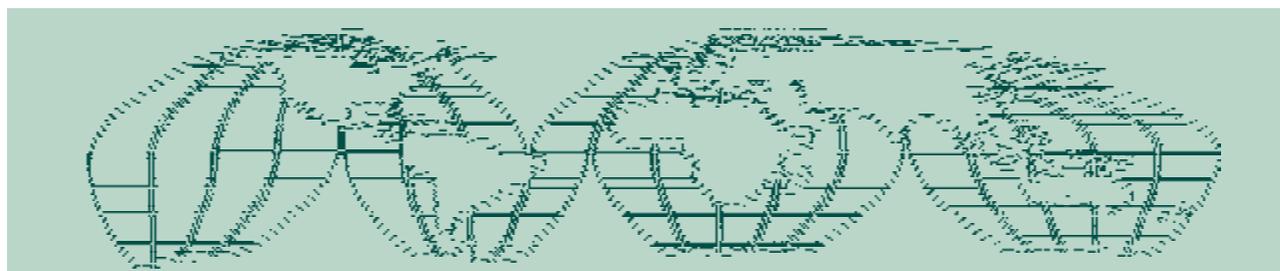

Aftermath: Women and Women's Organizations In Postgenocide Rwanda



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Overview

IN A 100-DAY PERIOD during 1994, more than 500,000 people in the central African nation of Rwanda were massacred. The killings were carried out not by a foreign power and not with weapons of mass destruction. Rather, 1 of every 15 Rwandans was murdered—by other Rwandans. The killers used bullets, machetes, and clubs.

Most of those slaughtered were Tutsi, an ethnic minority. But many Hutu (the ethnic majority) died too—usually because they refused to kill their countrymen or in retribution for the Tutsi genocide. During the conflict, up to two million Rwandans fled across national borders.

The genocide divided and polarized Rwandan society. Unlike a natural calamity after which members of a community often join together to comfort one another, this crisis shattered trust and left a legacy of fear and hatred.

This Highlights forms part of USAID's Center for Development Information and Evaluation (CDIE) multicountry evaluation of gender issues in postconflict societies. This particular assessment examines the impact of the 1994 genocide in Rwanda on women. It also examines the role women's organizations have since played in trying to rebuild the country. A two-woman team working jointly for CDIE and the Agency's Office of Transition Initiatives carried out the field research over four weeks in May and June

1999. The team compiled the findings in a pair of Working Papers, "Aftermath: Women in Postgenocide Rwanda" and "Aftermath: Women's Organizations in Postconflict Rwanda." Those reports can be found online at www.dec.org/partners/dexs_public/.

The war and genocide affected men and women differently. It is estimated that more than 200,000 Rwandan women and girls were victims of some form of sexual violence. Most who died, who never returned to Rwanda after fleeing, or who were imprisoned on charges of genocide were men. Thus, many war widows and other single women survived to care for families alone, to take in orphans, and to assume duties traditionally carried out in patriarchal Rwanda by men.

Almost every Rwandan woman survivor of the genocide has a dramatic story—of hunger, deprivation, fear, flight, and loss of family and friends. Rwandan women of all groups and social strata saw their lives, their families, and their tenuous hold on economic security disrupted by the carnage and continuing turmoil.

In the aftermath, as Rwanda tries to put itself back together, women's organizations have proliferated. On the one hand, the war and genocide shattered the social networks that had traditionally provided support for women. On the other hand, when the state lacked the means to meet critical needs, women began forming groups to seek ways to confront common problems. Offering a range of services, women's associations have helped many rebuild their lives.

Hostility Turns to Genocide

From 1990, a conflict had been incubating in the Republic of Rwanda. Roughly the size of Vermont and inhabited by 7.5 million people, Rwanda was then grappling with a severe economic crisis, stalled democratization initiatives, and ethnic polarization between the Hutu majority and Tutsi.* That year, members of the Rwandan Patriotic Front based in Uganda initiated attacks on northern Rwanda. Composed primarily of the descendants of Rwandan Tutsi refugees who had fled the violence associated with decolonization during 1959–61, the RPF claimed it was fighting to ensure the right of return for all exiles and to install a more democratic regime in Rwanda.

