

Millennium Development Goals: Rwanda

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Rwanda, a Central African country, gained international attention in 1994 after the discovery of an incidence of genocide that shocked the world in its depth and scope of human destruction. The fact that 800,000 people were systematically slaughtered in a mere one hundred days was horrifying and the events surrounding this destruction have been dissected and studied intensely for the past fifteen years. What happened? Why was this considered genocide? Why was there no intervention by the international community? How could this be allowed to happen in modern times? Answers to these questions must be examined before a discussion about the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and how Rwanda has attempted to achieve these goals can begin. There have been articles, books, and even motion pictures about this time in Rwanda's history. A discussion of the genocide of 1994 must be followed by a close examination of the reconciliation that has since taken place in the country. As difficult as it is to understand exactly what led to this mass destruction of human life, it is just as difficult to observe the possibility of reconciliation and the return to some kind of normalcy. Part of the reconciliation process has been the active role of the women of Rwanda. It is from the study of changing gender roles and women's participation in reconstruction after the Rwandan conflict that the task of reconciliation has been successful. The success of Rwanda's government in achieving the goals established by the United Nations as the MDGs lies in the actions that women in this country have taken to assure the advancement and empowerment of women that are such a large part of the MDGs.

Geographically, Rwanda is about the size of Maryland in the United States. (26,338 square kilometers) The country is landlocked, mostly savanna grassland, with a predominately rural population. There are three ethnic groups in Rwanda: Hutu (Bantu) 84%, Tutsi (Hamitic) 15%, Twa (Pygmy) 1%. It is also the most densely populated country in Africa. The

government is a republic with a presidential, multiparty system. Since April, 2000, the president has been Paul Kagame. A colony of Belgium, Rwanda gained independence on July 1, 1962. Most of the economy is based on subsistence agriculture because there are relatively few natural resources. The exports are mainly coffee, tea, hides and tin ore. (www.cia.gov)

To begin to understand what happened in 1994, the historical perspective of ethnic relations in Rwanda must be examined. The Hutus were the original inhabitants of the region. Tutsi cattle herders came to Rwanda in the 15th century. With their arrival, the Tutsis proceeded to take control of the area by establishing a monarchy headed by the king or *mwami* and a feudal hierarchy of Tutsi nobles and gentry. Although the Tutsis retained political power, there were Hutu principalities and the relationship between the two groups was stable and fluid. Inter-marriage was common among them. In 1915, the Belgians became administrative rulers in Rwanda as well as the neighboring country of Burundi. (www.state.gov) The Belgians were supportive of the conflict between Hutus and Tutsis. In fact, they brought scientists to measure and weigh the different groups in order to determine the superiority of one over the other. "...the scientists found what they had believed all along. Tutsis had 'nobler', more 'naturally' aristocratic dimensions than the 'coarse' and 'bestial' Hutus." (Gourevitch 55-56) With the colonization of Rwanda, and the Belgian support of Tutsi domination, the ethnic lines were drawn and reinforced. Soon identification cards were issued so there was little chance that these ethnic lines could be erased. "... (this) permitted the Belgians to perfect the administration of an apartheid system rooted in the myth of Tutsi superiority." (Gourevitch 57)

It was in 1959 that the Hutus revolted and took a stand against Tutsi rule. The Hutus were well supported by the Belgians during this revolt. Thousands of Tutsis were killed and as many as 150,000 were forced out of Rwanda at the hands of the Hutus. The three years before

independence in 1962 were filled with discontent and struggle. The Hutus were determined to overcome Tutsi rule, and the rebellion was the catalyst for this change in power. As the Hutus became the leaders in the post independence one-party system, the Tutsis that lived in exile united to form a resistance party. “The children of these exiles later formed a rebel group, the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF).” (www.state.gov) In 1990 the RPF fought against Hutu rule and demanded the return of thousands of Tutsi refugees to Rwanda. The fighting continued for two years and peace talks were begun. Tension was high during the early 1990s. “On April 6, 1994, the airplane carrying President Habyarimana and the President of Burundi was shot down as it prepared to land at Kigali (the capital of Rwanda). Both presidents were killed. As though the shooting down was a signal, military and militia groups began rounding up and killing all Tutsis and political moderates, regardless of their ethnic background.” (www.state.gov)

