

Aftermath: Women in Postgenocide Rwanda

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Preface

AS PART OF ITS ongoing studies on the rehabilitation and reconstruction of the societies ravaged by civil wars, USAID's Center for Development Information and Evaluation (CDIE) undertook a multicountry assessment of gender issues in postconflict societies. The assessment concentrated on three sets of questions:

- What has been the impact of intrastate conflicts on women? How did these conflicts affect their economic, social, and political roles and responsibilities? What are the major problems and challenges facing women in these societies?
- What types of women's organizations have emerged during the postconflict era to address the challenges women face and to promote gender equality? What types of activities do they undertake? What has been their overall impact on the empowerment of women? What factors affect their performance and impact?
- What has been the nature and emphasis of assistance provided by USAID and other donor agencies to women's organizations? What are some of the major problem areas in international assistance?

The purpose of the assessment was to generate a body of empirically grounded knowledge that could inform the policy and programmatic interventions of USAID and other international donor agencies.

CDIE sent research teams to Bosnia and Herzegovina, Cambodia, El Salvador, Georgia, Guatemala, and Rwanda. These teams conducted in-depth interviews with key informants, reviewed literature, and conducted fieldwork. They prepared comprehensive reports, which were reviewed by USAID and outside scholars.

This paper, written by Catharine Newbury and Hannah Baldwin, explains the impact of the genocide on women and gender relations in Rwanda. I am grateful to the authors for their insightful analysis.

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1. Introduction

This report forms part of USAID’s Center for Development Information and Evaluation (CDIE) multicountry evaluation of gender issues in postconflict societies. In particular, it focuses on a series of questions about the impact of the genocide in Rwanda on women—how the conflict affected their economic, social, and political roles and responsibilities; their response to the conflict; and the major problems and challenges they face today.

Field research for the report took place over four weeks in May and June 1999. A researcher with experience in gender and transition settings and a political scientist with 30 years of experience working on Rwandan issues conducted this research under the auspices of the Office of Transition Initiatives and CDIE as part of CDIE’s larger study of women in postconflict societies. Interviews were conducted with local government officials, association members, elected women leaders, project beneficiaries, local and international nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), donor agencies, and ministry officials. The team also collected documents, records, and other publications not available in Washington.

After a brief background on the country context and the nature and history of the genocide in Rwanda, the personal, social, and economic impact of the genocide on Rwandan women is discussed.

Country Context and the Nature Of the Conflict

Before 1994, few people outside the region knew much about Rwanda, a small, densely populated country in the center of Africa, where more than 7.5 million people inhabited a land area about the size of Vermont. Violent conflicts marked Rwanda’s transition from colonial rule to independence in the early 1960s, and continuing episodes of violence created a large refugee population in surrounding countries. The 1994 genocide led to the murder of more than 500,000 Rwandans, and the massive population movements that followed led to a humanitarian crisis. The crisis was met by an enormous international response, although many criticized that this assistance arrived after the bloodshed.¹

The conflagration had been incubating for four years, fueled by a severe economic crisis, stalled democratization initiatives, and ethnic polarization between Hutu and Tutsi, Rwanda’s two major ethnic groups.² Beginning in October 1990, members of the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) 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 30 years earlier, the RPF claimed it was fighting to ensure the right of return for all exiles and to install a more democratic regime in Rwanda. In early 1993, the RPF staged a vigorous offensive and occupied large portions of northern Rwanda. Almost a million people—primarily Hutu—fled from these areas to seek refuge in displaced persons’ settlements north of Kigali and elsewhere in the country.

The Rwandan government of President Juvénal Habyarimana, dominated by Hutu from the north of the country (the region most directly affected by the fighting), used the war to provoke fears that the RPF wished to reimpose the Tutsi monarchy overthrown in the decolonization struggles of 1959–61. By polarizing ethnicity and redefining the nature of political debate within the country, this political faction sought to undercut the growing opposition from internal political opponents (many of them Hutu from south and central Rwanda), who were demanding greater democratization. As part of this policy, the government arrested many Tutsi and moderate Hutu at the beginning of the war, fomented a series of pogroms against Tutsi in rural areas, and tried to instill ethnic hatred through the mass media.

The event that triggered the genocide in Rwanda was a plane crash on the night of 6 April 1994 that killed President Habyarimana, the president of Burundi, and several members of Habyarimana’s government. The plane was shot down as it prepared to land at the airport in Kigali. Although the perpetrators of the crash have never been established, various hypotheses have been put forward. Rwandan government and military leaders blamed the RPF, while international opinion has tended to accept the RPF view that extremists in Habyarimana’s own government eliminated him.

To avenge Habyarimana's death, extremists associated with his regime immediately began to exterminate the Tutsi minority in the country, as well as moderate Hutu. The Forces Armées Rwandaises (FAR), especially the Presidential Guard, carried out much of the killing, but civilian militias—recruited, armed, and trained by the political and military officials who planned the genocide—also took part. Over a period of 100 days, more than 500,000 Rwandans, most of them Tutsi, were massacred.

In July 1994, the genocide against the Tutsi ended when the RPF captured Kigali, defeated the FAR and the militias, and put in place a new government that established control over the country. Meanwhile, most of the ring-leaders and perpetrators of the genocide and many militia members fled Rwanda.³ Hundreds of thousands of Hutu who feared vengeance on the part of the RPF fled with them, as they were encouraged (or pressured) by their leaders to do. In the areas near Goma in North Kivu, Zaire, thousands of refugees died of cholera, malnutrition, and exhaustion before international aid could provide adequate food, water, and sanitary facilities.