The event that triggered Rwanda's 1994 genocide was the 6 April plane crash that killed President Juvénal Habyarimana and several members of his government. The plane was shot down as it prepared to land in Kigali, the capital city. The perpetrators of the crash have never been positively identified.

Extremists in the Rwandan government assumed authority and, through the media, instructed the Hutu majority to go out and kill their neighbors, coworkers, and friends who happened to be Tutsi. Moderate Hutu were targeted as well. Over the next 100 days, more than 500,000 Rwandans, most of them Tutsi, were massacred.

In July, as the RPF was capturing Kigali and installing a new government, most of the ringleaders and perpetrators of the genocide fled Rwanda. Including Tutsi, up to two million Rwandans left the country during and shortly after the genocide.

During the first two years following the genocide, 800,000 former Rwandan exiles and their children born abroad, mostly Tutsi, returned to Rwanda. Many of them occupied houses left empty by owners who had died or had fled. Through 1996, close to two million refugees, mostly Hutu, who had fled during or after the genocide, remained in camps in Zaire, Tanzania, and Burundi. Then in November and December of that

* According to the 1991 census, Hutu were 90 percent of the population, Tutsi 8 percent. Despite social and political distinctions, Rwandans share a common language (Kinyarwanda), a common culture, and a common set of beliefs associated with their indigenous religion.

year, close to 500,000 Hutu refugees returned to Rwanda en masse from Zaire, with smaller numbers returning gradually in subsequent months. Meanwhile, the Tanzanian government decided to close the Rwandan refugee camps, and a wave of refugees returned from Tanzania.

Effects of the War And Genocide on Women

In previous episodes of violence in Rwanda, women and children usually were spared. In 1994, the perpetrators of the massacres targeted women and children as well as men. At risk were all Tutsi women, even those married to Hutu men, as were Hutu women married to Tutsi men, Hutu women who tried to protect Tutsi, and Hutu women associated with groups seen as opponents of the Habyarimana regime.

Sexual Violence And the Resultant Stigma

It is estimated that more than 200,000 Rwandan women were victims of some form of sexual violence during the conflict. The militias and soldiers leading the genocide exacted particularly brutal treatment on Tutsi women. As Human Rights Watch has documented, sexual abuse was used to humiliate Tutsi as a group by devastating Tutsi women. Some victims were sexually mutilated. Others have had to deal with chronic pain, the fear of pregnancy, and the risk of HIV/AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases. Some women were forced to serve as "sex slaves" for Hutu men. Elite women, regardless of ethnicity, were at risk as militias acted out class anger against the privileged. After the RPF victory, some Hutu women were beaten, raped, or otherwise humiliated by RPF soldiers.

Because the stigma of rape is enormous, women who have been violated often hesitate to speak of it. Psychological trauma is thus compounded by social isolation. Adding insult to injury, victims are admonished for having preferred survival through rape. Such women's chances for marriage may be destroyed. Up to 5,000 children were born as a result of rape during the genocide. These children in turn have been scorned by Rwandan society.

Women's New and Expanded Responsibilities

The number of woman-headed households has increased dramatically since the genocide. A 1996 government survey estimated that 54 percent of Rwanda's population was female and that women headed 34 percent of households. The latter figure, while significantly higher than the 25 percent of female-headed households before 1994, probably underestimates the actual number, because of reluctance on the part of those surveyed to claim that status. Moreover, the 1996 figure does not include refugees who returned in November and December of that year.

To care for the tens of thousands of Rwandan children who lost one or both parents during the war and genocide, many women have taken in children other than their own. And many are caring for older surviving relatives. Despite the many households newly headed by women, legal obstacles have hampered their efforts to gain access to property and land belonging to their deceased husbands or other relatives. Under customary law in Rwanda, girls did not inherit land from their fathers.* When a husband died, his widow could remain on her husband's land but had to hold it in trust for her sons. This custom left many war widows and other single women in postgenocide Rwanda homeless.

Women who are divorced or widowed usually remain single, whereas divorced or widowed men tend to remarry. In 1996, women constituted 86 percent of those separated or divorced and 89 percent of widows/widowers. The war and genocide, by killing so many young men, have put young women in competi-

tion for a limited number of marriage partners. And there is pressure on women of childbearing age to produce offspring to replace those lost during the conflicts.