So began the genocide. The definition of genocide was established by the 1948 Genocide Convention. It says, in part: “Genocide is defined in accordance with the 1948 Genocide Convention to include various acts committed ‘with the intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group as such.’” (www.humanrightsfirst.org)

There was a United Nations presence preceding the massacre, but ten Belgian peacekeepers were murdered so most troops were withdrawn for fear of further attacks on UN personnel. During the height of the killings there were 270 military personnel: the country was basically abandoned by the UN peacekeepers. After the president’s plane crashed, the killings began in earnest. The magnitude of the destruction can hardly be fathomed. The pressure for Hutus to exterminate Tutsis was enormous. “The architects of the Rwanda genocide succeeded in organizing the killing of many people because they were able to convince a large proportion of the Hutu population that it was in their political interest to exterminate the Tutsi population.”

(Hughes 171) These architects were members of the Hutu authorities in the government.

“...outbreaks were planned and prepared, with targets being identified in speeches by representatives of the authorities, broadcasts on Rwandan radio, and leaflets...the persons perpetrating the massacres were under organized leadership.” (Durch 374) The call for Hutus to attack was enormous and carried out with vengeance.

The violence ended in July 1994. The problems involved in dealing with prosecution of crimes committed during the genocide were enormous. In fact, the difficulty in prosecution of war crimes provides a counter-argument to the very root of reconciliation. Legal representation was made all the more difficult because so many lawyers had been assassinated, forced out of the country, or adversely affected by the deaths of family members. The sheer numbers of defendants also took its toll on the judicial system. It was at this point that the *gacaca* tribunals were employed.

In 2001, Rwanda established the *gacaca* court system which is modeled after traditional justice systems and is responsible for prosecuting the crimes against humanity that occurred in 1994. The *gacaca* is complex and the tasks set before the court is immense because of the scale and magnitude of the people to be tried. One of the objectives in the court is to allow Rwanda to actively participate in bringing the perpetrators to justice. (www.inkiko-gacaca.gov.rw)

The scope of the prosecution of the people who participated in the genocide is enormous. “Since 1996, the RPF has sought to reform the judicial apparatus and bring to trial those accused of having participated in the genocide, while forging a ‘government of unity and national reconciliation.’” (Simon 206) The establishment of the National Unity and Reconciliation Commission (NURC) was an effort to promote Rwandan unity by stressing the harmonious relationship between Rwanda’s three principal ethnic groups. When first established, the NURC

stressed the role that colonialism played on ethnic relationships. (Simon 206) Now the commission is using a pragmatic approach to promote reconciliation and justice. “Community mediators. They are elected by the population on the basis of integrity to resolve day to day conflicts before referring them to conventional courts. This reduces the number of cases that would otherwise go to conventional court, and reinforces unity and reconciliation.”

(www.nurc.gov.rw)

The role of women in the reconciliation has been documented on the NURC web-site. “The research findings indicate that women’s contribution to peace and reconciliation has been considerable and in many cases unprecedented. At the grassroots level women’s various initiatives to cope with the post genocide challenges have opened up windows of opportunity for rebuilding trust among families and reconciling former enemies.” (www.nurc.gov.rw) Because the genocide left many women alone with children, it became their responsibility to take an active role in the reconciliation process. Overcoming the limitations of gender issues has been a road-block at times because the role of women has been traditionally that of a lower caste of society. “In society, gender inequality is expressed as restrictions to women’s participation in civic and political life.” (Deegan 106) Post genocide Rwanda may provide a strong example to the rest of Africa that women can and will play an important part in restoring peace to a country that has been torn apart by war and destruction.

The third MDG, *Promote gender equality and empower women*, has been especially important in Rwanda given that the number of women who were widowed after the 1994 events has left a gap in the demographics of the country. The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) published its report in 2007. The sub-section of this report provides an in-depth look at how gender equality and empowerment is being promoted in Rwanda. Mention is made of the

efforts to eliminate gender-based violence (GBV). The government is promoting community action to alleviate the problems associated with gender-based violence. “ This community-based approach has created a sense of empathy, solidarity and communal responsibility towards GBV victims, as well as cultivated a sense of security by those suffering from trauma.”