Present Situation

The government that took power in July 1994 faced enormous challenges. Government coffers had been emptied, ministries had been sacked, and vehicles stolen or destroyed. The economy was at a standstill, and the country's human capital had been devastated. Many of Rwanda's surviving trained personnel had fled the country and feared returning. Survivors of the genocide were destitute and traumatized.

During the first two years after the genocide, 800,000 former Rwandan exiles, mostly Tutsi, returned to Rwanda from neighboring countries (Uganda, Burundi, Tanzania, and Zaire), and from Europe, North America, and elsewhere in Africa. Settling mainly in Rwanda's two main cities, Kigali and Butare, and in areas in the east (Kibungo, Byumba, and the new prefecture of

Umutara), these returnees frequently occupied houses left empty by owners who died or fled to other parts of Rwanda or to refugee camps in neighboring countries. Official policy calls for the return of houses and property to their owners. To implement such a policy, however, required that many houses be built to accommodate those who had none. Housing, then, has continued to be a major challenge for the postgenocide government in Rwanda.

Meanwhile, for more than two years after the genocide, close to 2 million refugees, mostly Hutu, who had fled during or after the genocide, remained in refugee camps in Zaire, Tanzania, and Burundi. In late October 1996, disappointed by the apparent unwillingness of the international community to disarm armed elements in the camps and stop the increasing number of attacks into Rwanda, the Rwanda Patriotic Army (RPA) moved to close the refugee camps in Zaire by force. In a joint operation with Zairean rebels opposed to the regime of President Mobutu Sese Seko in Zaire, the RPA attacked the camps in North and South Kivu, forcing the refugees to flee. Although most of these refugees returned to Rwanda, tens of thousands of others fled west into the Zairean interior, where many were killed by soldiers of the RPA and the Alliance des Forces Démocratiques Pour la Libération du Congo (the Zairean rebel alliance) or died from hunger, disease, or exposure.¹

During November and December 1996, close to half a million 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 in December 1996, and a wave of refugees returned to Rwanda from Tanzania as well. This massive influx of people placed an enormous strain on social services in Rwanda. By the end of the 1990s, postgenocide Rwanda contained a very heterogeneous mix of people, each with its own experiences of violence and sorrow, with all trying to rebuild their lives in a time of uncertainty and, for most, desperate poverty.

2. Genocide and Rwandan Women

Ntawe ugira ijambo yambaye injamba. (No one can speak publicly wearing torn clothes.)

—Rwandan proverb

In previous episodes of violence in Rwanda, men had been the main targets while women and children were usually spared.¹ Also, in the past, churches had been places of refuge for those threatened with violence. But in 1994, churches became chambers of death, and the perpetrators of the massacres targeted women and children as well as men. Tutsi women in general were at risk, 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. One of the first women killed in the massacre that began on 7 April 1994, for example, was Agathe Uwilingiyimana, a Hutu leader in the Mouvement Democratique Rwandais party and Rwanda's first woman prime minister.

Individual women were at risk simply because of their gender, while certain categories of women were targeted because of their actual or presumed membership in particular groups (as noted above).² All Tutsi women were targeted, simply because they were Tutsi, and large numbers were killed, often after having been subjected to sexual violence and torture. Educated, elite women were attacked by marauding militia gangs, regardless of their ethnicity. Some Hutu women were subjected to violence by RPF soldiers, in revenge for the violence perpetrated by Hutu men.³ Whether sexually violated or not, Rwandan women of all groups and social strata saw their lives, their families, and their tenuous hold on economic security disrupted by the conflicts.

Effects of the Conflict on Women

Almost every Rwandan woman has a dramatic story—of hunger and deprivation, fear, flight, and loss of family and friends. The ubiquity and the depth of suffering are striking, even five years after the war and genocide.

Destruction of Trust

The war and the genocide shattered the dense local friendship networks and community solidarity that had traditionally provided solace and support for women. Family members and friends were killed or fled, and neighbors and former friends sometimes turned into enemies. What was left was not only social dislocation, but also legacy of fear, insecurity, anger, and, for some, a desire for revenge. Under these conditions, social trust dissolved, and many women came to feel isolated, alone, and abandoned; they found it difficult to trust others beyond members of their immediate families.

Many women who survived the war and genocide experienced serious economic deprivation. Not surprisingly, female-headed households were vulnerable. This is a worldwide phenomenon, but in this case the “normal” net of social networks was also frayed and unstable. After the genocide, this vulnerability was particularly severe and affected a large proportion of Rwandan women. Many women were left completely destitute, without even a place to live. Extreme poverty made it difficult for women to care for children and other relatives who had survived, and legal constraints hampered

Voices of Rwandan Women

We have suffered (twarababaye). The men made war, and the women suffer.

We felt as if we had lost all, as if we had been stripped of our skin. People lacked food, clothing, housing.

The social fabric was ripped apart; indeed, the person herself had been torn apart.

efforts to obtain access to property and land belonging to their deceased husbands or other relatives.

War and genocide intensified lasting differences among women while creating new ones. The current government claims that ethnic distinctions are no longer meaningful and expresses a commitment to transcending them. Public discussion of ethnicity is discouraged. But in the years since the genocide, ethnic distinction and discrimination have hardly disappeared.

Tutsi women survivors often distrust or fear Hutu neighbors whom they suspect of involvement in the violence. Many other genocide survivors do not want to return to their previous residences because of bad memories and suspicions about former neighbors.

