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## Women Parliamentary Forum Propels Female Cause

**The New Times** (Kigali)

NEWS

January 25, 2007

Posted to the web January 25, 2007

By Eleneus Akanga  
Kigali

For some time, Rwanda has been a country best known for the 1994 Genocide that claimed nearly a tenth of its population. For the last twelve years, Rwandans, mostly women, have struggled to overcome the horror and trauma meted out on them by their awful past as they try to re-string the country's torn social, political and psychological foundation.

In more recent times, the sickening attributes have changed. Tiny Rwanda is today well known for a more humane and plausible statistic. In October 2003, just nine and a half years after the genocide, women won 48.8% of seats in its lower house of parliament, making it the leading country in the world with the highest women representation in politics.

The statistic was itself an offshoot of a determined group of women leaders in the country, majority of whom lady parliamentarians under a medium that has established itself as one of the best in championing the women cause in this country-The Rwanda Women Parliamentary Forum (RWPF).

Many people have long argued that women's ability to make an impact in male-dominated institutions will be limited until they are represented in numbers large enough to have a collective voice, until they reach a "critical mass." And based on political theory and investigation, most activists have settled on 30 percent as the minimum necessary for critical mass.

Established in 1996, RWPF has vigorously played its role as a consultative mechanism for facilitating gender integration within parliament, while advocating for greater participation of women in leadership. In all its attempts, the Forum continues to emphasise the thirty per cent constitutional allocation at all decision-making levels.

Subsequently, the Forum today boasts of its commitment to fighting gender-based violence, fighting the genocide ideology, championing family unity, the establishment of a gender monitoring desk in the Parliament, reviewing the existing laws on women rights and a gender-based control of government action and budget.

With almost 49 percent women in parliament, Rwanda is today recognised as a global leader in changing the gender ratios for democratic representation. In cabinet, approximately 30 percent of the 29 ministers and state ministers are women. This, according to Mr. Alain Noudehou the UNDP resident

representative in Rwanda, is by any measure anywhere in the world, representative of the country's remarkable achievements.

According to a 2003 study by Women Waging Peace it was reported that in the post-conflict period, Rwandans have implemented several initiatives to involve more women in their political system.

Through constant lobbying and persistent explanation of the role of women in major decision making positions, the Forum has succeeded in making its demands somehow felt. A parallel system of women's councils and women-only elections has been created guaranteeing the election of given women seats at the sector and district levels. A gender ministry has been created with gender posts being provided for at all levels in government and ministerial structures.

The new constitution, ratified in May 2003, called for a minimum of 30 percent women in all decision-making posts and set aside 30 percent of seats in the Chamber of Deputies for women emerging from a women-only voting system.

Again, the Forum has initiated or substantially contributed to the drafting and passing of important legislations that have positively impacted on the conditions of women in the country. It is through the Forum's advocacy work that gender issues have been streamlined in the Rwandan family code as well as in the organic law on land use and management.

In August last year, the forum introduced a law on the prevention, protection and punishment of any Gender-based violence. This will serve and provide the legislative framework to protect women's rights and foster an environment conducive to the eradication of poverty.

Though the above will assist support the national constitution and prove instrumental in the attainment of the country's Vision 2020, they are extremely important in that they support international instruments that protect women rights such as the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of discrimination against Women (CEDAW) and the Beijing Platform for Action.

Hon. Judith Kanakuze, the Forum President maintains that, "By both ensuring the representation of women in all echelons of decision making and providing a protective legal framework for women, RWPF is making a huge difference in achieving good governance and poverty reduction."

Both President Kagame and Gender Minister, Valerie Nyirahabineza, have on many occasions reiterated Rwanda's commitment to women's national leadership giving special credit to the international example that Rwanda has set in this area.

The 2002 UNIFEM report on Women, War and Peace argued that bringing women to the peace table improves the quality of agreements reached and enhances the chances that they are implemented. And such seems to be what the executive in Rwanda have looked to.

Previous destruction of the social fabric and the need to survive has opened new windows for Rwandan women's empowerment. As a result of the Forum's success story, thousands of women's groups have emerged in the country to collectively address daily subsistence needs and other issues.

In 1996, when President Kagame identified Rwandan women as key agents in reconstruction and rehabilitation at the World Food Summit in Rome, his argument was in relation to what had been initiated by the Forum. His government has since supported and called for the support of women because to him, they constitute majority of the producers in the country and so need to be supported,

trained and mobilised to fulfill this challenge.

Today, a new law sponsored by women in the appointed legislature enables women to inherit property for the first time and the process of government decentralisation has made a cautious start with elections of local and township women's committees emerging a success story.

Everywhere, women have expressed a strong desire for education, training, credit and investment programmes having moved beyond the single-shot financial and food assistance of the past five years.

However, Rwandans are not about to be deceived into thinking that their goals for gender equity have been realised. It is clear that for women their share of real power remains small. The country's predominantly agriculture-based economy supports a largely conservative social fabric in which women's primary role is defined within the household rather than in the public sphere but according to Hon Kanakuze, the Forum knows this well.

At least, women in Rwanda are rejoicing. One can be excused for believing that Gender balance in politics is becoming a reality in this country. Like the English say, we can only hope for the better.

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