Because of their second-class status and a variety of legal impediments in both customary law and the written legal code, few women have had much experience in state-level interactions. Dealings with political authorities, taxes, banks, and large-scale commercial activities historically were left to men. Yet women since the genocide have had to assume responsibility for activities previously carried out by men or by a husband and wife together.

Facing and Feeling Distrust

The war and genocide shattered the dense social networks that had traditionally provided solace and support for women. Some neighbors and former friends became enemies. What remained was not only social dislocation but also a legacy of fear, insecurity, anger, and, for some, a desire for revenge.

Despite the current government's claims that ethnic distinctions are no longer meaningful, ethnic discrimination has hardly disappeared. Tutsi women

survivors often distrust or fear Hutu neighbors they suspect of involvement in the violence. Hutu and Tutsi women involved in mixed marriages bear a special burden: a widow whose husband was killed in the genocide may find herself rejected by her in-laws and denied access to her husband's land and property.

Hutu women whose husbands are in prison face particular problems. Such women are socially stigmatized and, at times, ostracized because of their relationships to those suspected of participation in the genocide. Though not technically widows, these women may lack housing. Like widows, they do not have access to sufficient labor to ensure adequate food

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*A law took effect earlier this year allowing Rwandan women for the first time to inherit property.

and other necessities (let alone school fees and health care) for themselves and their children. Yet they are expected to provide food for their incarcerated husbands.

The war and genocide also exacerbated many existing problems, such as poverty and illiteracy, that affected women in greater numbers than men. But women's organizations—some new, some old—are working to alleviate those problems.

The Reemergence of Women's Organizations

On the one hand, the conflicts had a devastating effect on women's organizations, destroying their physical infrastructure and decimating their human resources. Many members and leaders were killed, while others fled into exile. Yet on the other hand, in the aftermath of the conflicts, women's organizations, both new and old, took a leading role in efforts to help women reconstruct their lives through emergency material assistance, counseling, vocational training, and assistance with income-earning activities. Many organizations provided a space where women could reestablish social ties, seek solace, and find support.

In postgenocide Rwanda, many of these organizations grouped together women of one ethnic group—either Hutu or Tutsi. But in some areas, associations involving both Hutu and Tutsi reemerged.

In the context of severe crisis, when the state lacked the means to meet critical needs, women began to seek ways of cooperating to confront common problems. Throughout the turmoil, women's groups provided the country one of its few enduring social continuities. In the refugee camps, women reestab-

lished networks to provide mutual support—in receiving child care, in gaining access to necessary resources, and in discussing the genesis of conflicts and possible avenues to peace. Groups of women formed in rural areas, building on previous rural organizations that had provided economic and social support to their members.

Factors Boosting Women's Organizations

Rwandan women's organizations proliferated during the second half of the 1990s. Starting from earlier experiences with cooperatives, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), and self-help groups, the growth was fueled by three developments: 1) after 1994 the international community supported women's organizations in Rwanda, 2) the postgenocide government encouraged their reemergence, and 3) the conditions of the postgenocide prompted women to assume leadership roles.

Some bilateral and multilateral donors, along with some international NGOs, provided direct support for Rwandan women's organizations at the national and grass-roots levels. Such funding and technical assistance have been critical to strengthening and expanding women's NGOs.

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The Ministry of Gender and Promotion of Women's Development supported women's groups by establishing a ministry representative in each prefecture and commune. These officials (who were usually but not always women) worked alongside and placed pressure on local government authorities to bring attention to women's concerns. The results were impressive. By 1999 the number of Rwandan women's organizations exceeded 15,000. Of those, an estimated 50 operated at the national level.

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The conditions of postconflict Rwanda—the relative scarcity of men, the unserviceable infrastructure, the obvious need to dress the open wounds of genocide—prompted some women to step forward for the first time as community leaders. In refugee camps, women sometimes became leaders by default. Women returning from exile often brought with them better educational qualifications than women educated in Rwanda.