Many Hutu women in both rural and urban areas feel insecure under the postgenocide government because public discourse tends to label all Hutu as “génocidaires.” In particular, during 1997, women returnees from the refugee camps in Zaire or Tanzania found themselves not only economically destitute but also socially stigmatized as complicit in the genocide.¹ Another particularly vulnerable group are women whose husbands are in prison, accused of involvement in the genocide. In addition to caring for their children, these women are expected to provide food for their husbands in prison. They also are sometimes ostracized in the localities where they live.

Hutu and Tutsi women involved in mixed marriages bear a special burden. A Hutu widow whose Tutsi husband was killed in the genocide may find herself rejected by her in-laws and denied access to her husband’s land and property. Likewise, a Tutsi woman married to a Hutu man often encounters similar problems with her husband’s relatives. The daughters born of such mixed marriages also have difficulties.²

The experiences of women who grew up in Rwanda before and during the genocide differed from the tens of thousands of Rwandan women who returned from exile as adults. Often referred to as “59ers” (because they or their parents fled during the Rwandan revolution, which began in 1959), these returned exiles are not a homogeneous group. Exiles who lived in Uganda or Tanzania speak a different language (English) and have experienced a different social environment from those who lived in Burundi or the Congo, both Francophone countries.

And those who lived in the Congo grew up in a different political and social situation from those who were socialized in the polarized, ethnic atmosphere of Burundi. There are differences and sometimes tensions among these returnees from different places, as well as between them and Rwandan women survivors who lived in the country before the genocide.

Under these conditions, rebuilding social trust among women and in the broader society is no small challenge. Some women’s associations in Rwanda have taken steps to rebuild this trust, but much work remains to be done.

Sexual Violence and Social Stigma

An estimated 200,000 Rwandan women or more have been victims of some form of sexual violence during the genocide. All women were at risk, but the militias and soldiers carrying out the genocide meted out particularly brutal treatment on Tutsi women. As Human Rights Watch has documented in *Shattered Lives: Sexual Violence During the Rwandan Genocide and Its Aftermath*, sexual abuse was used as a weapon to humiliate Tutsi as a group by destroying their women.³ The survivors of this brutal treatment have been described as the “living dead.” Some were sexually mutilated. Others have had to deal with chronic pain, in addition to the risk of AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases and the fear of pregnancy. The psychological burdens are severe as well. The Interahamwe militia often sexually abused women in public, even before their own families. Some women were forced to serve as “sex slaves” for Hutu men.

The Stigma of Rape

A secondary school student, forced to be a sex slave of a Hutu militiaman for several weeks during the genocide, found it difficult to continue her studies after the conflict ended. A tall, beautiful woman, she formed a friendship with an RPF soldier, and they were engaged to be married. But a few days before the wedding, when she told her fiancé of her rape during the genocide and that one of her parents was Hutu, he called off the wedding and ended the relationship. She was devastated, pondering what kind of future she has.

Elite women, regardless of ethnicity, were at risk as the militias acted out class anger against the privileged. Some reports indicate that Hutu women were also targeted, first in northern areas of Rwanda controlled by the RPF and later during and after the genocide. “Hutu women were made to pay for what Hutu men had done.”⁴

In Rwanda, because the stigma of rape is enormous, women who have been violated often hesitate to talk about it. Psychological trauma is thus compounded by social isolation. As a Rwandan testifying at the Fourth International Conference of Women at Beijing explained:

Raped women are doubly punished by society. First, judicial practice does not grant them redress for rape as long as graphic evidence is not brought out into the open. Second, from society’s point of view there is little sympathy, for at the moment that men and children died without defense, these women used the sex card, “selling their bodies to save their lives.” Thus, they are judged from all sides, and even among their families they are not easily pardoned. Even worse, people reproach them for having preferred survival through rape.⁵

Women who have been raped in this fashion are victims of political struggles and war, yet they are denigrated by society. Their chances for marriage may be destroyed, and some have given birth to children who themselves are scorned. It is estimated that up to 5,000 children have been born as a result of rape during the genocide. Some women chose not to keep their babies born of rape. Many who decided to keep these children encountered resistance and reprobation from their families and the local community. The terms used to describe these offspring reflect such reprobation: children of bad memories, devil’s children, little Interahamwe.⁶

The incidence of sexual violence against women in Rwanda diminished after 1994, but patterns of violence continued. After the RPF victory, young Tutsi women survivors of the genocide were reportedly pressured at times to accept relationships with RPF soldiers, in recognition of the soldiers’ sacrifices during the war. Some Hutu women were beaten, raped, or otherwise humiliated by RPF soldiers. In some areas, Tutsi women who had survived the genocide were targeted in grisly attacks carried out by Zaire-based Interahamwe guerillas, who sought to eliminate witnesses.⁷ A recent report on the growing incidence of prostitution in Rwanda dur-

The Plight of Widows: Large Burdens, Limited Resources

A middle-aged widow lost her husband and her four youngest children in the genocide. She now lives in Kigali with her three remaining children and several orphans she has adopted. She loves children. Though caring for these orphans cannot replace the children she lost, she feels less sorrow. While having a salaried job, she is not secure. She fears a younger person with higher educational qualifications may replace her. Losing her job would make her situation much more difficult. With her modest income and help from a relative, she regularly provides meals daily to more than 15 people in her household.

ing the past five years mentions the particular vulnerability of women who experienced sexual violence. Apparently, local officials in the postgenocide government have pressured such women into sexual liaisons on the grounds that they were already social outcasts because of their experiences.⁸

Expanded Family Responsibilities

Tens of thousands of Rwandan children lost one or both parents during the war and the genocide. To care for these orphans, many women have taken in children other than their own—often, the children of relatives or friends, but also sometimes unknown children needing help. In addition to fostering orphans, many Rwandan women are caring for elderly or infirm relatives. And there is pressure on women of childbearing age to produce offspring to replace those lost during the war and the genocide.⁹ In the refugee camps, a pattern of child marriages developed, linking a young girl with a teenage boy or an older man. Such marriages were seldom durable; when they ended, the young wife found herself abandoned, with few prospects of finding another husband.¹⁰

Clearly, women have had to shoulder enormous burdens, particularly since, in addition to caring for the surviving members of their own nuclear families, many women are providing food, clothing, and school fees for orphaned children.

