

First Lady Jeannette Kagame's Remarks at

the Global First Ladies Alliance

**"The Future of Women: Defining Leadership
for a New Era"**

New York, September 21, 2017

**Excellencies Dear Sisters,
My dear Friend Joe,
Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen,**

Good afternoon.

It is my great pleasure to be with all of you today, for this event on the **“The Future of Women”**, which gives us yet another opportunity to look at the roles, we, as women should play in the public and private spheres; but also, talk about an issue that has always been so very close to my heart, as I am sure yours: children, for they are the most sacred part of us. Indeed, their spontaneity, love and innocence represent some of the best attributes of humanity, while also the most vulnerable ones to life circumstances.

As a woman and a mother, I humbly believe that a truly healthy society is judged by the way it treats all its citizens, including those who are the most vulnerable in times of crises: women and children. Regardless of their socio-economic, religious or racial background, we owe it to our future generations to not only deconstruct those gender norms, but also, further invest in the holistic wellbeing of our youth, for the self-actualization of all members of our communities.

Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen,

Allow me to start my address this afternoon, by sharing with you the story of my country, Rwanda, a nation which 23 years ago, lived through the last Genocide of the 20th century. In a mere 100 days, this Genocide against the Tutsi resulted in:

- More than 1 million Tutsi and moderate Hutu men, women, and children violently massacred;
- Hundreds of thousands of women viciously raped and purposely infected with HIV/AIDS as part of a deliberate campaign;
- 50,000 widows and 75,000 devastated orphans;
- Hundreds of thousands of people internally displaced, while 2 million people, used as shields by the extremist Genocidal regime, were forced to flee with them to a neighboring country.

At the end of the Genocide, my country was left with the overwhelming responsibility to tend to the broken hearts, the injured bodies, and rebuild the destroyed institutions. In that post-1994 era, there were many socio-political and economic priorities, and even more limited resources to answer all of them.

So we looked within. We drew inspiration from our centuries-old traditions, that helped maintain social cohesion and harmony, as the core of communities, and applied them to the current challenges we faced, whether they related to economic development, justice, education, or unity and reconciliation.

Esteemed audience,

As you can imagine, those days required all of us, from government and civil society to join hands for the rebuilding of our nation so our communities could live again in peace, security, while seeking prosperity for all.

The liberation movement, infused by its spirit of gender inclusion since its early days in the 1980's, succeeded in putting an end to the Genocide, and focused on fighting all forms of discrimination that had ruled our country in the post-colonial era, so every Rwandan would be included in the transformation of our nation.

As President Paul Kagame simply put it, ***“I was organizing for people’s rights. All people. How could I exclude women’s rights?”*** So it was only logical that we enacted the constitutional requirement of the 30% minimum of women in public leadership positions, which helped us achieve in 23 years, the highest rate worldwide of women

representation at the parliament, with 64%; and 40% female representation in our cabinet.

One could argue that Rwanda's attitude towards today's gender inclusion and equality, dates back to pre-colonial times, when the holistic well-being of a woman had a central place in society, as she was considered a powerful force in her community, with special guidance and protection accompanying the different stages of her life.

I strongly believe that this inclusive attitude towards women is a natural process that we deserve, as women, and custodians of our respective cultures, if we are to successfully raise the next generations of leaders of this world.

Honourable Ladies and Gentlemen,

For Rwanda, overcoming those darkest times in our history required us to tap into our 'soft' powers to help rebuild the social fabric of our society.

And in the midst of the great loss and pain of the post-genocide era, we saw our survival instinct defiantly rise to the task of devising innovative strategies, to help respond to the many crises affecting the very core of our communities, the family.

Indeed, in the immediate aftermath of the Genocide against the Tutsi, thousands of orphans left behind by parents brutally killed, or born from systematic rapes of women, were placed in orphanages. However, not because we thought it was the healthiest environment for them, but due to the limited choices available to us at the time. Our country was in shambles, communities had to be revived, families were struggling to make ends meet, and had barely anything to spare. Our will to successfully rebuild a new Rwanda was strong, but survival was still an everyday reality.

