With nearly 30 years of experience in gender justice and using the law as a tool for social change, Jennet Kem has dedicated her life to defending the rights of women and girls across Africa and beyond. Since taking office as UN Women Country Representative to Rwanda in April 2022, she has engaged with the country's approach to leadership and accountability in promoting gender equality, at a time when such progress is increasingly under threat in many parts of the world. In this exclusive interview with *Rwanda Dispatch*, Jennet reflects on policy, progress, and personal experiences that continue to drive her work.

Excerpts:

Can you briefly tell us about yourself and how your background led you to work in the field of gender equality?

I'm Jennet Kem, the UN Women Representative in Rwanda. More than just an advocate for gender equality, I have been closely involved in the design, implementation, and monitoring of gender policies for nearly 30 years. My academic background is in law, complemented by professional training in social administration. During my studies, I focused on juvenile delinquency and gender justice, shaping the course of my career. I have devoted my life to using the law as a powerful tool for social transformation, especially in protecting women, children, and vulnerable groups.

Since your appointment in April 2022, what has been your experience working in Rwanda? How would you describe the country's approach to gender equality?

Arriving in Rwanda, I was already familiar with the country's global reputation as a leader in gender equality, especially in parliamentary representation. But what struck me immediately was the genuine and profound commitment across all levels, government, institutions, and communities alike.One of my earliest experiences was attending the 25th anniversary of the Women's Parliamentary Forum. Hearing their story from the difficult post-genocide recovery period to the present, highlighted three main enablers behind Rwanda's progress:

First, the leadership at the highest level, notably from His Excellency the President, a prominent HeForShe champion. Secondly, the robust legal, policy, and institutional frameworks, including a gender-responsive constitution and national gender policies, and thirdly, strong National Gender Machinery and Accountability

mechanisms spanning from local communities to national government.

I was particularly impressed by Gender Accountability Days (GADs), during which local leaders report on gender outcomes at the village level. Such structured local ownership of gender issues is rare. Rwanda also consistently reports to global platforms like the UN's Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and the Commission on the Status of Women, demonstrating a culture of transparency and accountability on their commitment to gender equality, women's rights and empowerment.



What main challenges does Rwanda still face in advancing gender equality despite the progress achieved?

Several challenges persist. First, social norms and mindsets remain a barrier. For example, unpaid care work, primarily undertaken by women, is still undervalued. Many women themselves do not see caregiving as "real work" because society fails to recognize it as such.

Second, violence against women and girls is a persistent problem. Deep-rooted power imbalances and harmful cultural interpretations of men as heads of households, often leads to abuse of power and perpetuate this violence. Third, financing for gender equality is insufficient despite clear evidence of its socioeconomic benefits. Lastly, there is a gap in the implementation of existing laws and policies. Rwanda has strong frameworks, but translating legislation into effective action is often hindered by limited capacity and resources.

How is UN Women Rwanda working to address and reduce gender-based violence, and what specific initiatives are you supporting?

Gender-based violence is a main barrier to achieving gender equality. Our approach targets three pillars; prevention, protection, and the provision of services. One innovative intervention is the Isange One Stop Centre, launched in 2009 with support from the government and partners. These centers provide comprehensive services for survivors of gender-based violence, including legal aid, psychosocial counseling, and forensic services. The model is internationally recognized and has inspired similar initiatives in other countries.

On the prevention front, we work closely with the Ministry of Gender and Family

Promotion (MIGEPROF) to promote gender-accountable villages and facilitate community and household dialogues that challenge harmful social norms. We have also innovated by addressing GBV in non-traditional sectors such as mining. We found high rates of violence within the industry and partnered with (MIGEPROF) and the Recycling Union of Extractive Workers (REWU) to develop support strategies for female miners, including tailored services for working mothers.

Have there been any personal stories from women or girls in Rwanda that have deeply moved you or reinforced your commitment to this work?

There are countless stories that move me sincerely. One of the most powerful moments is hearing from young girls who have benefited from education, training, and mentorship programs. These stories reveal the real, human impact. For example, I was recently invited to the First Lady's event honoring the best-performing girls in education. Listening to girls from rural areas who were selected and supported to pursue careers as pilots, medical doctors, and military officers gave me goosebumps. Many of these girls might never have made it beyond primary school if not for targeted support for top students.

Similarly, through initiatives like the **Young Female Graduates Mentorship Programme,** implemented with Rwanda Association of Local Government Authorities (RALGA) and MIGEPROF, we have supported girls from university graduation through local mentorships that help them gain hands-on experience. One young woman, after completing her mentorship, was employed by a local council and went on to run for a leadership position. She became a Councilor, with aspirations even to become a parliamentarian. In the same light are the amazing stories of young girls between the ages of 13-17, alumni of the African Girls Can Code Initiative (AGCCI), co-creating and delivering digital solutions to health, Gender-based violence, climate change and financial inclusion challenges. This Pan-African Initiative is implemented in collaboration with MIGEPROF, MINICT, MIEDUC. These success stories, often shared at graduation ceremonies and youth knowledge-sharing events, continually remind me of the transformational power of empowerment.

I am inspired by women leaders who emerged after the 1994 genocide. Their journeys embody resilience, determination, and love for their country. Projects like the "Basket Weaving for Peace" initiative, supported by UN Women (then the United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM), turned indigenous skills into symbols of peace and solidarity. This creative approach helped women channel

their strengths into rebuilding the nation rather than succumbing to despair. These stories affirm the importance of our work.

In your leadership role, how do you stay connected to the real-life experiences behind the data on gender equality?

My grounding comes from my own identity and journey. I am an African girl, from a rural background, who has seen many of the same barriers I see in the communities I serve. That personal connection fuels my passion and commitment. Every country I visit, I want girls to be inspired by my story, girls who say, “I want to be like Mama Jennet. I want to follow her path, or even surpass it.” This passion is what motivates me every day and is evident in everything I do.

Compassion is equally essential. If you don’t put yourself in the shoes of others, like a poor girl in a remote village, you will not feel the urgency to push for policies, partnerships, and strategies that lift her. My drivers are many, but fundamentally, it’s about my experience as a rural African girl who overcame some of the obstacles we are still struggling with today. I want others to see that they, too, can rise above challenges and excel.

Was there a defining moment earlier in your life that sparked your passion for gender justice?

Yes. During my university years studying law, I frequently visited courts during holidays just to observe. One day, at a local court near my home, I witnessed a case involving a woman who had been raped. The entire community was abuzz with gossip. The woman bravely spoke out despite the immense taboo around discussing such matters publicly. During the trial, the woman struggled to even say the word “sexual intercourse” due to shame and stigma, while the judge urged her to be explicit. The crowd was so eager to hear her story that the trial nearly became a spectacle.

When she broke down crying, my heart shattered. The case was dismissed because people claimed she was lying, judging her inability to speak openly about the assault. Witnessing that injustice was heartbreaking. I knew then that I had to become a defender of women and girls who suffer in silence. That moment set me on the path to criminal law and advocacy for gender justice as well as criminal

justice.

Finally, what message or insight would you like to share?

I want to shed light on what's happening around the world right now. There's a growing pushback against gender equality. Nevertheless, Rwanda remains a leader in this area. It is essential to document and share Rwanda's stories of innovation and resilience, from the success of the Isange One Stop Centre to gender-responsive budgeting and accountability at all levels of government. These stories are inspirational and powerful examples globally of what it means to empower women and girls and stay committed to the cause. It is not just about policies, but about women driving their empowerment journeys. In these challenging times, sharing these successes with the world is more important than ever.

Thank you.