court. Women had a large role in the drafting of the constitution and a Constitution Committee traveled the country to gather input from the public. Women in parliament created a Forum of Women Parliamentarians to work on key legislative issues for women, including the inheritance bill, children’s rights legislation and the gender-based violence bill. Women learned to work together within the parliament and with non-governmental women’s organizations to bring about major legislative changes that benefited women. The advanced position of women in politics was demonstrated with the presentation of Victoire Ingabire as an opposition candidate for the 2010 Presidential election. Unfortunately, Ms. Ingabire was arrested twice, before and after the election and not permitted to run officially in the election. This indicates strong political oppression is at work in Rwanda, creating an impediment to women’s true political advancement. The impact of the new legislation is difficult to judge as incidences of domestic violence continues and women still struggle for equal inheritance rights.
Prior to the 1994 genocide Rwandan women held traditional roles within the patriarchal society that limited their participation in society and politics. Before the colonial period Rwandan society was communal and everyone was responsible for one another. Property was jointly owned and good standing in the community was very important. Men who abused women were not allowed to sit with the men in communal meetings (Kolini 2008, 70). This practice changed over the intervening decades as the value of a woman’s life began to decline. During the colonial period Rwandan women carried little official weight. “Women, regardless of ethnicity, enjoyed few spaces of the public realm, with few legal rights, they were neither subject nor citizen of the colonial state but were relegated to the private sphere” (Mazurana, Raven-Roberts, and Parpart 2005, 222). In the time between independence in 1962 and the 1994 genocide, Rwandan women’s circumstances were difficult due to their low social status. A Rwandan women’s role was defined by her male relatives. She was similar to a child in the eyes of society:

Within Rwandan society, women have traditionally been regarded and treated as dependents of their male relatives. Throughout their lives, women are expected to be managed and protected by their fathers, their husbands and their male children. Traditionally, the role of the Rwandan woman in society has centered around her position as wife and mother. (Human Rights Watch/Africa 1996, 20)
During the decades leading up to the genocide Rwandan women’s lives were circumscribed by poverty, limited education, poor health and arduous labor. Women made up 51.3% of the population and were employed mostly in subsistence agriculture (Human Rights Watch/Africa 1996, 21). They were not represented in education in proportion to their percentage of the population. During the 1980s 45% of students were girls in primary schools, but in secondary schools the boy-girl ratio fell to 7 to 1, and then to 15 to 1 in college. Parents were much more likely to pull daughters out of school than they were their sons in times of economic difficulty. Due to lack of education the illiteracy rate among women was very high (Human Rights Watch/Africa 1996, 21). Girls were kept home from school to work on the family’s land plot and her education suffered greatly for it, as did her future prospects.

Those few Rwandan women who were able to attend college in the pre-genocide period confronted obstacles to completing their education. Marie Beatrice Umutesi, born in 1959, a Hutu refugee due to the genocide, managed to earn a degree in sociology. Despite being part of a small educated elite in Rwanda, Umutesi experienced constraints on her own and her female friends’ behavior while at the university in Butare, Rwanda. “Each group practiced rigid social control over their members, particularly over its women. When a female student behaved in a way that others from her region or ethnic group considered inappropriate, they had meetings to decide what measures to take to remedy the situation” (Umutesi 2004, 15). One of Umutesi’s female college friends was deemed a bad influence on Umutesi and her
friends by the ethnic committees at her university. The young woman, Furaha, who dated whites among other perceived transgressions, was put in a reeducation facility for women in 1982. When her imprisonment was completed she was still kept under observation in her local village. She finally fled to Kenya hidden in a truck and then left permanently to live in Paris (Umutesi 2004, 15). Furaha’s ordeal illustrates the lack of freedom suffered by even the most educated Rwandan women prior to the genocide. Umutesi herself finished her studies in Belgium in 1985. She worked with the rural Rwandan poor, especially women, doing social services work after college (Umutesi 2004, 16). Umutesi realized the great need that existed among the largely poor female population in Rwanda.

As was the case with women’s education, Rwandan women’s health was poor in the decades leading up to the genocide. The gravest health problem facing women in the 1980s was maternal mortality. The vast majority of women delivered their babies at home. Rwandan women had one of the highest averages of children per woman in the world (6.2). This high birth rate limited the number of women seeking jobs outside the home (Human Rights Watch/Africa 1996, 20). In 1993 well over half of women’s deaths were attributed to reproductive issues. “Insufficient maternal health care, a lack of family planning facilities, and lack of medical technology all combined to deny women adequate pre- and post-natal care” (Human Rights Watch/Africa 1996, 21).
The other great health problem that plagued women apart from reproductive issues was malnutrition due to poverty and poor diet. “Famine had raged in many parts of the country since 1988. People were dying of hunger and diseases associated with malnutrition. The impoverishment of the countryside was so severe that theft, both of crops and personal property, was rampant” (Umutesi 2004, 18). Shortly before the genocide the economic conditions worsened severely in Rwanda. There were deadly battles over food, money and land with women and children often the victims.

The first case I heard about was that of a woman from Masango killed by her father and his wives over land. At Nyambuye, a few months later, a man killed his two children and his sister’s fiancé because they wanted part of the insurance money that had been given to the man after the accidental death of his first wife, the mother of the two murdered children. (Umutesi 2004, 41)

Like their access to good health care, Rwandan women’s access to fair working conditions prior to the genocide was limited. At that time women made up over half of the work force. However, their access to the benefits of their hard labor was limited due to discriminatory laws that limited their roles and prevented them from obtaining credit to be able to open businesses of their own. Most women at this time worked as subsistence farmers, making up 65-70% of all farmers. In addition to straight farming, women bore the greater responsibility for cultivating land, collecting water, and taking care of children and the household (Human Rights Watch/Africa 1996, 22). Despite how hard Rwandan women worked in addition to their other duties, they were not given their fair share of the income from their efforts nor did they have equal access to credit. While men were permitted to work in salaried positions and in the private
sector, women could not without the permission of their husbands (Human Rights Watch/Africa 1996, 22).

For those women who did attempt to work in the private sector, they were met with discrimination. The private sector was quite small employing only approximately 10% of the Rwandan population. In the latter half of the 1980s women comprised only approximately 12-18% of the private sector. Less than 5% of the private enterprises had women directors but women were represented in greater numbers in lower positions, but even then only about 13% of private enterprises even hired women. In the public sector women comprised nearly 40% of jobs but they were mostly employed in the lower rungs or in lower paying jobs like education or nursing (Human Rights Watch/Africa 1996, 22-23).

Prior to the genocide women had limited control over the income they earned from farming or other means of labor. While women were in charge of providing the means of sustaining their household they did not have the ability to keep any surplus, but their husbands had the right to their wives’ surplus (Jefremovas 2002, 79). The majority of households’ basic food was provided by women. In addition to controlling income surplus produced by their wives, men controlled the very land that was farmed. While widows could control any land brought to a marriage it was often lost once their sons reached maturity (Jefremovas 2002, 141).

In the traditional Rwandan society prior to the genocide, marriage and family were the main focus of a woman’s life. Women who entered into marriage were
accompanied by a bride price. Due to Rwanda being a predominantly agrarian society, the bride price was paid in cows. The Tutsis were the group that traditionally owned the cows. “So everyone who wanted a wife would need to go to the Tutsi to buy cow(s) to negotiate for a wife, after her value was established. Women today can be worth between three to six cows, valued at around $500 each” (Kolini 2008, 48).

Rwandan women usually married young, which often curtailed their education. Marie-Louise Kagire, a shopkeeper from Nyamata and a genocide survivor, commented on her experiences as a young girl: “My parents were small farmers and livestock breeders. They gave me permission to finish my first year in secondary school before looking for a husband. In our customs, girls marry earlier when the parents are rich” (Hatzfeld 2006, 123). The girls most likely married earlier because their labor was not as necessary in their childhood homes as it would have been for poorer girls. Ms. Kagire describes how she caught the eye of a successful businessman in the main square one day, but she makes it clear that girls were not permitted to “accept any advances directly in those days” and he approached her aunt as a marriage broker. “The gentleman walked an entire day in the sun to go to visit my parents--who said that a man who had come on foot should not be made to cool his heels any longer. I was married when I was nineteen years old” (Hatzfeld 2006, 123). Ms. Kagire married whom her family approved for her but she is not able to directly pursue a relationship. He was considered a good match because he already had a successful business.
Traditional Rwandan family life was centered on a family compound. The structure of the family and land inheritance practices gave women few land rights. Married children would leave to set up their own compound. Married women had the legal right to vote but needed their husbands’ permission to participate in business or any legal court actions. Women could have their own bank accounts but their husbands could withdraw money without their permission. Men could even deny their wives access to their own bank accounts (Jefremovas 2002, 98-99). Married Rwandan women were treated as dependants, like children. Polygamy, though illegal was still practiced at this time, and each wife along with her children lived on their own compound. Married men could even use their wives’ income from farming or other enterprises to take another wife or wives (Jefremovas, 2002, 99).

Unfortunately, divorce, which was common, could drive a woman back to her parents and a land-less status (Jefremovas 2002, 83). In addition, if the man had paid the bride price when they married he could claim their children as his alone, unless her father could pay him back, and the woman would be forced to leave her children behind (Jefremovas 2002, 88). Additionally, husbands used domestic violence to control their wives and keep them from leaving. It was not standard practice for fathers to rescue their daughters from a violent domestic situation because domestic violence “…was a sign of power, and could enhance a man’s reputation…” (Jefremovas 2002, 88-9) and fathers were reluctant to pay back the bride price. Fathers
saw their daughters as belonging to their husbands once they were married.

When asked if their fathers or brothers would protect them or even punish their husbands for beating them, women in Rwanda frequently state that ‘when you are married, it is as if you were never a member of your family, they no longer know you.’ As the proverb states,…’[T]he cow leaves the large herd to live an unhappy life,’ that is to say, ‘the daughter does not inherit from her parents, the quality of life depends on her husband’…. (Jefremovas 2002, 89)

Rwandan women were abandoned to their fates at the time of their marriage.

The Rwandan wife spent all her time working the land to support her family but her male relatives reaped the benefits.

The sons of each wife were given their inheritance from among the fields that their mother worked. While young children worked with their mother on the land, it was uncommon to see older male children working with their mother. The husband might work with his wife during peak periods if he had only one wife. However, it was uncommon for a man in a polygynous marriage to work with any of his wives. There were relatively few interhousehold links, and children felt no obligation to work with parents. Most of the income generated by either the wife or the husband was controlled by the husband…. (Jefremovas 2002, 84)

Women and men had different responsibilities within the household. Men and women were responsible for different crops. Men worked cash crops while women farmed, stored and managed subsistence crops, made the family’s food, and took care of the children, including providing their education. Women also made products for the household such as mats and baskets, fetched water and wood. If the family had hired workers it was the woman’s job to supervise them. In addition, women were in charge of the daily tasks in the fields for both cash and subsistence crops (Jefremovas 2002, 87).
While all of women’s labor and most of their earned income went into supporting the family, men had no such obligation. Any surplus a man earned could be spent as he chose, plus he controlled the use of his wife’s surplus. It was a common complaint of woman that men “want to have a lot of children, but they do not care if they get fed” (Jefremovas 2002, 87). When women sold surplus from their crops they often spent the money on items for their families that they could not produce themselves such as “sugar, tea, oil, and occasionally bread…” (Jefremovas 2002, 87). Any extra cash was to be given to their husbands (Jefremovas 2002, 87). Sustaining one’s family was a Rwandan woman’s expected duty and one that her husband demanded she do well.

In 1983, almost every Rwandan household, whether rural or urban, wealthy or poor had a garden of important foodstuffs…[I]t also signaled the capacity or incapacity of a man to control his wife/wives. Agricultural success was a source of respect and pride for women, but given women’s tenuous hold on the product of their labor and their responsibility for reproducing the family, it also provides a means of control over women by men. (Jefremovas 2002, 89)

Women’s labor in the fields to support the family also made it possible for their husbands and other male family members to participate in other industries, such as brick and tile production. “While family labor in brick and tile production was conspicuous by its absence, the role of women’s labor in agriculture was crucially important for the reproduction of these enterprises” (Jefremovas 2002, 86).

Unlike their poor counterparts, wealthy Rwandan woman were in charge of hired labor instead of the farming themselves. In addition to managerial duties they took care of the household as the poorer women did.
Wealthy women were responsible for overseeing the husband’s clients, servants, field hands, and cowherds. During the period of Tutsi rule, a tiny elite of Tutsi woman acted as managers for their husbands in a larger capacity. They could administer land, command armies, and hold court in their husbands’ stead. The vast majority of Tutsi women did not have this type of wealth or power. After independence, the importance of ethnicity in determining the nature of woman’s lives diminished. (Jefremovas, 2002, 87)

While Rwandan women did the lion’s share of the farming they received an unfairly small share of the profits. The other household duties performed by women outweighed what the men in these households were expected to perform. The men did indeed profit from the women’s labor and income. In a speech in 1973 Minister of Justice Bonaventure Habimana emphasized the woman’s producing role as one that undergirds her role as a mother. “He concluded this paean to the exemplary wife by stating that while the Rwandan wife might be ‘tempted to abandon her hoe,’ thoughts of her children’s welfare would move her to relinquish ‘her own endeavors.’ The virtuous woman was, first and foremost, a good wife and mother” (Jafremovas 2002, 88).

Widows had a slightly better position in pre-genocide Rwandan society than married women. They were considered the head of their households and could act as their families’ spokesperson at community gatherings. However, because of the land inheritance laws, they could not sell their husband’s land but could only farm it. The land rights of widowed women depended on the age and existence of any sons. Women with young sons could act in a custodial manner to their sons’ inheritance and could benefit from it. Women with adult sons who chose to honor their mothers’ use of the
land, could keep the land, and those with sons who wished to be awarded their inheritance immediately were out of luck. Widowed women with no sons were completely unprotected and could lose their land to their late husbands’ families (Jefremovas 2002, 99).

Single Rwandan women during this time had full legal status but were still considered as “wards” (Jefremovas 2002, 99) of their father and brother. A single woman could obtain some access to her father’s assets if she behaved in a socially acceptable way; as a “timid virgin,” but a “loose woman” (Jefremovas 2002, 99) (according to conservative social standards), or one who bore an illegitimate child, risked losing the financial and emotional support of her family. Single women who were labeled loose women by society often had to resort to prostitution to survive (Jefremovas 2002, 99). Women’s roles were tightly defined and their social circumstances were pre-determined. Whether a Rwandan woman was married, divorced, widowed or single, she was at the mercy of her male relatives in one way or another.

Prior to the genocide women who participated in businesses other than agriculture met up with various obstacles to success. In the mid-1980s Villia Jefremovas conducted a study of the brick and tile business in Rwanda. She interviewed women with different marital statuses. One woman, Vestine, 23, was single and had borne an illegitimate stillborn baby. She lived in a building that also housed her brick and tile making business. In addition to her brick and tile business
she ran a small store and managed laborers who worked her mother’s land. She bought unfired bricks and fired them in a kiln that she both owned and rented out. She had 15 laborers and was one of the largest brick makers in her area. Her only access to the clay she used for the bricks was a government-owned clay pit which required its users to be members of the cooperative. Vestine had no choice but to join but was discriminated against because she did not know how to make bricks and used laborers instead, and because she was a woman, the only woman, in fact. When she went to the pit to try and learn how to make bricks she was harassed by the male cooperative members. She decided it was not worth the hassle and left the cooperative. “Vestine, forced out of the cooperative by ridicule and harassment, decided to let her tile business drop, rent out her kiln, and concentrate on her other businesses,” (Jefremovas 2002, 103) and her father did not support her publicly due to her status as a disobedient daughter and fallen woman.

Jefremovas also interviewed a married woman who was in the tile and brick making business. Mediatrice, a wealthy middle-aged woman, ran a number of businesses with her husband including the brick and tile operation, growing fruits and vegetables, and renting out a truck they owned. While Mediatrice saw herself as owning the businesses jointly with her husband it was clear that her husband, who was interviewed separately, saw himself as the sole owner (Jefremovas 2002, 104).
Mediatrice was not considered to be a business co-owner by her husband because he considered her to be subordinate to him, as did most traditional Rwandan males at that time.