In those days, we also saw Genocide survivors of different age groups organize themselves in associations to tend to their own psychosocial, health, and financial needs. Organizing themselves in surrogate families, in which some had adopted parents, children, and/or siblings, to help each other rebuild their lives, after their loved ones were taken away.

After the basics of our society's reconstruction were eventually laid, we resolved to quickly take decisive measures on orphanages. I should add, that in our culture and traditions, no institutions had ever been created for the sole purpose of taking in children that had lost their parents: they were automatically the responsibility of their extended families, and communities.

As our national authorities established homegrown solutions, as a foundational mark of Rwanda's socio-economic development, the deinstitutionalization of children, and reintegration into carefully assessed family settings, which were one of the features of these grassroots solutions, were accepted as normal, because it spoke to values that had been at the core of our beliefs for ages. As a result, joint efforts from the Government of Rwanda and the civil society, to sensitize communities about stepping up their role in the well-being of children, produced remarkable results.

We saw new reforms adopted at the national level, including the 2007 **National Strategic Plan for Orphans and Vulnerable Children**, which is a national framework with a holistic approach to address child vulnerability.

The year 2007 also saw my Foundation, the Imbuto Foundation initiates the network of **'Malayika Murinzi'**, which means 'Guardian angels', to create a protective environment for children without appropriate care, by promoting adoption and foster care.

Based on Rwandan traditional cultural values, the **'Malayika Mulinzi'** initiative consists of a network of more than **3,000** adults across the country, who have shown remarkable compassion and fiercely protective love, in

taking care of abandoned children. We made the decision to publicly recognize these men and women for their acts, in order to encourage others to do the same, and reignite the cultural flame of responsibility towards children and the most vulnerable.

This network was inspired by the continental campaign **‘Treat every child as your own’**, as initiated by the Organization of African First Ladies against HIV/AIDS. In fact, I should take a few minutes here to express to all First Ladies, how effective we can be when we decide to come together to catalyze social change. Though more could always be done, this program has been inspirational throughout the continent, and triggered replications such as in Rwanda.

In 2012, the **Strategy for National Child Care Reform** was also adopted, with the aim to transform orphanages and other residential institutions, and reintegrate children into sustainable family-based care, as an entry point to building sustainable child care, and protection systems.

This strategy relies on the national framework of the **“Tubarerere Mu Muryango”** Programme, which translates into **‘Let us raise children in families’**. Organised as a multilayered initiative, this programme includes:

- the recruitment and training of professional social workers in childcare and protection;
- the creation of community-based family services and social protection support to facilitate the family reintegration of these children;
- and the prevention of unnecessary removal of other children from their families.

Between 2011 and 2017, **2,909** out of **3,323** children living in institutions had been reintegrated into families; and **21** out of **33** surveyed institutions managed to reintegrate all their children.

The successful reintegration of our children into family-based care also heavily relies on a network made of over **29,000 ‘Inshuti z’umuryango’**, or **‘Friends of the family’**, who are social workers and psychologists, whose responsibilities also include the protection of children, from family assessment to post-placement support and monitoring.

Distinguished audience,

As a nation that lived through the most extreme failure of humanity and had to rebuild itself from the ground up, we found ourselves having to use unconventional, and at times, unpopular, methods to fast-track our development, ensuring no one was left behind.

From our continued commitment towards true gender equality at all levels of society, to ensuring our youth received the best care possible that can be provided by a father or mother figure, we called on all faith and secular segments of our society to play their part for the rebuilding of our nation, to allow them to grow into the leaders our nation needs, to fully thrive in this global village. Indeed, we owe it to our little ones to be showered with this kind of love and we owe it to our societies, so they can move towards more humanity, peace and unity.

As I conclude my remarks, I would like to reiterate my appreciation for being with you today, for this event that allows us to learn from each other, about how to further invest and empower our people, so they can build the kind of truly thriving nation, our future generations are fully entitled to live in.

I thank you for your kind attention and wish us all fruitful discussions.