Although some women have the assistance of a male relative, many women in postconflict Rwanda do not. Widows of the genocide, women whose husbands are in prison, and teenage girls heading households are particularly vulnerable. In such conditions, women have had to assume responsibility for activities previously carried out by men or by a husband and wife together. Rural women have long participated actively in cultivating food and cash crops. But they normally relied on men to build and repair the house, track household finances, devise income-earning strategies, tend the banana grove, and care for cattle. Where men are absent in postconflict Rwanda, rural women have had to take over such activities. In urban areas, women find it particularly challenging to secure rights to housing, obtain resources for rent, and find employment or other income-earning activities. Before the war and genocide, women did not work as day laborers on construction sites; this has now become a common sight in Kigali.

New Political Roles and Responsibilities

For a long time, patriarchal attitudes and practices have permeated Rwandan politics and society.¹¹ It would be surprising if these had disappeared as a result of the genocide. Indeed, patriarchy is alive and well in postconflict Rwanda. In some ways, the war and genocide have reinforced the subordination of women by the emphasis placed on militarism and military values and by putting young women in competition with one another for a limited number of marriageable men.

There are, however, countervailing tendencies. At the national level and in local communities, individual women, women's associations, and mixed groups in which women play an important role have demonstrated admirable initiative in addressing the challenges of rebuilding their communities. Women taking leadership positions is not a new phenomenon; the women's movement in Rwanda dates back to the mid-1980s. But the activism of the Women's Ministry in the postgenocide government in promoting women's empowerment is a departure from the past. The number of women in high positions in the central government has increased but is still quite limited. At lower levels of state structures, women have increasingly been recruited for positions of responsibility. Women are especially visible in the non-governmental sector. Through their leadership in such associations, they have gained useful experience—so much so that many have subsequently been co-opted

into government structures. This may be a good thing for the bureaucracy, but it also tends to weaken the NGO sector.

Legislation to give women in Rwanda inheritance rights (to their fathers' and husbands' property) was spearheaded by women in the Ministry of Gender and in the NGO sector. This legislation, a much-needed response to the dire straits of women after the war and the genocide, has encountered repeated delays—an indication, it would appear, of the continuing strength of patriarchal constraints. As of June 1999, the reform was reaching the final stages of discussion in the Parliament and was expected to become law very soon.

In rural areas, some women have become assertive representatives for their communities, bringing concerns and demands to the attention of local authorities. Whether such increased participation will guarantee women better and more secure access to resources, such as land, is still an open question. Discussion and debate seem to be encouraged, yet there are certain policies in which women have had little input and that the government has already decided are not negotiable. In some cases, there has been a negotiation process led by the burgomaster, or *prefet*; in other cases, the government has taken a stronger role in bringing about change. An example of such an issue is “villagization”—the regrouping of scattered homesteads into dense village settlements. This policy is strongly advocated by Tutsi, especially Tutsi widows, but Hutu women are more likely to oppose it.

Woman-Headed Households

The number of woman-headed households increased dramatically because of the war and genocide. A demographic survey conducted by the government in 1996 estimated that 54 percent of the population was female and that 34 percent of households were headed by women.¹² The latter figure is significantly higher than the 25 percent of female-headed households before 1994. Yet 34 percent 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 the large numbers of refugees who returned in November and December 1996.

Of the 34 percent of households headed by women, many were headed by widows. Widows headed an average of 60 percent of the female-headed households, although

regional figures varied considerably. In 5 of Rwanda's 12 prefectures, the percentage of widows heading households was higher than 60 percent: Byumba (66.5 percent), Kibungo (65.7 percent), Butare (65 percent), Gisenyi (63.5 percent), Ruhengeri (62.9 percent) and Cyangugu (61 percent). The 1996 *Enquête Socio-Démographique* also confirmed that women who are separated, divorced, or widowed usually remain single, whereas men who are separated, divorced, or widowed tend to remarry. For example, in 1996, women constituted 85.5 percent of those separated or divorced, and 89 percent of widows/widowers. Most of these widows were over 30 years old.¹³

These figures show the importance of taking gender into account in efforts to reconstruct Rwanda after the genocide. The evidence on poverty serves to reinforce this point. In 1999, five years after the genocide, the World Bank estimated that 70 percent of the population in Rwanda was living below the poverty line.

Visits to rural communes provide graphic examples of what poverty means in terms of people's lives. First, housing remains a serious problem. An estimated 300,000 people, many of them women, still need housing.

Food is another problem. The poorest households in Rwanda experience regular food deficits. In 1995–96 the government estimated that 10 percent of households needed food aid on a permanent basis and an additional 2.2 percent needed food aid on a temporary basis. This means that 340,000 children were living in absolute poverty.¹⁴ Interestingly, the proportion of vulnerable households was almost the same as the percentage of women 20 and over found to be undernourished (13.8 percent).¹⁵

These statistics refer only to the most vulnerable households, which experience chronic food deficits. In the last half of 1996, 26 percent of households received food aid of some kind, and 30 percent were helped by food-for-work programs. But the problem goes beyond inadequate food. If, as the World Bank has estimated, 70 percent of Rwanda's households live below the poverty line, then even households that are able to meet their minimum food needs may not be able to obtain other basic necessities such as salt, soap, and decent clothes. Of course, health care and school fees are especially problematic.