Devota, a widow, was also involved in the brick and tile business and was interviewed by Jefremovas. She was in her late 40s and had no formal education, typical of Rwandan woman of her age group in the 1980s. She was the widow of a man who had held an important political position. She ran the brick making business and sold a number of crops with the help of hired hands. In addition, she had a shop. The amazing fact that came out in the interview was that she ran the business as if her husband were still alive and the head of the business. She said her resources were jointly owned and she had brought land into the marriage, inheriting it as the only child of an only son (Jefremovas 2002, 105). “Using her husband’s name as head of the enterprise maintained some of his connections and some of the status associated with his political appointment. It also established her right to administer this business, to use her husband’s land and resources, and to use the profits of the enterprise” (Jefremovas 2002, 106). Devota, because of her widowed marital status, risked losing her business, property and assets to her husband’s family when her husband died. The only way she figured out to maintain control of the fruits of her labors was to latch on to a dead man’s influence and position. Even with her apparent success in business Devota was forced to follow strict protocol due to her widowed status. Receiving unrelated male visitors put a widow at risk of being taken advantage of, robbed,
physically harmed or mistaken for a prostitute (Jefremovas 2002, 106). These women were able to participate in business due to a certain extent through their relationships to men.

These three women were able to establish enterprises and to exploit the labor of poorer men because they were able to control scarce resources. However, their capacity to maintain this position was negotiated through their public roles as wives, daughters, and lovers of the men who legally owned the enterprises and who had claims over the resources and the surplus they generated. (Jefremovas, 107)

In the three decades leading up to the genocide some official recognition of women’s issues did take place. In 1965 the Ministry of Women was set up in Rwanda which was followed by the Decade of Women in 1975. Neither occurrence had much effect on the “cultural, social and educational marginalization” of women (Goldfaden 2008, 1). In Nairobi in 1985 the third Global Conference of Women pushed Rwandan women to set up the first Rwandan NGO called the Réseau des Femmes (RDF). Focusing on rural women, its 29 founders organized 330 women across the country. Other voluntary groups sprang up which focused on women’s issues related to law, business, health and business cooperatives (Goldfaden, 2008, 1). In 1988 the ruling governmental party (MRND) established the Union of Rwandese Women for Development. The URWAMA pushed the government to allow women to take part in work co-operatives and for-profit enterprises (Goldfaden 2008, 1).

While the 1991 Rwandan constitution guarantees all its citizens the right to take part in political life, the reality is that prior to the genocide few women did participate. Husbands imposed their political views on their wives. Women’s participation in
elected office was low. Prior to the genocide women’s participation in parliament never topped 17%. There were no women appointees in the executive branch of the government until 1990 and even then women only represented 5.26% of all appointees. Only three women served as ministers in the multi-party governments established after 1991. One such woman, Agathe Uwilingiyimana, took office as prime minister in July 1993. Known to be a moderate who would have opposed the genocide, she was one of the first national leaders killed when the carnage was launched in 1994. In 1992, the government created the Ministry of Family and the Promotion of Women. Within local government, there were no female burgomasters or prefects before the genocide, and only 3.2 percent of sub-prefects were women (Human Rights Watch/Africa 1996, 22).

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, the years just prior to the genocide, women began to fight against the social, economic and political constraints placed on them by the patriarchal society in which they lived. Women were active in forming organizations and looking for income opportunities outside of traditional labor which discriminated against them (Goldfaden 2008, 1). Despite Rwandan women’s efforts to fight against the social and political factors that repressed them in an attempt to improve their lot, forces pushing back against them largely negated their efforts.

In spite of women’s minimal occupancy of political posts and lack of formal education, these groups and associations were beginning to acquire a certain political weight and negotiating strength… Even so, social tensions in Rwanda rose during the late 1980s and early 1990s. The harassment of women in pre-genocide Rwanda mirrors the experience of women in other pre-conflict settings. Repression and rape, a gendered expression of the rising extremism,
became more commonplace. As the threat of civil war loomed in the early 1990s, Hutu extremists sought to carefully circumscribe women’s roles…. (Goldfaden 2008, 1)

Prior to the genocide Rwandan women’s primary role in the patriarchal society was restricted to that of primary provider and caretaker for her family mainly in an agricultural setting. Rwandan women labored to provide food and other necessities for her family while the male family members were often free to pursue other means of income. Any surplus that Rwandan women earned at this time went to her husband or other male family members. Rwandan women of this time were rarely landowners and their hold on their land and assets was tenuous at best as male relatives could fairly easily remove it from their possession. The pre-genocidal Rwandan woman was hampered by poor education, poor health, and discriminatory employment practices. The opportunities to improve the conditions for Rwandan women through political action were fairly limited due to the small percentage of women who participated in politics.
CHAPTER TWO
WOMEN DURING THE 1994 GENOCIDE:
THEIR TREATMENT AND ROLE

I know, myself, that when you have seen your mama cut so wickedly, and suffer so slowly, you become forever less trusting toward people, and not just the interahamwe. I mean that someone who has seen suffering for so long can never again live among others as before, because this person will remain on guard, suspicious of people, even if they have done nothing. I am saying that Mama's death brought me the most sorrow, but that her overlong agony did me the most damage, and that now this can never be fixed. (Hatzfeld 2006, 29)

---Jeanette Ayinkamiye, genocide survivor

For over 100 days in the spring and summer of 1994 in Rwanda a planned genocide occurred, orchestrated by extremists among the Hutu ethnic group, the ruling faction of the government, which took the lives of 800,000 to 1,000,000 moderate Hutus and Tutsis. The genocide displaced more than 50% of the Rwandan population from their homes, causing over 2 million people to leave the country entirely (B. Jones 2001, 1). The majority of the victims of the genocide were male. This created an imbalance of the sexes in Rwanda, resulting in women rising to 70% of the total Rwandan population. The genocide affected the political and societal role of Rwandan women in a number of positive and negative ways.

Before focusing on the 1994 Rwanda genocide and its effect on Rwandan women, it is important to review relevant Rwandan history. For 500 years Rwanda was part of a centralized kingdom ruled by Tutsi kings (Embassy of Rwanda Website). Germany conquered both Rwanda and its neighbor Burundi and ruled them as a single
colony from the 1890s until the end of World War I. During German rule the two combined countries, plus Tanganyika were known as German East Africa (Flags of the World website 2006). Following Germany’s defeat in the war, Rwanda and Burundi were handed over to Belgium by the League of Nations (Turshen and Twagiramariya 1998, 101). In 1933, after a detailed census in which each person was identified by his or her physical characteristics, all Rwandans were issued identification cards with their ethnic classification, either Hutu, Tutsi or Twa (Barnett 2002, 50). The Hutus comprised the majority of the population at 84%, the Tutsis 15% and the Twa only 1% of the population (Khan 2000, 3). The ethnic identification system imposed by the colonial government created lasting divisions within Rwanda that laid the foundation for the ethnic violence that would come to a head in the 1994 genocide; “…the coupling of ethnicity and violence is due largely to a colonization period that introduced myths of a superior race coming from the north to conquer an inferior native population…” (Barnett 2002, 51).

The identification card system was arbitrary and capricious, making little sense but having dangerous repercussions as those identities were used to single out individuals for death during the genocide. The Belgians made ethnic classifications based on physical appearance. They classified those who were tall and light skinned as Tutsis, and those who were shorter and had darker skin as Hutus (Ka Hon Chu 2009, 4). The Belgians granted the Tutsi minority an elevated status in government and education which caused the lesser-valued Hutu to be resentful. “Utilizing the classic
strategy of ‘divide and rule,’ the Belgians granted preferential status to the Tutsi minority…” (A. Jones n.d.).

An identity card system begun in the 1930s imposed this ethnic and racial privilege and made it hereditary. Thus a Hutu of today is a person whose grandfather received that designation. In cases of doubt regarding Hutu, Tutsi, or Twa status, the rule of 10 cattle was applied. If a man had 10 or more cattle, he was granted Tutsi identity: if fewer, Hutu identity. Cases were recalled in which brothers landed on opposite sides of this ethnic divide. A woman’s identity was defined by her father’s. (Janzen and Kauenhoven Janzen 2000, 8)

While initially the Belgians supported the Tutsi minority, believing them to be superior, they switched allegiances to the Hutu majority shortly before Rwandan independence in 1962. This followed Hutu-initiated violence in 1959-1961 which caused thousands of Tutsis to flee across the border to Uganda (Barnett 2002, 52). Tutsis carried out retaliatory border raids from Uganda on the Rwandan Hutus in 1963. The Hutus fought back, killing 10,000-20,000 Tutsis. The first president of Rwanda was Gregoire Kayibanda, elected in September 1961, who led the Parmehutu Party. He was very divisive in his politics, pulling the Hutu party into power. “The Majority Hutus now politically powerful, inferiority complex and all, and the newly installed President Kayibanda was more than willing to use ethnic terror and sow divisions to maintain rule” (Barnett 2002, 52).

In 1973 Juvénal Habyarimana, a Hutu, took over the Rwandan government in a coup (Barnett 2002, 52-53). Habyarimana’s rule of Rwanda was as a strong-armed dictator with unfair ethnic policies. “…Juvénal Habyarmina assumed the presidency and authoritarian control of political institutions and the military, pursuing a policy of
accommodation but also retribution, where Tutsi faced deliberate institutional exclusion” (Mazurana, Raven-Roberts, and Parpart 2005, 222). Despite having some success in improving the economic situation in desperately poor Rwanda, Habyarimana was unable to quell the violent ethnic unrest in his country. Civil war broke out in Rwanda in 1990 when the rebel forces of the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) attacked the Hutus in an invasion from Uganda (B. Jones 2001, 16).

Movement towards a multi-party system in Rwanda over the next few years triggered violent opposition from Hutu extremists in the ruling Hutu party, the National Revolutionary Movement for Development (MRND), which then went on to form the Interahamwe (Barnett 2002, 54). The Interahamwe was the militia group which would later lead the attacks during the 1994 genocide. Despite assistance from the United Nations and nearby nations during the Arusha peace negotiations between the Tutsi rebel RPF and the Rwandan government, the tenuous situation fell to pieces with the fatal shooting down of Habyarimana’s airplane on August 6, 1994. Thus began the genocide that forever changed the landscape of Rwanda (Barnett 2002, 62).

During the genocide Rwandan women were brutally treated and their primary role was that of the innocent victims of violence. Women of both the Tutsi and Hutu ethnic groups were murdered, tortured, maimed and raped. The perpetrators of the genocide sought to make an example out of the women, targeting them particularly in brutal ways. Seen as perpetuators of their ethnic group (and, if Hutu, accomplices), Tutsi women were slaughtered, along with their children, in an effort to wipe out their
entire ethnic group. While more men than women were killed in the genocide, the women received particularly harsh treatments at the hands of the genocidaires.

The events leading up to the genocide initially seemed to promise a better future for Rwanda. The drafting of the Arusha peace accords pointed to democratic reforms. The Accords were signed in August 1993 and covered a variety of issues. The articles of the Accords included:

…rule of law, power sharing, transitional institutions, repatriation of refugees, timetable for the projected twenty-two month transition period, beginning with the establishment of transitional institutions within thirty-seven days after the signing of the agreement—that is, by September 10 – and ending with democratic elections. On the surface Arusha promised a brighter, more stable, and democratic Rwanda. (Barnett 2002, 62)

Unfortunately, the political parties were not able to establish a transitional government. A lack of any real forward momentum stalled the process. President Habyarmina wanted to include the extremist anti-Tutsi party, the CDR, in the new coalition and the opposing RPF would not agree. (Barnett 2002, 75). The new government was supposed to come into being on December 29, 1993 which would lead to multiparty elections. Included in the new coalition government were supposed to be the Mouvement Democratique Replicain (MDR), the Liberal Party (PC) and the Social Democrats (PSD) (Kumukama 1997, 61). In addition to an expansion of involved political parties a new cabinet to replace Habyarimana’s one-man rule was to be formed and an initial parliament comprised of members of all the various political parties was to be included (Kamukama 1997, 61). Habyarimana bargained on using stalling techniques to build up a force to counter the RPF and to wear them down.
enough to give up the struggle as the peace process dragged on. (Kamukama 1997, 61).
But instead pressure from the RPF and overseas gave Habyarimana little room to maneuver.

By March 1994 Habyarimana was set to go ahead and agree to the Accords despite the strong opposition coming from the extremists in his party. “However, the MRND and its extremist allies PSR, PECO, PDI and UDPR were determined to block the implementation of the Accord even if this meant getting rid of Habyarimana.” (Kamukama 1997, 61).

The Hutu extremists within the government did not want to give up their monopoly of power which they were sure to do if the transitional government stipulated in the Arusha Accords actually came to be. For this reason the Presidential Guard and the interahamwe began to compile weapons and train in order to wipe out the RPF, their Tutsi sympathizers and the moderate Hutus. (Kamukama 1997, 62).

The genocide began on April 6, 1994, unfolding in a rapid series of events.

On the evening of April 6, 1994, President Habyarmina was flying back from Arusha, Tanzania, where he was rumored to have put the final pieces in place for the BBTG. But the Mystère Falcon jet carrying him, Burundi President Cyprien Ntaryamira, seven senior members of the Rwandan government, and a French air crew was shot down as it approached the Kigali airport. At 8:30 P.M., the plane crashed onto the grounds of the presidential palace, killing everyone on board. The crash acted like a signal; forty-eight minutes later, the Presidential Guard erected the first road blocks and were immediately joined by the Interahamwe. Shortly afterward, the conspirators fanned out around the city, picking up and murdering Tutsi and moderate Hutu politicians, and evacuating MRND officials and their families to a camp where they would be safe. UNAMIR went on red alert at around 9:30 P.M. (Barnett 2002, 97)
While the murder of President Habyarimana is often seen as the stepping off point for the genocide it might be more accurate to see it as “genocide’s first act” and was part of a plan which had been put in place long before. (Kinzer 2008, 138). “Because of the violence unleashed by the interhamwe … ‘no one was safe, not women, not children, not the elderly, not priests, not nuns.’ A climate of fear descended on the whole country; the lives of all Hutu, Tutsi, and Twa were in jeopardy.” (Adekunle 2007, 22). The pace of the killing was swift. The interahamwe and army murdered 6,000 Rwandans in the first 24 hours. The dead included nearly all the opponents to the current government. After three days the number of dead had risen to 20,000. (Kinzer 2008, 148). By the middle of May an estimated 500,000 Rwandans had been killed (Kamukama 1997, 97). In the beginning, for the most part, the killing was very low tech, yet efficient.

At first, many Rwandans were murdered at roadblocks. The procedure was straightforward. People in every passing car were made to show their identity cards. Those who were listed as Tutsi were removed and shot or hacked to death, often on the spot. Militia men at these roadblocks, many of them drunk on banana beer, kept their clubs and pangas wet with fresh blood. (Kinzer 2008, 148)

The killings rapidly spread out across Rwanda with no hindrance. A great red wave quickly enveloped the entire nation.

Things in Rwanda went equally smoothly. In the early morning of April 7, six or seven hours after the explosion of the plane, a core group gave the green light; the administration, army, and police went into action. The soldiers were ready, the militias were gung-ho, plenty of machetes were available—with stout arms to wield them. Spirits were willing. Orders went out across the country. The killings began, one day after another, at different paces in
different regions, but nothing hindered the progress of the massacres. (Hatzfeld 2005, 57)

Local government officials helped to corral victims and find venues for their execution. Tutsi men, women and children were killed in schools and churches, often with the clergy’s collusion. “The victims, in their last moments alive, were also faced by another appalling fact: their cold-blooded killers were people they knew - neighbours, work-mates, former friends, sometimes even relatives through marriage. Even aid agencies were helpless; having let into compound or hospital people injured or in flight, they were forced to leave them there. Few survived” (Pledge Peace Union).

While the United Nations Assistance Mission for Rwanda (UNAMIR), which was put in place in late 1993 to help with the peace process and the transition to a new government, initially attempted to stop the violence, an order from the UN Security Council cutting troops to ineffectively low levels, permanently derailed that effort. (Sirleaf 2009, 199).

Immediately prior to and during the genocide government extremists used their radio stations -- Mille Collines Radio (Barnett 2002, 54) and RTLM radio (Kinzer 2008, 138) to broadcast hate propaganda targeting the Tutsis. “Its announcers were angrily reporting that Tutsi rebels had assassinated the nation’s beloved leader. One urged citizens to rise up and ‘avenge the death of our president.’ Another insisted that all Tutsi must answer for the crime, and that the time had come to ‘finish them off’” (Kinzer 2008, 138). The broadcasts listed names and addresses of targeted individuals to be killed (Kinzer 2008, 138). The announcers used the broadcasts to urge the killers
to hunt their prey. “Tens of thousands became infected – and I can think of no other word that can describe the condition – by an anti-Tutsi psychosis; they were convinced through newspapers, radio and the frequent public speeches of Habyarimana’s closest supporters that the Tutsis were going to turn them into the beasts of the field once again” (Keane 1995, 9).

Hate propaganda was used against Tutsi women in ways to portray them as seductresses with evil intentions and to promote violence against them. The Hutu extremists put out the infamous “Hutu Ten Commandments” which was widely circulated before the genocide. The initial commandments dealt directly with the “caricature of the Tutsi women as subversive temptresses who should be avoided at all costs… ‘[E]ach 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 is secretary or protégée.’” (Rwanda: The Preventable Genocide n.d., 145).

