

Félicité Rwemarika is a pioneering force in Rwandan sports, celebrated for her transformative work in women's football and unwavering commitment to gender equality. Her journey, marked by resilience and visionary leadership, has earned her national and international recognition for using sports as a powerful vehicle for social change.

Through her initiatives, Rwemarika has opened doors for thousands of Rwandan women, enabling them to assert their place in society—socially, economically, and culturally—by participating in a domain long dominated by men.

As the former head of women's football in Rwanda, Rwemarika's trailblazing efforts culminated in her induction into the prestigious Ashoka Fellowship in 2012. But her influence stretches far beyond the football field. She has challenged entrenched gender norms and supported women rise as leaders within their communities.



Born the second of thirteen children and the eldest among eleven sisters, Rwemarika grew up in a supportive family in Uganda. Her father, a medical doctor who loved to play football and volleyball, often took her to matches—planting the seeds for her lifelong love of sport and instilling in her the values of teamwork, resilience, and discipline. After training as a nurse, she married a dentist, but her life changed dramatically in the early 1990s when her husband joined Rwanda's liberation struggle, leaving her to raise their four children alone. Faced with adversity, she developed entrepreneurial skills to support her family. "You will never know your potential until you're tested," she says.

With her nursing salary insufficient, she opened a shop along Entebbe Road in Uganda, selling various goods. She worked as a nurse in the mornings and ran her business in the evenings. The shop flourished, revealing her natural aptitude for business.

Upon returning to Rwanda even before Kigali was secured by the liberation struggle in 1994, Rwemarika shifted careers, entering the beverage distribution trade and running a cross- border business between Uganda and Rwanda. At one point, she even worked as a money changer for truck drivers from the region. Following the liberation of the country, Rwemarika continued her entrepreneurial spirit when her husband left for further studies in the UK. As life began to normalize after the genocide, she became the first to open a hair salon in Kigali.

This spirit inspired many other women to follow suit, contributing to economic recovery and advancing women's empowerment.



## **SHIFTING FOCUS TO WOMEN FOOTBALL DEVELOPMENT**

As her business grew, Rwemarika became increasingly aware of the national efforts toward development and reconstruction in post- genocide Rwanda. She recognized the untapped potential of women to actively contribute and believed they could play an equal role alongside men. Her success and growing reputation as a leader reinforced her belief that women's participation was vital to the country's progress. In 2002, she founded the Association of Kigali Women in Sports (AKWOS), initially focusing on women's football in the capital. But her ambition reached far beyond Kigali. She advocated for national policies to support female athletes and pushed for the creation of a national women's sports council within the football federation.

The journey to establish AKWOS was a long-fought battle that had started in 1997 through convincing local authorities, parents and girls that women could also play football.

"My inspiration began at a young age when I used to accompany my father to football or volleyball games," Rwemarika recalled.

But for Rwemarika, it was never just about football—it was about transformation.

She saw the sport as a tool to uplift women, particularly survivors of the 1994 Genocide against the Tutsi. She believed football could build confidence, foster solidarity, and break gender barriers.

"When I launched the campaign in 1997, many thought I was crazy. It took over two years to convince parents that girls could play. When we finally formed two women's teams, I was thrilled. I used profits from my salon to fund transport and meals for players. Eventually, my business collapsed."

She never wavered, driven by this conviction, she introduced sports programs in schools, and arranged scholarships for talented girls. She also targeted rural women, organizing them into teams and launching provincial tournaments.

Her grassroots efforts eventually gave rise to a national women's football league—

now one of the most vibrant in the country.

"I approached districts with sports budgets to support transport and meals for women's clubs," she said. "That allowed them to travel, compete, and bring communities together."

Through Rwemarika's organization, AKWOS, she saw an opportunity to transform these women clubs as educational hubs for leadership and life-skills training by collaborating with different government awareness programs, to promote health education, peacebuilding, and poverty reduction on a grassroots level.

By 2000, with help from partners and the media, the impact of her work was undeniable. She organized Rwanda's first international women's match against Burundi-an emotional victory and symbolic milestone marking the beginning of Rwanda's presence in women's international football.

To further advance female leadership in the sport, Rwemarika educated local coaches-empowering them to lead with confidence and mentor the next generation of women in football.

Several of her protégés eventually went on to become prestigious FIFA- certified referees. Most notably, she paved the way for Salima Mukansanga, the first African and Rwandan woman to officiate at both the 2022 FIFA World Cup in Qatar and the Africa Cup of Nations, who now serves as a FIFA-certified Video Assistant Referee.

By 2005, Rwemarika continued her efforts on both the local and international level, making significant strides in the development of women's football. She became the first woman president to lead the newly established Women's Football Commission within Rwanda's national federation and went on to found Kigali's first women's city team.

Her leadership attracted key international support, including a \$20,000 donation from Nike and strategic partnerships with organizations such as Women Win (Netherlands), Kvinna Till Kvinna (Sweden), SOL Foundation (Liechtenstein), Play International (France), Association Internationale des Maires Francophones (France), and Peace and Sports (Monaco).

With international backing, Rwemarika has successfully expanded her work to a wide range of social issues, using sports as a vehicle for women's empowerment

and social change. Her work has encapsulated gender- based violence prevention, sexual reproductive health education for adolescents and preventing teen pregnancies, HIV/AIDS prevention and awareness, conflict resolution and peacebuilding, environmental protection and climate change, and more recently, economic empowerment. Beyond sports, Rwemarika's mission is to focus on equipping women with the leadership skills to thrive in all aspects of society.



Her work continued to earn international acclaim and in 2016, she received the International Olympic Committee (IOC) Women and Sport Award. A year later, she was elected an IOC member and became the first vice president of Rwanda's Olympic Committee.

While Rwemarika's contributions have transformed the landscape of women's football in Rwanda, the struggle is far from over. Systemic challenges — such as limited institutional support, unequal and limited funding, and bureaucracy —continue to hinder progress. The National Football Federation, for instance, only permitted a women's representative into its General Assembly in 2018 — by which point there were already 18 active women's football teams across Rwanda.

Now more than ever, Rwemarika's vision is urgently needed. The gains made must be protected, and solidarity must continue for future generations of girls to have the opportunity to lead and thrive through sport.

Rwemarika's visionary model— empowering women through sports— has inspired post-conflict nations across the globe, offering a scalable blueprint for community transformation and resilience. Her legacy is one of courage, vision, and tireless advocacy.

Through AKWOS, she hopes to expand to a broader array of sports and now serves as a counsel member of the World Taekwondo Federation.

Félicité Rwemarika didn't just build women's football in Rwanda—she ignited a movement of trailblazing women.