Female-headed households are especially vulnerable to poverty, as are households headed by children, the elderly, and the disabled. The main reasons for such poverty are lack of access to land, lack of livestock, and lack of labor.

In 1994–95, a government study estimated that 35 percent of rural households had only half a hectare of land or less. The land occupied by these households was only 6.8 percent of Rwanda's total arable land. By contrast, even though only 6.6 percent of Rwandan households held three hectares or more of land, those households occupied 27.8 percent of the total arable land.¹⁶ While these figures applied to conditions before the genocide, the situation probably has worsened since then, with newcomers reclaiming land and members of the political elite (often backed by the army in various subtle ways) reportedly taking over large tracts in the east to be used for cattle ranches.

Widows and other women without partners often do not have adequate access to land. In customary legal practices in Rwanda, girls usually did not inherit land from their fathers; when a woman married, her husband was expected to provide her with land to cultivate to meet the needs of her husband, their children, and herself. When a husband died, his widow was supposed to be allowed to remain on the husband's land, holding it in trust for her male children; levirate marriage (a brother of the deceased husband marrying the widow) was sometimes practiced. If there were no children, a widow's staying on her husband's land depended on the goodwill of her late husband's kin or on whether she would have a house and land if she were to return to her own family.

In recent decades, the growing monetization of agriculture and increased population pressure have eroded widows' land-use rights. Clearly, the tenuous position of women without husbands in rural Rwanda is not new. But because of the large number of widows and other single women after the war and genocide, this problem is more serious now. It is perhaps not a coincidence that the estimated percentage of female-headed households in 1996 (34.1 percent) was almost the same as the percentage of rural households which (in 1994–95) had only half a hectare or less of land (34 percent). A 1997 UNICEF study noted difficulties widows were encountering with regard to land, citing "anecdotal evidence that women who have been widowed are being refused access to the land that they worked prior to 1994."¹⁷

Upon returning from refugee camps in Congo in 1996, some widows were denied access to their husbands' land. This problem was exacerbated in some cases because the marriage had not been registered at the commune—either because the marriage had occurred in the refugee camp (so there was no record of it in Rwanda) or because, although married before fleeing to the Congo, the couple had not registered their marriage. One sign of severe rural impoverishment during the late 1980s and early 1990s was the large number of common law unions that had not been “legally” registered. Young men lacked the wherewithal to pay the bride price and other costs associated with formal registration of their marriages.

The UNICEF study observed that “households that have one economically active member are more likely to be classified as poor.”¹⁸ Since women head the majority of households headed by a single person, this burden falls particularly heavily on them. It is difficult for a woman to grow sufficient food for her family as well as do all her other chores unassisted. If the woman has inadequate land (one fourth of a hectare or less), the way to make up for food deficits is to work for cash, often as an occasional agricultural laborer. This, too, is difficult for a woman heading a household with small children, yet the number of women working as day laborers has grown in the postgenocide era.

Widows and other women living alone lack both resources and time, and they seldom have the means to hire others. As already noted, economic difficulties are compounded because many women, both Hutu and Tutsi, are supporting not only their own children but also orphans. Family structures are thus quite dynamic; the burdens of caring for orphans strains household resources. For many such children, this situation undoubtedly plants the seeds of future problems related to education, marriage, and inheritance.

A rural woman who is supporting her children alone and who turns to wage labor finds her opportunities are limited. Moreover, in some areas, wages have remained stagnant, even while food prices have increased.¹⁹ Purchasing food is a necessary but risky strategy, and this is a serious issue for long-term self-sufficiency. Mothers experiencing such poverty are unable to ensure the basic needs of their children:

Without sufficient land, rural mothers heading a household with small children (i.e.,

she [sic] is the only member of the household that is old enough to be economically active) could not hope to provide the basics for the children, even if she [sic] finds alternative agricultural income-generating opportunities.²⁰

Without a house, food to eat, a goat, and decent clothes to wear, women find it difficult to participate actively in the public arena. Clothes in particular are seen as important in Rwandan culture, as reflected in the Rwandan proverb: “No one can speak publicly wearing torn clothes.” Still, attaining this basic minimum is necessary but not sufficient.

Women whose husbands are in prison face particular problems. Although not technically widows, these women may lack housing. Like widows, they do not have access to sufficient labor to ensure adequate food and other necessities (let alone school fees and health care) for themselves and their children. Regular trips to take food to a central prison or communal lock-up sap both their time and resources. The wives of men in prison are socially stigmatized and, at times, ostracized because of their relationships to those suspected of participation in the genocide.

Women in Rwanda have always worked. Rural women remain the mainstay of food production and play a critical role in the production of cash crops such as coffee. Urban educated women have salaried jobs outside the home, and non-elite women have performed other income-earning roles. But because of their second-class status and a variety of legal constraints in both customary law and the written legal code, few women have had much experience in state-level interactions: dealing with political authorities, taxes, banks, and large-scale commercial activities. Such concerns were normally left to men who paid the taxes. Consequently, many widows were ill prepared to assume responsibilities that previously had been their spouses'.