Kangura, an extremist newspaper, published pornographic cartoons depicting Tutsi women and justified them by stating “The inkotanyi [members of the RPF] will not hesitate to transform their sisters, wives and mothers into pistols to conquer Rwanda” (Rwanda: The Preventable Genocide n.d., 145). Hutu men were warned to watch out for Tutsi women. Propaganda stated that Tutsi women had daughters in order to sleep with their sons and that Tutsi women looked down on Hutu men whom
they saw as inferior (Human Rights Watch/Africa 1996, 16) and monopolized job positions (Human Rights Watch/Africa 1996, 18). Clearly the message was that Tutsi women were dangerous and must be eliminated for the sake of Hutu men (Rwanda: The Preventable Genocide n.d., 145). “Such imagery ultimately promoted sexual violence against women, which was used extensively as a weapon in the genocide” (Bauer 2006, 137). The authors of the genocide were trying to make the case that killing Tutsi women (and their protectors) was justifiable homicide, just as killing of all Tutsis and their sympathizers was in the extremists’ minds.

If you look at the genocide propaganda that preceded the Rwandan genocide, and you look at the Rwandan media in portraying images of women, particularly Tutsi women, you will see in that propaganda, portrayal of women, Tutsi women, as being beautiful, sexual, seductresses, but devious, using their sexuality in order to undermine the Hutu, in order to perpetuate a Tutsi agenda. (Hate Media, Rwanda Initiative 2004)

On April 7, a day after the downing of Habyarimana’s plane, the presidential guard hunted down and murdered one of the first women to die in the genocide, Madam Agathe Uwilingiyamana, the Rwandan prime minister. Her brave struggle to notify the outside world about the launching of the genocide and her brutal death, made her into an important symbol of the struggle for justice in Rwanda. Madam Uwilingiyimana, from the Butare region, was a moderate Hutu from a modest peasant background. Her husband was a university administrator who had also been killed in a massacre. She became an education minister when the new coalition government
formed in 1992 and was later designated as acting prime minister in 1993 (McCullum 2004, 22).

When Madam Agathe received word of the downing of President Habyarimana’s plane and the beginning of the violence, she made an announcement that she would address the nation the next day. She contacted Romeo Dallaire, head of UNAMIR to ask for peacekeepers to protect her and her five children. She was sent Ten Belgians and Five Ghanaians but the roadblocks delayed their arrival and they were fired upon when they arrived. Madam Agathe fled with her five children over the wall and into the house of Joyce Leader, an American diplomat who resided next door. The children hid and were rescued by a United Nations peacekeeper and taken to Mille Collines Hotel. An African diplomatic family took her children and pretended they were theirs to save their lives and eventually escape the massacre (Khan 2000, 17). Unfortunately, Madam Agathe did not survive (Kinzer 2008, 14-141). She managed to give an interview to Radio France Internationale as the genocide began (McCullum 2004, 22). Soon after, the presidential guard disarmed her Belgian guards, assassinated the prime minister and later killed the Belgians as well (Kinzer 2008, 144). The death of the prime minister symbolized the end to legal authority and to peace in Rwanda (Kinzer 2008, 144).

Madam Agathe had been a courageous fighter for equality among ethnic groups and between men and women in Rwanda. She stood up against the stereotype of women as weak. “A zealous crusader for justice who led a long crusade for
reconciliation and tolerance between the majority Hutu and the minority Tutsi, Mme Uwilingiyamana was equally spirited in her struggle to change Rwandese customs that depicted women as weak and only obedient to men, unfit for public office.” (McCullum 2004, 23). Holding the office of prime minister, raising five children, and hours before her death vowing to notify the nation and the world of the genocide, proved Madam Agathe was an incredible leader and role model for Rwandan women and girls.

After her death, the Forum for African Women’s Education (FAWE) expressed its grief at the murder of one of their founding members: “We must celebrate the life of the great woman, the great African leader that was Agathe Uwilingiyamana. Her recent efforts to reconcile the warring factions, her fight against ethnic interests, her courage in resisting all adversities: these are life-long values that no death can quell. They hold the only hope for Rwanda and for Africa. Long live the spirit of Agathe Uwilingiyamana. (McCullum 2004, 23)

Madam Agathe summed up how she viewed herself and the issues of ethnic strife and sexism in one of her last interviews: “I am Rwandese and I am a person. I have a role to play in my country and it does not matter whether I am a man or a woman, a Hutu or a Tutsi” (McCullum 2004, 23). In additional to Madam Agathe, many other political and activist women were murdered in the genocide. The genocide eliminated the leadership of many women’s rights organizations as well as of human rights groups and development organizations (Bauer 2006, 137).

From the murder of Prime Minister Uwilingiyamana the genocide spread to include the murder, torture and rape of hundreds of thousands of other Rwandan
women. Tutsi women, as procreators, were particularly targeted by the militias in order to wipe out their entire ethnic group.

They were not, after all, forgotten by the killers during the genocide, who specifically targeted Tutsi women as part of their carefully organized programme. They were raped, tortured, mutilated, and killed. Ultimately, their elimination was central to the genocide plan: Tutsi women had to be eradicated to prevent the birth of a new generation of children who would become the RPF of the future, Tutsi children and babies had to be wiped out before they grew into subversive adults. It was an item of faith among the genocidaires that they must not repeat the mistake of their predecessors in the massacres of 1959 to 1963, who allowed women and children to survive. The genocidaire saw the RPF invasion by the sons of the exiles as a direct consequence of that oversight. They determined that the blunder would not be made again. (Rwanda: The Preventable Genocide n.d., 145)

During the genocide traditional Rwandan values were thrown aside and the sacredness and innocence of women, children and the elderly in eyes of society was forgotten.

Traditional Rwandan society would not allow women, children, or the elderly to be harmed, even in times of war, for ‘their blood is dangerous.’ Children were innocent, women the source of life, and the elderly the source of wisdom. Society cannot be sustained without their wisdom. These values were all part of traditional African society, except in the 1994 genocide. (Kolini 2008, 115)

While initially women were witnesses to the genocide they soon became victims themselves (Berry and Pott Berry 1999, 21). The leaders of the genocide in the effort to destroy the Tutsis by targeting the women and children were also destroying society as well. “The evidence also says something about the ultimate focus of both the demonic and the leaders of the genocide, its lust to destroy the two most significant givers of life for men: his women and children” (Kolini 2008, 115).
During the genocide family members were forced by the militias and their accomplices to witness the death of or murder their own. Parents murdered children and husbands in mixed marriages murdered wives.

Hundreds of thousands experienced unimaginable horrors, either directly or indirectly. Writes one woman, ‘I will never forget the sight of my son pleading with me not to bury him alive…he kept trying to come out and was beaten back. And we had to keep covering the pit with earth until…there was no movement left…. (Kolini 2008, 8)

Many women were made to murder their own children to save themselves (Khan 2000, 17). At Butare University a Hutu professor witnessed the death of his pregnant wife. Her fetus was savagely removed, shoved in his face and the murders cried “Here, Eat your bastard!” The perpetrators of the genocide paid particular attention to the women, making a special effort to destroy (whether through death or mental shock) as many as possible. “Rwanda being a patrilineal society, children took their father's ethnicity. Hutu women married to Tutsi men were sometimes compelled to murder their Tutsi children to demonstrate their commitment to Hutu Power. The effect on these mothers is also beyond imagining” (Rwanda: The Preventable Genocide n.d., 145).

In addition to the terror inflicted upon them through murder and torture, Rwandan women were subjected to rape in unprecedented numbers during the genocide. “Gender inequality and gender-based violence existed in Rwanda prior to the genocide, but the events of 1994 provided a backdrop for rape to be perpetrated against Tutsi women and their sympathizers on a mass scale. The ideology of Hutu power was underscored through the dehumanization of Tutsi women” (Ka Hon Chu
During the 1994 genocide, Rwandan women were subjected to sexual violence on a massive scale, perpetrated by members of the infamous Hutu militia groups known as the *Interahamwe*, by other civilians, and by soldiers of the Rwandan Armed Forces (*Forces Armées Rwandaises*, FAR), including the Presidential Guard. Administrative, military and political leaders at the national and local levels, as well as heads of militia, directed or encouraged both the killings and sexual violence to further their political goal: The destruction of the Tutsi as a group. (Human Rights Watch/Africa 1996, 1)

Rape became the tool of choice for the perpetrators of the genocide. The social stigma of rape was very clear to the perpetrators. They knew that women would suffer even more because of it. “Women are raped by an enemy who is fully aware of how unacceptable a raped woman is to the patriarchal community and to herself” (Turshen and Twagiramariya 1998, 104). The mental and physical toll on the rape victim was increased due to her ostracism by Rwandan society. Incited by the hate propaganda put out by the Hutu extremists portraying the seductive nature of Tutsi women, the killers would more often than not rape and mutilate their female victims beforehand.

Women were subjected to violent sexual abuse in a methodical way by the genocide militias.

Although the exact number of women raped will never be known, testimonies from survivors confirm that rape was extremely widespread and that thousands of women were individually raped, gang-raped, raped with objects such as sharpened sticks or gun barrels, held in sexual slavery (either collectively or through forced ‘marriage’) or sexually mutilated. These crimes were frequently part of a pattern in which Tutsi women were raped after they had witnessed the torture and killings of their relatives and the destruction and
looting of their homes. According to witnesses, many women were killed immediately after being raped (Human Rights Watch/Africa 1996, 1).

The intention of rape was to terrify the women and control both them and their families.

Women were subject to all sorts of torture; they were raped, burned alive, or buried alive. Women were also raped by large groups of soldiers and militia. The soldiers and militia did the most they could to humiliate the woman, raping her in front of her husband and children, then killing her children and husband in front of her before taking her life. (Berry and Pott Berry 1999, 21)

The mutilation of these women was sexually targeted and made to bring about a slow and painful death. “Attackers often mutilated their victims in the course of a rape or before killing them. They cut off breasts, noses, fingers, and arms and left the women and girls to bleed to death” (Rwanda: The Preventable Genocide n.d., 148). Women were often raped by men they knew such as their neighbors, and school girls by their teachers (Rwanda: The Preventable Genocide n.d., 148) adding to the horror of the experience. Many women were also raped by men who knew they were infected with HIV/AIDS (Rwanda, The Preventable Genocide n.d., 148). “It seems to have been the direct policy of the militias or interahamwe, either to kill or to infect women with HIV…” (Kolini 2008, 115).

Hutu women were also victims of sexual violence as the Hutu extremists deemed many of them to be sympathetic to the Tutsis. Women who were associated with the political opposition, married to Tutsis or who protected Tutsis were targeted for rape as well. Some women from both ethnicities were targeted indiscriminately. Attractive women and girls were also targeted (Human Rights Watch/Africa 1996, 2).
During the genocide young girls and older women were not exempt from rape. Victims ranged in age from mere toddlers to women in their 50s. “Girls as young as six were gang raped and kept as sexual slaves, both in Rwanda and in refugee camps set up in the neighboring countries...some of the young girls became pregnant...many more endured illness or caught sexually transmitted diseases, including HIV/AIDS” (Kolini 2008, 10).

Women who managed to survive being raped were often subjected to sexual slavery. They were held at locations where others were being marked for death. They were forced to perform sexual services and were threatened with death or physical harm. These women were held for anywhere from a few days to months. (Human Rights Watch/Africa 1996, 1 and Rwanda: The Preventable Genocide n.d., 148).

Women who were kidnapped to be used as sexual slaves were often referred to as “wives” by their captors. Hutu husbands or family members were known to have abandoned their Tutsi wives to their fate and run away ahead of the RPF.

Women and young girls were taken away and locked up in homes by militias as their private property. The militia members referred to this action as ‘taking a wife.’ The militia member would come back and rape the women or girls whenever he wanted. Some women were threatened by their Hutu husband or husband’s family because they were Tutsi or even because they resembled a Tutsi. With the advance of the RPF, husbands would sometimes abandon their Tutsi wives and family and flee for the border so they would not have problems at the roadblocks. (Berry and Pott Berry 1999, 21)

The rape, torture, and sexual slavery of Tutsi women and their sympathizers reduced the women to the role of abused pawns in the genocide. The perpetrators of the
genocide saw women as greatly responsible for the perceived subordination of the
Hutus and they took out their wrath upon their female victims.

Female survivors of the genocide tell in hair-raising detail of the violence they
witnessed and endured. Their stories make it clear that women suffered unfathomable
atrocities during the course of the bloody 100 days. Hugh McCullum, a foreign
journalist who visited Ntarama, a site of a large church massacre, met several
survivors. He describes the scene a few weeks after the slaughter:

The bleached white skulls, still covered in tufts of curly black hair, stared up
sightlessly into the camera lens. Many were split open like melons, mouths
drawn tight with toothy grimaces. Claws of once-warm and caring hands were
drawn close around tiny bodies mutilated and crushed by clubs…[T]he church
doors were jammed half shut with corpses. The windows had been blown in
by fragmentation grenades just to make certain no one had escaped the slashing
carnage. Inside was a slaughterhouse with bodies piled a meter deep under,
beside and on top of the rough wooden benches…. [T]he small wooden altar
itself as lying crazily askew with a decomposing body draped across one side.
(McCullum 2004, xx).

Survivors lay buried under corpses which protected them when the killers returned to
finish the job (McCullum 2004, xxi). Women and children survivors hid in the
marshes, often chased their by the persistent genocidaires.

They dragged me into the papyrus and clubbed me, laying me out straightaway
with a first blow full on the forehead, without cutting my throat. Often, they
would leave the wounded in the mud for a day or two before returning to finish
them off. As for me, though I believe they simply forgot to come back there,
that’s why they botched the job. (Hatzfeld 2006, 38)

It is clear that women of every age fell victim to the murderous militias. The
traditional respect that Rwandan society paid to women, especially mothers and
grandmothers, disappeared during the genocide. Women witnessed their mother,
sisters and children’s death by torture in the marshes. Jeanette Ayinkamiye describes the death of her mother in the marshes: “the interahamwe unearthed Mama beneath the papyrus. She stood up; she offered them money to kill her with a single machete blow. They stripped her to take the money knotted up in her pagne. They chopped both her arms off first, then her legs. Mama was murmuring ‘Saint Cecile, Saint Cecile,’ but she didn’t beg for mercy” (Hatzfeld 2006, 24). Jeanette’s younger sisters were near their mother and cut at that same time, but survived. Her mother lay in agony for three days before she died (Hatzfeld 2006, 24-25).

Despite the agony they suffered in the churches and marshes, women continued to care for their family members during the massacres. Above all else even injury and death, Rwandan women’s role as caregiver took priority. Rwandan women experienced such abuse and horror during the genocide but many managed to try to hold together what family remained. Survivors cared for new orphans as the killers took their parents away. Another survivor, Angelique, describes how she and her sister cared for children orphaned in the genocide: “With my sister Laetitia, I take care of eight children left on their own. It just happened naturally. In the marshes, when parents go off into death without taking along their little ones, those who had none, like us, offered to take them in the pinch. Later, time entrusted them to us for good” (Hatzfeld 2006, 81). Survivors formed supportive groups as they hid from the Interahamwe in the marshes. These groups helped to console the survivors after the
deaths of their own families. “In the marshes, we tried to stay with the same group of acquaintances, to find easier comfort among ourselves” (Hatzfeld 2006, 39).

Women were brutally treated before and after death, their bodies mutilated and desecrated:

I listened to a young boy who told me that he … managed to escape and found a hiding place in some bushes near his home. From the bushes where he was hiding he saw militia members and soldiers rape his mother until she died. He was so frightened that he continued to hide. When he saw dogs come to eat his mother’s body, he could not move to chase them away because he was afraid that the militia would see where he was hiding. (Berry and Pott Berry 1999, 16)

Women were not accorded any respect during the genocide, not even in death. Women were stripped and raped before their families, robbing them of any dignity. The desecration of the body of the little boy’s mother was unfortunately very common. Women’s bodies were often stripped after death as well. A survivor comments “Out in the swamp, we came upon many naked women, because the Hutus stripped their dead victims of any pagnes in good condition. Truly, such sights spilled angry tears from our eyes” (Hatzfeld 2006, 37).

Many women survived by being hidden by sympathetic moderate Hutus. Their tales are similar to those who survived the Nazi Holocaust by being hidden by sympathetic Gentiles. A young woman named Immaculee Illibagiza, during an interview for 60 Minutes, told of her survival thanks to being hidden by a Hutu minister neighbor. The minister hid Immaculee and six other women in a small
bathroom for 91 days. They took turns standing up and on occasion ventured into an adjacent room (Simon 2007).