(<http://www.undp.org.rw/UNDPAnnualreport2007.pdf>) It is through these community-based efforts that gender empowerment can be established, especially if GBV is eliminated.

The role of women in Rwanda presents its own challenge to the achievement of the third millennium goal of empowerment. There is the possibility that “...(the) transformative forms of agency on the part of women...suggest a greater ability on the part of poor women to question, analyse, and act on the patriarchal constraint in their lives.” (Sweetman 15) A closer look at the role of women in Rwanda provides clarity to the situation. The immediate and localized actions of women have promoted peace and reconciliation. These actions continue to improve the lives of women throughout the country.

Although the role of women in African society is one of subservience to men, women are the pillars of the family and in that capacity, they are able to promote peaceful coexistence within society.

“...women throughout the country have been instrumental in rebuilding unity and reconciliation among Rwandese because (it) is the vision of the women leaders and the latter has guided women to promote peace and reconciliation. Women in leadership formed caucuses and alliances to serve as models for other women to emulate these alliances include among others Unity Club, Pro-Femmes Twese Hamwe , and Rwandan Women Parliamentary Caucus.” (www.nurc.gov.rw)

It is through such alliances that women are demonstrating the value of peace in the aftermath of the genocide in Rwanda. As the main source of familial socialization, women are well-equipped to take the lead in the transitional movement towards reconciliation. In addition to their role as

peacekeepers, women have been actively involved in security operations as well. “Traditionally, it is believed that it is the duty of men to restore and maintain security however in the last ten years, these trends have changed and this has further increased the self-confidence among women that they can do what men can also do.” (www.nurc.gov.rw)

Women are taking the lead politically in Rwanda. The women’s empowerment that is at the root of the third MDG is supported by the political presence of Rwandan women. Grassroots alliances that have been formed are partnered by the relatively new phenomenon of women in governmental capacities. In fact, Rwanda has the largest female representation in its legislature than any other country in the world.

In May of 2003, Rwandans ratified a new constitution that requires the participation of women in 30% of decision-making positions. In October of 2003, Rwanda's post-genocide transition officially came to a close with Parliamentary elections. In those elections, Rwandan women earned 49% of seats in Rwanda's new bicameral legislature, through election and appointment. This means that Rwanda has the highest percentage of women in its legislative branch, of any country, anywhere in the world. (<http://womensnet.org.za/country-focus/rwanda>)

In 2009, the percentage of women representatives in Rwanda is at 56%. “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.”

(www.washingtonpost.com)

The presence of women in the government of Rwanda is an important step forward in gender relations. With this percentage of women actively represented in governmental seats, the MDGs , especially the gender-related MDGs, will continue to be addressed. International donor organizations, as well as non-governmental organizations (NGOs), are targeting MDGs as part of their programs. Africare has focused on the sixth MDG, *combat HIV/Aids, malaria and other*

diseases. As one of the top five NGOs that are doing a “good job” as recognized by the Network of International Non Governmental organizations, Africare’s focus on disease eradication has been successful. (<http://www.africare.org/wherewework/rwanda/programs.php>). Although the goal of disease eradication MDG is not specifically targeting women, it contributes to the overall health of the country. This, in turn, alleviates some of the extra care giving that women must perform in addition to other duties like wood-gathering, water carrying, child rearing and food preparation.

The expanded presence of women in governmental arenas is a huge step forward, but attitudes about gender roles do not evolve quickly. There are still many challenges for the women of Rwanda to overcome. “Although tangible improvements in terms of women empowerment have been registered since 1994, their participation in the various domains of national development is still low. Challenges remain in the areas of limited experience and capacity, as well as overcoming the mentality of negative attitude towards women’s role in politics and decision-making.” This fact is further compounded by the gender-based division of labor wherein women still bear a great deal of other responsibilities both inside and outside the home. (www.nurc.gov.rw)

With many of their male counterparts either dead or in a neighboring country, the work of women has been even more demanding than before 1994. Women are living with physical and emotional trauma as well. “There are thousands of women who are victims of rape, trauma, physical injuries, and above all social trust has dissolved. Abject poverty is still high and it is affecting mainly women from the rural areas. Increasing rates of HIV/Aids where more than 250,000 women are victims, 66% of women who were raped tested positive and other infectious diseases coupled with limited health facilities further deteriorate their situation.” This situation

had an impact not only on the mental health of women but also on their physical well-being. Most survivors of the genocide, the majority of whom happen to be women, experience serious economic deprivation. (www.nurc.gov.rw)

Because of this, the first MDG, *eradicate extreme poverty and hunger*, has proven to be particularly difficult to achieve in Rwanda. After the 1994 genocide, poverty levels have been increasing; in 2000, the poverty level has been determined to be 60%.

