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## Rwanda: Rural Women are at the Forefront of the Country's Development Miracle

BY DIDIER BIKORIMANA, 21 APRIL 2012

SITTING under the shade of a mango tree, Agnes Uyisabye is reviewing the lists of beneficiaries of the country's health insurance scheme alongside a dozen or so grassroots community health workers.

Uyisabye, 35, is a grassroots leader in Kansi sector, in southern Rwanda. For the last nine years, she has been in charge of social affairs in the local Umudugudu, Rwanda's smallest administrative unit, in this case overseeing 896 people spread across 204 households. It is an unpaid role but Uyisabye does not mind.

She slides her Igitenge, a traditional cloth worn over her clothes, to one side to reveal a mobile telephone in her skirt pocket - used in emergencies to contact hospitals and health centres - and touches her blue and red shirt with pride. On her shirt, in Kinyarwanda, reads the message: "Uprooting malaria in Rwanda is the responsibility of us all".

Typically her role includes making sure that sick people in the neighbourhood get to hospitals or nearby health centres, advising pregnant women to go for antenatal consultations and administering treatment in minor cases of illness. She is not a qualified health worker but has had some basic training to diagnose ailments.

"Our neighbours vote for us as people with integrity," she says. "They also vote for us because they need us to serve them. So even if we are not paid, we can't afford to disappoint them," she says.

Uyisabye, a mother-of-four with a primary school education, was elected to her role in 2003.

"I was not surprised when I was elected," she says.

"[As a local leader] I now have more exposure than ever before. I follow the news and I can even speak to you journalists, whom I would have been afraid of before I became a leader," Uyisabye says, smiling.

Her husband, Vincent Niyonambaza, 39, says he now knows more about government policy. "When she goes to a meeting, she comes back telling me how important it is for our family to have mosquito nets to fight against malaria, to pay for health insurance and have a garden of vegetables to fight against malnutrition," he says. "Things have now changed. When my wife goes to the meetings, I look after our children. This is gender equality ... this is development."

Women like Agnes have played an important role in rebuilding and leading Rwanda since the 1994 Genocide, from the grassroots, to the highest tiers of Parliament.

The country made history in 2008, when 45 women were elected out of 80 members of parliament. At 56 per cent this is by far the highest percentage of women MPs in any government in the world. The constitution of Rwanda, adopted in 2003, states that at least 30 per cent of posts in "decision-making organs" must go to

women and this can be seen across the country. This is not lip service to gender equality. In elections for district and sector council officials last year, women won 43.2 per cent of district and Kigali City advisory posts. Women lead a third of Rwanda's ministries, including Foreign Affairs, Agriculture and Health and every Police station in Rwanda has a "gender desk" to take reports of violence against women, as does the national Army.

Alphonsine Mukarugema is head of the Rwanda Women Parliamentary Forum (RWPF). First elected in 2003, she is an MP in the Commission of Politics and Gender at Rwanda's Parliament.

"Our great number [of women in parliament] helps a lot with pro-women legislation. We initiated a number of laws, namely to fight against gender based violence, and made amendments of existing laws that had some injustice in them. So today, girls are able to inherit the property of their parents, including land," she adds - a rarity in many parts of Africa. "We influence activities in Parliament and make sure that the laws being passed are gender sensitive, and see if the budget looks at both women and men alike."

Female leaders in the country's senior administrative positions are an inspiration for younger generations.

Just next door to Agnes' sector is Mukura, in Huye district, where Aimée Carine Kura, 15, and Valentine Kampire, 18, live. Every weekday Carine and Valentine, together with their neighbour, Fabrice Ishimwe, aged 15, walk three hours back-and-forth to reach Regina Pacis Secondary School, in the nearby sector of Tumba, a suburb of Butare town.

"Louise Mushikiwabo [Rwanda's foreign minister] gives me hope that I can also be in her position in the future," says Valentine, who is in her second year, nodding her head emphatically, as I walk with the three of them, in their white and blue school uniforms, back to their home sector of Mukura, after class.