The five hidden women could hear the killing going on around them and the killers searched the house but never found them. “She says she was terrified the entire time she was cooped up in the tiny space. They all expected to be killed, eventually. One said she just hoped she’d be shot and not tortured; another made the pastor promise to put dirt on her corpse so dogs wouldn’t eat her” (Simon 2007). Immaculee expressed her fear of being caught, cut and raped (Simon 2007). The women had very little to eat and Immaculee lost 40 pounds during her confinement. Eventually, the pastor was able to sneak the women out to a French camp that was nearby. When she arrived at the camp she learned that her parents and brothers had been killed (Simon 2007). Immaculee was spared the fate of so many women during the genocide but lived for nearly its entire duration fearing death and harm.

Accounts from the male genocide perpetrators themselves further illustrate the complete lack of regard for their female victims: “First I cracked an old mama’s skull with a club. But she was already lying almost dead on the ground, so I did not feel death at the end of my arm. I went home that evening without even thinking of it” (Hatzfeld 2005, 21). Another male perpetrator illustrates how the killers willingly did what they were ordered to do in terms of killing without regards to their victims: “But on the way back, we discovered another group of girls and boys. We pushed them along to the judge’s house. He ordered that they be sliced up on the spot, in the dark.
No one grumbled despite our weariness from an exhausting day. But afterward he assigned us ordinary schedules such as we were used to. That relieved us” (Hatzfeld 2005, 63). The killers did not regard their victims, in this case young boys and girls, as possessing rights at all.

During the genocide Rwandan women suffered unspeakable cruelty at the hands of the brutal militias. Hundreds of thousands were mutilated, raped and slaughtered. They were robbed of their dignity preceding death and after, often being stripped by their assailants, and left to be consumed by feral dogs. The genocide stripped away the tradition of respect for women and replaced it with disdain and murderous rage and hatred. Even the most powerful women, such as Prime Minister Uwilingiyamana, were granted no protection from the intentional genocide of the Tutsis and their supporters. Madam Agathe and many women leaders were slaughtered along with many less prominent women. The perpetrators of the genocide, blaming Tutsi women and those who supported them, for perceived societal and political inequalities, placed women in the role of sacrifices. Rwandan women were the innocent lambs to the slaughter during the genocide. However, many women who survived the genocide actively sought to protect those they could from death and harm.
CHAPTER THREE

SOCIETAL AND ECONOMIC ROLE OF RWANDAN WOMEN
SINCE THE GENOCIDE

The genocide in effect destroyed the social fabric in Rwanda. Demographics changed dramatically; women’s roles in society and gender relations were fundamentally transformed. In the aftermath, women assumed non-traditional social and economic roles, stepped into the public sphere, and...took on new responsibilities. The genocide forced women to think of themselves differently and in many cases develop skills they would not otherwise have acquired. (Powley 2004, 6)

The effects of the genocide on women, as victims as well as witnesses, were brutal. Experiencing the total destruction of their families took a large physical and emotional toll on Rwandan women.

The genocide affected all Rwandans, but women in particular were deeply affected. Women had to witness the murder of their families. Many women have emotionally died because they were forced to watch as their families were killed. Many women were raped and they must now bear the pain of the horrors in the permanent form of a child. We must deal with the impact of the genocide, particularly the impact it has had on Rwandan women. We must find solutions to the problems resulting from the horror that has swept Rwanda. (Berry and Pott Berry 1999, 22)

Despite the harsh effects of the genocide, including poverty, loss of family, prisons, refugee camps, rape and its consequences, which were coupled with traditional Rwandan gender inequality, Rwandan women’s societal and economic role has continued to expand since the genocide. “The post-genocide period has been characterized by women performing non-traditional roles such as decision-making, managing financial resources, building households and roads, despite their
shortcoming of having minimum capacities to take on the roles” (Mutamba and Izabiliza 2005, 15).

Conditions for Women after the Genocide

The adverse conditions that existed before the genocide continued to plague Rwandan women following the genocide. Rwandan women suffered from:

- Psychological trauma caused by the loss of direct or indirect family members, rape and its resulting unwanted pregnancies and the fear of sexually transmitted diseases
- Physical trauma resulting from wounds, rape, and malnutrition
- Lack of housing owing to destruction, occupation or lack of money for rent
- Increase in the number of widows or women-lead households, with many children or orphans
- Problems of inheritance, especially for women who were in common-law marriages
- Increase in poverty levels due to lack of employment in refugee and displaced persons camps, loss of a spouse or other family member who assured a subsistence-level income, and a general reduction in economic activity
- Increased risk of exposure to HIV/AIDS through rape or promiscuity, especially among abandoned young girls
- A decline in sanitary conditions due to malnutrition, poor conditions in the camps, and lack of health care facilities in rural communities
- A lack of basic household necessities (Berry and Pott Berry 1999, 160-161)

After the genocide women were left even poorer than before and mostly alone. Their men were either “dead or had fled” (Kumar 2001, 98). In addition to the men killed during the genocide, many were imprisoned in its aftermath. Many women were left alone while their husbands and other male family members were in jail. “The exile of the head of the family means the loss of moral and material support. But the imprisonment of a spouse is an additional responsibility: they had to visit him and take food and clothing to him” (Sibomana 2007, 144-145). Women still had basic needs to meet such as housing, clothing and food for themselves, various relatives, their
children and often orphans, all the while suffering the physical and psychological trauma caused by the genocide (Kumar 2001, 98). Women took on the role of heads-of-households due to the changes in the traditional family unit.

The genocide particularly affected women as they had become the majority of the population owing to the decimation of a large percentage of the male population. Women, who prior to the genocide occupied a low status in Rwandan society, were further pushed down the rungs of society’s ladder by the slaughter that converted most of their numbers to widows, orphans and abandoned spouses.

The profound discrimination against women has carried over into a post-genocide Rwanda and poses serious problems for women, particularly given that they now constitute roughly 70 percent of the population. Many survivors are widows who lost their families in the genocide and found themselves displaced or refugees with no remaining male relatives. Others are women whose husbands fled the country when the RPF-led government took over. Still others are young girls whose families were killed or have fled the country. Many households are headed by women who are in turn supporting children – their own, children of relatives, and orphans they have taken in. Their subordinate status continues to disadvantage them as they attempt to rebuild their lives. (Human Rights Watch/Africa 1996, 23)

Rwandan women suffered a lower standard of living following the genocide. According to *Shattered Lives: Sexual Violence during the Rwandan Genocide and its Aftermath*, a report done by Human Rights Watch in 1996, the majority of women survivors lacked education, job skills and were often not allowed to own their father’s or husband’s land (Human Rights Watch/Africa 1996, 23). A 1995 Ministry of Family and Promotion of Women survey of 304 rape survivors noted that 35% of women were alone with no surviving family, 61.8% had finished primary school, 35.7% had
finished secondary school, and 10% had no formal education at all (Human Rights Watch/Africa 1996, 23). Of the women surveyed, 42% were subsistence farmers, 34% were in school, and 19% were employed in state or private jobs. Maternal and infant death rates and malnutrition all rose since the genocide (Human Rights Watch/Africa 1996, 23).

**New Role as Head of Household and Expanded Caregiver Role**

On top of the anguish caused by rape, sexual exploitation, and land ownership issues, Rwandan women had to contend with even higher poverty levels. Traditionally, the main bread winners had been men. Women faced economic uncertainty and hardship after the slaughter of so many of their male relatives.

As a result of genocide, many women lost their male relatives on whom they previously relied on for economic support and are now destitute. Women survivors are struggling to make ends meet, to reclaim their property, to rebuild their destroyed houses, and to raise children: their own and orphans. Some Hutu women, whose husbands were killed or are now in exile or in prison accused of genocide, are dealing with similar issues of poverty. (Mazurana, Raven-Roberts, and Parpart 2005, 221)

The inequality inherent in the Rwandan social structure before the genocide coupled with the decimation of the male population by the genocide, deeply affected the efforts of women now forced into the role of heads of households. However, their new role as heads-of households presented new opportunities for women that had been previously denied to them.

During the genocide, many men were killed, maimed, or forced into exile and unable to carry out their family responsibilities, and women emerged as heads of households. Instead of the man being the ‘the central pole of the house,’ as a
Ugandan proverb states, it is the woman who has become the pillar of the house in Rwanda. The female population has risen, and female-headed households have increased. A recent figure shows that women make up 54 percent of the population. Women head approximately 34 percent of Rwanda’s households. These figures prove that a change has occurred in gender and social relations in the aftermath of the genocide. (Adekunle 2007, 111)

Since the genocide women have taken on an expanded caregiver role as well as a new one as head of the household. In doing so many sacrificed their former relationship and education goals. The high number of orphans resulting from the genocide caused women to create and care for families fashioned from the disaster. Angelique, a survivor, talks of sacrificing her education and a potential career due to the genocide and her new responsibilities as caregiver to orphans: “If the genocide had not overrun us, I might have passed the national exam, I would have gotten my law degree and worn a lawyer’s robes in a private practice in Kigali. But now I am twenty-five. I see only obstacles in my life, marshlands around my memories, and the hoe reaching its handle out to me” (Hatzfeld 2006, 85).

Even very young girls, pre-teens and young teens, were forced into the role of caregivers after the genocide. The strain of caring for younger siblings upon these only slightly-older children, many of them girls, created problems within these families and upon the caregivers themselves. “Children have also suffered. Large numbers of those who survived were in their early teens, suddenly found themselves responsible for their younger brothers and sisters – forming child-headed families. Tens of thousands are now beginning to show signs of a range of emotional and physical illnesses never known in Africa” (Kolini 2008, 2). Girls as young as ten were converted into
caregivers for younger siblings. A pair of sisters, ages 11 and 12, tried to commit suicide together owing to the effects of their role as caregivers. They were forced to give up their own education to tend to the needs of their younger siblings. “Such sickness builds over the years. Time does not heal” (Kolini, 2008, 9). Due to the genocide and their new roles as head of households, many women did not continue their education which limited their future economic prospects.

Women who lost children or who had grown children also took on the role of caregiver to the numerous genocide orphans. One such woman was a 50-year-old named Primitiva whose children worked abroad. One of her sons was taken away by the interahamwe and never seen again. (Temple-Raston 2005, 159). Primitiva fed a crowd of children who visited her home every day. “Most were orphans who gathered under the collective skirts of the community to find care and food among the women who lost children or sisters or brothers in the genocide. The women of Rwanda picked up the remains of their lives and wove them seamlessly into the threads of their own” (Temple-Raston 2005, 157).

Legacy of Rape

As indicated in the prior chapter, women genocide survivors were often victims of torture and rape which resulted in pregnancies, children and AIDS, creating physical and mental problems.

Now, after the genocide, when you see women who survived, you must realize that they have many problems. They are morose because they were powerless and could do nothing to stop the killing, but they also suffered all sorts of
torture and trauma. Some were mutilated and cannot accept their own bodies. Some girls and women who were raped by the militias are now pregnant and will soon be having the children of their attackers. They are in despair and do not know what they will do with these children. Some might wish to abandon or kill the child; others may simply wish to kill themselves. (Berry and Pott Berry 1999, 21)

In the traditional Rwandan society rape, out-of-wedlock babies and AIDS were socially unacceptable realities. In addition to suffering the mental and physical trauma resulting from the abuse itself the women were often times ostracized through no fault of their own. “Women also faced serious social stigma because of rape during the genocide and in many cases the birth of children from those rapes. The extensive sexual violence had also left women infected with HIV/AIDS” (Bauer 2006, 137).

Many rape victims did not receive any support to deal with their situation. Rwandan victims of rape are now suffering the worst time of their lives; they are being isolated by their own communities in spite of the mental and physical pain they have endured and are still enduring. Most survivors of violence are faced with overwhelming problems such as severe health complications, children born of rape, social isolation and ostracism. The psychological trauma of rape is intense….Many Rwandan women who survived rape contemplate suicide; some feel guilty for having submitted, and some are accused of having chosen life over death. (Turshen and Twagiramariya 1998, 110)

Survivors’ guilt was a reality for the Rwandan rape victims. Rape survivors were often viewed as “selling their bodies to save their lives” (Turshen and Twagiramariya 1998, 110). What the rest of Rwandan society did not comprehend was that rape victims did not choose to be raped. Rape victims needed medical attention but they often did not seek it out due to shame. Even when the medical needs were addressed the psychological needs were not. Often there was no psychological help available for
victims of rape. (Turshen and Twagiramariya 1998, 110). “These women are the ‘walking dead.’ Many of them would rather have been killed than have the stigma of rape attached to their persons” (Moghalu 2005, 60).

Many of the rape victims became pregnant and sought out abortion, despite it being illegal in Rwanda. Some women attempted to self-abort causing many health complications. A study by the Ministry of Family and the Promotion of women in February 1995 reported that out of 716 rape cases 417 resulted in pregnancy and 282 of these pregnancies had been aborted (Human Rights Watch/Africa 1996, 78). Doctors who later treated women who had performed self-induced abortions reported severe complications such as “uterine infections, rupturing of the uterus, hemorrhaging, and other gynecological complications” (Human Rights Watch/Africa 1996, 78). Pregnant rape victims were desperate enough to terminate their pregnancy that they would risk their lives. Many women committed suicide as a result of the rapes and pregnancies (Human Rights Watch/Africa 1996, 79).

Despite the use of abortion, many births resulted from the numerous rapes committed during the genocide. “According to the estimates of the National Population Office, survivors of rape have given birth to 2,000 and 5,000 children who are known as …unwanted children…or children of bad memories, or children of hate” (Human Rights Watch/Africa 1996, 79). An Amnesty International Report from a year following the genocide states: “Hundreds or even thousands of children are reported to have been born to victims of these rapes, and many babies have been
abandoned, or even killed” (Rwanda: Crying 1995, 8). Estimates made in 2009 of the number of babies born were higher, putting them at “up to 25,000” (Cose 2009). One woman who had a child born of rape commented “How can you have a child of someone who killed your husband and children?” (Human Rights Watch/Africa 1996, 79). Some refused to register at the hospital when they had their children and abandoned them upon leaving. There are health professionals who believe that some children were left to die once home. Some saw the face of their rapists in the children’s face and rejected them shortly after birth. (Human Rights Watch/Africa 1996, 79-80).

There were those children who were raised by mothers alone, due to their families’ rejection, as well as those welcomed into families as any other child. (Human Rights Watch/Africa 1996, 80). Some of the women with children of rape were helped by organizations such as AVEGA, a government agency (Temple-Rason 2005, 157).

The effect on women, who had to raise the children of their rapists often after losing their entire family, cannot be underestimated. A Rwandan editor expresses a common viewpoint toward these women and their children: “Both mother and child…will be seen by society as a curse and relic--visible reminders of the bitter memories of a past that everyone loves to forget” (Turshen and Twagiramariya 1998, 104). In addition to fulfilling the role of perpetual reminders of the cruelty and violence of the genocide, many of these mothers also took on the role of caretakers of a harshly created, unwanted generation. Many rape survivors who had children, did so with extreme reluctance (Temple-Raston 2005, 156). One survivor “wanted nothing to do with the
little boy who was born of evil” (Temple-Raston 2005, 156-157). Rape survivors who took on the new role of mother did so undergirded by a large amount of physical and psychological trauma and without their prior consent.

In addition to forced pregnancies and often unwanted children, the rape of Rwandan women caused them to suffer from high instances of HIV/AIDS following the genocide. Rape during the genocide launched the rise in the AIDS epidemic in Rwanda (Moghalu 2005, 60). It is estimated that thousands of women who were raped during the genocide contracted the HIV virus (Turshen and Twagiramariya 1998, 111). These women would then pass the disease on to their newborn children. “What is clear is that, with one of the highest incidences of AIDS in Africa, Rwanda is unable to provide adequate health services for women with this debilitating, usually fatal disease” (Turshen and Twagiramariya 1998, 111). With so many women and, through them their children and spouses, infected with AIDS, Rwandan women filled the role of caregiver to the large number of AIDS victims, besides themselves.

Land Inheritance and Forced Relocation

Despite taking on the role of head of households after the genocide, many women experienced difficulty laying claims to their male relatives’ land after their deaths. Traditional Rwandan inheritance laws did not allow a woman to inherit her father’s or other male relatives’ land unless they were unmarried and there exists no male heir or one cannot be located (Human Rights Watch/Africa 1996, 84). Many women returned from fleeing the genocide to find family lands taken over by their...
husband’s relatives or other Rwandan returnees. Hutu women with husbands in jail faced particular difficulty reclaiming their land (Human Rights Watch/Africa 1996, 86).

