‘From Ashes to the Top’: Rwanda Genocide and Promotion of Women

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Rwandan Women Rising

by Swanee Hunt

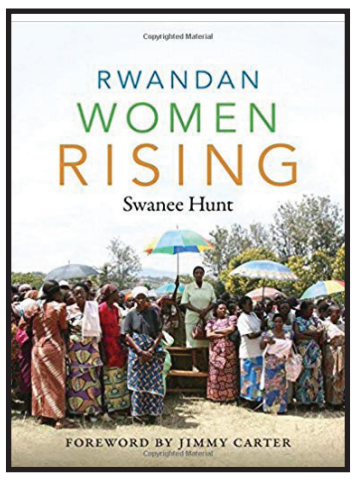
Duke University Press, 2017, xlii + 392 pages, $34.95,
ISBN: 978-0822362579HC

On April 6, 1994, violence broke out in Rwanda, with Hutu killing Tutsi. The violence began as a response to the shooting of President Juvenal Habyarimana’s plane at about 8:30 pm on April 6 and killed all on board. It degenerated into a genocide that lasted for one hundred days and left approximately eight hundred thousand people dead. This genocide has been the subject of extensive study and documentation.[1]

In *Rwandan Women Rising*, Swanee Hunt adds to this literature by exploring how Rwandan women rose from helpless victims to powerful and influential positions of leadership that enabled them to be at the forefront of helping their country rise from the ashes. Drawing on hundreds of conversations with mostly women and a few men over a period of sixteen years, Hunt brings forth the women’s stories both during and after the massacre. She lets Rwandan women share their stories in their own words. This gives the reader a vivid picture of the events and experiences during the massacre and in its aftermath. Her main thrust is that the genocide and its aftermath provided space and opportunities for Rwandan women to rise to prominent positions, especially as they engaged in talks, reconciliation work, and took up positions in both government structures and the private sector. But how was this possible and what was the context?

From the narratives gathered by Hunt, we learn that the marginalization of Rwandan women was rooted in patriarchy and dates back to pre-colonial times; unknot surprisingly, even Western education and colonialism did not promote women. Scholars of Africa will agree that, with very few exceptions, this is not unique to Rwanda. Formal girls’ education in colonial Africa was primarily intended to train women an homemakers and confine them to the domestic sphere. In the case of Rwanda, the first girls’ school was established in the 1940s with sole purpose of training nuns.Over time, women who acquired formal education would train to become teachers or nurses but not politicians. This was largely the case in Rwanda before the genocide. As Hunt states, ‘Leading up to the genocide, women were excluded, publicly slandered, mocked, and assaulted.’ Regardless of their identity as Hutu or Tutsi, ‘taking an assertive stance on behalf of women’s rights was not just discouraged. It could be fatal’(p. 33).But this was radically changed in post-genocide Rwanda. Why and how? What changed after the genocide?

Hunt argues that women’s progress was possible not because there was a shortage of men who could take up the key leadership positions, but because of multiple integrated factors. In part II of the book, she lays out what she considers to be the ten basic elements that unexpectedly combined to support women’s upsurge in post-genocide Rwanda. Among others, the suffering and trauma during and after the genocide was crucial in bonding the survivors as they figured out how they would live amidst the tense and uncertain circumstances. As a first step,widows organized informal meetings at each other’s homes to share problems and find ways to help each other. Such meetings eventually metamorphosed into influential advocacy and civil society organizations that prepared women for bigger leadership positions. Establishment of basic grassroots organizations from such meetings gave the women a good foundation that prepared them for more prominent roles in civil society organizations, government units or the private sector. ‘With hard-won credibility, women began to formalize their influence, both by using their new found power to push for strong female-friendly policies and by drawing on their confidence to vie for leadership position’(p. 94).Common problems affecting women in the post-genocide period brought them together and provided them with a foundation to prepare for bigger and more powerful responsibilities.



Moreover, the enabling political environment in post-genocide Rwanda was perhaps most crucial to the women’s progress. President Paul Kagame’s political will and support enabled women to push for the enactment of female friendly policies and to gain access to prominent positions in government. There were deliberate initiatives to help them cope with post-genocide trauma and also to establish businesses in the extremely fragile economy. Kagame personally asked Swanee Hunt ‘to help women advance in public and social spheres’ (p. xxxvi). Being a founder of the Women and Public Policy Program at Havard’s Kennedy School of Government and the Washington, DC-based Institute for Inclusive Security, Hunt taught and supported Rwandan women both inside and outside Rwanda. Inclusive Security opened an office in Kigali and its staff helped women parliamentarians to develop a strategic plan designed to ‘promote their agenda for social change and stability’ (p. xxxvii). Given such support, it is not very surprising that women in Rwanda progressed to another level.