In Kigali, women who had participated before 1994 in national women’s organizations started to meet. Joined by the repatriates, they began rebuilding organizations grouped within Pro-Femmes/Twese Hamwe, a preexisting umbrella organization of women’s associations. At the end of 1994, Pro-Femmes drafted a Campaign for Peace as a means of addressing Rwanda’s social and economic problems following the genocide. The campaign emphasized women’s needs and proposed ways of involving women in efforts to promote overall reconstruction and reduce social tensions.

Activities of Women’s Organizations

As the number of women’s organizations grew in the aftermath of the war and genocide, so did the scope of their activities. The most prominent example of this shift was the Campaign for Peace, which stressed four missions: 1) encourage a culture of peace, 2) combat gender discrimination, 3) promote socioeconomic reconstruction, and 4) reinforce the institutional capacity of Pro-Femmes and its member associations.

Shelter Projects

Helping female heads of household and other vulnerable groups repair damaged houses or build new ones became an important activity for several national Rwandan women’s NGOs, some local women’s NGOs, and mixed groups involved in rural-development initiatives. Shelter projects were important too for the postgenocide government, which faced the overwhelming tasks of rehabilitating and reintegrating two million exiles and refugees who returned from outside Rwanda during 1994–97. Both the new government and women’s organizations involved in such projects saw housing as an important first step for women to rebuild their lives.

Women’s Rights

Many groups that have surfaced since the genocide promote women’s rights. The oldest and most visible of these is Haguruka, which means “stand up” in Kinyarwanda. Haguruka seeks to educate women and children about their rights and help them plead for redress in the legal system. The organization was instrumental in forwarding the recently enacted law allowing women for the first time to inherit land.

The rights of women workers is an important advocacy area, because often a single employee supports an extended family. The Conseil National des Organisations Syndicales Libres au Rwanda (COSYLI), a trade union organization with both men and women members, includes women among its leading officers and has attempted to raise public awareness about the problems women workers face in the public and private sectors. Concerned about the economic repercussions against older women, COSYLI has pushed for public discussion about the criteria used in dismissing public service employees.

Organizational and Civic Training Programs

Many Rwandan organizations support vocational training, an activity that has increased substantially since 1994. Among the 35 member organizations of Pro-Femmes, at least 18 carry out some sort of training program. Réseau des Femmes, for example, has organized gender sensitization programs for government authorities in rural areas and civic education programs and workshops on how to run viable organizations for women at the grass-roots level. The organization Umushumba Mwiza operates a residential center in Kigali that provides yearlong vocational training and psychological support to women in distress. It boasts a 70 percent success rate in finding employment for its trainees.

Income-Generating Programs

Women’s organizations in Rwanda have operated programs to generate income for women and woman-headed households.

USAID’s Women in Transition (WIT) program has carried out projects in conjunction with Rwandan

women's organizations to distribute goats. By increasing agricultural yields and improving women's social standing, the projects have contributed to women's and children's well-being.

Since April 1999, WIT-funded organizations have been making repayments to women's communal funds that each commune has been encouraged to establish, as part of a Rwandan government program to encourage microcredit for women. These funds charge a modest interest rate (usually 6–8 percent) for their loans. WIT's agriculture and petty trade programs require recipients to repay loans, but without interest. In WIT's early phase, recipients initially were expected to repay 80 percent of what they had received. Repayments were then put into a fund used to assist orphans. Later recipients repaid 100 percent.

The most visible national women's organization working in microcredit is Duterimbere. It holds training programs for loan applicants, organizes workshops on managing small business endeavors, grants small loans, and guarantees some larger loans. The Kigali-based Polyclinic of Hope, with assistance from WIT, makes small loans available to women engaged in petty trade. Seruka, another NGO that provides microcredit to rural and urban women, has had good success in repayment.

To assist young women whose studies were interrupted by the conflicts, the Association des Femmes Chefs de Famille is struggling to launch an ambitious training program in computer skills. While waiting for additional donor support, the association has set up a typing service and school-supply store that generates revenues to keep it afloat.

Health Care and Psychotherapy

At the national level, two Pro-Femmes member NGOs address primarily health concerns, while at least eight others give some attention to health. Their role in health is important where government programs are woefully inadequate.