In December of 1996 the Rwandan Cabinet came up with a program of forced relocation called the National Habitat Policy which greatly affected women. The December 13, 1996 policy dictated “that all Rwandans living in scattered homesteads throughout the country were to reside instead in government-created ‘villages’ called imidugudu…” (Human Rights Watch 2001, 1) and it affected 94% of the Rwandan population. The policy was developed to achieve long-term RPF goals as well as to relieve the housing shortage created by the return of the refugees after the genocide (Human Rights Watch 2001, 1). While many returning Tutsi refugees went under their own power to the settlements, the government insisted that Hutus and Tutsis who had homes move to imidugudu as well. While not openly admitting to coercion, the government was aware of the use of intimidation by locals on the rural population. Homeowners were even forced to level their own homes before leaving (Human Rights Watch 2001, 1). While the first to move into the settlements were provided with houses, those who were forced to leave behind their homes and relocate received very little (Human Rights Watch 2001, 1). “Many of them lacked the resources to build houses and cobbled together temporary shelters of wood, grass or leaves, and pieces of plastic. Some have lived in such temporary shelters for two years or longer” (Human Rights Watch 2001, 1).
Despite the difficulties women experienced in the imidugudus many played key new roles in agriculture and home construction. The genocide killed and imprisoned the majority of the male population leaving the women to revive agricultural efforts in the new government-mandated settlements. Women provided their families with food by working cooperative plots (“food for work programme”) or their own personal plots (Mutamba and Izabiliza 2005, 26). Women were actively involved in the role of house builder, something brand new to them.

Women participated massively in the national programme of Imidugudu settlement where women provided labour and for the first time in history of Rwanda, they went right on top of the roof to build houses. Some proved to be capable of doing a relatively new job. This was out of sheer determination and need for survival. Throughout the entire territory of Rwanda women were seen on building sites working side by side with men or sometimes alone trying to cope with[the] difficult challenge of constructing houses. This broke the myth that if a woman constructs a house, it leaks said one female respondent in Butare. (Mutamba and Izabiliza 2005, 27)

During the imidugudus period a NGO organization called the Association for solidarity Between Rwandan Women (ASOFERWA) which promotes women’s economic empowerment, was involved in the resettlement project. The organization built a site known as Nelson Mandela Village in the heavily genocide- scarred region of Ntarama which boasted social services, utilities, a health clinic a school and a store (Mutamba and Izabiliza 2005, 27).

New Organizations to Promote New Roles

Since the genocide Rwandan women have taken on new societal roles, flying in the face of traditional gender roles which previously hindered their full participation.
The decimation of the male population by the genocide left a female majority that worked to rebuild the ravaged country. Rwandan women, with the support of their government, banded together to form organizations that promoted new roles for all Rwandan women.

The role being played by women and girls to redefine gender roles in order to participate alongside men in the rebuilding of Rwandan society has been little documented. Their remarkable courage gives reason for renewed hope after the tragic events in Rwanda. Through thousands of grassroots associations, connected by networks throughout the country they have begun to rebuild their lives; reconstructing their homes, building centres for survivors of genocide and rape, learning to read and write, returning to school, acquiring new skills, participating in political life and forming local businesses. This work is promoted by the Ministry for Gender and Women in Development (MIGEPROFE). Ministry representatives in each prefecture and commune work with local government officials to raise awareness of women’s issues. MIGEPROFE also works to support the women’s grassroots organizations, 15,400 of which have been set up since 1994. (Quick 2001, 1)

Rwandan women’s participation in new roles helped to break long-held stereotypes about their weakness and inferiority to men. Women took on leadership roles in women’s organizations to promote women’s participation in all aspects of reconstruction (Baines 2001, 4). Since the genocide, women have been questioning and knocking down the old walls that had surrounded them for so many decades. In 1996 the United National High Commissioner for Refugees began the Rwandan Women’s Initiative (RWI) to support Rwandan women in their task of creating new roles for themselves in a more inclusive Rwanda (Baines 2001, 4).

Concretely, the RWI accomplishments included: providing food, shelter and income to rural women; contributing to the development of Women’s Communal Funds; developing responses to acts of violence against women; providing a focus on the situation of adolescent girls; increasing visibility of
gender concerns; [and] promoting the role of women in politics’” (Baines 2001, 8).

**Security Promoters**

Following the genocide women were active in a new role as preservers of security. While rebels continued to attack across the Rwandan border from neighboring countries, female family members who initially supported the rebellion changed their allegiances. Women worked to convince their male family members to leave the insurgency and come home, realizing that such a move would mean more security for their families, despite the personal risk involved. Women negotiated directly with the government for peaceful surrender for their family members (Mutamba and Izabiliza 2005, 30). They also worked as informants against the rebels for the government.

It is interesting to understand the important role women continued to play in matters of security to ensure the complete return of security to the areas that were hit by the insurgency. A local district mayor of Ruhengeri town stated: ‘Besides the great contribution made by women in the restoration of security in Ruhengeri, they continued being involved in the vigilance and passing of information to security personnel regarding strangers whom they spotted in their area….Traditionally, it is believed that it is the duty of men to restore and maintain security however in the last ten years, these trends have changed and this has further increased the self-confidence among women that they can do what men can also do.’ This is part of the new responsibilities women have come to assume after the 1994 genocide [and] they have come to fully accept the responsibility and role of rebuilding their country. (Mutamba and Izabaliza 2005, 30)

Many women are recognized as having influenced their male family members to leave the rebel groups in Congo and return to Rwanda to join society (Powley 2004, 7).
Another way that Rwandan women carried out the role as security promoters was in the formation of groups for ex-women combatants. One such organization was Ndabaga. The organization brought together former female fighters from both FAR and RPA, the rebel group. “We had a duty to show our sisters and other Rwandese that we are capable of contributing to unity and reconciliation” commented a member Ndabaga (Mutamaba 2005, 30). Because women know their community very well they functioned well carrying out the role of security maintainers. Women functioned in the security role in a civilian as well as an official manner, as police officers and Rwandan soldiers. “As a local government official in Kigali-Negali Province put it, ‘If there are men who are planning war, who are planning genocide, the women know. They know better than [those men]” (Powley 2004, 7).

Economic Role

Women’s organizations in Rwanda have supported women in their new societal roles. One organization called the Rwanda Women’s Network has worked to improve women’s socio-economic condition by helping them to help themselves meet their own needs. The organization, founded in 1997, inherited the mandate of the Church World Service and helps female sexual violence survivors, the most vulnerable group at society’s edges (Rwandan Women’s Network, n.d.). The organization provides human and legal rights counseling, health education and services, and financial, employment and training assistance. Recognizing that illiteracy and poverty hold women back from
economic solvency, the Rwanda Women’s Network strives to provide women with the financial seed and job training they need to take on roles as breadwinners.

In the aftermath of the genocide, it came to the forefront the issue of women being economically disadvantaged, illiterate and lacking in marketable skills. Empowerment is necessary if the women are to attain a sense of security, including it being an important key in the healing process….The Network therefore enables the women to access financial credit, in order for them to develop income-generating activities. Other than microcredit finance, the program includes shelter construction and houses rehabilitation, training in business and management skills, and organizational capacity building for the women in their enterprises. (Rwandan Women’s Network, n.d.)

Rwanda’s economy took several years to recover from the 1990 rebel invasion and the 1994 genocide. More than three million Rwandans were living outside the country until 1997 and many of those who remained inside were often unable to work for various reasons. The continuous population displacement affected the economy for years. Rwanda’s gross domestic product (GDP) fell from $2 billion in 1990 to $585 million after the genocide, according to the World Bank. The economy did not obtain pre-1990 levels until 2001. Unfortunately, while as many as 3.2 million people had returned to Rwanda they brought with them few resources other than their labor capacity, and GDP per head stayed at an extremely low $20 (Waugh 2004, 207).

In a speech given in 2007 for the Gender, Nation building and Role of Parliament Conference President Paul Kagame stated that “gender equality is not just women’s business, it is everybody’s business and that gender equality and women’s empowerment are critical to sustainable socio-economic development” (Rwanda: Investing 2009, 2). It has become clear to the Rwandan government that gender
inequality affects the socio-economic development of the country and that changes need to be made.

In fifteen years, the government and people of Rwanda have developed a vision for their country, written a constitution, established free primary school education, and have experienced eight years of strong economic growth. The country is laying a foundation for information technology that will result, eventually, in much of the country being connected to the Internet. Women are involved, and in many fields, dominate decision-making at the highest levels. This is a country that despite the savagery of the genocide realizes that its people are its primary strength. (Ensign and Bertrand 2010, 12)

The fact that women make up the majority of the population in the country makes their struggles with work and daily living important to the well-being of the nation’s economy. “In March 2009, Rwanda developed a revised gender policy that now includes the private sector as a driving engine of the national economy” (Rwanda: Investing 2009, 2).

…somehow from this infertile, chauvinistic soil has emerged a country in which women now play an important economic, political, and social role—in a way that hugely benefits Rwanda as a whole. Rwanda is consciously implementing policies that empower and promote women—and, perhaps partly as a result, it is one of the fastest growing economies in Africa….Paul Kagame, the rebel leader who defeated the genocidaires and became Rwanda’s president, wanted to revive the country’s economy and saw that he needed women to do that. ‘You shut that population out of economic activity at your peril’ [Kagame said]. (Kristof and WuDunn 2009, 211-212)

Women’s new role in re-building the Rwandan economy was also recognized and supported by a number of NGOs, associations, cooperative organizations, and international organizations. One such organization, Club Mamans Sportives (CMS), obtained funding from RWI to build Kigali’s first women’s center which developed programs to focus on girls’ literacy and to provide job training. “CMS forge ahead to
prepare Rwandan young women for their future roles in the development of their
country” (Baines 2001, 10).

In Rwanda the link between economic development and peace was very strong
and the women’s role in the process was clear (Mutamba and Izabiliza 2005, 26). In
the years following the genocide income-generating activities have been directed in a
large majority by women’s organizations. Many activities were begun by various
associations, cooperatives, NGOs, government groups and outside charity groups
(Mutamba and Izabiliza 2005, 27). One income-generating project begun in Byumba
province is called “Cows of Peace” and was created in 2001 by the Rwandan
government and USAID to “support vulnerable groups to acquire improved breeds of
cows in order to increase incomes and livelihoods” (Mutamba and Izabiliza 2005, 28).
The local association that benefitted from the “Cows of Peace” program was
comprised of genocide widows, imprisoned men’s wives and ex-soldiers (Mutamba
and Izabiliza 2005, 28). The “Cows of Peace,” which brought income to the little
association of 31 members, over half of them women, truly brought reconciliation,
living up to its name. One participant noted the positive impact the program had on
her community:

Cows have also created a healthy community environment. Since every
community member is a potential beneficiary direct or indirect, every body
[sic] feels responsible for the security of the cow. Neighbours meet in the
evening to talk and keep company in the home where the cow is kept…. this is
a forum for sharing and building trust and solidarity and by far contributes to
reconciliation and peace building and reconciliation. (Mutamba and Izabiliza
2005, 28)
The “Cows for Peace” program also allowed the women involved to take on new roles as cow managers which raised their status in the eyes of their communities and families.

These cows have enhanced the status of women in their respective associations. Before the inception of this activity, there used to be skeptics that women could not be able to manage cows since traditionally managing cows was considered as a demanding occupation only suitable for men yet cows were a valuable asset in Rwandan culture... ‘women have proved to manage these cows better than men because we have noticed that those cows look healthier and are more productive than those managed by men,’ reported the local veterinary assistant. (Mutamba and Izabiliza 2005, 28)

The Rwanda Women’s Initiative also directed income generating projects that helped women to earn enough for food and school expenses for their children, taking on expanded socio-economic roles. Many of the women went on to expand their businesses once emergency needs were met and were able to do so using loans from Women’s Communal Funds (WCF) (Baines 2001, 9). The use of funds assisted women in business and educated them in handling finances. Women were able to take on the role of business owner with the available credit.

In 1997, women’s committees across Rwanda called council meetings in each commune to inform women of Women’s Communal Funds (WCF). Women were asked to contribute a nominal, personal amount of money into the funds to demonstrate will and commitment. Once a certain amount was collected (the amount differs from commune to commune), the committee could request an infusion of funds from the Ministry for Gender and Women in Development. WCF were established to channel resources to the local level: women (individually or in organizations) can apply for small grants to start or build micro-enterprises or to purchase essential agricultural tools or livestock. (Baines 2001, 9)
For thousands of women the genocide brought new professions and responsibilities born out of economic necessity. “The poverty of many women increased in the aftermath of the 1994 genocide, and ornament making offered an alternative to return to normal life. Women weavers used their creative ability to send the message of peace and unity through inscriptions on ornaments” (Adekunle 2007, 72). Rwandan women took on the majority of the work following the genocide and the lion’s share of the country’s farming. “A report by the Catholic Church Worldwide says that fifty-seven percent of the adult working population aged 20 to 44 is female, and women produce up to 70 per cent of the country’s agricultural output” (News from Africa 2004, 1).

Other women took over their late husbands’ businesses after their husbands’ deaths in the genocide. Many became cabaret, or small café/store owners and serve their communities by mixing charity with a safe haven to gather for both men and women:

…thanks to a managerial style of the utmost simplicity: whatever coins are occasionally received from a customer buying a beer serve immediately to provide a bottle to a regular fallen on hard times…Marie’s cabaret is called the Widow’s corner, because many local women, most of them widowed by the genocide, like to meet there and share a bottle or two of Primus, just to gossip up a storm and laugh at everything and nothing, and especially themselves. (Hatzfeld 2006, 77)

Some cabarets now run by women in Nyamata, site of some of the most devastating slaughters of the genocide, are new gathering spots for the villagers, away from the former cabarets, which are now un-patronized. These widows renew the economy in
their small way, becoming sole proprietors for the first time (Hatzfeld 2006, 119, 130). The survivors prefer to patronize the new cabarets because the traditional cabarets only served to remind them of those that were dead or in prison (Hatzfeld 2006, 121-122). Other women became bricklayers, a new profession, after returning to their homes and finding nothing left of family or farms. Some learned as apprentices during the building of memorials in Nyamata to the genocide’s many victims (Hatzfeld 2006, 155-156).

Many women turned to entrepreneurship as a means to support themselves and their families. Odile Gakire Katese is a good example of a Rwandan woman who has taken on the role of promoting female entrepreneurship. Odile is the founder of Rwandan’s first and only all-female drumming group, Ingoma Nshya. She founded the group in 2004 to create “a healing space for widows and orphans after the war” (Middleton 2010, 1). The over 100 members of the group “represent both sides of the 1994” (Middleton 2010, 2). In June of 2010 Katese partnered with Alexis Miesen and Jennie Dundas of the US non-profit Blue Marble Dreams to open an ice cream shop in Butare, Rwanda. Marble Dreams will help pay for English and business lessons for the women of Ingoma Nshya who will work in the ice cream shop (Middleton 2010, 2). Providing many women with training and a job will help lift them out of poverty as well as promote reconciliation. The business will use all local ingredients, supporting local agriculture (Middleton 2010, 2).
Education

In order to support Rwandan women’s expanded socio-economic role, the Rwandan government is focusing on improving girls’ education which has been sorely neglected. In 1999 the Forum for African Women in Education (FAWE) secondary school for girls was founded in collaboration with the Ministry of Education. The goals of the school are: to increase the number of school slots for girls; reduce girls’ social problems; provide an appropriate learning environment for girls especially in math and sciences; and establish an environment that encourages girls to shine academically (Ensign and Bertrand 2010, 87-88). The school offers its students programs in leadership and lessening the still-prevalent problem of domestic violence. Enrollment at the school grew from 160 students at its founding to 700 in grades 7-12 by 2008. The students perform well academically and FAWE is among the nation’s top schools. In 2004 the nation’s top student and its top math and science student came from FAWE. The school director Sarah Besaje commented about her school: “We are demonstrating that a girl is as capable as a boy…and girls who are empowered are able to become leaders. We want to prove to the world that if we have well-trained teachers and good equipment, our girls can not only help rebuild our country but be as successful as any children in the world” (Ensign and Bertrand 2010, 88).

The FAWE school strives to accomplish the education goals set forth in Rwanda’s Vision 2020, which “is based on the notion that developing an educated populace who understands science and is familiar with using information technologies
will be the primary way Rwandans become a knowledge-based society” (Ensign and Bertrand 2010, 88-89). There has been improvement in primary school enrollment levels rising from 74% to 95% between 2000 and 2006. Official revocation of tuition and fees in 2003 may help to further push enrollment to 100% by 2015 (Ensign and Bertrand 2010, 89). As of 2000 gender parity in enrollment at the primary school level was achieved but work still needs to be done to bring up girls’ graduation rates and test scores. In 2009 a new Rwandan education policy called Nine Years Basic Education (9YBE) began in 764 schools. The name speaks for itself, describing a program offering nine free years of education, a major goal for a developing country (Ensign and Bertrand 2010, 89-90). The new program attempts to address the issue that a small percentage of the Rwandan school-age population attends secondary school (10%) and an even smaller percentage continues on to the university level (4%). The Rwandan government’s education policies concerning gender parity are a good beginning towards helping girls and young women obtain the education they need to carry out their new social and economic roles but much work lies ahead.

