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## The Impact of Women On Policy Formulation

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*On February 22, Rwanda will host an International Women Summit to cap commemoration of the 10th anniversary of the Forum for Rwanda Women Parliamentarians. ELENEUS AKANGA looks at the role of women legislators and how their untiring efforts have proved successful to the cause of their fellow females and the over all policy development in the country.*

When the new Constitution was adopted in 2003, women representation at all levels became a fundamental principle. To cement this notion, commitment to the rule of law as well as gender equality became paramount.

With a mandatory constitutional mandate of 30 percent fixed for women, women grouped and began gunning for positions of influence. It was not a surprise when during the 2003 elections women met and exceeded the minimum target. The road to policymaking and implementation had just begun.

Aware of their previous tribulations and what their colleagues went through in post genocide Rwanda, those who had risen to positions of influence committed to doing something about the plight of women in the country. No wonder they never looked back.

Research has shown that the improvement of health and the education of women coupled with their direct involvement in decision-making positions is a viable investment. This, analysts say, is mainly because the inclusion of women in national legislature results into positive policy outcomes for their children and families, who actually make up the nation.

Further, it is also true that the effect of gender on the attitude of parliamentarians who draft and pass laws in most parliaments around the world changes positively when women have an equal representation in decision making organs like men. Such will definitely have a significant effect on policies related to gender promotion with regard to legislation and influence on the national budget.

To understand better the impact of women especially legislators on policy outcomes in Rwanda, it is important that one understands the impact of the 1994 Genocide on the social fabric of this nation. In a situation where close to a tenth of the total population was killed and a bigger number displaced, development and success needed to follow a well thought line.

The dramatic gains for our country's women in parliament can be traced, in part, to the significant changes in gender roles during and immediately after the genocide.

During the genocide, women were targeted based not only upon their ethnicity, but also their gender. Many were subjected to sexual assault, torture, rape and forced incest. Not even the country's first female Prime Minister, Agathe Uwilingiyimana was exempt from this humiliation. In the years leading up to the genocide, she was frequently depicted in extremist literature and political cartoons as being sexually promiscuous and a threat to the nation.

Women who survived the genocide lost husbands, children, relatives, and communities. They endured systematic rape and torture, witnessed unspeakable cruelty, besides losing livelihoods and property. In addition to this violence, women faced displacement, family separation, and food insecurity, all of which resulted in post-conflict psychological trauma.

Their social structures were destroyed; their relationships and traditional networks were severed. To bring back their lost treasure and position in society, Rwandan women had to think differently of themselves and develop skills they would not otherwise have acquired.

With due support from government, they have managed to make a way out. Speaking about the upcoming parliamentary elections in April of 2003, President Paul Kagame said, "We shall continue to appeal to women to offer themselves as candidates and also to vote for gender sensitive men who will defend and protect their interests."

He continued, "Women's under-representation distances elected representatives from a part of their constituency and, as such, affects the legitimacy of political decisions...Increased participation of women in politics is, therefore, necessary for improved social, economic and political conditions of their families and the entire country."

It may have been a presidential call but Kagame, who five days ago, was named winner of the 2007 African Gender Award, was quite sure of the role of women in the development process of any given country.

It should be noted however that before its civil war in the early 1990s and the genocide in 1994, women had never held more than 18 percent of seats in the country's parliament. It was only during the nine-year period of a post-genocide transitional government, from 1994-2003, that women representation reached 25.7 percent in the bicameral parliament. Consequently, a new gender-sensitive constitution was adopted.

And in 1996, determined to steer their cause through, a group of women parliamentarians at the time formed a cross-party caucus, the Forum of Women Parliamentarians, known by its French acronym, the FFRP. Originally composed of not more than 15 members, the forum became a sound platform through which women views throughout the country were aired.

FFRP has since established itself as a joint uniting women parliamentarians together irrespective of political party affiliation. Today all female MPs from the upper and lower houses including those elected on the "women's ballot" - are members. Together they have become a solid block that has cautiously but resoundingly taken their stand on any bill that comes up to ensure that gender equality is respected.

MP Connie Bwiza Sekamana once noted, "When it comes to the Forum, we unite as women, irrespective of political parties. So we don't think of our parties, [we think of] the challenges that surround us as women."

Forum president Hon. Judith Kanakuze is all praise that FFRP has become increasingly focused on legislative responsibilities. To date the Forum has helped review existing laws, introduced amendments to change discriminatory statutes, and examined proposed laws, all with the aim at promoting gender sensitivity in the country.

Under the leadership of Kanakuze, the FFRP adopted in 2005 a five-year Strategic Plan to guide its activities through 2009 and reach its goal of developing policies, laws, programmes, and practices that ensure equality between men and women and gender equity.

Women parliamentarians are today credited for advocating for increased spending in the areas of education and health. During debates on the education budget for example, women pushed to ensure that there was support for the children from poor families.

Every time the budget proposal is presented to parliament in September or October, it is common to hear questions like 'How will women benefit from this budget, and how will children benefit from this budget?', from female members of parliaments, a question that was impossible to ask in the previous regimes.

Due to women advocacy and their persistence that hospitals and health centres be extended to the people, the health budget for instance has gone up from three percent before 1998 to 12 percent in 2006, and according to Kanakuze, it is women who are pushing to have it go to 15 percent, in line with the Millennium Development Goals.

As the forum members together with other well wishers in the country join their invited guests at Intercontinental Hotel in Kigali for the International Women Summit, they will have much to showcase than a mere grouping.

With all the laws in place and the women representation at all levels in government reaching favourable proportions, they can smile and celebrate their 10th anniversary.