(<http://www.undp.org.rw/MDGs.html>) Poverty and hunger affect hundreds of thousands of people in the country and women and children are the most susceptible to its effects.

Ethnic tensions are actively being addressed these fifteen years after the genocide. “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.”

(www.washingtonpost.com) The struggle to maintain a national identity rather than the ethnic identity that was instilled in the majority of Rwandans by colonial powers continues to this day. Identification cards no longer specify Hutu or Tutsi. Yet ethnicity does not always preclude conflict. “Ethnicity opened a channel of negotiation and bargaining between the nationalist state and civil society.” (Thomson 73) The strength of diversity often lies in a nation's inclusion of different ethnic groups. It becomes problematic when the roots of supposed superiority are traced to ethnic identity. Such was the case between Hutus and Tutsis. In order to resolve the conflict, the ethnicity is downplayed and a sense of nationalism takes its place.

There has been a resurgence of an international presence in Rwanda. The Peace Corps has brought in volunteers as of January, 2009. These volunteers will be working within the medical community to deal with the HIV/AIDS cases, many of which have occurred as the result

of crimes committed during the genocide. Non-governmental organizations have a huge presence in Rwanda as well. There are a total of 276 NGOs listed on the National University of Rwanda web-site. Africare has been assisting the survivors of the genocide since 1994. In addition to helping with the relocation of refugees, this organization also provides food security assistance as well as water resource development. (www.africare.org) The International Rescue Committee (IRC) has been consistently providing assistance to the people of Rwanda in many areas of post-conflict need. They have been helping with the re-building of infrastructure, health care, and development of sustainable agricultural practices. (www.irc.org) Oxfam GB is yet another NGO that is offering assistance in diverse areas throughout Rwanda. It is encouraging to see that the road to recovery in Rwanda has been supported by the international community in so many important ways.

Now that some semblance of normalcy has returned to Rwanda, it is gratifying to know that the whole world has taken notice of how devastating ethnic conflict can be. Even in the 20th century, we have been a witness to unfathomable atrocities not only in Rwanda but also in places like Bosnia and Darfur. With the advent of globalization, events around the globe can be witnessed within hours of their onset. The fact that there was virtually no international attempt to stop the genocide in Rwanda as it was unfolding is inconceivable. The positive changes that have occurred as the result of that conflict are promising, though. Especially relevant is the role that women are assuming to promote peacekeeping and reconciliation. After just fifteen years, the improvement and empowerment that the women of Rwanda are experiencing is formidable. The role of the United Nations MDGs has been paramount to continued advancement of women and women's lives. Gender relations are softening and men have benefitted from MDG work as well. The eighth MDG, although somewhat vague, has given new hope to a country devastated

by the ravages of war. This MDG says *Develop a global partnership for development*. Since the goals are measurable and provide accountability, the donor agencies are able to determine who gets what types of international aid. (Sweetman 94) It is through this accountability that responsible development can be achieved. The re-building process has been slow, but the dramatic reversal of ethnic conflict is admirable. Due to good governance and solid community relations, Rwanda is now on its way to health and security, things that have not been present there for many years.

As the Hutus and Tutsis come to a place of reconciliation, their country is being reunited in ways that cross ethnic, gender and family lines. The development of a national rather than strictly ethnic identity has proved to be one avenue of development that stands to strengthen the nation. The next generation of Rwandans is emerging as a stronger more tolerant society of men and women. The past genocide has certainly not been forgotten, but forgiveness is taking place. It is in that forgiveness that Rwanda will grow and flourish as a nation of peace and perhaps even prosperity.

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