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The Enhancement of Women's Participation in Electoral Processes in Post-Conflict Countries: The Case of Rwanda

INTRODUCTION

The women of Rwanda have suffered periods of traumatic episodes in the last century but are now on their feet celebrating the many achievements acquired only in the last 10 years.

My presence here today, however, is no mean opportunity to celebrate; for a small African country, right at the heart of Africa, only 10 years after the most unfair genocides the world has witnessed, to be invited by the organizers, notably the Office of the Special Advisor on Gender Issues and Advancement of Women (OSAGI), the Inter-Parliamentary Union and the Permanent Mission of the United Kingdom of the Norway to the United Nations, to share our experiences at the panel discussion on "The enhancement of women's participation in electoral processes in post-conflict countries".

On behalf of the women of Rwanda, allow me to voice their pleasure and to thank you, the organizers of this event. I do hope that I will be able to deliver the actual experience of the Rwandan women.

Rwanda stormed the world headlines as a country topping the list in the proportion of women parliamentarians (IPU) soon after its first ever-held multiparty elections. The process that Rwanda went through was deemed rather short in comparison with that of other countries but I will highlight some of the more predictable factors that together and synergistically came into play to bring about the current situation.

1. Current Political Commitment to Women's Empowerment in a Historical Perspective

Rwanda's current ruling party, the Rwanda Patriotic Front-Inkotanyi (RPF) has its roots as a liberation movement/struggle born in exile by Rwandans in the Diaspora who had been denied a homeland by successive despotic regimes that ruled Rwanda in the period that overlaps between the colonial period and past independence Rwanda up to and until the 1994 Genocide.

The common denominator among the then Rwandan Diaspora was the desire for social justice, economic and political rights and above all a sense of belonging and national identity.

The history of the current strong political will to promote women within the State of Rwanda as one of its good governance tools is traceable way back into the last decade or so, within the RPF's political ideology. It includes among others, equal opportunity for all Rwandans and more particularly, between women and men.

Many more Rwandans, especially women, joined the party principally because it was perceived as a political party in which everyone could find a voice and recognition.

Women generally got involved both in the military and political wings of the struggle, secured key decision-making positions within RPF party ranks and party women were appointed to many of the RPF's decision-making positions within the Ruling Transition.

Women occupy senior ranks within the Army and the Police force. We have a woman Lieutenant Colonel, and a Deputy Commissioner General of Police.

These and many others were strong political signals such that it is no wonder that today, a woman holds the portfolio of the Minister in the Presidents office, the Minister of Justice is a woman, and above all, the President of the Supreme Court is a woman, to mention but a few examples.

In addition, the RPF leadership relentlessly and aggressively lobbied among other political organizations within the Transitional government for the inclusion of women within State institutions. Gradually, it became fashionable for the other political parties within the ruling transitional government, to recruit women within their party ranks.

2. Consensus on the need to accelerate women to ascend into decision-making organs of the State

According to the General Population and Housing census of August 31st 2002, women in Rwanda account for 52.3% of the total population.

The Transitional government (July 1994 May 2003) embarked on an ambitious reconstruction program, the success of which largely depended on the involvement of everyone, men and women a like. Women were called upon in the demanding tasks of physical and social reconstruction of the nation, social healing, unity and reconciliation, repatriation of refugees, peace building in times of insurgence, justice and governance programs. The Rwandan women proved themselves formidable partners in all aspects of the recovery processes of the nation. No noise was made, no eyebrows were raised, but gender roles had changed.

The challenges of national reconstruction provided good process opportunities for the Rwandan women to demonstrate their abilities and potentials, while providing equally good opportunities to Rwandan society and men, to gradually let go to the traditional prejudices and stereotypes previously cherished.

The earlier elections for the local authority in 1999 and 2001 demonstrated that women were not yet well primed to compete for public office. It was not uncommon to find that even candidates to fill the seats reserved for women only, were hard to come by.

3. Legal Instruments

Although Rwanda is a signatory to many international resolutions, conventions, Declarations, recommendations and provisions on the social, economic and political rights of women, in particular, the Convention on the Elimination of All forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW 1979) the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action adopted at the Fourth World Conference on Women in 1995, the situation of Rwandan women before the application of the new constitutional requirements, had been short of the legal provisions that confer equal rights between women and men.