Hunt’s interlocutors applauded the government for its support. One of them observed that: ‘There is nothing special about Rwandan women. There’s something special about the Rwandan government, which has encouraged women, which has brought us to the forefront’ (p.101). Hunt reveals that many women who rose to prominence at the national level encouraged those in the rural communities too to aspire for public office. The government entrusted them with leadership and women responded by taking up the role. For instance, the Ministry of Women and Female Promotion was created to spearhead ‘women’s advancement, gender equality, organizing from grassroots to national level’ and ‘empowering women in civil society’ (p. 110). It initiated several projects that resulted in strategies and policies aimed at the promotion of women. Through gender awareness workshops for civil servants, teachers, religious leaders and political appointees, ministry officials advocated for and advanced women issues. Deliberate effort was made to unite women beyond political, ethnic, regional and class differences.

Support from within their country aside, Hunt shows that Rwandan women also borrowed a leaf from Uganda, South Africa and countries in West Africa. They were inspired by women who were participating in political affairs in Ivory Coast and Senegal in the 1980s. As they observed: ‘these other women are claiming seats in the government, in parliament, so we should [also] start’(p. 40). Similarly, Uganda’s gender equality promotion also inspired Rwanda’s focus on inclusion. Members of the RPF had been exposed to gender equality promotion while living in exile in Uganda. They learnt lessons from Mandela’s ANC in post-apartheid South Africa, where women won 26 percent of seats in parliament. While it is possible that developments in the other African countries informed the actions and progress of Rwandan women, how do we explain the fact that Rwanda went ahead to overtake them, especially with regard to political participation? What conditions contributed to their success? The author does not dwell on this, but it seems obvious that the enabling political environment under President Kagame was a key factor.

And the women themselves developed strategies of increasing their numbers in parliament. In pushing their agenda, the women formed partnerships with the government and they were able to place gender at the center of Rwandan politics. In 2003, they won 48.8 percent of the parliamentary seats; by 2008 the number had gone up 56 percent. With this, Rwanda became the first parliament with a majority of female members. But, impressive as these percentages are, how have they impacted on the lives of Rwandans? Or is it just a question of numbers? Hunt herself asks an interesting question: ‘But who can prove it’s made a real difference having so many women in top positions?’ (p. 221). Unfortunately, she does not answer this question because, intriguing as it might be, it was not the objective of the book. This is a glaring gap in the book. It would be nice to know how having women in powerful and influential positions impacts the lives of everyday women in rural Rwanda. Moreover, as the author points out, some Rwandan women are worried about the diminishing numbers of activists as more and more women moved from activism to politics. One of the interviewees, Justine Mbabazi who is a gender specialist and rights activist, opined thus: ‘the real activists became politicians, and then there was nobody left behind to be a real activist. The government also wants those people who can bring their messages across. So even though women have risen from the ashes to the top, the spirit of pushing the issues forward had died’ (p. 330). This is a serious concern that requires some reflection. While celebrating the promotion of women, one ought to think about the sustainability of thetrend.

Hunt asserts that the UN tribunal established in Tanzania to deal with the genocide aftermath established a legal framework to deal with sexual violence and this led to the recognition and national legislation of rape as war crime. This was possible because women activists pressed that rape be treated as a serious war crime and brave Rwandan women co-operated by opening up and telling the whole world the ‘the severity of the aggression they and their sisters had endured’ (p. 185). In so doing, the women of Rwanda turned that violence into a transformative occasion. New laws were formulated and, contrary to the past where rape was regarded as just another spoil of war, it would now be considered a war crime. In part III of the text, Hunt lays out the traumatic effects of rape during and after the genocide as remembered and narrated by victims and survivors who described in detail how they were raped and/or how they looked on helplessly as others were raped.

Whereas raping of women during war had been used during World War II and the Liberian and Sierra Leonean civil wars, it did not attract the attention of the UN Security Council until 1992 following widespread rapes of women in former Yugoslavia. The Statute of the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY, 1993) declared rape as a crime against humanity. Similarly, the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda (ICTR, 1994) also reinforced rape as a war crime and a crime against humanity. And in 1998, the ICTR became the first international court to find an accused person guilty of rape as a crime against humanity. The trial and eventual conviction of a former mayor, Jean-Paul Akayesu, who was found guilty of committing rape and sexual assault during the genocide constituted a decisive case for international law. And Hunt applauds the victims for making this possible by sharing their stories. She writes, ‘But in addition to the advocacy of national and international women’s groups and a clear-thinking judge, these historic Rwandan cases

hinged on the willingness of victims to tell the court about the unending harm they'd survived' (p. 191).