Mushikiwabo has become such an icon that some men, while chatting, say, in pubs, change her name "Mushikiwabo" which means "their sister" in Kinyarwanda, into "Mushikiwacu", to mean "our sister" in Kinyarwanda.

"Today women are treated in just the same way as men and this gives us confidence that we can make things happen as well," says Carine.

However, first year student Fabrice, says he has lost out thanks to positive discrimination in favour of women. When he got his national exam results last year he saw girls with lower result than him get places at prestigious state boarding schools because the schools needed to fill quotas.

"I get sad when I see girls who scored lower grades than me or even the same as me now studying in boarding schools whereas I am not", he said, gripping his school bag.

The girls say they don't need this positive discrimination anymore and that it is shaming to them as they feel confident enough to compete with their male counterparts on equal footing.

Certainly in terms of enrollment in schools, girls and boys are on a par in Rwanda - unusual in Africa where most countries have much lower numbers of girls in class and therefore lower literacy levels among women.

In Rwanda, 77 per cent of all 15 to 24-year-olds - irrespective of what sex they are - can read and write as of 2005-2010, according to UNICEF. Primary school enrollment is in fact slightly higher for girls - 97 per cent compared with 95 per cent for boys, as is attendance at 87 per cent and 84 per cent respectively. However, these figures drop off significantly in secondary school and there are fewer women at university. Girls are not dropping out of school because they lack intelligence or the will to learn, according to the Rwanda Association of University Women, they are dropping out because they hold all the household responsibilities. Equal access, say campaigners, but not equal opportunity.

Usta Kaitesi, a teacher of Gender and Law and Vice-Dean of Post-graduate Research and Consultancy in the Faculty of Law at the National University of Rwanda, says political will was lacking in the years up to the 1994 Genocide against the Tutsi, even though the country had already signed the 1978 UN Convention prohibiting all discrimination against women.

"Generally, there was an environment of tolerating discrimination based on ethnicity, religion - and discrimination against women was one area of discrimination," she says.

Nowadays, she says, "There is political will to avoid discrimination in Rwanda, and that will give a legal direction."

"Most countries do have good laws, laws that don't have any form of injustice but the application of such laws is another issue altogether," she adds. "So in Rwanda there is a political will to empower women and women are quite aware of their role to play in society."

The Genocide, she says, also played a role in the women empowerment.

"Many women were left as widows because of the Genocide. Others had to work hard in the place of their jailed husbands for allegedly taking part in the Genocide. So even young girls got that mentality to perform genuinely to access good jobs, and good jobs means going to school first," she said.

President Paul Kagame credits women's empowerment for the strides Rwanda has made in terms of development. In the last five years one million Rwandans have emerged from poverty, with poverty rates falling from 56.7 per cent in 2005/6 to 44.9 per cent in 2009/10.

The confidence that girls like Carine and Valentine have should not be underestimated.

"Before, girls were not a priority for education and women could not own property," says Berra Kabarungi, Country Director for the international charity Women For Women.

"There was a culture that did not allow women to speak in public. It was considered arrogant, not humble or respectful. Women feared to speak in public because it was shameful. Now it is normal for women to speak in meetings, for women even to be leaders in meetings. Men no longer look at them with a critical or ridiculing eye.

"The Constitution opened the door for women to speak and for educated women to educate other women. Now women have the power to participate in leadership, to own property, to get loans in banks, to claim property from their parents. Before the constitution this was not possible.

"It also opened the door for organisations like Women For Women to teach women about their rights and about domestic violence."

Irena Mukansoneye lives a stone's throw from Carine, Valentine and Fabrice. As I asked for her birth date, she gave me estimates, pointing to the time of one of the kings of the traditional Rwanda, King Rudahigwa. It was only when I saw her ID card that I saw she was 78 years old.

"In our time, girls were disfavoured and boys were given more value. Most parents regarded girls as people who could benefit their husbands, not their parents," Irena recalls, leaning on a walking stick for support. "But today laws have come, and girls go to school in as great number as boys," Irena continues. "I see this as development," she concludes.