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A Survivor of Rwanda's Horrors Writes Hope Into Law

By Nora Boustany
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She was born a Rwandan refugee in Uganda, where her parents herded cattle. A bright and determined student, she went to class under a tree using a borrowed identity, was smuggled across borders to continue her schooling, graduated from Uganda's Makerere University and studied law on a scholarship in Australia.

But inevitably, she returned to Rwanda to work. She was there in 1994 when the genocide broke out. An estimated 800,000 people were slaughtered in 100 days -- mostly members of the Tutsi tribe -- including her father, her first husband and seven of her eight brothers and sisters. Her mother died while in hiding.

Now 42, *Justine Mbabazi* has become one of the new female leaders in her homeland: a lawyer who drafted Rwanda's first legislation against gender-based violence, country director of the American Bar Association, and former executive director of a legal network that brought the rights of women to the forefront of national politics and played a critical role in the debate over a new constitution.

"My story is just a tiny dot compared to what others suffered in Rwanda," said Mbabazi, who just finished attending a colloquium in Boston and Washington with 25 other women who have survived bullets, ethnic cleansing, political isolation and social discrimination in such countries as Iraq, Afghanistan, Sudan, Colombia, Bosnia, Somalia and Kyrgyzstan.

The event was organized by the Initiative for Inclusive Security, chaired by *Swanee Hunt*, a former U.S. ambassador to Austria. The women met with officials from U.S. government agencies, the United Nations, world financial institutions, and relief and security organizations.

"The issues I am dealing with are big," Mbabazi said. "Justice and reconciliation. I feel I have to push until there is a legal framework to prevent it from happening again. I know I am the voice of a big congregation of women, not only in Rwanda. All over the world there are women who are ashamed and frustrated that rape is still being used as a weapon of hate and revenge."

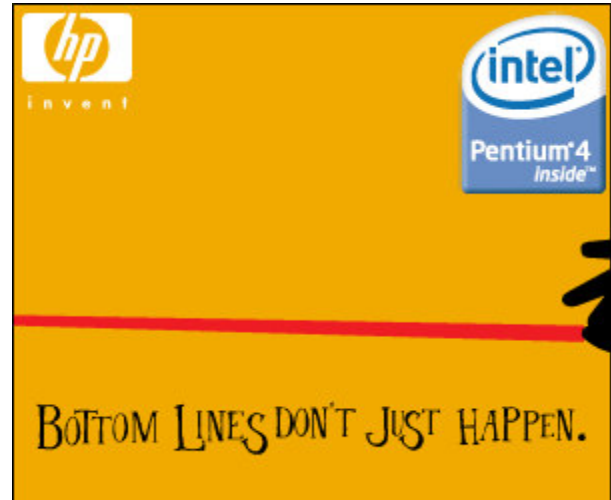
Mbabazi's odyssey has been extraordinary by any measure.

When she was 11, she asked her father what Rwanda looked like. Tearfully, he answered, "It looks like you." Soon after that, she left her family and safe haven in Uganda and returned to Rwanda to get a better education. She was smuggled across Tanzania by traders, went to live with an aunt and obtained Hutu documents to attend school.

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"To survive I had to change identities, and I felt growing up that it was unjust," she said.

As a driven young adult, Mbabazi kept moving, though she also married and began raising a family. She joined Norwegian relief organizations and lived in Norway, but her work took her to Burundi, Ethiopia and back to Rwanda.

After a crisis in Uganda put pressure on Rwandan refugees, her family decided to return home in 1979. Mbabazi visited them from time to time. In 1990, seven months pregnant, she was briefly imprisoned as a suspected Tutsi spy.

Four years later, while she was working in the Rwandan town of Kigali, the genocide erupted. With thousands of fellow Tutsis being slaughtered, she tried to bribe her way into the Hotel de Mille Collines -- the safe haven depicted in the film "Hotel Rwanda" -- but was unable to reach it. To escape from Hutu security men, she hid with her children in a cave.

"Nights gave me a bit of relief. I was scared to see the sun rise merely because I was afraid of being killed," she wrote in a slim memoir titled "A Journey to Remember."

In the aftermath of the bloodbath, she took several orphans under her wing and took them out begging for food.

"What let me think there was hope was to see women pick up children from garbage cans and roundabouts, calling them their own, though they themselves were traumatized and hungry," Mbabazi said.

"I had found the country that looked like me," she said. "Without a husband, I was raising an angry brood of children who came home with horror stories from school every day."

In 1997, she left for Canada and applied for asylum to lead a more tranquil life. She worked as an immigration officer, helping displaced Africans, and studied for a master's degree in gender studies.

"I also had time to grieve," she said. "I was safe and I could cry. In Rwanda, crying was meaningless. . . . There were women who were raped and who could not stand up. They were dying inside their own bodies."

Later, she obtained a master's and a doctorate in law from American University's Washington College of Law, graduating in 2004. She began working as a consultant for Rwanda's new legislators -- half of whom are women -- and decided to return to Kigali.

Despite the cruel tragedy that befell her family, Mbabazi's buoyant personality kept her going. Through intelligence, courage, hard work and the kindness of strangers, a survivor of Rwanda's genocide is now shaping the future of her country.

"We have to prepare for the next generation now because there is a political will," she said. "Sharing the Rwandan experience is providing hope for others."

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