Gender Issues and Challenges

A growing number of Rwandan women's associations, with encouragement from the Ministry of Gender and Development, international NGOs, and bilateral and multilateral donors, have attempted to bring women's voices into current discussions about important issues—such as the efforts to revise legal texts regulating succession and inherit-

ance, which are designed to guarantee women the right to inherit a share of their fathers' and husbands' property. New local government structures introduced in March and April 1999 provide for broad representation of women at the grass-roots level. And while women are still only weakly represented in national decision-making organs, some progress is being made in this area as well.

As the reconstruction process continues, Rwanda is moving into a phase at which considerations of "development" will receive increased attention. In the view of many international donors, the "emergency" phase is now over; it is time to move into longer term planning. This is true for some areas of the country and some strata of the population. But there remain many people and places in the country where targeted assistance to the most vulnerable is still necessary. This makes it imperative that policies and programs designed to help those in need be flexible, with the capacity to adapt to the realities of diverse local contexts. It is essential that gender be taken into account in such efforts, and it is important that women be directly involved in the formulation and implementation of policies that affect them. In this regard, significant challenges lie ahead.

Three issues in particular will require attention from the government of Rwanda, international donor agencies, and women's organizations: poverty, education and literacy, and discrimination.

Prevalence of Poverty

In 2000, six years after the war and genocide, the extent of poverty in Rwanda is still severe. Although some areas have improved, pockets of poverty continue in many areas. This poverty is based on the inability of individuals to market their agricultural products despite increased production of and access to food. This is a structural problem, which makes it particularly difficult to remedy.

Measures being taken to address poverty are inadequate. Urgent attention is needed to confront the root causes of poverty and to ensure that the most vulnerable elements of the population, particularly women, receive the assistance they need to become self-sustaining. To ignore the socioeconomic plight of women is to neglect not only women, but also their children. Such neglect has implications on efforts to alleviate social tensions and promote reconciliation.

A recent Ministry of Health study on the growing prevalence of prostitution in Rwanda illustrates some of the problems. The report notes an alarming growth of prostitution of not only women in their 20s and 30s, but also of teenagers and older women. Although prostitution was once rare and found primarily in the capital and in major towns, it has now become common in some rural areas as well. The first obvious change is in scale. There also has been a change of social mores—not viewed in a moral sense, but as a social indicator. Women interviewed for the study cited economic need as the major reason they engaged in the sex trade. Although fully aware of the risks of HIV infection, these prostitutes could envisage no other way of earning enough to stay alive.

The economic plight of prostitutes points to the need to combat poverty and provide land, training, jobs, and moral support to women who lack such assistance. One way to do this would be to expand programs that provide vocational training to women in need.

Education and Literacy

Formal education in postconflict Rwanda is sorely lacking. The Rwandan government, international NGOs, and various Rwandan NGOs have undertaken rehabilitation of school buildings that were looted or destroyed during the genocide and war. Despite valiant efforts by the government, education is still seriously underfunded. Moreover, schools are hampered by a shortage of qualified teachers and teaching materials. Large class size also makes it difficult for teachers to teach well. Tuition for primary school appears modest, but other expenses associated with school attendance, such as materials and a new school uniform every second year, are a significant burden. These expenses, together with a variety of other factors (poor nutrition of many students, lack of adequate lighting for studying in the evening, and the need for help from children in household and agricultural work), contribute to poor performance and a high dropout rate. Moreover, not all school-age children begin school. Of those who enter first grade, only 36 percent continue through sixth grade. At all levels, a disproportionate number of girls drop out.

The high dropout rate of girls in secondary school is also a concern. Sending a child to secondary school is even more difficult. Of primary school students who took the final year exam in 1995–96, only 16 percent qualified for admittance to a state or state-subsidized school.

Another 10 percent were able to attend private secondary schools, at great cost to their families.

The illiteracy rate has grown since the early 1990s and appears headed even higher, in part because of the disruption of the educational system by the war and genocide. In 1996 the illiteracy rate among people ages 10 and older was estimated to be 60 percent. Of those who were illiterate, 57.2 percent were women. There is significant interest in adult literacy programs. Although such programs existed in the 1980s and early 1990s, they never received adequate funding, and there was little postliteracy follow-up. Funding remains a major constraint. Women would like to have more opportunities to learn to read. The main obstacle, especially for those in the most vulnerable households, is lack of time.

Many young women saw their education interrupted by the war and genocide. Those who had reached secondary school in particular are positioned to benefit enormously from an opportunity to continue their studies. Adult education programs enabling these women to study would build on the education they have already acquired and provide them the skills they so desperately need.

Challenge of Promoting Gender Equality

Passage of the law on inheritance and then careful attention to implementation of this measure to ensure women's rights to inherit land and property are essential. The government's villagization policies and plans to introduce land reform could have enormous consequences for women. It will be difficult to protect women's rights as these changes

move forward, because the constraints are not only legal and technical, but also political.

Conclusion

Socially, politically, and economically, the situation of Rwandans in general and women in particular after the genocide and war was catastrophic. Unlike a natural calamity after which members of a community often join together to comfort each other, the genocide in Rwanda, which aimed to divide and polarize the society, shattered trust and left a legacy of fear and hatred. The widespread death and destruction associated with the genocide and war deprived women and men of the networks of social support on which they had relied in the past.

It is a tribute to the resilience of Rwandans that, despite these stark realities, significant steps have been taken to rebuild the physical infrastructure and reconstruct the country's tattered social fabric in the years since 1994. Despite experiencing trauma, women have found creative ways to confront the challenges of postgenocide Rwanda. To support themselves and their children, they have taken advantage of the openings created by crisis conditions, adopting new roles and reconfiguring older ones. Women help build houses (in the past, climbing on a ladder was considered inappropriate for women), work at construction sites for city buildings, and trade food and other goods in rural and urban markets and shops. Rwandan women are playing an important role in rebuilding their communities as individuals and as members of a broad spectrum of associations at the local and national levels.