In spite of the demonstrated good will of the Transitional government to increase women's participation, and progressively establish institutional mechanisms to promote gender equality and improve women's capacities, women were still under-represented and below the required 30% minimum target in strategic decision-making institutions. The following was the actual situation before the enforcement of the new Constitution:

Legislature

- the legislature increased from 17% to 25% of women by the end of the Transition
- 3% of local administrators were women

Executive

19 % of ministers and State Ministers were women, and 25% Secretary Generals were women

Judiciarv

2 out of 6 judges on the Supreme Court were women; of the 4 presidents and 4 vice-presidents of the Court of Appeal, none were women; and only 3 out of 157 Appeal Judges were women.

Civil society

 Under-representation was also apparent among trade unions, cooperatives, professional organizations and grass-roots organizations.

4. Changes Ushered in by the new Constitutional Provisions

The entire text of the new Rwandan Constitution is concerned with equal opportunity and social justice. Above all, the 203 articles are fully engendered and in accordance with the existing international legal instruments.

Part 10 of the preamble reads as follows: "committed to ensuring equal rights between Rwandans and between women and men without prejudice to the principles of gender equality and complementality in national development".

Article 9 of the Constitution spells out its six fundamental principles, which are in essence the pillars of the Rwandan Constitution. The provision begins by stipulating that "The Rwandan state undertakes to conform to the following principles and to uphold them:" and *part 4* continues:

"Building a state governed by the rule of law, a pluralistic democratic government, equality of all Rwandans, and between women and men reflected by ensuring that women are granted at least thirty percent of posts in decision making organs".

Articles 54 and 76 of the Constitution specifically enshrines the Beijing Declaration to allow for quotas and reserved seats for women:

"Article 54. The political organizations must constantly reflect unity of the people of Rwanda and, gender equality and complementarity, whether in the recruitment of members, putting in place organs of leadership and in their operations and activities."

"Article 76. "The Chamber of Deputies is composed of eighty (80) members, as follows:

- 1. Fifty-three (53) are elected in accordance with the provision of Article 77 of this constitution;
- Twenty-four (24) women; that is: two from each province and the city of Kigali. These shall be
 elected by a joint assembly composed members of the respective District Municipality, Town or
 Kigali City Councils and members of the executive committees of women's organizations at the
 provinces, Kigali city, District Municipalities, Towns and Sector levels."

Article 82 refers to the Senate's composition at explicitly allows for "... at least 30% women".

The electoral laws heavily borrowed from the corresponding sections of the Constitution. Thus the different political party lists had to have at least 30% of women candidates.

Articles 185 and 187 establishes the Gender Monitoring Office and the National Council of Women, both of which are institutional mechanisms to safeguard the continued promotion of women as well as a gender approach in national planning.

Today, Rwanda's parliament is bicameral comprising of the Senate and the Chamber of Deputies.

- out of the current 20 Senators, 6 are women (30%)
- out of 80 Deputies, 39 are women (48.8)
- within the Executive, 37% are women
- in the Supreme Court, 41% are women including the President, and
- women head a number of State co-operations.

These strong signals are being echoed in other sectors of the society such that women are increasingly becoming more visible in places where different decisions are made.

5. The role of Women's Organizations as Pressure/Lobby Groups in Enhancing Women's Involvement in National Processes Leading up to Elections

The women of Rwanda were not passive participants but rather active actors throughout the process. The women were quick to respond by establishing mechanisms that strengthened women's capacities in advocacy and lobbying skills, building solidarity with one another and partnerships with men around gender issues.

Women's organizations and networks grouped in the *Collectifs Pro-femmes Twese Hamwe* (41 different associations), The Rwandan Women Leaders Caucus, The Forum for Rwanda Women Parliamentarians (FFRP), The National Council of Women, as well the Ministry of Gender and Women Promotion, together and in a concerted effort achieved the following:

- reviewed and lobbied for the repeal of all laws that subscribed to inequalities or any other forms
 of discrimination against women such as issues of nationality, property ownership, family
 relations etc
- mainstreamed a gender approach in all national planning
- ensured that all national budgets are engendered
- sensitized the population at large and women in particular to the existing inequalities between men and women, boys and girls eg right to education, access and right to inherit property including land,
- educated leaders and planners, both men and women on gender issues, concepts, tools etc,
- devised the national gender policy as the road map to achieving equity in the Rwandan society.
- mobilized women to give their views during the constitution drafting process, to turn up in big numbers for the voting processes, as well as running for political office.

