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## Women Run the Show In a Recovering Rwanda

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KIGALI, Rwanda -- On a continent that has been dominated by the rule of men, this tiny East African nation is trying something new.

Here, women are not only driving the economy -- working on construction sites, in factories and as truck and taxi drivers -- they are also filling the ranks of government.

Women hold a third of all cabinet positions, including foreign minister, education minister, Supreme Court chief and police commissioner general. And Rwanda's parliament last month became the first in the world where women claim the majority -- 56 percent, including the speaker's chair.

One result is that Rwanda has banished archaic patriarchal laws that are still enforced in many African societies, such as those that prevent women from inheriting land. The legislature has passed bills aimed at ending domestic violence and child abuse, while a committee is now combing through the legal code to purge it of discriminatory laws.

One lawmaker said the committee has compiled "a stack" of laws to modify or toss out altogether -- including one that requires a woman to get her husband's signature on a bank loan.

"The fact that we are so many has made it possible for men to listen to our views," said lawmaker Espérance Mwiza. "Now that we're a majority, we can do even more."

The unusually high percentage of women in Rwandan government is in part a reflection of popular will in a country of 10 million that is 55 percent female.

But it also reflects the heavy hand of one man, President [Paul Kagame](#), whose photo hangs on the walls of houses, restaurants and shops. It also hovered over the swiveling leather chair of parliament speaker Rose Mukantabana as she opened a session late last week.

Since the 1994 genocide, in which more than 800,000 ethnic Tutsis and moderate Hutus were killed in 100 days of highly organized violence that included the systematic rape of Tutsi women, Kagame, a Tutsi, has enforced a kind of zealous social engineering.

With a population that was about 70 percent female after the genocide, Kagame's new government adopted ambitious policies to help women economically and politically, including a new constitution in 2003 requiring that at least 30 percent of all parliamentary and cabinet seats go to women. The remaining 26 percent of the women in parliament were indirectly elected.

"This was a broken society after the genocide," said Aloisea Inyumba, Kagame's former gender and social affairs minister, who was also a prominent official in his ruling Rwandan Patriotic Front when it was still a

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rebel group fighting the country's genocidal government. "We made a decision that if Rwanda is going to survive, we have to have a change of heart as a society. Equality and reconciliation are the only options."

While many African legislatures have adopted quotas reserving seats for female lawmakers, none has done so as ambitiously as Rwanda. The country's overall attitude toward gender puts it at odds with its neighbors.

Just next door, an epidemic of sexual violence has ravaged eastern Congo, where law and order have almost completely broken down. In the run-up to Kenyan elections last year, several female candidates were beaten and threatened with sexual violence. One was murdered. Out of the legislature's 222 lawmakers, 21 are women.

In this hilly and green capital city, meanwhile, women successfully lobbied for the removal of a statue in a central roundabout that depicted a woman holding a jug of water on her head and a baby on her hip.

In its place came a more neutral one: a smiling woman free of the jug, holding the hand of a little boy walking alongside her.

Not far away is the parliament building, where rows of women took their seats last Thursday, and listened to the finance minister present the midterm national budget.

Afterward came questions from women such as Bernadette Kanzayire, who was a practicing lawyer before she became a politician, or Suzanne Mukayjore, who once worked in banking. And then there was Ignacienne Nyirarukundo, who went to work for Rwanda's national reconciliation commission after surviving the genocide. She then worked on children's welfare issues, and decided to run for office this year, campaigning on a platform of eradicating poverty through reduced birth rates.

"I felt I could do better helping to build my country in parliament," said Nyirarukundo, 39.

Other female lawmakers are Hutu or Tutsi, genocide survivors or former refugees who grew up in Uganda, Burundi or Tanzania. They come from different parties, though opposition to Kagame is not exactly vigorous.

In the recent parliament session, lawmakers asked the finance minister about the impact of the global financial crisis on Rwanda's budget, the gap between exports and imports and the soundness of Rwanda's booming mortgage market. Just one question -- about funding for maternal and child health -- was gender-specific.

Sitting in her office later, Kanzayire spoke diplomatically about "working with men" and seemed sensitive to the joke going around that soon, Rwanda will need affirmative action for men.

Though profound tensions and scars from the genocide still exist here, so does a strong sense of national purpose tinged with unapologetic political correctness.

It is taboo to speak of Hutus or Tutsis these days; everyone is Rwandan. The last Saturday of every month is community work day, when neighbors gather for six hours to help with a collective project -- clearing brush, or repairing a less-fortunate neighbor's house.

"We are doing this for ourselves -- not because it's a law," said Beatrice Namyonga, who was clearing weeds with her neighbors.

When it comes to the role of women, a similar attitude prevails.

In general, men here seem to have accepted and even embraced the policy of promoting women in government, even if their endorsement at times carries a dutiful tone.

"It was the government's aim to promote women, and the biggest proportion of Rwandans are women," said Jean Muhikira, 49, a driver who said he notices many more women in his line of work these days. "Women can contribute a lot in ideas."

In some quarters of Rwandan society -- particularly among older men and Hutu men who harbor some mistrust of Kagame's government -- the policy is viewed with faint suspicion.

"Maybe now that women have more than 50 percent in parliament, it could be a big problem," said Thomas Habumuisha, 29, who was out shopping with a friend on Saturday. "Maybe women could take advantage and oppress men."

His friend, Muhire Bitorwa, whose wife, a teacher, is helping pay his way through Kigali University, nodded politely, but disagreed.

"In my view, women are more reasonable, more merciful and less corrupt than men," he offered. "And culturally, women have not been recognized."

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