Despite unprecedented access to power and enormous strides in increasing access for girls to primary school, significant structural challenges remain, especially in increasing girl’s access to secondary school and higher education, increasing the participation in girls studying math, science and technology, and improving completion rates at the primary and secondary level especially between rural and urban areas. The cost of education, combined with failure to pass the primary school exit exam are the two primary reasons cited by parents in a recent survey to determine why completion rates for girls are so low. Both are affected by poverty and traditional gender roles. While poverty reduction is a priority for the government, widespread programs to sensitize the population to issues of gender equity (beyond the classroom) are essential. Moreover, improving girl’s access to secondary school is an important goal in
its own right but also one of the most significant predictors of declining fertility and improving childhood health over time. (Ensign and Bertrand 2010, 102)

**Role in Reconciliation**

Despite the myriad of harsh post-genocide conditions, Rwandan women were by default charged with the role of picking up the pieces of a shattered nation.

As Rwanda begins the onerous task of rebuilding a country ravaged by bloodshed and genocide, the burden is falling heavily on Rwandan women. Rwanda has become a country of women. It is currently estimated that ...50 percent of all households are headed by women. Regardless of their status – Tutsi, Hutu, displaced, returnees – all women face overwhelming problems because of upheaval caused by the genocide, including social stigmatization, poor physical and psychological health, unwanted pregnancy, and increasingly, poverty. (Human Rights Watch/Africa 1996, 2)

Traditionally, Rwandan women had suffered from gender inequality which continued after the genocide. This inequality made their new role as reconcilers of their country all the more difficult. “It is women in particular in Africa who feel the terrible consequences of genocide, massacres, and war. They are largely unprepared to assume all the new responsibilities that fall on their backs. This is why it is particularly important to reconsider the role of women in the new society that is being built in Rwanda” (Berry and Pott Berry 1999, 159-160).

The Rwandan government realized the importance of reconciliation in order to maintain a secure existence for its citizens and bring about economic development. Despite the atrocities of the genocide the government has emphasized the need for Rwanda’s people to figure out a way to get along or risk sliding back into chaos once
again. President Kagame held a Summit on Reconciliation and Unity in October of 2000. Not much came out of the summit at the time but the “Government of National Unity” has attempted to surmount the serious problems that exist inside and outside of Rwanda’s borders (Waugh 2004, 209).

To advance social and economic goals, the Rwandan government has opted to prioritize security and stability over freedom of expression and political organization. After the experience of the genocide, it is a bargain that the population seems ready to embrace for now. While reconciliation is difficult to measure, Rwandans are certainly providing a remarkable example of coexistence in the aftermath of genocide, as survivors, bystanders, and perpetrators find ways to live together and move forward as a country. (U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum 2009)

Rwanda also recognized that women played a key role in bringing about peace and reconciliation in the country. In 2005 The National Unity and Reconciliation Commission (NURC) in Rwanda published a study entitled “The Role of Women in Reconciliation and Peace Building in Rwanda: Ten Years After Genocide: 1994-2004; Contributions, Challenges and the Way Forward.”

After the 1994 genocide there was a massive return of … Rwandese from neighbouring countries and beyond. There was a period of resettling these refugees …. There was no province where this occurred on larger scale than in the Eastern province of Kibungo. The tensions between people who found themselves as neighbours and the restoration of trust and harmony was gradually established through women talking to their counterparts and they in turn persuading their husbands to be more tolerant. Women were again the first to overcome this by farming associations, groups and sharing the basic items such as salt and water. Gradually men also started talking to each other. (Mutamba and Izabiliza 2005, 26)

The study notes that “women’s contribution to peace building and reconciliation has been considerable and in many cases, unprecedented. At the grassroots level women’s
various initiatives to cope with the post genocide challenges have opened up windows of opportunity for rebuilding trust among families and reconciling former enemies…” (Mutamba and Izabiliza 2005, 7). The report recognizes that women can be good peacemakers because of the experience they have gleaned within their families.

Their long experiences as peacemakers… in the family as mothers, wives and sisters where they prefer problem solving through open communication, honest discussions of differences and dialogue among all concerned parties. They are used to resolving disputes through the best means of ensuring that at least some of the concerns of all conflicting parties are met - a win/win situation - a family model which seeks fairness and reconciliation rather than victory and retribution….Further, as bearers of life, women can offer a special perspective and experience which will help help to overcome prevailing life-destroying methods of dealing with human problems and conflicts. Since military conflicts and diplomacy, which have traditionally been exclusively orchestrated by men, have filed to be a reliable system to safeguard peace, the inclusion of women in all stages of the peace process becomes imperative. (Mutamba and Izabiliza 2005, 18)

Additionally, a report prepared by Elizabeth Powley for the United Nation’s Office of the Special Adviser on Gender Issues and Advancement of Women highlights women’s role as reconcilers and their success in leadership roles in group reconciliation projects.

Rwandans’ perceptions about women’s capacity for forgiveness seem to be substantiated by the reality of women’s leadership in reconciliation activities….a UNHCR pilot project, the Imagine Coexistence Initiative, began without a specific gender mandate but include among its lessons learned that ‘in Rwanda, women have taken a lead role in coexistence and reconciliation work. (Powley 2004, 7)

It is noted that women often choose to reconcile in order to continue the business of life, something they fought so hard to maintain (Powley 2004, 7). The female survivors are those who continue to hope and strive for peace.
...one of the most thought-provoking results of this research is the finding that many Rwandans perceive women to be ‘better’ at forgiveness, reconciliation, and post-conflict peace building than their male counterparts. These perceptions are based predominantly on two notions. First, Rwandans believe that most of the consequences of war and violence fall on women and that they are therefore highly motivated to prevent conflicts. Circumstances of their lives and burdens they carry cause women to recognize their interdependence; such pragmatism allows them to work across ethnic lines more easily than men. (Powley 2004, 6)

In 2003 President Kagame released 40,000 prisoners who had “confessed to genocide” from six prisons around Rwanda (Hatzfeld 2009, 9). The reaction of the female survivors was utter disbelief, making it clear that reconciliation was going to be a tough row to hoe. One survivor describes her own reaction and that of other survivors to the prisoners’ release:

I went outside with the children to look at them; they were passing in single file with bundles on their heads. We exchanged no words. The children were scared, thinking that the prisoners would start plotting again. Personally, I was simply curious to see them. The first one I recognized was a neighbor named Cambarela—the very one who hacked up my big sister. As for them, their sheepish voices were saying, ‘Hallelujah, hallelujah! How are you? May God protect you! Love one another as yourselves. We shall pray for you, that’s definite from now on,’ We stared at them, gaping without lifting a finger. (Hatzfeld 2009, 13)

There was such pain and fear when the female survivors saw the freed prisoners for the first time. Trying to reconcile with the killers seemed impossible. Claudine, another survivor expresses her angry and hurt reaction at seeing the prisoners: “Not one prisoner came asking for forgiveness. They are afraid to have a conversation, so if someone goes near them - quick, they blurt out a bonjour to ward off a handshake, behaving like angels but turning away from any closeness with us. I myself would
have no trouble watching them be shot, one after the other, in public” (Hatzfeld 2009, 16).

Despite the fear and anger that women genocide survivors felt, many have taken on the role of reconcilers by forgiving their rapists and killers of their families. Marie-Louise Kagoyire explains how she often hides her feelings in order to interact civilly with Hutus in her daily life: “Whenever I speak to a Hutu, I try to camouflage what I feel--which is to say, my bad thoughts. If we are talking about work, we can easily discuss the schedule. If he needs me or I need him, fine. You can evoke the killings in a conversation, but only in the form of pleasantries, rote words, nothing substantial…” (Hatzfeld 2009, 82). Francine Niyitegeka talks about chatting with Hutus in the market about farming and the weather and even reconciliation but not about the genocide (Hatzfeld 2009, 83). This is her way of avoiding conflict and moving on.

Sylvie Umubyeyi, a social worker in Butare who met with a delegation of Hutus from the north who had killed of their local Tutsis back in 1959, recalls their encounter with the gentlemen seated next to her at the final dinner together:

We talked without trouble. We were quite at ease because we were complete strangers. I had no idea what he’d done during the killings, and he didn’t know anything about how I had survived…he knows as well as I that our destinies will never find a chance to escape from Rwanda. We are going to live next to one another; we must talk together. (Hatzfeld 2009, 87)

She speaks about an encounter with an ex-prisoner and allows that she might accept friendship from him. “I thought, fine, this man is speaking sincerely. If all the Hutus
went wrong, each and every Hutu, what could be the point in learning what this one did in particular? If he shows remorse or offers to be friends with me, I’ll say yes from my heart, because life must go on. He must go on” (Hatzfeld 2009, 20-21).

Norah Bagirinka is another survivor who worked as a translator on the Emmy Award-winning and Oscar Award-nominated documentary short *God Sleeps in Rwanda*. She is founder of *Rwanda Women in Action*. She spoke in an interview about women’s role in reconciliation:

> Women are making reconciliation possible in their own way. For instance, Rwandan villages are not separate; all of us, Hutus and Tutsis alike, live together. Because so many people have died, most people do not have extended families. So what do I do when I need to go to the hospital and I don't have a baby-sitter? If I need help or a friend to talk to, where do I go? I must go to my neighbor, I must forgive and we must come to a compromise….Rwandan women are also publicly calling for reconciliation….Women's ability to forgive and rebuild life reminds me of a proverb I heard one bishop say: ‘When you teach a man, you teach an individual. When you teach a woman, you teach a nation’….We're teaching our children that they need to be better citizens. We want them to grow up and bring about change and learn from our past which wasn't good. We want them to use our experiences and be better human beings and we want them to share their knowledge with the world. (Bagirinka, n.d.)

Reconciliation is vital to Rwandan’s future and the women who are actively playing a role in its creation realize this. One survivor, Berthe Mwanankabanki understands that reconciliation to rebuild the country trumps righting the terrible wrong that was done to the genocide’s victims. “Justice finds no place after genocide,
because it surpasses human intelligence. Priority must be given to the fields, the harvests, the country, and so to the killers as well and to their families, who are many and strong. What would become of a nation lying fallow, without schools or sturdy houses, eyed greedily by neighboring countries?” (Hatzfeld, *Antelope*, 131). Berthe later comments that “Everything can be learned, above all must be learned, like the policy of reconciliation” (Hatzfeld, *Antelope*, 208).

Catherine Claire Larson writes about incredible *Stories of Reconciliation* such as the one about Monique, a genocide rape survivor and subsequent AIDS victim who describes confronting her rapist who kept her prisoner as a “wife”. Monique tells him that she and her husband were now infected with AIDS and that they had lost two children to the disease as well. Her rapist Hakizamana could not answer initially but she carries on by saying “I am here to tell you that God has helped me to forgive you for how you sinned against me. I want to tell you that I forgive you,” and his response is “I should have come to you…I have been a wretched coward” (Larson 2009, 154). Monique’s husband lost his battle with AIDS soon after Monique’s reconciling encounter with her rapist (Larson 2009, 156).

Women have formed groups in Rwanda to help bring about reconciliation. One of these groups is AVEGA, a group for widows. There are also church groups for Hutu and Tutsi women together with members whose husbands were killed or jailed. “These women began to work together out of necessity, out of a need to provide for their families in new ways” (U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum 2008).
Rwandan women have seen their societal and economic role change and expand during the years since the 1994 genocide. While the severe affects of the genocide physically and psychologically debilitated thousands of women survivors, many women have managed to bring positive change to their society. While the genocide wiped out entire families, many new ones were created by the efforts of women caretakers, some unrelated to the orphans they took in, and many still practically children themselves. The situations created by dangerously unsanitary conditions in prisons and refugee camps worked against women as they struggled to keep their families afloat in harsh economic conditions. Women experienced threats and acts of retaliatory rape and killing, as well as discriminatory land ownership policies which made rebuilding their lives very difficult. Despite the adverse conditions following the genocide many women took on the new role of heads of households and worked hard at agriculture and non-traditional entrepreneurial occupations to support their families. Through hard work and against long odds, Rwandan women have essentially become the principal rebuilders of a broken society and economy, the peace makers, reconcilers and bread winners.
CHAPTER FOUR

POLITICAL ROLE OF RWANDAN WOMEN
SINCE THE GENOCIDE

Research demonstrates that increased numbers of women in parliament provides a boost in ‘the public representation of different ways of performing gender [roles],’ and that ‘representation of such alternatives in top-level politics increases the cultural choices available to women.’ (Pearson 2008, 40)

The decimation of the male population by the genocide created a majority female nation, a situation which, in addition to the social changes discussed earlier, helped to create for women new political opportunities previously denied to them by the traditional society. Women’s political roles in Rwanda since the genocide have expanded and improved to include proportional participation in government and promotion and recognition of basic human, inheritance and land ownership rights.

Women in Parliament before the Genocide

Prior to the genocide women had a small percentage of government representation. The first women representative joined the Chamber of Deputies in 1965 but the number of women stayed low under the regimes of Kayibanda and Habyarimana (Bauer 2006, 143). Under Habyarimana the parliament was called the National Council of Development and by 1988 it had a total of 17.1% women (Bauer 2006, 143). By 1990 a democratic movement was taking hold in the country. While the opposition party to Habiyarimana touted women’s rights, it did little to raise the percentage of women representatives in the government proposed after the Arusha
Accords just prior to the genocide. On the list of 70 proposed deputies, only three were women (Bauer 2006, 144). The circumstances of the genocide, followed by a transition in government, changed Rwanda’s political structure and led to a greater role for women. “The government has … empowered women through legal reforms and by promoting participation in government, increased economic growth and stability, and adopted a new constitution” (United States Holocaust Museum, Legacies 2007).

**General Discussion of Women’s Participation in Government since the Genocide**

Women in Rwanda have increased their governmental participation percentage steadily since the genocide. In 2004 Rwandan women had a 49% representation rate in parliament (Mutume 2004). That year Rwanda surpassed Sweden which had 45% women in their parliament. As of 2010 Rwandan women have the largest representation in government of any country in the world at 56%. This steady rise in the percentage of women’s representation in government is due to several changes that have occurred in Rwanda since the genocide. The government of Rwanda’s efforts to increase women’s political participation demonstrate its effort to address gender inequality issues (Rombouts 2006, 204). The government of Rwanda officially stated its commitment to supporting the cause of women’s rights and their contribution to reconciliation through political means in its National Unity and Reconciliation Commission’s report on the first decade after the genocide:

> The grassroots women took their full responsibility to face the challenge of the post conflict period and put their efforts together to ensure the survival of their family and determined not to see their country slide back but instead move
forward towards last[ing] peace and reconciliation. This yielded positive results
and [at] the same time committed to gender equality and women’s
empowerment. (Mutamba and Izabiliza 2005, 46)

President Kagame expressed his support for the expanded role of women during the
June, 2010 International Conference on the Role of Leadership Promoting Gender
Equality and Women’s Empowerment when he said: “Empowering women and
ensuring gender equality ultimately enriches communities and entire nations. Both
historically, during our liberation struggle and even more recently… women have
contributed greatly and have been at the forefront of political, economic and
reconciliation initiatives” (International Knowledge 2010).

In addition to official changes in government structure and policy, Rwandan
women themselves have contributed to bringing about the increase in political
participation.

…Rwandan women achieved this impressive figure in parliament by taking an
active role in the country’s reconstruction and lobbying heavily for a
constitutional quota for women in the lower house of parliament. They were
able to push for the creation of a government ministry of women’s affairs to
promote policies in favour of women’s interests. (Kwenda 2010)

In 1995, one year after the genocide, a group of Rwandan women activists attended
the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing and brought home important
political resolutions (Pearson 2008, 20). Among these resolutions was a 30%
government participation quota system for women, which was incorporated in the new
Rwandan constitution and discussed below (Pearson 2008, 20). Women’s
organizations have worked together in political activities to influence various
components in Rwanda’s political and justice systems. These organizations have sought to bring about political and legal reform by putting their energies into increasing women’s election participation and re-writing the constitution (Mutamba and Izabiliza 2005, 47).

A New Constitution

In 2003 the Rwandan government adopted a new constitution which established increased representation of women in parliament and an increased legal recognition of their rights. Women were deeply involved in bringing to fruition the new constitution which dramatically affected the political role of women. The new constitution set aside 24 of the 80 seats for women in the lower house of parliament and the September 2003 election increased this number to 39 (Mutume 2004). The number of seats reserved for women in the upper house of parliament was 6 out of 20 (Mutume 2004).

The constitutional drafting process began three years earlier in the year 2000 on the heels of the government transition and reconstruction following the genocide (Powley 2008a, 8). The government held a series of public meetings to gather responses and educate its citizens about the new constitution (N. Jones 2010, 90). Out of these meetings the government compiled a book to provide the public with a further clarification of the re-drafting process (N. Jones 2010, 90).