Endnotes

- ¹ For general accounts of the genocide and the events that led up to it, see Alison Des Forges, *Leave None to Tell the Story: Genocide in Rwanda* (Human Rights Watch & International Federation of Human Rights, 1999); *Issue: A Journal of Opinion*, special issue on the Rwanda genocide, 23, 2 (1995); Catharine Newbury and David Newbury, "A Catholic Mass in Kigali: Contested Views of the Genocide and Ethnicity in Rwanda," *Canadian Journal of African Studies* (in press); David Newbury, "Understanding Genocide," *African Studies Review* 41, 1 (April 1998); David Newbury, "Ecology and the Politics of Genocide," *Cultural Survival Quarterly* (Winter 1999), pp. 32–35; Gérard Prunier, *The Rwanda Crisis: History of a Genocide* (Columbia University Press, 2nd edition, 1997); Filip Reyntjens; *L'Afrique des Grands Lacs en Crise. Rwanda, Burundi 1988–94* (Karthala, 1994); Filip Reyntjens, *Trois jours qui ont fait basculer l'Histoire* (l'Harmattan, 1995); Jean-Claude Willame, *Aux sources de l'hécatombe rwandaise* (l'Harmattan, 1995); *Joint Evaluation of Emergency Assistance to Rwanda, The International Response to Conflict and Genocide: Lessons from the Rwanda Experience*, 4 vols. (Steering Committee of the Joint Evaluation of Emergency Assistance to Rwanda, 1996).
- ² The early European missionaries and colonial administrators who came to Rwanda found that in addition to family, lineage, and clan ties Rwandans recognized social distinctions among three social categories—Hutu, Tutsi, and Twa.

In general, Tutsi enjoyed the highest social status, Hutu (85 percent of the population) were of lower status than Tutsi, and Twa (less than 1 percent of the population) occupied the bottom stratum. Although both Tutsi and Hutu kept cattle, Tutsi tended to own larger herds, and whereas most Hutu engaged in cultivation, not all Tutsi did. Twa often had roles as court jesters or police at the royal court, or as potters or hunter-gatherers in rural areas. Hutu, Tutsi, and Twa lived interspersed throughout the country, although the concentration of Tutsi tended to be higher in areas with good pasturage. Despite such social and political distinctions, Rwandans share a common language (Kinyarwanda), a common culture, and a common set of beliefs associated with their indigenous religion. In 1990, Tutsi were about 14 percent of the population, Hutu 85 percent, and Twa less than 1 percent. These were not corporate groups, however, and the importance of “ethnicity” in Rwanda has varied over time depending on political power relationships.

- ³ Their exit was facilitated by the French, who had occupied a large portion of western Rwanda in a military operation that was supposed to save Tutsi lives. This Opération Turquoise saved some lives but also made it possible for the perpetrators of the genocide to flee.
- ⁴ See F. Reyntjens, *La Guerre des Grands Lacs: Alliances mouvantes et conflits extraterritoriaux en Afrique centrale* (l’Harmattan, 1999).
- ⁵ The attacks against Tutsi civilians in Rwanda in early 1964 were a major exception; at that time, political authorities of the First Republic encouraged or condoned massacres of men, women, and children as a form of vengeance against Tutsi exiles who had carried out guerilla incursions into Rwanda, almost reaching the capital in December 1963. In the first half of 1973, Tutsi in Rwanda were again targets of ethnic violence, amid political crisis in Rwanda and a spillover of tensions from Burundi, where the Tutsi-dominated government had carried out selective genocide against tens of thousands of Hutu in 1972. Extremists stirring up ethnic violence in Rwanda laid the groundwork for Juvénal Habyarimana to seize power in a coup d’état in July 1973.
- ⁶ During the genocide, the militias, composed almost entirely of Hutu men and youth, committed some of the worst atrocities, treating their victims with unimaginable cruelty. Soldiers in the ex-FAR and particularly the Presidential Guard also committed violence against women. Some women managed to survive by playing dead, hiding, or running away—but often they escaped only after having been raped repeatedly and abused in other ways. Some Tutsi women were compelled by their captors to live as “sex slaves” for weeks or months. See Human Rights Watch, *Shattered Lives* (1996). Additional analysis on the effects of sexual violence on women during and after the genocide is found in Clotilde Twagiramariya and Meredith Turshen, “‘Favours’ to Give and ‘Consenting’ Victims: The Sexual Politics of Survival in Rwanda,” in Meredith Turshen and Clotilde Twagiramariya, eds., *What Women Do in Wartime: Gender and Conflict in Africa* (Zed Books, 1998).
- ⁷ Twagiramariya and Turshen, “‘Favours’ to Give and ‘Consenting’ Victims.”
- ⁸ Women’s Commission for Refugee Women and Children, “Rwanda’s Women and Children: The Long Road to Reconciliation” (field report, 1997).
- ⁹ One woman the authors met in the course of fieldwork explained that her husband, a Hutu, had been in prison for more than two years, accused of genocide. She insisted he was innocent and regularly took food to the prison for him. But she was having difficulties with her husband’s family, who did not trust her. She herself is the daughter of a mixed marriage; because her father (who was killed in the genocide) was Tutsi, she is viewed as a Tutsi. She feels caught in the middle, in a liminal status without a firm social base.
- ¹⁰ Human Rights Watch, *Shattered Lives: Sexual Violence during the Rwandan Genocide and Its Aftermath* (1996).
- ¹¹ Twagiramariya and Turshen, “‘Favours’ to Give and ‘Consenting’ Victims,” p. 103.
- ¹² F.U. Layika, “War Crimes against Women in Rwanda,” in N. Reilly, ed., *Without Reservation: The Beijing Tribunal on Accountability for Women’s Human Rights* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Center for Women’s Global Leadership), p. 40, cited in Twagiramariya and Turshen, “‘Favours’ to Give and ‘Consenting’ Victims,” p. 110.
- ¹³ Twagiramariya and Turshen, “‘Favours’ to Give and ‘Consenting’ Victims,” p. 104.
- ¹⁴ For examples of such incidents, see Twagiramariya and Turshen, “‘Favours’ to Give and ‘Consenting’ Victims,” pp. 105–107.
- ¹⁵ Rwanda Republic, Ministry of Health, “Etude sur la Prostitution et le Sida. Rapport Provisoire.” (September 1998).
- ¹⁶ Twagiramariya and Turshen, “‘Favours’ to Give and ‘Consenting’ Victims”; D. Newbury, “Understanding Genocide.”

