

Rwanda works because women have remained central to the country's liberation

What we tend to see is that after liberation struggles have been successful, women are relegated back to the 'kitchen'. Women then have to fight their brothers in arms for equal status. In Rwanda, this was not the case. Why? It's the story of a receipt.

Recently, someone told me a story about the late Aloisea Inyumba. In 1991, the liberation struggle was just beginning. The Rwandan Patriotic Army (RPA), which would later stop the Genocide of the Tutsi in 1994, had suffered heavy casualties including of its leader in the first offensive.

Off the battlefield, the RPA was also suffering. Morale was low and the financial situation was precarious. In this environment, Inyumba and countless other women and men went across Uganda, Zaire, Burundi, Tanzania and many other countries, all over the world, to collect funds and in-kind contributions. They also went to recruit young men and women for the war.

Late one night in Kampala, Inyumba met a man to collect his pledge. The person was not an RPF (Rwandan Patriotic Front) member yet. Inyumba, with much emotion after seeing the amount in the envelope, told him that he could not understand what he had just done, and promised him a receipt. The person lived very far away so he shrugged, embarrassed by her gratitude. A few months later, someone came to see him at work and passed him an envelope in hushed tones. He opened it and found a receipt. A few days later, he became an RPF member. "Her accountability convinced me that even in war, these details mattered."

If you have watched movies where there is some sort of military training, you will remember the part of soldiers jumping over a wooden wall with heavy backpacks and guns. You will notice that the first soldier doesn't jump right away, but takes a knee and either shoulders the next soldier or uses his palmed hands to lift up the next soldier in line. This means that the first soldier will often be last up the wall, pulled up by those who have already gone over. This analogy reminds me of the men and women who stopped the Genocide of the Tutsi and liberated Rwanda.

Today, we are jumping over what seems like insurmountable walls, spring boarded by the example and sacrifices of women and men who chose to, according to President Paul Kagame, "stay together, to be accountable, and to think big." Unity. Accountability. Vision.

A few years ago, I asked my aunt, who was one of those young women who traveled at night in the eastern DRC for the cause, why she did it. "I felt that if people were giving their lives so we could have a country, I also needed to take courage, and do something, however small it was." This is Agaciro – the dignity you give yourself through choices, hard work, personal accountability and sacrifice.

This sense of personal responsibility and the urgency of the situation brought many women into the liberation ranks as soldiers, officers, doctors, nurses, fundraisers, trainers, cooks etc. The RPF, like other African liberation movements, had women in the highest ranks of leadership.

Women at the center of reconstruction

Women became central to the reconstruction of Rwanda. Women led the efforts around unity and reconciliation. In fact, Pro-Femme Twese Hamwe, an umbrella organization of women's rights groups, was instrumental in training Abunzi, the Gacaca court citizen judges, ensuring that there were at least 30-40

percent women.

In every sector you look in Rwanda, health, tourism, agriculture, ICT, you will see female leadership backed up by strong allies from the very top. In his book "Conversations with the President of Rwanda", François Soudan asks President Paul Kagame why the issue of women's right is so important to him. He answers, "Frankly, if I were a woman, I would have waged a war a long time ago to liberate women, as I did to liberate my country. If oppressed women should wage a war, I would readily smuggle ammunition to them, for it would be a justified war" (2015: 104).

Increased female leadership brings better outcomes for society

Our female led Parliament is a result of a deliberate view in the RPF that increased female leadership brings about better outcomes for society. Today, there is growing research around women-led businesses doing better.

But leadership is not just about political representation. It is about deciding to do something and pay the price for a purpose greater than ourselves. In our case, as was with our elders, the purpose is a thriving Rwanda where all Rwandans live a decent life, and a thriving Africa that takes its place in the world, leading with Ubuntu.

The point is that it must cost you something, personally. The path is not straight forward so where does one start? We seem to forget that our liberation heroes were also young like us, or younger. We already have a better starting point. We have a country, good leaders. But the struggle towards a sustainable knowledge-led economy that we have set out as a pursuit for our generation continues. The question to ask is, what can I do? And then do it.

As for the women today, it is true that we did not inherit the silence of our mothers but we must emulate their endurance, courage and clarity of purpose. It's not about the trees, it's

about the forest.

The experiences of other liberation movements should teach us to be vigilant. Inyumba, like our women leaders today, was central to the cause. We need to sit at the table and lead without complex. Our goal is total liberation. A luta continua.

Happy 25th Liberation Day to all Rwandans! Thank you Inkotanyi.

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