Following the public meetings, Rwanda created a Constitutional Commission to draft the new legal document. One fourth of the 12-member commission was women, including Judith Kanakuze, an activist and head of an NGO (Powley 2008a,
"Kanakuze played an important role as a ‘gender expert’ within the Commission ranks and as a liaison to her primary constituency—the women’s movement” (Powley 2008a, 8).

For six months the Commission traveled around Rwanda, obtaining the public’s opinion and suggestions on the new draft constitution, as well as seeking to educate the public as to the document’s importance and key points (Powley 2008a, 8). Individual women and women’s groups contributed significantly to these input sessions (Powley, 2008a, 8). For the first time in Rwanda women were being given a voice in establishing the legal framework of their country. This realization caused the political mobilization of women across the tiny nation.

The women’s movement mobilized around the drafting of the constitution to ensure that equality became a cornerstone of the new document. An umbrella organization, Collectifs Pro-Femmes/Twese Hamwe, and its member NGOs brought pressure to bear on the process and carefully coordinated efforts with female parliamentarians and the Ministry of Gender and Women in Development (MIGEPROFE). These organizations carried out a lobbying campaign and disseminated information about the draft constitution to women and women’s organizations throughout the country, holding consultations, meetings and trainings on the proposed provisions. (Powley 2008a, 8-9)

The new constitution, which was adopted in May, 2003, covered new ground for women and children’s rights, including in its preamble “human rights instruments and conventions …[such as] the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and the Convention on the Rights of the Child” (Powley 2008a, 9). Article 10 expresses the government of Rwanda’s support of equal rights: “We the people of Rwanda…commit[ed] to ensuring equal rights
between Rwandans and between women and men without prejudice to the principles of
gender equality and complementarity in national development” (Ensign and Bertrand
2010, 94). The constitution undergirds the Rwandan government’s intention to ensure
women’s rights by establishing a government office to oversee the premises set forth in
the document. “Rwanda’s constitution was drafted with deliberate attention to the
principles and mechanisms of equal participation for men and women….Article
185…establishes the Gender Monitoring Office, charged with supervising Rwanda’s
efforts toward gender equality and submitting recommendations related to the
promotion of gender inclusiveness” (Pearson 2008, 19).

The 2003 constitution increased women’s participation in government by
establishing in Article 89 a “30 percent quota for women in the legislature, the other
two branches of government, and all ‘decision-making organs’” (Powley 2008a, 9 and
Pearson 2008, 19). The reasons behind establishing a quota system are explained in
Title I, Chapter 2, Article 9 of the constitution: “a state governed by the rule of law, a
pluralistic democratic government, quality of all Rwandans and equality between
women and men is reflected by ensuring that women are granted at least thirty percent
of posts …” (Powley 2008a, 9). The quota system established in the 2003 constitution
helped to give Rwandan women the push they needed toward more equal political
representation with men. “The constitution established principles of equality for men
and women in every aspect and mandatory representation of women at every level of
leadership in the country” (Ensign and Bertrand 2010, 95).
Women in Parliament

The mandated quota system set forth in the 2003 constitution had an immediate positive effect on the percentage of women representatives in the Rwandan parliament. In the elections held in 2003 women comprised 45.3 percent of the parliamentarians (Powley 2008a, 10). As a point of comparison, in 1994 women held only eight out of 70 seats in Parliament, or 11% (David 2008, 2). In 2003 the government included an extra election just for women in order to fill the required number of parliamentary seats (Powley 2008b, 6). By the 2008 elections in which the governing RPF party endorsed 35 women and the opposing Social Democrats and Liberal Party also endorsed numerous women, the percentage of women in parliament rose to 56%, making Rwanda the first nation to reach the 50% quota established by the “African Union’s Protocol to the African Charter on Rights of Women in Africa” (David 2008, 1).

The Rwandan parliament is a bicameral legislature comprised of the upper house, or Senate, and the lower house, or Chamber of Deputies. Rose Mukantamburga, the first female Speaker of the Chamber of Deputies, elected in 2008 (David 2008, 1), explained how the quota system worked in the Chamber of Deputies:

…for elections of the lower house, each political party was legally required to nominate both male and female candidates. They were also obliged to draw a separate list, comprising exclusively female nominees for seats on the National Women’s Council, to guarantee that the Chamber of Deputies would satisfy a constitutional provision mandating that women must hold at least 30 per cent of decision-making positions. (Press Conference, Annual Statistics 2009)

The enlargement of Rwandan women’s political role has positively affected their social role as well as served as an incentive for Rwandan women in general to
become more active participants in politics. The national discussion on gender equality has grown due to the government’s efforts, an increasing number of women leaders, and women’s civil activism (Pearson 2008, 40). The growing presence of women leaders is a major factor that Women for Women International, an NGO, holds up as responsible for drawing women into political activity (Pearson 2008, 40).

Women parliamentarians initially had a difficult time in the early days of their representation. But as their numbers grew so did their confidence (Bauer 2006, 188). Bernadette Mukarutaba, a deputy in the Chamber of Deputies, was elected in October, 2003. She initially served in a civil position as president of the League of Human Rights Organizations and president of the League for the Protection of Human Rights in Rwanda. She also worked for the Collection of Leagues and Associations for the Defense of Human Rights and was on parliament’s human rights committee in 2006 (Bauer 2006, 187). Ms. Mukarutaba explains why many Rwandan women entered politics.

Working in civil society, I understood the need for political involvement. In civil society, we participated in various forums of civil society organizations, such [as] Reseau des Femmes [Women’s Network]. As women, we had the ambition to participate in politics, even before the war. We say here that ‘when a woman speaks, the nation speaks.’ But women have not had political power…. We saw that if women were involved in politics more, then there were many things in society that could change. (Bauer 2006, 187-188)

The important contribution of women parliamentarians was evident as they took on political roles as representatives of Rwanda in international gatherings. Senator Odette Nyiramirimo, who is Secretary General of the Liberal Party, went as Rwanda’s
representative to the International Conference on Population Development in Bangkok
Thailand in 2006. Nyiramirimo was one of a group of many parliamentarians from
around the world (Skaine 2008, 55, 57).

Forum of Women Parliamentarians

In 1996 Rwandan women parliamentarians created a multi-ethnic, non-partisan
caucus, the Forum of Women Parliamentarians (FFRP), to promote and support
women’s issues. The entire body of female Parliamentarians holds membership in the
FFRP (Powley 2008a, 8). The parliamentary caucus worked in the beginning of its
creation on empowering female parliamentarians and more recently concentrates on
eliminating gender bias in Rwanda’s laws and studies proposed legislation on gender
issues. The FFRP also organizes meetings for women’s groups concerning women’s
legal rights (Powley 2008a, 8). Judith Kanakuze, mentioned earlier, who was elected
to parliament in 2003 and was head of the FFRP from 2004-2007, presided over the
adoption of the FFRP’s five-year plan (2004-2009) to ensure equality by means of
policies and programs. The plan covered four areas: “building the institutional and
organizational capacity of FERP; enhancing gender equality within parliament;
initiating gender-sensitive laws; and improving gender-based government oversight”
(Powley 2008a, 10). Deputy Speciose Mukandutiye took over as leader of the FFRP in
2007 (Powley 2008a, 10).

The Forum of Women Parliamentarians celebrated its tenth anniversary in 2006
by conducting an international conference in Kigali for women legislators from across
the globe. The conference named Gender, Nation Building and the Role of Parliaments emphasized Rwanda’s top world position in women’s representation in parliament and the great strides achieved in gender equality (Powley 2008a, 11).

The conference highlighted Rwanda’s success in modeling a democratic transition in which gender-sensitive policies played a central role. Codified in a document entitled ‘The Kigali Declaration of Gender, Nation Building and the Role of Parliaments,’ the conference proceedings include[d] recommendations for governments, parliaments, women parliamentarians, the private sector, civil society, and multilateral organizations concerning ‘the centrality of gender equity to social, economic, and political development.’ The attendance of two heads of state, Rwandan President Paul Kagame and Liberian President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, provided high-level attention to the Rwandan female parliamentarians and their policy priorities. The conference, which demonstrated the convening power of the FFRP, illustrated the gains made by women since the genocide. (Powley 2008a, 11)

The conference emphasized the government’s focus on gender equality in Rwanda and its importance to the political role of women. The prominent political role of women in Rwanda formed the basis for the conference’s recommendations to other nations concerning gender equality’s relationship to political, social and economic development. Deputy Bernadette Mukarutabnana expressed this view of the continued role of the Forum of Women Parliamentarians in 2006: “I think that the forum needs to continue to sensitize. The laws are there, but people do not always follow them or understand them, so we have to raise awareness. There is also a ministry for women that works on these issues, sensitizing people about the rights of women” (Bauer 2006, 189).
Women Parliamentarians’ Legislative Priorities

Women parliamentarians have focused on changing the laws that discriminate based on gender. They feel it is their duty to support women’s issues. In 2005 97% of women parliamentarians viewed the promotion of women’s issues as “very important” (Pearson 2008, 28). Key legislative priorities have been the inheritance law in 1999, children’s rights legislation in 2001, and the gender-based violence bill in 2006 (Powley 2008a, 5). The government of Rwanda has drawn up various propositions to counter the issue of gender inequality including changing the prior inheritance laws which discriminated against women, denying them land inheritance (Rombouts 2006, 205). Women parliamentarians recognized the serious consequences of discrimination in land inheritance and worked to bring about change. Parliamentarian Bernadette Mukarutaba comments:

We have tried to have an influence on the laws, especially those affecting us directly as women. The most important of these has been inheritance. Women were left without husbands to raise their families alone, and yet they couldn’t inherit the land and goods of their husbands. Widows were being thrown out. Their husbands’ families simply cast them aside, and they had no rights. Even after changing the laws, we saw that men were continuing to ignore the rights of women. (Bauer 2006, 188)

In the early years of the post-genocide transition period women parliamentarians worked to change discriminatory inheritance laws. In 1999 the Law on Matrimonial Regimes, Liberalities, and Successions was approved. The Rwandan inheritance law, as it was more widely known, is considered to be one of the most important achievements in gender equality since the genocide (Powley 2008a, 15).
The law disallowed sex discrimination in land inheritance and division. The historical significance of this law was the establishment of girls and women as legal heirs to property (Powley 2008a, 15). The success of women parliamentarians’ efforts with the 1999 inheritance law was connected to cooperation with women’s groups. The female parliamentarians worked with the Ministry of Gender and Women in Development (MIGEPROFE) and women’s civil groups to work on passing the inheritance legislation (Powley 2008a, 15). The inheritance legislation was a key factor in changing the lives of many Rwandan women. “Particularly in light of the genocide, which destroyed and scattered families, the right to inherit land was crucial—not just a matter of rights but because it had an impact on food production and security, the environment, settlement patterns, and the livelihoods of families and children left behind” (Powley 2008a, 15).

The 1999 inheritance law had its shortcomings in terms of protecting women’s inheritance rights. The law granted legitimate children and legally married spouses inheritance rights (Englert and Daley 2008, 142) but, unfortunately, it does not discuss the rights of women who are not legally married, and their children. “[T]he inheritance law ignores the rights of the very large vulnerable group of wives in non-legal marriages and their children…these different types of marriages are…insufficient to be recognized as legal; a ‘legal marriage’ has to be registered before the local authorities and only then are children recognized as ‘legitimate children’” (Englert and Daley
Polygamous marriages, still a fairly common practice in Rwanda, are not recognized as legal either under the inheritance law (Englert and Daley 2008, 143).

In September, 2005, Rwanda published a new land law which sought to end discrimination against women in land inheritance. It has as a reference the 1999 Inheritance law (Englert and Daley 2008, 139). Women parliamentarians’ continued focus on women’s inheritance rights was evident in their support of the 2005 land law. The law, formally known as the Organic Law Determining the Use and Management of Land in Rwanda, contains in Article 4 the anti-gender discrimination provision: “any discrimination either based on sex or origin in matters relating to ownership or possession of rights over land is prohibited. The wife and husband have equal rights over the land” (Englert and Daley 2008, 138). The original Kinyarwanda uses the words “men and women” and so the article clearly protects unmarried women as well (Englert and Daley 2008, 164). Other provisions in the 2005 land law that protect the rights of women, regardless of marriage status, are spelled out in Articles 35 and 36 which state “all members of the family who are joint owners of such rights - including (but not limited to) spouses, legally married’, to give their ‘prior consent’ to permanent transfers of land, while joint registration of family land by legally married couples is implied in Article 32, which requires details of both ‘the applicant, and of his or her spouse’” (Englert and Daley 2008, 164). The 2005 land law was an improvement upon the provisions in the 1999 inheritance law giving more women rights to inherit land.
Despite the provisions in the land law, as of 2009, women still face major obstacles when making property claims (U.S. Department of State 2010).

Another legislative priority for women parliamentarians has been children’s rights which they brought to fruition by supporting the passage of the Law Relating to the Rights and Protection of the Child against Violence in 2001. The law protects the rights of children under the age of 18 and “criminalizes murder, rape, the use of children for ‘dehumanizing acts’ and prostitution, exploitation, neglect and abandonment, and forced or premature (before age 21) marriage” (Powley 2008a, 15). The passage of the law came about from cooperation among women in the executive and legislative branches working together with women from NGOs (Powley 2008a, 15). The women’s parliamentarians’ use of this coordinated advocacy effort has become an often-used and successful technique (Powley 2008a, 15).

In addition to inheritance and children’s rights, women parliamentarians have further supported gender rights by helping to draft the gender-based violence bill (GBV) in 2006. The Draft law on Prevention, Protection and Punishment of Any Gender Based Violence concerns general gender issues in addition to many types of gender violence (Powley 2008a, 17). The legislation involved information gathered through FFRP’s study of statutes in other African nations, as well as interviews with women across Rwanda about their and their children’s experiences with gender-based violence (Powley 2008a, 17).

The bill defines gender-based violence as ‘any act that results in or is likely to result in a negative consequence to an individual due to his or her physical,
sexual, or psychological nature.’ Addressing the current situation of violence against women as well as crimes committed during the genocide, the draft identifies various types of gender-based violence perpetrated against women and children and, in rare cases, men. It highlights polygamy as a cause of violence and, for the first time under Rwandan law, provides a legal definition of rape of an adult woman and prescribes punishment. (Powley 2008a, 17)

For the first time women’s and children’s legal protection against gender-based violence was put into writing. Women parliamentarians worked to support victims of gender-based violence, an act that was historic considering Rwanda’s past atrocities committed against women with impunity.

The GBV bill was the first piece of legislation that women parliamentarians drafted and they knew they needed the support of their male counterparts. For this reason, they introduced the legislation as a “community matter” not a “women’s issue” (Powley 2008a, 17). “Female parliamentarians and their counterparts in civil society developed ways of discussing gender-based violence to attract male support…The genuine commitment to all children, not just to girls, and the strategic use of non-threatening language worked in the bill’s favor” (Powley 2008a, 17).

The Forum of Rwandan Women Parliamentarians worked on the GBV legislation, harnessing the power of the entire caucus with positive results. As with their work on the inheritance and children’s rights legislation, the power of the women’s caucus increased their influence concerning the GBV legislation (Powley 2008a, 5). Women parliamentarians spoke to their constituents and other parliamentarians about the issue of gender-based violence, informing both groups of the issue (Pearson, Demonstrating 2008). The FFRP hired Rwandan consultants to aid
in obtaining the help of both gender-based violence experts and civil organizations (Pearson 2008, 22). The consultants gave the leaders of civil organizations a questionnaire about gender-based violence (Pearson 2008, 22).

In addition, an international consultant who had previously studied and reported on Rwandan legal statutes was invited by the FFRP to compile a set of best practices in international law related to sexual violence. The documents produced by these consultants served as the starting point for a national conference on gender-based violence held in Kigali in October 2005…During the two-day conference, participants discussed and debated issues of gender-based violence in Rwanda and developed a set of recommendations that would provide the framework for the law itself. (Pearson 2008, 22)

In the three months that followed the conference parliamentarians returned to their home districts for short visits to discuss the issue of gender-based violence and the process of creating legislation with their constituents, bringing input back to parliament (Pearson 2008, 22). Women parliamentarians worked with the National Women’s Council to bring together large groups of women (totaling 550) in Byumba and Kibungo to discuss the issue in women-only sessions (Pearson 2008, 22). Twenty-four women activists were invited by women parliamentarians to take part in information sessions in parliament (Pearson 2008, 22). The FFRP also utilized media to spread the word about the GBV. The caucus launched a national media campaign over TV and radio to broadcast discussions led by experts and legislators (Pearson 2008, 22). A free call-in number was announced on the radio programs featuring gender-based violence discussions, so listeners could call in with their input (Pearson 2008, 22).
After months of work reaching out to the community on the issue of gender-based violence and receiving the report from the consultants hired to aid in the compilation of information, the FFRP put together a mixed male and female committee comprised of parliamentarian technical experts, members of MIGEPROFE and civil society, justice ministers, national police officers, parliamentarians who also were attorneys, and members of the legal community at large (Pearson 2008, 22). The committee drew of the GBV for the Chamber of Deputies during the course of monthly meetings (Pearson 2008, 22). During the entire process of drafting the GBV legislation, from teaming up with their male counterparts, to meeting with female constituents and organizing a media campaign, women parliamentarians took the leadership role in supporting women’s and children’s rights.

