Rwanda Making Strides For Women

by Karen Sherman

The legacy of the Rwanda genocide was devastating for women. Tens of thousands of women were subject to some of the worst inhumanities known to man, including brutally rapes, torture, lost homes, husbands, children, and means of support, and the relegation to refugee status throughout the region. The emotional and psychological toll on women was equally severe, including a loss of dignity, self-esteem, hope, and belief in a future.

Today, it is still hard to reconcile the competing images of Rwanda. Over 17 relatively short years, a country once consumed by mass destruction and despair has transformed itself into a beacon of order and stability, a model for many other countries in the long, painful, and often incomplete transition from war and conflict to peace and prosperity.

Rwanda is governed by the firm hand by President Kagame. It is an ambitious state governed by the rule of law as well as strict rules of engagement for its citizens. The military still patrol the streets from 3:30 p.m. to 6 a.m. nightly to ensure the full security of people and assets. Government agencies, local officials, and even the private sector work according to a “master plan” that’s designed to move Rwanda along a defined path to a better future.

The government has placed the advancement of women across all strata of society at the forefront of the country’s political, social and economic development strategy. This is unique not just across Africa but across the globe. Fifty-six percent of parliamentarians are women and several key ministerial posts are held by women, as well as a large number of mayors, governors, and other elected and appointed officials.

More striking however, is the commitment of government to address the needs of the most poor and socially excluded women, the traditionally voiceless members of society. Women for Women International has also been working these women since 1997, and has served more than 41,000 women survivors of war through a core program that promotes lasting social and economic change for women, families and communities across Rwanda.

The organization’s mission of moving survivors from crisis and poverty to stability and self-sufficiency has been aided by some specific governmental initiatives that are having a direct impact on women’s lives:

• Savings and credit organizations (SACCOS) that operate in each village. As a result, 99 percent of women who participate in Women for Women’s twelve month program have bank accounts and opportunities to save and borrow small amounts of credit needed to launch an income generation activity;
• Health insurance for all women for the equivalent of approximately $5 a year;
• Specific laws designed and enforced to eradicate sexual and gender based violence and ensure that all property is jointly held between husbands and wives;
• Women’s investment program through the Bank of Kigali targeting poor and underserved women. The Bank has committed to make concessionary loans available to women who are self-employed or working as part of cooperatives or group businesses.

http://www.africa.com/printblog?id=499
The government's Gender Monitoring Office ensures that women's rights are protected and that there are repercussions when they are not. Women are taking advantage of these and other initiatives to change their lives and by extension the lives of their families and communities.

Take Ange, a recent graduate of Women for Women's program who lost both her parents in the genocide. Once enrolled in the program, Ange opened a bank account and used her savings to rehabilitate her family's house which has three small rooms and another five to rent. She is now earning 50,000 Rwandan francs per month in rental income and between 40,000-70,000 Rwandan francs monthly making handbags and jewelry for Kate Spade with local partner Gahaya Links.

Or Cecilia, who never had anything and spent her days crying in misery. Her husband would actually count the pieces of meat she ate to make sure she didn't eat more than her worth. Her husband beat her when she enrolled in Women for Women's program but she still found the courage to do so. As she gained confidence and began to understand her rights, she learned that she did not have to keep quiet about the beatings and reported her husband to local leaders, who quickly took action. Today, Cecilia moves about freely and is able to sell her products in the marketplace without fear and her husband actually listens to her when she talks now.

These are just two of hundreds of examples of women who have learned about their rights and are taking full advantage of government programs to drive more systemic change in Rwandan society. As women gain in confidence, ability and are able to earn and sustain an income, they will not only be beneficiaries of such programs but will be the ones leading Rwanda's on-going social and economic development.