Women's Empowerment Boosts National Development

Women in Rwanda are making significant strides across all sectors, including business, marking a clear shift from the male-dominated era that once characterized key industries. Today, Rwandan women are breaking through systemic barriers and dismantling stereotypes that once excluded them from fields such as construction, manufacturing, or finance among others.

Over the past three decades, the representation of women in Rwanda's politics, business, and civil society has steadily grown. In 1993, women held only 14.9% of parliamentary seats; today, they represent over 64% of the Lower House—one of the highest rates in the world. Rwanda's Constitution mandates a minimum of 30% female representation at all decision-making levels, reflecting the country's firm commitment to gender equality.

"I am glad to highlight that Rwanda has made a significant choice, through embedding the principle of respect for gender in this Constitution, thus at least 30% of decision-making positions must be allocated to women (in each political party, institutions etc.)," said MP Donatha Gihana, speaking on behalf of the Speaker of Parliament in a recent interview with Rwanda Dispatch.

The impact is tangible. Women's representation in parliament increased from 4% in 1995 to 48% in 2003, and stands at 68% in 2024.

Rwanda's move was reached to promote equality of women and men, the shift highlights the country's commitment to gender equality.

Meanwhile, *Rwanda Dispatch* interacted with women leaders in different fields early this year whose narratives echo great satisfaction of the growing standards they enjoy toady, and hope for a better future.

Stories reveal how these gallant women have leveraged their talents, experience, and resilience to uplift thousands of families—particularly women and children. Notable among them are Jeanne-Françoise Mubiligi (Chairperson of PSF and CEO of E.M.P Construction), Dr. Godelième Mukasarasi (activist) Agatesi Mugabo, Honorine Mugorewase (founder of a pharmaceutical import company), and others such as Alice Nkulikiyinka (BPN Rwanda), Sharon Akanyana (Ishyo Foods), Rosie Kayitesi (RK Global Business), Theopita Kanzayire (Divine Garments), Claudine Rukundo

(hospitality) and Félicité Rwemalika, a pioneering force in Rwandan sports.

There are many more women out there who have promoted advocacy for women's rights and freedoms along presiding over reforms that have dramatically improved the wellbeing of Rwandan women and families in general.

Rwanda has witnessed increased awareness of women's rights following mass mobilization of the population about need to fight negative constructions that represent women as inferior and incompetent, and hence, the traditional Rwandan society classify roles as either feminine or masculine. The women were limited to the kitchen and unpaid care work in general.

The women leaders say that formerly traditional limitations and bad governance confined Rwandan women to domestic chores, producing children until menopause arrives, ensuring food security in households through practicing traditional and rudimentary farming, accepting denial of their daughters' right to education and choice of a marriage partner. They appreciated taboos forbidding them from participating in community activities though they felt the pinch of bad decisions more.

Still, they appreciated the exclusive ownership and management of property ranging from land, household assets including livestock by men who expected absolute submissiveness from the women.

To this effect, women are grateful to President Paul Kagame and RPF-Inkotanyi led government for the security, peace and gender related law reforms, altogether have enabled them gain equal access to political and economic opportunities as Rwandans. Article 16 of the 2003 Constitution protects Rwandans from discrimination of any form.

Hence, Rwandan women are no longer limited by gender to ascend to leadership positions and/or do jobs formerly perceived as masculine roles.

Many social observers attribute the breakthrough to several reforms in Private Sector Federation enhanced by pro-women government policies and laws that promote equality of men and women as well as promote social protection for people with disabilities.

Advocacy for women has been a priority for all stakeholders including the ministries

and affiliated agencies, civil society organizations, development partners, and the private sector. Emancipated women in different domains have helped accelerate women related reforms.

In the same vein, PRO-FEMME TWESE HAMWE, an umbrella bringing together several local women NGOs where women have either relentlessly designed and passionately implemented different initiatives alongside supporting government interventions to address socio-economic issues to ultimately create a healthy and economically productive citizenry.

As a formidable force in country's economic development, women have keenly supported ongoing efforts by the government and its development partners to deal with the prevalence of killer diseases and strategic plans aimed at eradicating them to improve the living standards of the Rwandan people.

Apart from strengthening Rwanda's healthcare system, these concerted efforts have led to a substantial drop in the prevalence of several health problems including malaria incidence, maternal mortality, and neonatal mortality among others.

Health indicators after implementing Rwanda's Health Sector Strategic Plan (HSSP IV) show that maternal mortality declined by 50%, up from 210 deaths per 100,000 live births between 2014–15 to 105 deaths per 100,000 live births in 2023 while neonatal mortality dropped from 10.7 to 5.45 per 1,000 live births.

Malaria incidence declined from 308 to 45 cases per 1,000 population while skilled birth attendance rose to 94.9%, nearing the target of over 95%. The Community-Based Health Insurance (CBHI), known locally as *Mutuelle de Sante*, covers 83.5% of the population, representing 92% of insured Rwandans.

There is widespread public confidence that women will play a key role in dealing with immunization coverage for measles-rubella, which is consistently high at 97.4%, sources in the Health Ministry indicate.

The post-genocide Rwanda has seen women of rare courage rise up to uplift the wellbeing of the most vulnerable Rwandan women and girls including people disadvantaged by the 1994 Genocide against the Tutsi and people with disabilities.

A typical example is Dr. Godelième Mukasarasi, a Philanthropist and Coordinator of

the Solidarity for the Development of Widows and Orphans to Promote Self-Sufficiency and Livelihoods (SEVOTA), which dates back December 1994.

Through her work, Dr. Mukasarasi has restored hope through various healing and empowerment programmes benefitting mostly rape victims and children born out of rape. They lived in total dejection – a vast majority lived in total denial of the basics of life including food, shelter, education, medical care and clothes.

Rwanda's cooperative for the handicapped and disadvantaged codenamed APROHADE has restored human dignity of Rwandan women through equipping them with valuable skills such as tailoring, and handicrafts embroidery, financial literacy, and making crafts. Economic empowerment helps beneficiaries start businesses and achieve financial independence. Agnes Mutegwara started APROHADE in September 1994.

Struggles for emancipation

The wave of women empowerment sweeping across the Continent has seen women venturing into industries like mining, manufacturing, creative industry, media and sports with impactful roles benefitting communities.

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Mukansanga oversaw Group B game between Guinea and Zimbabwe at the Ahmadou Ahidjo Stadium in Yaonde on January 18, 2022. She is an example of women's empowerment in sports and has inspired millions of girls on the Continent.

In mining, women's role in the transformation of the sector is recognized.

The shift in women's attitude has led to the formation of associations like the Rwanda Women in Mining Association (RWIMA), a platform that empowers women

to contribute to national economic development, explains Immaculée Nyiranzirorera, the association’s President.

In other sectors, the number of women is on the rise such as geologists, engineers, and environmentalists.

Across the board, empowered Rwandan women are driving national development. Through entrepreneurship, leadership, advocacy, and innovation, they are reshaping Rwanda’s future—proving that with equal opportunity, women can lead transformative change for generations to come.