Drawing on narratives of both women activists and victims of rape, Hunt exposes the shortfalls of the UN tribunal in dealing with victims of rape. Although the tribunal staff travelled throughout Rwanda to identify witnesses and victims who could travel to Arusha to give testimony, the team was not sensitive to the survivors during the court proceedings in Arusha. They seemed unaware that'those sexually attacked faced extra layers of adversity from the stigma associated with public assaults, rejection by family and friends, health crises, and unwanted pregnancies' (p. 192). Victims were brought face to face with the suspects sitting in court. The courtroom was big and full of people who were there to listen to the proceedings and yet the questions were humiliating. One victim who appeared in the courtroom was shocked. 'I couldn't believe some of the questions they wanted us to answer,' she stated (p. 194). Such an environment was not conducive to the victims of rape and it affected their ability to freely speak out. Hunt shows that women activists intervened to protect the rape victims. Accusing the defense lawyers of humiliating and intimidating the victims, they petitioned the United Nations and singled out the tribunal prosecutor for not defending the women. The activists also created safe environments in which victims could describe freely they had endured. A women's organization called Solidarite pour I'Epanouissement des Veuves et des Orphelins visant le Tailvail et I'Auto-promotion (SEVOTA) is a good example of one such safe space where women freely shared their stories. Owing to the pressure from women activists, the UN tribunal later created 'a unit for gender crimes and made some other structural changes aimed at protecting and supporting victims' (p. 196).

However, the tribunal could not handle all the cases because they were too many. An alternative was found in the Gacaca procedure that was established to try the masses implicated in the genocide. This was a traditional form of mediating local conflicts and it was hoped that citizens would easily accept it since it was familiar to them. Women became instrumental in this grassroots process and their involvement made a dramatic difference: 'they not only helped to design the system but also implemented the process' (p. 201). They were involved in the National Service of Gacaca Jurisdictions. Women organizations also worked closely with Gacaca offices. They needed women to testify in order for the courts to succeed. In the past, women had not held key positions such as that of Gacaca mediator. In contrast, 'During the post-genocide gacaca grassroots justice process … a lot of women were chosen because they were regarded as the most honest, tenacious, and resilient' (p. 203). Four women were appointed as magistrates to the Gacaca Department of Jurisdiction and during the election of judges in 2001, 35 percent of the seats were occupied by women. These were powerful women whose actions disrupted the gendered power structure as many of them 'were deciding the fate of tens of thousands of prisoners' (p. 203).

Like the UN tribunal, Hunt shows that Gacaca too had its own weaknesses. It did not provide protection to the rape victims. There was no privacy and confidentiality during the proceedings as women came face to face with their assailants. Suspects would intimidate and harass the victims in an attempt to scare them. Some victims even doubted the impartiality of the judges. As one of them narrated:'I refused [to appear before] several judges because they were neighbors or friends of my attacker'(p. 212). In spite of the shortfalls, Hunt applauds the Gacaca system for trying nearly two million cases by 2012 as compared to only seventy five cases completed by the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda from 1997 to 2003. The Gacaca courts spent between US$ 23 and 33 per case while the ICTR spent around US$ 2.6 million per case. 'However imperfect,' the author concludes, 'the local courts helped the country stabilize socially, allowing millions to confront debilitating uncertainties and look ahead' (p. 217).

Hunt not only ably demonstrates that Rwandan women were central to the recovery and reorganization of their country, but she also thinks that they set a path for other women to follow. She asserts that the purpose of the book is 'to tease apart the overall achievement of Rwandan women, so that their sisters … in other countries can think about which elements they might use in their own contexts'(p. 121).This is rather simplistic because women in other countries operate in contexts that are very different from that of Rwanda. Rwandan women activists and leaders benefited from systematic training and guidance by different institutions and people, including the author herself. Moreover, the overwhelming support from President Kagame was very crucial to their success. In fact, one could argue that this book is really about the purported success of Kagame's regime in promoting women. The picture one gets as one reads the book is that the state of affairs for women in Rwanda was very gloomy until Paul Kagame became president and rapidly turned things around.

In spite of the very few concerns that I raise, this book makes an interesting contribution to the literature on Rwanda. It details how women in Parliament pushed for legislation against rape as a crime of genocide, demanded protection of rape victims during the trial, and formed advocacy and civil society organization, among other things. I would recommend it to scholars and general readers of Eastern Africa and Rwanda in particular, gender scholars and women activists, development workers, policy makers and those working in advocacy and civil society organisations.

Note

1. Among others see: Linda Melvern, 2009, *A People Betrayed: the Role of The West in Rwanda's Genocide*, London: Zed Books; Gerard Prunier, 1995, *The Rwanda Crisis 1959 to1994: History of a Genocide,* Kampala: Fountain Publishers.

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