

# **Liberating the Rwandan woman – To whom will President Kagame smuggle ammunition? – Part I**

After the Genocide against the Tutsi in 1994, the RPF pushed for equal representation of women in leadership. Inclusiveness was critical to ensuring that no one was left behind since discrimination based on ethnicity, gender or regional identities had eroded the social fabric. In this sense, quotas to ensure the representation of women were enshrined in the constitution as one of the measures to reflect a new inclusive culture and a set of values promoting equality before the law, as well as equal opportunities for all Rwandans.

Obviously, while recognizing the importance of unity and inclusion of all Rwandans in the political and economic life of the country, the RPF-led government considered women participation as an imperative with inestimable benefits for society. Women had to have the fair share not only because they had fought and paid a heavy price for the birth of the new Rwanda, but also because they were entitled to full citizenship rights. Today a little more than 61% of MPs are women—the highest in the world.

Naturally, people assumed that in a traditionally patriarchal society where women had little say in key decisions affecting their lives and families and were subjected to gender and sexual violence, equal representation would instantly level the field or, at the very least, significantly improve the condition of women in society. It was assumed that high-ranking decision-making institutions with such a level of representation for women would deal more effectively with challenges that disproportionately affect womenfolk. Not only

were such institutions expected to prioritize the concerns of women, but they were also expected to be emotionally empathetic and intellectually informed about historical predicaments and cultural limitations that resisted – and still resist – meaningful change and essential freedoms for women.

Consequently, a high percentage of women representation was not an end in itself. It was a means to an end; a tool whose effectiveness could be measured against impactful change on the condition of ordinary women in Rwandan society. Otherwise, the concept of “representation” loses its entire meaning. Rather than seeking change in the conditions of those who represent, the concept of representation should seek change in the lives of those who are represented.

For instance, it is saddening when one looks at the numbers of victims of gender-based violence and teenage pregnancies provided by different institutions. In 2016, about 17000 cases of teenage pregnancy were recorded, according to Imbuto Foundation. Data (2014-15) from the National Institute of Statistics (NISR) shows that for one in five 19-year-old girls has given birth or is pregnant.

What is more, [gender-based violence cases alone increased from 4124 to 5013 two years ago in 2018, according to Rwanda's justice minister](#), Johnson Busingye. The numbers are likely higher today. These numbers seem to suggest that a pandemic is underway. Worse, it seems there's no cure any time soon. The laws are not effective in deterring the violence. Which begs the question: If the laws and policies put in place to curb gender-based violence and teenage pregnancies are not as effective as they seemed when they were promulgated, then it is only logical to conclude that those who fronted them didn't carry with them the adequate emotional empathy of the victims in particular and the conditions of women in patriarchal societies in general. Who would know more about these than the representatives of women? Besides, if there was any oversight

at the front end of the legislative process and decision making, how did the concept of representation come to bear in checking for the effectiveness at the back end? Or was it a matter of appearances that “something is being done”?

A good place to start would be meeting with women in our local communities, hearing their concerns, and from there finding a cure from these views. However, this cannot happen from the legislative offices in Kigali. Effective representation must return to the grassroots if it isn't only meant for window-dressing.

President Kagame recently underscored that the country is facing two pandemics: corruption and coronavirus. From the perspective of women, the most detrimental corruption we are facing includes sexual harassment. It is making the workplace a toxic environment and a site of violence, physical and emotional. Gender-based violence and teenage pregnancies constitute another form of corruption in society. Moreover, representation that isn't attuned to the priorities of the represented is corrupt. For this reason, the demand to end corruption includes calling out women representatives in parliament and other areas of leadership to bring the perspectives of women on the high table – to “represent.” Valid as the argument is that the issue of women should concern men is, this argument assumes that the agency of the most affected – in this case women's agency – has no value and undercuts the very essence of representation. Indeed, it's an argument for the removal of the quota system.

Rather than integrate themselves into the patriarchal logic of our society that is toxic to women emancipation, they ought to bring a new paradigm for a society where women and girls would feel safe and protected from any form of gender-based violence. Women in Rwanda have a valuable ally in President Kagame. It seems the president is ready to support women, only if they are ready to fight for their liberation.

“If oppressed women should wage a war, I would readily smuggle ammunition to them for it would be a justified war” Kagame said in his biography that was written by the French journalist Francois Soudan. If Kagame isn’t smuggling ammunition, then it means women in leadership, parliament and elsewhere, are not waging war for this just cause of women liberation.