

- **Mrs. Grace Deniro, thank you for the kind introduction;**
- **To all the women we are celebrating tonight;**
- **My fellow speakers;**
- **Distinguished guests;**

Good evening,

Let me start by thanking my dear friend Grace for inviting me to this special event. Grace is certainly a champion for women so it comes as no surprise that she would organize this event to celebrate women and pay homage to the courage and determination with which, they have answered the call to lead and change our world.

Grace is not just a talker but a do-er. For the past 2 years she has been in Rwanda, assisting women to economically uplift themselves through her coffee business. Her venture and vision should be recognized.

It is an honor for me to be in the presence of accomplished women like you and the men who have walked this path with us. I stand here to lend my voice, to pay tribute to the brave Rwandan women, who have borne the greatest burden of our history.

As some of you in the audience may know, Rwanda is often cited as a gender powerhouse. As we commemorate the genocide against Tutsi for the 20th time, I would be remiss if I did not tell you of the arduous journey we have embarked on, to change the course of history.

Understanding how and why such a transformation occurred offers not just an opportunity to celebrate our accomplishments. It also provides lessons for other countries struggling to overcome histories of gender oppression.

We understood early on, that similar to ethnic polarization, gender inequality in our society was both systematic and systemic. The will of the government and women empowerment had to be inextricably tied. Dismantling structural barriers, was a necessary

pre-requisite to gender equality.

Allow me to give a brief synopsis of ever evolving roles of Rwandan women.

From being considered a quiet force, some women turned into villains, others were victims and at the same time victors. Today, women have become a voice of reconciliation and peace building.

In 1994, our country stared into the depths of human cruelty that knew no bounds. Among the villains was Pauline - one of the masterminds of the genocide. She - ironically - was the minister of women's affairs, yet she ordered the rape of thousands of Tutsi women. She even went so far as to force her own son to rape.

Her daughter-in-law Beatrice was recently convicted of genocide crimes in the state of New Hampshire; for this, we applaud the American justice system for apprehending her.

Valérie was a presenter on the infamous Radio Télévision Libre des Mille Collines (RTLM). During her time at RTLM, she was known for reading out names of Tutsi, leading to their murder.

Consolata and her colleague Julienne were both nuns. They were found guilty of participating in the massacre of more than 7,600 people, at a convent in the South of Rwanda. On the contrary, not all the nuns were evil. Some were heroes like Sister Felicite whose brother was a colonel in the genocidaire army.

She hid and protected desperate Tutsi, helped some of them cross the border to safety and lost her life trying to save them.

Rwandan women who survived the genocide against the Tutsi saw this horror and went through immeasurable anguish. The lights of too many of our mothers, daughters, sisters and wives were extinguished amid the debris and despair.

Theirs are stories too agonizing to tell, too painful to recount. It is sobering to listen to their experiences, but it paints a true picture of exactly what these women endured.

Suzanne, was 58 years old in '94, when she fell victim to one of the most heinous weapons of genocide: rape. Hers was not a singular instance of pain and humiliation. She was raped day in, day out until she lost consciousness. Suzanne was stripped bare of all humanity and dignity and incapacitated in every way. She could neither sit nor stand, or even respond to nature's call.

Many women, much like Suzanne, were raped and had to raise children, they carried in their wombs as a result of sexual violence. They were faced with a double tragedy of nurturing and loving a constant reminder of the shame, pain and disgrace these women went through.

Yolande, was hunted down day and night, and made a choice no mother should have to: to separate with her children. In fear of all of their lives, she decided that, in order to increase the chances of

survival, her niece should hide her three precious children. But when her niece returned towards the end of the genocide, all alone, the sight was too much to bear.

Rose, cradled her teenage daughter, Hyacinthe, as she died in her arms at the St. Famille church. Her budding life snatched away at the behest of a notoriously brutal Roman Catholic priest, who continues to preach unabated in different parishes in France.

Dianne is now at university, but the same man who raped her mother, raped her when she was just five-years-old. Her body continues to suffer the consequences of that ill-fated day; she does not know if she will ever bear children of her own.

The 1994 genocide was the culmination of decades of a divisive leadership that mismanaged our diversity. Another consequence of this divisive regime is that millions of Tutsi were forcefully driven out of their motherland and made stateless.

For 100 days as our country was torn apart from the core, the sun never came up, the stars did not shine, but a few good men and women could not bear to just stand by and watch.

Up against all odds, with a mere force of 16,000 people, these brave ones had to face an army more than twice its size supported by 100,000 militias.

All hands on deck were needed to successfully free Rwanda. Women took up arms and fought courageously alongside their brothers to free Rwanda of genocidaires.

Some nursed wounded soldiers on the battlefield; others kept the supplies replenished. Some, like Maria, gave up their sons for the cause and sadly lost each and every one of them.

Many more unsung heroines raised funds, prayed, wrote songs and prepared meals to keep the fighting spirit of the liberators alive.

In the immediate aftermath of the 1994 season of slaughter, many men had died or were in prison for genocide crimes; this left women in charge of homes and communities.

Since they were the ones left, they garnered enough strength and stamina to soothe the broken hearts of their orphaned children, to assist their helpless widowed sisters, and to shoulder the responsibility of mending the fabric of their broken society.

They had to forgive those who had killed their husbands, brothers and children; they had to unite and live side by side with the very people who had wiped out their families. The choice was between forgiving the unforgivable or self-destruct with anger.

As a result, we were collectively determined in words and deeds, to chart a new course for our future, offer hope and usher in a new dawn.

The leadership's main intent became to be deliberate about inclusiveness. There are women, such as Nelly and Regine, whose

parents are either in prison for committing genocide or went down in history as orchestrators of it. Nelly and Regine are public servants in the highest offices of our country.

Other women, such as Marie Rose and Anne Marie were instrumental in convincing their husbands to lay down arms and return home. Their husbands have been reintegrated; and one of them is serving as a senior ranking officer in our Reserve Forces.

Seraphine was among many who were fed genocidal ideology. Over a number of years, she came to reject this venom and recently returned home to Rwanda, with her family and is serving as a cabinet minister.

I recognize the incredible grace and admirable strength, with which Rwandan women have borne the burden, of our horrific history.

Women now play roles at all levels of reconstruction, applying their existing proficiencies in new ways. The result is that in just 20 years we have the highest legislative representation of women in the world at 64%; women make up 40% of cabinet and the judiciary; women have rights and a voice; they have reintegrated and reclaimed their space in Rwandan society.

As I end my remarks, I quote Eleanor Roosevelt, who said: *“surely, in the light of history, it is more intelligent to hope rather than to fear, to try rather than not to try. For one thing we know beyond all doubt: Nothing has ever been achieved by the person who says, ‘It can't be done.’”*

I salute all women for standing strong in the face of adversity, for being the keepers of our diversity, for coming out resilient and dignified. Let us continue to celebrate these women: ‘May we know them, May we be them, May we raise them!’

Thank you for your attention