

Rwandan women offer a blueprint

Zainab Salbi

Friday, February 23, 2007

The genocide in Rwanda literally left the women behind to pick up the pieces. After the violence subsided in 1994, 70 percent of the remaining population of Rwanda was women. If communities were going to survive, and if the country was ever going to recover, it was up to them to make it happen. They forced themselves to face the inconceivable and they rebuilt. It was women who cleared the dead bodies from the streets; women who rebuilt the homes and women who solved the national orphan crisis -- more than 500,000 children with nowhere to go. Nearly every woman took at least one child into her home.

The government of Rwanda was quick to acknowledge the significance of women in the rebuilding process. In 1996, President Paul Kagame mandated that 30 percent of the parliamentary seats be designated for women. Kagame stressed that he saw them as key agents in the country's reconstruction, and argued that the government must train, support and mobilize them. As we see from today's revived Rwanda, he was right on target.

Rwandan women represent 49.8 percent of the country's lower house of parliament, a larger percentage than any other country in the world. Women also occupy nearly 50 percent of the positions in Rwanda's ministries from the village to the province to the national government level.

Thus, Rwanda was the obvious and fitting location for the 2007 Women Parliamentarians International Conference, under way now, whose theme is "Gender, Nation Building, and the Role of Parliaments." More than 400 world leaders and dignitaries have gathered in Kigali, among them, Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, president of the Republic of Liberia, Gertrude I. Mongella, president of the Pan African Parliament, and 2004 Nobel Peace Prize winner Wangari Maathai.

In the minds of many outsiders, Rwanda is fixed in time -- frozen as it was in 1994 at the end of a genocide that claimed more than 800,000 people and saw nearly 500,000 women raped in 100 days. Perhaps we have not revisited this country's story because the truth was so painful; Rwanda is, after all, a shameful reminder of how little the world did to help as millions were murdered, tortured and displaced. It's time now to look again at Rwanda.

The question is: How can we apply the lessons of Rwanda's recovery to other war-torn countries like Afghanistan and Iraq? Despite historical discrimination against women in Afghanistan and insecurity in Iraq, we, at Women for Women International, have been working hard at the grassroots level to embolden women to move from victim to survivor to active citizen, but we can't do it alone and the time is now. We can't wait for the bombs and bullets to stop to acknowledge the importance of women in their countries' future.



Through our work, I have watched women rise up against their horrific memories, damaged bodies and pain to rebuild their lives and their communities after war. I have come to believe that, without a doubt, it is stronger women that lead to stronger nations.

Zainab Salbi is the founder and CEO of Women for Women International, an organization that helps women in war-torn regions rebuild their lives by giving them financial and emotional support, job skills training, rights education, access to capital and assistance for small business development.

www.womenforwomen.org

http://sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/chronicle/archive/2007/02/23/EDGRJN77S41.DTL

This article appeared on page **B - 11** of the San Francisco Chronicle

San Francisco Chronicle Sections

[© 2007 Hearst Communications Inc.](#) | [Privacy Policy](#) | [Feedback](#) | [RSS Feeds](#) | [FAQ](#) | [Site Index](#) | [Contact](#)