Several women's organizations concentrate on the physical and emotional trauma of women survivors. The Pro-Femmes program counsels trauma victims and runs training programs to promote tolerance and reduce conflict. And the Polyclinic of Hope offers solace and medical treatment to widows and women victims of sexual violence.

Shortcomings Of Women's Organizations

Studies have shown that national women's organizations often do more to promote the social status and well-being of the urban women who staff them than to address the most pressing concerns of the rural majority. Many Rwandan women's organizations, now as in the past, provide jobs and a platform for elite women. Historically, a woman's status derived from the status of her husband or brothers. Thus, some upper class women could still achieve public visibility and leadership. Today proximity to powerful men remains an important political asset for women who wish to exercise leadership.

The almost total dependence of women's organizations on international funding has obvious adverse consequences. International donors' tendency to shift their priorities year to year makes it difficult for women's organizations to undertake long-term plan-

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ning. Even when organizations carefully design a long-term initiative, they are under constant threat that it may abruptly close.

Clearly, these organizations serve as a training ground for women to acquire leadership skills and build networks that position them for participation in other activities in the public sphere. Yet the stated goals of most groups are to assist vulnerable women and promote their empowerment. It is worth noting, though, that a broad spectrum of Rwandan officials and repatriates involved in reconstruction indicate that these women's organizations are clearly meeting real, urgent needs. Criticism, when heard, tends to center on administrative shortcomings and accounting problems, on the heavy dependence of these groups on external aid, or on the seeming multiplication of (and possible competition among) national groups whose goals and projects sometimes appear to overlap.

The Role of International Assistance

USAID, together with the international community, has assisted women's organizations in postgenocide Rwanda in many ways. The most important has been the funding for projects—such as the Campaign for Peace. Several multilateral and bilateral donors have provided direct aid to the Ministry of Gender and Promotion of Women's Development for projects and capacity building. In 1999, an estimated 80 percent of the ministry's funding came from donor assistance.

Much of the aid the international community provided Rwanda after the war and genocide went directly to government ministries to assist in the reconstruction effort. Other funding came through international nongovernmental organizations that designed and implemented projects on their own or in partnership with Rwandan NGOs. Some donors have provided assistance to women's organizations, usually for specific projects.

International support for women's organizations has emphasized gender issues. This helps facilitate and validate the activities of those within the Rwandan government and in civil society who wish to expand opportunities for women's empowerment.

Poverty alleviation has been an important area of donor concern, and much of the project aid for reducing poverty has been directed toward women in organizations. The international community also provided assistance for the local elections held in Rwanda during the first part of 1999, including the introduction of the women's councils.

Lessons Learned

1. *Strategies must be developed for sustaining women's organizations in Rwanda.* Though some organizations have begun self-financing initiatives, few (if any) could survive on those alone. Thus, donor support is crucial. The external requirement of drafting project proposals and evaluating organization activities helps build capacity within these groups. Moreover, those within the Rwandan government and civil society who wish to expand opportunities for women's empowerment can benefit from the authority and experience of the international community.

2. *Government can play an important role in helping establish women's organizations.* USAID ordinarily expends more resources strengthening civil society than promoting government. But Rwanda's current government consists primarily of people who came of age in exile and who had no experience governing before 1994. Even so, that government's Ministry of Gender and Promotion of Women's Development took the bold step of putting a ministry representative in each prefecture and commune. Those officials in turn have worked with local government authorities to bring attention to women's concerns.

3. *The international community can help address property rights.* USAID has been a pioneer in pushing for property rights for women in postconflict societies. Its efforts in Rwanda now must go beyond constitutional and legislative reforms to concentrate on their implementation. It is also necessary to support initiatives designed to build public support for those rights and to resolve bureaucratic inertia and resistance.

Suggested Reading

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This Highlights, by Michael Hopps of Conwal Incorporated, summarizes the findings of Working Papers Nos. 303 and 304, "Aftermath: Women in Postgenocide Rwanda," and "Aftermath: Women's Organizations in Postconflict Rwanda," both by Catharine Newbury and Hannah Baldwin. To access this Highlights and other CDIE documents from the Internet, key in www.usaid.gov. Click on Publications/Partner Resources, then on USAID Evaluation Publications.
