

Mothers of Rwanda raise a nation

Women make up 48.8% of members of Parliament

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Call her The Mother of Rwanda.

When the 1994 genocide killed nearly a 10th of her country's population, Aloisea Inyumba found herself with an enormous task – arranging homes for the 500,000 orphans left behind. It was a job few people could ever imagine doing.

So Inyumba devised an elaborate countrywide program encouraging widows to adopt the children and even asking them to take in orphans from rival ethnic communities.

"Women went to the orphanages and took children home," she explained years later. "(They) have all taken children, regardless of ethnic background. It was the first step in reconciliation."

Thanks to her program, more than 90 per cent of the orphans were able to find new homes.

And that is not all. As Rwanda's Minister of Family, Gender and Social Affairs, Inyumba was also in charge of burying the dead, resettling refugees, and establishing national networks to help women resolve family and property inheritance issues.

All this before the age of 30.

Inyumba, now a senator, is not the only woman in Rwanda to rise to power after the genocide. Nearly half the country's members of parliament – 48.8 per cent – are women. That ranks first in the world.

These female MPs are slowly knocking down the door of gender inequality on a continent where most women are still second-class citizens. And the whole country has benefited.

After the genocide, more than two-thirds of Rwanda's population was female. They became the key to rebuilding, and finally started to be recognized for their work as heads of households, community leaders and even financial providers.

So when Rwanda signed a new constitution in 2003, it was only natural that women play an integral role. It guaranteed that the county's political representation be made up of at least 30 per cent women.



AP FILE PHOTO
Children are seen at the Imbabazi orphanage in Gisenyi, Rwanda, in this file image from March 18, 2000.

Since then, the mothers of Rwanda have become the mothers of the nation.

According to a 2006 UN report, politicians like Inyumba "are among a pioneer generation, challenging traditional gender roles, taking on new responsibility, embracing high profile positions, and advocating for their rights."

The report said, thanks largely to these female MPs, Rwandan women have won the right to inherit land, while children's rights have been enshrined by law. Healthcare and education spending are also on the rise.

The country still has a long way to go. AIDS and poverty are rampant, forcing more than 100,000 children to live in child-headed households. Rural females lack many rights. Things are slowly changing though, and women are at the centre of it all.

More than just an inspiration, Rwanda's politicians serve as a lesson on what can happen when women play a central role in how a country is run.

Despite making up more than half of Canada's population, women account for only one-fifth of our MPs – that's fewer than in Ethiopia, Iraq and Afghanistan. In a country that prides itself on social justice, this is a disappointing reality.

It's no surprise, then, that issues of importance to women and mothers don't get the attention they deserve. In the past year alone, the government has scrapped the national childcare program and slashed funding to the federal agency in charge of women's rights.

There have been attempts to fix this imbalance, such as Stephane Dion's recent pledge to run 33 per cent female candidates in the next election. But this often has little effect because parties nominate women to run in ridings where they have little chance of winning.

"Party hierarchies are still overwhelmingly male," says Robert MacDermid, a politics professor at York University. "There is still a difficult hurdle for female candidates in the way parties are run. It's a failure to represent people."

If we are going to remain at the forefront of diversity, political parties need to make a real commitment to ensuring women – as well as the country's many minority groups – are fairly represented. That means providing them with the chance for more than just token nominations.

Canadians can use the ballot box to make sure this happens by voting for parties dedicated to diversity.

Election reform is another way of strengthening the female voice. Studies show that countries with systems of proportional representation have, on average, twice as many women in politics as countries – like Canada – that do not.

That's because, under proportional representation, parties create lists of candidates they want elected, and the number of those candidates who earn a seat depends on how many votes each party gets.

So if parties want to appeal to more voters, they would need many women on their lists.

As the experience of Rwanda shows, when women have greater representation in government, they are better able to combat issues that affect them. The more women in politics, the more they will benefit.

And when they do, we all do.

***Craig and Marc Kielburger** are founders of Free the Children and co-authors of *Me to We*. With this column, they are exploring the impact of global issues on young people in developing nations and what it means to youth in the GTA.*