Allow me to use a few examples of some of these women groups to explain the kind of response made by the Rwanda Women.

The Rwandan Women Parliamentary forum (FFRP), with financial assistance from its international partners, was able to visit and learn from the experiences in the Parliaments of Norway and Sweden (AWEPA).

Technical and financial assistance from the IPU enabled us to bring the different women's groups together with members of parliament including men, and charter the best strategies on how to engender the new constitution. A women's committee was formed from across the various women's groups and carried out nation-wide training, awareness building and sensitization on the constitution. Grassroots consultative processes resulted in a women's memorandum to the Constitutional Commission that voiced the wishes and aspirations of the Rwandan women.

The mobilization was so successful that over 240 women candidates competed for the 24 women only seats. In addition, women offered the use of their Kitenge robes to the Electoral Commission to be used to provide for privacy in the voting rooms.

6. Challenges/ difficulties faced by women in the electoral process and Solutions:

Literacy levels are still low in rural Rwanda and the problem is more pronounced among women. Only 47% are literate compared to 58.1% literate men.

Dealing with an illiterate electorate presents its own difficulties and becomes worse when women are involved. The more literate men tend to lead the women's opinion such that a woman will be inclined to vote for the husband's choice.

The women were educated on the benefits of the secret ballot and were assured that nobody would get to know their choice.

There was also the issue of urban living women easily outwitting the more rural women and the male electorate almost invariably voted in favor of the urban ones. This was minimized through the use of women's grassroots organizations that voted for the ones they knew best, their fellow rural woman.

Small political parties got into electoral coalitions to ensure that they obtained the minimum vote of 5% of the electorate. The line up was such that the minimum 30% of women was observed.

In as far as legal provisions were concerned, the rules had been set and were very clear, no major difficulties but the practice was not always smooth.

Male colleagues were usually better connected with wider networks among the local administration and local communities than women.

The campaign business and terrain seemed to favor the more male behavior, like staying overnight outside the home environment, after, the campaigns, and rallies, men found it much easier to relate to the electorate in social evenings much better than women.

At rallies, male colleagues were quite often perceived and judged to be 'better' candidates by the electorate; women candidates were not a familiar phenomenon. It is true that men and society are gradually accepting women in the public domain; traditional residual thinking can still be detected even among fellow women.

At some rallies, campaign tools could be in short supply like voice amplifiers; in such cases, women's voices were clearly at a disadvantage.

Fortunately, our electoral laws were such that you could not be out competed by a candidate on the same party list or within the same coalition lists because the list line up was not changeable.

7. The Role of none State Actors in preparing Women's for enhanced Participation in the political processes in Rwanda.

It can be said that the women of Rwanda owned the process of enhancing their capacities to engage in the decision-making roles during the constitution drafting process and this heavily curved and shaped the electoral processes.

However, this would not have been possible without the technical and financial assistance and above all, encouragement of our international partners.

We are highly indebted to all our partners but I will only mention those that closely worked with the Forum for Women Parliamentarians because they are among those that I directly interacted with: USAID, DFID, IPU, UNDP, AWEPA, International Alert, to mention but a few.

Lastly and not least, the experiential learning the Rwanda women parliamentarians received from visiting both the Norwegian and Swedish Parliaments, the role models and experience we received from our sister members of parliaments from Kenya, Republic of South Africa and Uganda, all were instrumental in bringing more women into our Parliament.

8. Lessons from the Rwandan Scenario

- Rwanda went through a transitional period of 9 years, from extreme violence to a stable secure environment with the rule of law. The net effect on Rwandans was that they became very responsive to changes in mindsets. It is important to take full advantage of this receptive period and introduce changes especially during the drafting of a new constitution. It is the right time to enshrine international legal instruments and to include safe guards that promote/enhance women's participation.
- The electoral laws must contain clear safeguards to promote and protect women's participation.
- Building coalitions and solidarity among women groups and lobby the men who lead opinion. From
 the outset, the women of Rwanda realized that they lose out most, together with their children, in
 conflict situations and this became a binding force among women, across party and ethnic lines.
 Peace and security were campaign issues women voted for in the last elections.
- Guarding against women who easily fall out of women's common agenda and become side tracked by men's designed agendas. They usually serve to spread and divide the votes.
- International partnerships and outreach are very important in puts; technically, financially and role modeling.