



ensure females an equal shot. These systems created a floor, but not a ceiling, for women's participation.

Female members of the constitutional drafting commission and in Parliament point out that Rwanda's focus on inclusion owes much to the RPF members' earlier exposure to Uganda's gender equality promotion while living in exile. In 1989, that country was reserving one female seat from each district, resulting in a minimum of 14 percent in Parliament. Men and women in the RPF also watched carefully as Nelson Mandela's powerful African National Congress became the new leading party in postapartheid South Africa; women there won 26 percent of seats in Parliament in their first democratic elections, only days before the Rwandan slaughter began.

Seven years later, when the concept of a quota for women came into play in Rwanda during the drafting of the constitution, the country already had experience with women in leadership roles. But activists saw the chance to expand women's involvement and ensure it wouldn't slip if political will shifted. Fundamentally, this quota would be a tool to launch women into leadership, giving them the chance to prove their value as political equals while the culture caught up.

There was discussion about parity, the ideal, but you don't start social change like that. DOMITILLA served on the constitutional drafting commission alongside Judith and Marie Therese. You have to go more slowly. Do something, then give people time to get used to it. You have to be progressive, but also manage the shock.

The quota was about numbers, but it was also about much more.

It's really important to have provisions like the quota in the constitution so that we can stipulate, we can push, we can make it mandatory for each step in the life of this country to have women participating.

We put it in, first of all, because women are equal to men. They're different, but when it comes to studying, working, rights, they are equal. The big challenge was our culture. Parents think when they have a boy and a girl, they have to educate the boy.

But also, the idea of the quota was necessary because women were not so sure of themselves. You know, they think public life is for men and not women. So it was important for the constitution to make it mandatory that whatever



you're planning, you have to think about women. With time, people will get used to seeing women involved.

Typical of many Rwandans, fifteen years later Domitilla sees the cultural change already in action. Now when I'm advertising a job, I have female and male candidates. It wasn't always that way, so it's good to have a legal basis, which is binding. Now women can say, "This is our right. This is our part. Here we are!"—and no one disputes it.

But some did dispute it. **MARIE THERESE** adds her perspective as one of the constitution drafters. Since Rwandans had seen women taking on important public roles after the carnage, it wouldn't be a stretch, she thought, to reinforce their progress through tools like a quota. But thorny questions came up during the community consultations.

I remember one time, maybe in the outskirts of Kigali, some people said, "Okay, these things promoting women's rights are good, but we have to be careful not to confuse their rights with a kind of revolution."

Some people would say women have a role to play and have capacity, but it would be bad if they stopped acting like women and forgot their responsibilities as mothers and sisters. I remember one man saying he supports giving rights to women, but he'll be alarmed if the next night he sees his young daughter going out wearing a short skirt, not obeying their household rules because she's now free.

In the end, at one meeting some elders described how in the precolonial period women played an important role in governing, although behind the husband; so on the outside it looked like a man, as king or chief, was ruling, but really the hand of a woman was very influential.

The sentiment was that it's good for women to be educated, to have opportunities, but we have to also consider our society. The positive parts of our culture need to be promoted at the same time. It wasn't controversy really—more like an awareness of our culture.

That balancing act would be a constant feature of women's rise.

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Four months after the May 2003 constitutional referendum, Rwanda held its first parliamentary election since the butchery. Female candidates and voters turned out in a big way, and women won 48.8 percent of the seats in the lower house of Parliament, far surpassing the newly mandated 30 percent.





like us, and private sector. As we sit together, we can strategize about electing more women. The biggest challenges are funding, consolidating, helping newly elected women better understand their roles, promoting them in the community. We've trained all the women leaders in urban Kigali, and we're joining them with women elsewhere.

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Beatrice, Oda, Mary—three voices represent countless more. The changes in Rwanda that elevated the voices of rural women were not incidental. They required vision, hard work, and perseverance.

Here's a snapshot of the impact: In only seven years—nourished by a stew of the triple-ballot experiment, constitutional quota, top government pull, women's councils, gender ministry, decentralization, role modeling, sisters' coaxing—women doubled their local representation. A virtuous circle formed. Local officials rose to higher roles, gaining influence to make decisions that helped others follow in their footsteps. As years went by, that upward flow required less and less of a push. To use an American metaphor, the glass ceiling had been cracked, and the women streamed through.

Women wouldn't have accepted genocide, even if men proposed the idea. **ALPHONSINE M.** builds on that thought. *When I entered local government, and then when I entered Parliament, it was because of that conviction.* It's a nervy assertion, that women's sharing leadership could have dodged a cataclysm, but she frames it with this explanation: *Women are sensible, and they're conscious of the problems of others. They raise children, and they know that when a war comes—when a genocide comes—it will be those children who will suffer, who will fight.* Indeed, like the women she's describing, Alphonsine does more than opine. *That's what motivated us to go back to the grass roots.*

Before the collapse of the country, although they were indispensable in family and fields, women generally had no legal protection, and their voices were heard only behind the scenes. As war brewed, they felt powerless to stop those (mostly men) who were becoming crazed by the pos-



sibility of power. Yes, in the genocide there had been a few notorious female masterminds and perpetrators, but, in general, women didn't see themselves among those steering their country into an abyss. Now they had the opportunity to be at the metaphorical—and literal—table where issues of life and death are debated and decided.

Alphonsine is one more firm voice supporting a different, fundamental point expressed by many directly and indirectly, in simpler or more complex ways: the value of gender balance is ultimately not about numbers; it's about the wisdom of seeking out people with a wide variety of perspectives, values, life stories, social roles, and other differences.

Those differences include the ease with which women (as a group) form close relationships, compared to men (as a group). Women like **KIRABO**. Although many women progressed in the direction of Alphonsine, from local to national spots, then reached back to bring up more women, Kirabo shifted in whichever direction made more sense to her at the time. She cut short her time in Parliament when she saw the government's decentralizing of authority from national to local offering a chance to lead with a different style as Kigali's mayor. A year into the job, she explained, *This is an opportunity to contribute in a way that's more tangible than legislative. I requested permission to leave Parliament to campaign for about two months. Every day people would ask, "Exactly what are you about?" "Why are you leaving Parliament?" "What would you bring to a new position?" That made me reflect much more deeply on the possible move, which I'm happy to say I've never regretted.*

Being mayor is challenging; every day has its surprises. But it's also energizing as I realize how much others in the country, at all levels, are doing. With a listening ear and the right environment, they'll pull it off.

Maybe Kirabo's experience as a veterinarian for the community reinforced her nurturing tendencies. In a barter economy, where cows or other livestock have been a measure of wealth, Kirabo served as the equivalent of a money manager. Most Rwandans are subsistence farmers, so the person who could keep one cow or three goats alive was enormously important, central to the well-being of a family. She was the protector of their sustenance. Now, as mayor, she was again central to a community. *The good news is that the process at this level is more partic-*