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OPINION**Rwanda's Women Are Leading the Way**

By **CINDY MCCAIN**
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I have recently returned from Rwanda. I was last there in 1994, at the height of the genocide that claimed the lives of more than 800,000 Rwandans. The memories of what I saw haunt me still.

I wasn't sure what to expect all these years later, but I found a country that has found in its deep scars the will to move on and rebuild a civil society. And the renaissance is being led by women.

Women are at the forefront of the physical, emotional and spiritual healing that is moving Rwandan society forward. One of them, from eastern Rwanda, told me her story -- a violent, tragic and heartbreaking testimony of courage. She spoke of surviving multiple gang rapes, running at night in fear of losing her life, going days without food or water and witnessing the death of her entire family -- one person at a time, before her eyes.

The injuries she sustained left her unable to bear children. Illness, isolation and an utter lack of hope left her in abject despair.

And yet the day I met her, she wasn't consumed by hatred or resentment. She sat, talking with me and a few others, beside a man who had killed people guilty of nothing more than seeking shelter in a church. She forgave him. She forgave the perpetrators of her tragedy, and she explained her story with hope that such cruelty would never be repeated.


It is a humbling experience to be in the presence of those who have such a capacity for forgiveness and care. It is also instructive. If wealthy nations want their assistance programs to be effective, they should look to the women who form the backbone of every society. With some education, training, basic rights and empowerment, women will transform a society -- and the world.

Women today make up a disproportionate percentage of the Rwandan population. In the aftermath of the genocide, they had to head households bereft of fathers. They had to take over farms, and take jobs previously done by men. But there were opportunities, too: Today, 41% of Rwandan businesses are owned by women.

I saw their impact first hand at a coffee project in the city of Nyandungu. All the washing and coffee-bean selection is done by hand, by women there. [Women for Women International](#)¹, a remarkably active and innovative nongovernmental organization, has already helped over 15,000 Rwandan women through a year-long program of direct aid, job-skills training and education.

The organization is launching a project to train 3,000 women in organic agriculture, and is reaching out to females across the country. The women who instruct their fellow war survivors in economic development

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are an inspiration to those who cherish the essential benevolence of humanity.

But that is just the beginning. A new constitution ratified in 2003 required that women occupy at least 30% of the seats in parliament. (In our House and Senate only about 17% of the seats are filled by women.) Some wondered at the time whether it was feasible to meet this target. Now, nearly half of parliament and a third of the president's cabinet posts are held by women. Rwanda today has the world's highest percentage of female legislators.

Rwanda has a dark past but a bright future. It has a long way to go -- the country remains one of the world's poorest, and the social reverberations of the genocide are evident everywhere. Yet in the midst of tragedy, the women are building something genuinely new. Perhaps it is fitting that a nation so wracked by death could give birth to a vibrant new age. I know that one thing is clear: Through their bold and courageous actions, these women should inspire not only their fellow Africans, but all individuals -- men and women -- across the globe.

Mrs. McCain, the wife of Sen. John McCain and mother of four, founded the American Voluntary Medical Team, which helps bring doctors to war-torn countries.

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