

8 Rwandan Women Rising

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Women saved Rwanda after genocide, creating a model for lasting security in countries worldwide. How they did it, and the difference they've made, holds lessons for the US and countries around the world.

In the spring of 1994, the tiny African nation was ripped apart, leaving nearly a million dead. After the violence subsided, Rwanda's women—drawn by the necessity of protecting their families—carved out unlikely new roles for themselves, creating stability and reconciliation in devastation's wake.

Duke University Press has just published Inclusive Security Founder and Chair **Swanee Hunt's** new book, *Rwandan Women Rising*, which tells the stories of dozens of women who worked for peace after the genocide. Today, nearly 64% of the seats in the Rwandan parliament are held by elected women, a number unrivaled by any other nation.

How did they succeed? Meet eight of these extraordinary women and you will find commonalities. At a time of cultural chaos, each one stepped forward to help. Each found ways to use her

professional capabilities and collaborate in ever-broadening circles of responsibility. And each contributed to rebuilding the nation.

“On every continent, there are countries where a dramatic increase in women’s influence has led to a peaceful foreign policy, higher education levels, longer life expectancy, safer streets, even cleaner water,” writes Jimmy Carter in the book’s foreword. “These gains aren’t coincidental.”

CHANTAL KAYITESI

Chantal Kayitesi was a 29-year-old college student with an infant son when the Rwandan genocide started. Her husband, parents, two siblings, and many extended family members were killed. In 1995, she cofounded an organization to aid widows and orphans. She joined a coalition that advocated for qualifying rape, other forms of sexual violence, and torture as crimes against humanity. In 1999, she immigrated to the US where she cofounded a survivors’ organization.

ODETTE NYIRAMILIMO

Odette Nyiramilimo recalls that professional opportunities for women were rare when she was growing up. Still, she managed to become a physician and survived the genocide under truly harrowing conditions. She was among those profiled in Philip Gourevitch’s 1998 book, *We Wish to Inform You that Tomorrow We Will Be Killed with our Families*.



After 1994, while practicing as an obstetrician and gynecologist, she counseled rape victims and widows and participated in various women’s associations to rebuild the country. She served as minister of state for Social Affairs from 2000-2003. Elected to the Senate in 2008, she chaired the committee for human rights, social affairs, and petitions.

CHRISTINE TUYISENGE

Attorney Christine Tuyisenge worked nearly 15 years for the rights of women and of children in Rwanda through the nonprofit legal aid organization Haguruka. She contributed to the amendment of discriminatory laws, helped establish shelters for abused women, and coordinated legal assistance throughout the country.



Since 2008, she has served as vice president of the National Commission for the Fight against Genocide and also as executive secretary—the senior career staff member—of the National Women’s Council, a forum that empowers women to participate effectively in development programs countrywide, from village to national levels.

FATUMA NDANGIZA

Fatuma Ndangiza has promoted reconciliation, gender equality, and good governance from both inside and outside the Rwandan government. As executive secretary for the National Unity and Reconciliation Commission after the genocide, she helped Rwandans come to terms with the past and collectively search for sustainable peace.

From 1994-2002, she championed women’s rights to access economic opportunities and participate in decision-making. She led women’s NGOs and chaired a task force that established the National Women’s Councils.

Currently, she is deputy CEO for the Rwanda Governance Board and chair of the African Peer Review Panel of Eminent Persons, which monitors national governance processes.



AISA KIRABO KACYIRA

As a veterinarian, Aisa Kirabo Kacyira found an important role immediately after the genocide, working with women who had little experience taking care of cattle but had to learn quickly after losing their husbands.

She was elected to parliament and also served as mayor of Kigali and governor of Rwanda’s largest province (with a population of 2.5 million). Under her leadership, Kigali won the UN-Habitat Scroll of Honor Award in 2008 for achievements in environmental sustainability and improved living conditions.

In 2011, Ms. Kacyira was appointed by the UN Secretary General to serve as UN Habitat’s deputy executive director.

BEATRICE MUKASINE

Beatrice Mukasine was a young high school teacher in Rwanda's Southern Province when schools closed during the genocide. Afterwards, she reunited displaced children with families, locating their own or finding adoptive parents.

For five years, she devoted her time to children's and women's rights, initially through emergency response efforts and then on longer-term projects. She helped establish social development committees throughout the country, raising awareness about changes in the law that allowed women to inherit property. She rose to serve as president of the National Women's Council.



ALICE KAREKEZI

Lawyer Alice Karekezi is known for spearheading a coalition against gender-based violence that led to the labeling of incitement of rape as a crime of genocide. But her work is much broader. As a lecturer at the National University's Faculty of Law in Kigali since 1996, she has researched *gacaca*, an indigenous mechanism reintroduced for the pursuit of both justice and reconciliation. She drew on her work with women who survived sexual violence and her experience as a gender monitor for the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda. Ms. Karekezi cofounded the Center for Conflict Management at the National University, heading the justice, human rights, and governance program.



ODA GASINZIGWA

Minister of Gender and Family Promotion Oda Gasinzigwa, born in Tanzania to Rwandan refugee parents, joined others in the struggle to reconstruct Rwanda after the genocide. In 1998, officials at the gender ministry selected her to work with the National Women's Council Secretariat. In 2004, she was elected President of the National Women's Council, where she promoted gender equality and women's participation in all aspects of national development.



<https://www.inclusivesecurity.org/2017/07/08/8-rwandan-women-rising/>

From 2005 to 2009 she represented women on the Rwandan Government's National Unity and Reconciliation Commission, which coordinates activities in communities and schools to promote peace and eradicate divisions among Rwandans. In 2008, the government nominated her to head the Gender Monitoring Office, which was constitutionally established to monitor implementation of gender principles throughout the country.