In the development of this legislation, women parliamentarians had a strong sense of responsibility to female constituents and civil society activists. Women within civil society organizations consistently spoke of a history of women’s exclusion from public life, often in reference to the creation of legislation of gender-based violence….women’s increased involvement in government and the development of gender-sensitive legislation are seen as part of a larger movement to improve women’s situation in Rwanda. (Pearson 2008, 27)

In addition to being an important example of gender-rights legislation, the GBV bill was historically significant because it represented women parliamentarians’ first efforts to introduce legislation themselves. Up until that point, women parliamentarians followed the lead of the executive branch (U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum 2008). Women’s political role has expanded considerably. The GBV bill became law in April, 2009 (U.S. Department of State 2010).
The current situation in Rwanda related to gender-based violence remains grave, however. Incidences of societal violence, domestic violence, and discrimination against women still occur with frequency (U.S. Department of State 2010). In 2009 there were 2,356 cases of rape investigated by the police, 3,152 cases tried, and 1,487 new cases filed (U.S. Department of State 2010). Regarding domestic violence, figures gathered by the National Institute of Statistics for 2009 record that over 30% of women over the age of 15 experienced domestic violence, including over 10% while pregnant (U.S. Department of State 2010). In addition, witnesses to the genocide, many of them women, continue to be threatened and murdered to prevent their testifying at the ongoing trials of genocide perpetrators (U.S. Department of State 2010). While the Rwandan government attempts to capture and prosecute these individuals, the gender-based violence continues (U.S. Department of State 2010).

**Women in Other Government Roles**

In recent years women have expanded their political influence beyond the parliament to include leadership roles in government ministries, the Supreme Court, and various public institutions.

Women also fill the Cabinet, the Ministries and the Office of the Presidency, including: Education, Foreign Affairs, health, Gender, Labour, Environment, and Agriculture are women. The Head of the Supreme Court and the Commissioner of Police are women. Numerous public institutions are headed by women including the powerful Rwanda Revenue Authority, REIPA, National Insurance, Tourism, National AIDS, Unity and Reconciliation and Human Rights Commissions, Gacaca, the Auditor-General, the Deputy Governor of the Bank, the Ombudsman, the French Commission and Rose Kabuye as the Chief of Protocol. (Ensign and Bertrand 2010, 94)
In 2007 in Senegal President Kagame won the African Gender Award for the high percentage of women appointees in cabinet positions (David 2008, 1). By 2008 women held 36% of Rwanda’s top cabinet positions (David 2008, 1). In addition, Rwanda has a series of women’s councils at all levels of government from the basic cell (or community) level through to the national level (Pearson 2008, 29).

The quota mandated by the 2003 constitution affected the number of women participating in local government as it did at the parliamentary level. Over 2,000 women candidates were carefully prepared to participate in the 2006 local elections in which 33.3% of the district mayor and vice mayor positions nationwide and 66.6% in Kigali were won by women (Powley 2008b, 6). The results of the 2006 elections represented an increase in female representation of 12 percent from the 2003 local elections (Ensign and Bertrand 2010, 99). The government reduced the number of districts prior to the 2006 elections, giving district leaders more power, many women among them (Powley 2008a, 14).

The 2006 local elections represented the first time that local government was brought into line with the 30 percent quota mandated in the 2003 constitution (Powley 2008b, 6). During those elections there was a special triple ballot used; one that was general, one for women, and one for youth which particular candidates for each ballot. “This was a deliberate attempt to make voters comfortable with voting for women and to increase the number of women in local government. So with mechanisms like that, with a constitutional mandate, the Rwandan government has made it clear that bringing
women into the political process is a priority” (U. S. Holocaust Memorial Museum 2008).

Many Rwandan women were drawn to participate in local government, as opposed to national government, due to the minimal qualifications required. Candidates for local office were not required to hold a university degree, as was the case with national office (Powley 2008b, 7). Even illiterate could participate at the cell level, the most basic form of neighborhood government, which affected their daily lives (Powley 2008b, 7). In addition, local government participation required less of their time and was less disruptive to their families than national government (Powley 2008b, 7). Participating in national government could demand a complete relocation to the capital, which was not conducive to daily family responsibilities (Powley 2008b, 7), while participation in local government allowed women to use their political role to help bring change to their own communities.

Women’s Political Role in 2010 and the Future

Paul Kagame, who led the rebel opposition group during and after the genocide, was formally elected president with 95 percent of the vote in 2003 and won re-election for a seven year term with 93 percent of the vote in August 2010 (Raghavan 2010). Kagame’s re-election was marred by controversy “following a campaign clouded by charges of political repression, assassinations and media crackdowns” (Raghavan 2010).
One woman presented herself as a candidate for president during the August, 2010 election, Victoire Ingabire. Ingabire is a Hutu born in western Rwanda in 1968. She is Chair of an international opposition party coalition, the Unified Democratic Forces (UDF) (Kwenda 2010). Ingabire’s party elected her to be its candidate in the election (Kwenda 2010). Ingabire returned to Rwanda in January, 2010 following 16 years of exile in the Netherlands (Kwenda 2010). She believed that women parliamentarians lacked a percentage of actual power to match their numbers (Kwenda 2010). Ingabire, commenting on women’s political role and their possible future, said: “Women’s political weight is yet to be seen. I am not interested in cosmetic changes whereby women are nominated for propaganda motives. I want to see women’s fingerprints in all sectors of the society” (Kwenda 2010).

While Victoire Ingabire did not receive a fair chance to campaign during the 2010 presidential election, complaining of harassment at the hands of supposed government security forces, the fact that she was nominated by her party is a significant political step for women in Rwanda (Kwenda 2010). Ms. Ingabire indicated that her party was not permitted to register any candidates prior to the August election (Rwanda: Opposition 2010, A14). Unfortunately, the Rwandan government’s tolerance of opposition parties is limited and Ms. Ingabire was arrested in April 2010 on accusations of association with a terrorist group and in October 2010 on accusations of rebel activity, linking her to former commander of rebel Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Rwanda, Peter Uwumuremyi (Rwanda: Opposition 2010, A14).
Kagame’s party, the RPF, has essentially dominated the government since 2003 (U.S. Department of State 2010). Rwandan “citizens’ right to change their government [is]…effectively restricted” (U.S. Department of State 2010).

In the period of time since the genocide, Rwandan women have made significant strides in increasing their political roles and have succeeded in drafting legislation that positively affects the lives of women and children. Along the way, the entire population of Rwanda, including the male component, has become better educated about gender issues through the efforts of Rwanda's women politicians. Despite having a majority representation in parliament, however, women in Rwanda still suffer a lack of choices in jobs, job advancement and education (U.S. State Department 2010). The Office of the Prime Minister’s Minister of Gender and Family Promotion continues to run programs that highlight gender issues and works with other government agencies, NGOs and law enforcement (U.S. Department of State). In January 2009 the Rwanda Gender Observatory opened to collect data for policy development and to follow gender equality issues throughout society (U.S. Department of State 2010).
CONCLUSION

This thesis explored the effect the Rwandan genocide had on the societal and political role of women. The research involved looking at women’s roles before, during, and since the 1994 genocide which took between 800,000 and 1,000,000 lives. While Rwandan women suffered harsh circumstances in Rwanda before the genocide, were violently treated during the genocide, and continue to experience major obstacles to advancement today, they have raised their status and have seen an enlargement of their societal and political roles.

Chapter One discussed the traditional social and limited political role that women held in Rwanda’s patriarchal pre-genocidal society. During the three decades from independence in 1962 to the genocide in 1994 most Rwandan women suffered from low social status and lives filled with poverty, minimal education, poor health, constant physical labor, and minimal legal rights. A woman’s status and role in society were linked to her male family members. Women comprised slightly over half of the population, comprising 45% of the primary school pupils, but the ratio of males to females fell to 15 to 1 by the university level. Women suffered poor health due to poverty, malnutrition, a high birth rate, and poor health care. Most women in pre-genocidal Rwanda worked in subsistence agriculture, comprising 65-70% of farmers, while women held only 40% of public sector jobs and just 12-18% of private sector jobs.
Women’s main roles in pre-genocidal Rwanda were as daughter, wife and mother. Women were responsible for children, the home, the crops for their families, supervising hired workers (if any) and daily tasks associated with subsistence and cash crops. Despite the arduous labor associated with maintaining their households, women were given few rights to their own money or access to credit for any businesses they might run. Divorce meant a loss of rights to their home and even children, as they were often sent back to live with their parents. Domestic violence was tolerated and not prosecuted. Women had few inheritance rights and very often had no right to their male relatives’ land.

Women’s political roles were limited in pre-genocidal Rwanda but there existed some recognition of women’s rights by the government and a bit of political advancement for Rwandan women. The Ministry of Women was founded in 1965 and the Union of Rwandese women in 1988. By the late 1980s women began to struggle purposely against their social and political limitations. Before the genocide the percentage of women in the parliament was only 17% but women in Rwanda witnessed some political progress as the first woman prime minister, Agathe Uwilingiyimana, a moderate Hutu, was elected in 1993. Unfortunately, women’s hopes were dashed as Ms. Uwilingiyimana was murdered in the early hours of the genocide in 1994. The insanity of the genocide set women back even further than they had been before it began.
Chapter Two studied the role Rwandan women played in the genocide which primarily was that of innocent victim of violence. After the Arusha Peace Accords unraveled and the genocide began, women became some of the first victims, including as mentioned, moderate Hutu Prime Minister Agathe Uwilingiyimana. The extremist genocide perpetrators chose to make examples of Tutsi women, whom they saw as perpetrators of the Tutsi race and recipients of a long-favored standing in society, raping, mutilating and slaughtering them by the hundreds of thousands. The campaign against women was launched via media using hate propaganda in newspapers and on the radio. The genocide witnessed the breakdown of the traditional Rwandan society as family members and neighbors were pitted against one another and all respect for women was thrown away and disdain and hatred took its place. But despite the murderous rage directed towards them, many women fought to protect others from harm. In addition, some women experienced salvation from their fate by being hidden by sympathetic moderate Hutus.

Chapter Three explored the societal and economic roles that women have held since the genocide. Despite suffering through the after effects of the genocide and the devastation it wrought on their country, Rwandan women have expanded their role in society and the economy in the intervening years. Due to the decimation of the male population by the genocide, women now comprised 70% of the population which positively affected their position in society. The conditions of daily life for most women directly following the genocide were harsh with a lower standard of living and
lower social status as many were now widows. Women’s role as caregiver was expanded as they now cared for the large numbers of orphans left behind by the genocide. Women suffered the effects of genocidal rape such as physical and psychological trauma, unwanted children and AIDS/HIV.

Since the genocide many women became heads of household, as their male relatives were gone, giving them more control over their lives. Forced relocations due to a government program caused difficulties for some women as they lost their homes but served to present economic opportunities for other women who were given new jobs in agriculture and housing construction. Many women’s organizations were formed to help women with their physical and mental recovery, job training and employment, providing women with new leadership opportunities. The Rwandan government recognized the importance of women’s economic role as it affected reconciliation. Many women have experienced new job opportunities since the genocide, some taking the place of deceased relatives in business. Education for women has improved somewhat as enrollment continues to rise and the government is now implementing a new education plan called Rwanda’s Vision 2020 with a special emphasis on girls’ education. While women still suffer from adverse conditions in Rwanda since the genocide, they have worked hard to fill the roles of reconcilers and rebuilders of their healing country.

Chapter Four researched the political role of women since the genocide. The Rwandan government focused on gender equality following the genocide, creating new
political opportunities for women. A new constitution drafted in 2003 put in place a quota system requiring a 30% participation rate for women in government. This quota system was responsible for the rise in participation rate to 56% in the Rwandan parliament, placing Rwanda first in the world in women’s government participation. The post-genocidal period has also witnessed an increase in women’s participation in ministries, the local government and the Supreme Court. The Forum for Women Parliamentarians (FFRP), an organization comprised of all women parliamentarians, worked on key pieces of legislation affecting women’s rights including the 1999 inheritance law, the 2005 land law, children’s rights legislation, and the gender-based violence bill, which became law in 2009. These important pieces of legislation finally granted women the right to inherit land, protected children from abuse, and legally protected men, women and children from sexual and physical abuse. A new government agency, the Rwanda Gender Observatory, was opened in January 2009 to collect data on women to be used in policy planning. Despite the implementation of these various laws, women and children in Rwanda continue to struggle to be granted their basic human rights and discrimination and abuse are still prevalent.

The 2010 presidential election saw the positive step of the introduction of a woman candidate, Victoire Ingabire. Unfortunately, her candidacy was reportedly repressed by incumbent Paul Kagame, leader of the RFP party and president since 2003, and she was arrested in April and again in October, 2010, charged with being linked to terrorism. Charges of political repression have been leveled against
Kagame’s administration, which won the August 2010 election by a landslide.

Whether women can continue to advance politically in an atmosphere of political repression, remains to be seen.

This thesis researched the societal and political role of women before, during and after a devastating genocide that killed between 800,000 and 1,000,000 people and shredded its nation’s societal fabric. Rwandan women emerged badly scarred from the genocide but with enlarged societal and political roles, partly due to the harsh reality of male decimation, partly to new government gender-equality policies, but largely due to their own tenacity and desire to better their circumstances and their country, and fight against human injustice and cruelty.

This study of the Rwandan genocide and its aftermath offers an opportunity to consider the values lessons that such events present. When a majority segment of a population attempts to annihilate systematically a minority within that population it is morally imperative to react. The fact that between 800,000 and 1,000,000 human souls lost their lives over a 100-day period is overwhelming to comprehend, but equally as atrocious is that the genocide went that far without being halted. The fact that the extremists were able to stir up most of the country to slaughter on their behalf is disturbing. In addition, the hate propaganda used against the Tutsis dehumanized them, which was also morally abhorrent. The people who killed unarmed people, driven to frenzy by radio programs that told them to get the “cockroaches,” were equally at fault as those who ordered them to kill.
The Rwandan genocide is not unlike past genocides that occurred in Germany and Armenia and contains the same moral issues. In all of these genocides a majority attempted to wipe out a minority using deadly force. In genocide, one group of people looks at another as less than human and deserving to die. Perpetrators of genocides order the execution of people who possess a particular ethnic or racial trait. In the case of Rwanda, the Tutsis were the group hunted down. Targeting a group for death simply because they are of a particular ethnic or racial make-up is morally wrong. This is racism run amok.

In all instances of genocide as well, there were groups of people who could, and some who did, save many of the victims from death, which is a moral act. Those who did protest the killing were killed as well. Unfortunately, in Rwanda, there were also people of supposed moral fiber, priests and nuns, who abandoned churches and allowed their flock to be slaughtered. It seemed that many, many people were very willing to step aside and allow approximately 10% of its population to be murdered.

It is key to consider what the circumstances are that led to a genocide. In the case of Rwanda it was too much power being allotted an extremist faction of the government that then controlled the media. This control allowed the extremists to spread its message of hate. It seems imperative that the government representatives be given the same share of power so as not to get out of hand. In Rwanda, despite a movement underway to sign peace accords and establish a more diverse government, the extremists managed to derail that process and slaughter their perceived enemies.
and seize control of the government. Without a balance in the government, one group controls the situation in the country.

The aftermath of genocide and its recovery period provide other chances to consider values issues. One of the most important values issues seems to be how to bring about peace in a situation where one group tried to eliminate the other. In the case of Rwanda the victims of the genocide worked on reconciliation by forgiving the killers of their families and friends and their own attackers. The Rwandan government tried to bring to justice those who perpetrated the genocide, imprisoning and trying thousands. But the question of whether true compensation can ever be given to the victims of genocide and their families is one without a clear answer.

Another values issue related to the genocidal aftermath recovery period is how to bring about a nationwide change so as to prevent genocide from occurring again. A key element in bringing about such a change seems to be educating the perpetrators of the genocide about the value of a human life and having them do something to make up for what they did apart from a prison term. The victims must be assisted so that they can move beyond being victims. Somehow educating the perpetrators of genocide about the similarities between them and their victims might help them to realize the vastness of their violation of a basic moral code and drive them to want to take responsibility. Bringing different ethnic groups together, as many women’s groups
did, and still do in Rwanda, will help to heal the wounds of genocide and will foster an understanding and openness that will help to move past genocide and forward to becoming a stronger, more just, community.
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