

Women leadership in Rwanda: Cosmetic or substantive? – Part II

There are two views on women's representation in political leadership in Rwanda. One view dismisses the contributions of women in leadership as being a cosmetic public relations stunt that has done nothing for women and the country. The other view gets women in leadership off the hook by suggesting that to demand that they take leadership on matters that disproportionately affect women is to ignore the reality that as long as society is patriarchal any proportion of women, however many, will still be dominated by men, however few. Both are wrong. The former is a cynical view driven by political opportunism; the latter is patronising.

The first view is fronted by women in political opposition who seek to pull the rug from under their fellow women. "So, what if Rwanda has the highest percentage of women in parliament? It's really just part of the image. Because what do these women do?" Ms. Diane Rwigara, a prototype of proponents of this view, said in her interview with The Guardian, dismissing the contribution of women to nation-building as mere "window-dressing."

Women in leadership cannot be window dressing for a number of reasons that should be obvious to reason. One, the representation of women in institutions is a right attached to citizenship and, therefore, guaranteed by the Constitution. In this sense, representation is "natural" and, obviously, a human right. It is right that has long been denied to women in patriarchal societies that questioned their ability to be leaders and even less so, effective ones.

In this sense, their presence in itself constitutes an

undeniable progress because it signals a change of mindset in that regard, a return of what naturally belongs to women. In other words, it's justice.

Second, it would be absurd for anyone to claim that Rwanda's reconstruction after genocide and the socioeconomic progress registered thereafter is entirely the work of men. What is undeniable is that women have been an essential driver of socioeconomic transformation. If the quality of leadership is key to socioeconomic transformation and women have been part of the leadership that has occasioned significant change, then their role in that transformation cannot be discounted as window-dressing. Women have been in science and technology, medicine, engineering, the police and army, in private sector decision-making, etc. Only cynical bitterness would render one oblivious to these incontrovertible facts. Otherwise, Rwandan society owes much to women – as it does men – for rebuilding a country that was materially and morally torn to ashes only a generation ago. To erase their contribution and make believe that their presence is only cosmetic is ignorance at best, and an intention to cause harm at worst. This second point is complementary to the first: Women have a right to leadership and, even without needing to, have proven that they deserve to be where they are.

Third, symbols are as important as substance in human relations. From an entirely symbolic point of view, the presence of women in positions of power is a strong signal addressed to young girls who are now growing up in a society that whispers in their ears that no place is inaccessible, if they allow themselves to dream and work to achieve their dreams. In other words, the presence of women in places of leadership nurtures the dreams of future generations, a presence that slams down the mental barriers that hindered young girls' imagination. It also teaches young boys to respect the ambitions of girls and to, as a result, nurture healthy gender relations of mutual respect.

What number triggers responsibility?

However, none of this should acquiesce the patronising of women to the notion that as long as society is patriarchal their views, and aspirations, will always be dominated by the views (and aspirations) of men even when women outnumber men. This view implies that even a setting that has 90% women and 10% men will still produce the aspirations of men. How is that not condescending to those women present in such a setting? Moreover, it begs the question: "What number triggers responsibility?" for prioritizing issues that disproportionately affect women?

I contend that this attitude that patronises women leaders by seeking to "protect them" from criticism, although well intentioned, demobilizes those who would otherwise be willing to challenge culture and social norms that still hinder the well-being of the ordinary Rwandan woman. Accordingly, issues like gender based violence, rape and teen pregnancy, among others, have reached the level of crisis because those who should provide leadership for administrative and cultural change haven't heard this loud call for duty and keep looking behind their shoulders for leaders to emerge and take responsibility. I have news for them. They are who they are waiting for.

One is reminded of President Kagame's remarks as he addressed the National Women Council in 2010. "Rwanda's interest is not just in numbers but quality," Kagame said, adding "There are stones but when a stone is gold, it is also referred to as a precious stone. We are not just interested in having Rwandan women, but quality Rwandan women." Whoever shields women in leadership from the responsibility of leading on matters that disproportionately affect women has not understood society's trust in the qualities that have earned those women leaders the privilege to hold positions of responsibility. This view assumes that women have made progress and should be satisfied with this accommodation rather than rattle feathers with over-

ambition.

Rwandan women have proven to be quality women since the sunrise of the liberation struggle and today, they are being asked to put on their combat gear once again on issues that disproportionately affect women. This time history calls upon them to dedicate their lives to dismantling a system of thought and practice that raises boys and men to be an obstacle to the total liberation of girls and women, an entrenched system that has historically recruited women to act as its staunchest guardians, if not accomplices. In other words, it's not a struggle waged against men but rather a struggle to free women and rescue men from a toxic system they have built that extends them petty privileges at the cost of their humanity.

However, it is a struggle that belongs to women against society demanding that their sensibilities and perspectives are valid contributions to challenges facing society. It is the uncompromising demand for the recognition that all society's problems affect women and girls in a unique and particular way, and that this perspective must be accounted for in engineering social change. In other words, that women's views will carry the day on matters that disproportionately affect women. Under normal circumstances this would be a just social contract; however, patriarchy (toxic men and compromised women) insists, without reason and evidence, that men understand better the challenges faced by women.

This is a historical struggle that has no place for cynical political opportunism that dismisses the contribution made by women to national transformation; neither is history on the side of patronising attitudes that shield women in leadership from responsibility of leading on issues that disproportionately affect women because the frontline is not a woman's place.

[Liberating the Rwandan woman – To whom will President Kagame](#)

smuggle ammunition? – Part I