- ¹⁷ Johan de Smedt, "Child Marriages in Rwandan Refugee Camps," *Africa* 68, 2 (1998): 211–237.
- ¹⁸ See, for example, Villia Jefremovas, "Loose Women, Virtuous Wives, and Timid Virgins: Gender and the Control of Resources in Rwanda," *Canadian Journal of African Studies* 25, 3 (1991), 378–395.
- ¹⁹ République du Rwanda, Ministère des Finances et de la Planification Economique, Direction de la Statistique, "Enquête Socio-Démographique 1996, Rapport Final (Abrégé)" (11 juillet 1998), pp. 6, 28–29. This report found the largest proportion of female-headed households in Butare (43 percent) and Kibungo (40.1 percent) and the lowest in Ruhengeri and Gikongoro (28 percent and 28.7 percent, respectively). Note that in 1995, as the country began to rebuild, it was estimated that 70 percent of the population was female and that 60 percent of households were headed by women.
- ²⁰ Enquête Socio-Démographique 1996, Rapport Final (Abrégé), pp. 8, 29–30.
- ²¹ République du Rwanda, MINAGRI/FAO/PAM, "Etude d'Identification des Groupes Vulnérables au Rwanda, 1995–1996," cited in François de Keersmaeker and Gerard Peart, *Children and Women of Rwanda: A Situation Analysis of Social Sectors* (UNICEF 1997), p. 51. The proportion of households identified as vulnerable was 15 percent in 1994–95. After 1996, with the return of hundreds of thousands of refugees from Congo and Tanzania, the proportion of households with food deficits probably increased significantly. De Keersmaeker and Peart point out that in 1994 food crop production had declined by 525 tons from its earlier level of 1,325 tons; the available calories were only a little more than one third of what was needed to meet minimum caloric requirements of the population.
- ²² Such aggregate statistics, however, tend to mask important regional variations and differences among households within a given area. For example, in two prefectures, the percentage of undernourished women was more than 50 percent higher than the national average: Kibungo (23.3 percent) and Umutara (21 percent). De Keersmaeker and Peart, *Children and Women of Rwanda*, p. 48. (Unless otherwise noted, these and subsequent statistics cited on poverty and rural inequality are from the De Keersmaeker and Peart study). The size of the food shortages faced by very poor households also varied significantly within a given prefecture. For example, in Butare the size of the food deficit for those who stayed through all of 1994 was 10–20 percent, but for those who had returned to the prefecture in March 1997 or after, the amount of the food deficit was 60–70 percent. Kibungo provides another example. Prefectoral figures on food production show a surplus. But for households with only one active person working, and one fourth of a hectare or less of land, the annual food deficit in 1997 was 30–40 percent. Save the Children Fund (United Kingdom), "Household Food Economy Analysis. Gikongoro and Butare, Rwanda, July–December 1997"; and idem., "Household Food Economy Analysis. Central Kibungo, Rwanda, July–December 1997," cited in de Keersmaeker and Peart, *Children and Women of Rwanda*, p. 54.
- ²³ MINAGRI/FAO/PAM, "Etude d'Identification des Groupes Vulnérables," (1995), cited in de Keersmaeker and Peart, *Children and Women of Rwanda*, p. 53. On the problem of inequality in landholdings in Rwanda, see also Catherine André and Phillip Platteau, "Land Under Unbearable Stress: Rwanda Caught in the Malthusian Trap," *Journal of Economic Behavior and Organization* 34 (1998), 1–47; David Newbury, "Ecology and the Politics of Genocide."
- ²⁴ De Keersmaeker and Peart, *Children and Women of Rwanda*.
- ²⁵ De Keersmaeker and Peart, *Children and Women of Rwanda*, p. 54.
- ²⁶ Save the Children Fund (United Kingdom), "Household Food Economy Analysis, Gikongoro and Butare Prefectures High Population Density Area and Western Highland Area (May 1998).
- ²⁷ Keersmaeker and Peart, *Children and Women of Rwanda*, p. 56. In addition to inadequate land, livestock, and labor, rural productivity in Rwanda is also limited by insufficient access to improved seeds and other inputs, by lack of credit, by the rudimentary nature of their tools, and by an inadequate system of agricultural extension that does little to meet the needs of most rural producers. The collapse of coffee prices (Rwanda's major export) in the late 1980s further undermined rural incomes (p. 53).