

- **Honorable Chief Justice,**
- **Honorable Minister of Gender,**
- **Vice President of the Chamber of Deputies,**
- **Professor Sandra Fredman,**
- **Distinguished members of Academia and Researchers,**
- **Graduate students,**
- **Ladies and Gentlemen,**

Good morning.

I am honored to be speaking to such an academic gathering, on this important theme related to women, poverty and human rights.

We celebrate the great strides made, in advancing women's roles and rights in the different societies represented in the room. I believe that I speak for Rwanda, when I say, that the government has established a favorable environment for women to thrive. At the same time, we are mindful of our responsibility to keep fighting for the rights of women and girls; the journey that lies ahead is still long.

There is no more appropriate time than the present, to reflect on our experience before and during the 1994 genocide against the Tutsi. We came from a society defined by alienation, oppression and separation.

They were excluded from participating meaningfully, in all aspects of life. Women had no rights to inherit property or any asset. A woman was prohibited from conducting business, unless she had permission from her husband, to do so. Our society was purely patriarchal, with little consideration for women. They were considered movable assets, with the primary purpose of bearing children.

In Rwanda, as I am sure was the case in other places, the law of the jungle ruled supreme for far too long. Since women were perceived as ‘weak’, and ‘might makes right’ men dominated and took advantage of the limited resources available.

As women were conveniently perceived to be helpless and fragile, it appeared to be the perfect excuse for men to make themselves even stronger. After all, equality is a power game. In this process, poverty for women was perpetuated; they had no access to resources; naturally their opportunities were extremely limited.

Today ladies and gentlemen,

We live in different and more dynamic times. The world has become more demanding of our time, energy and skills. The level of ambition is much higher at every level: as individuals, families, communities and countries.

There is stiff competition to be better and in order to satisfy these demands; one must work extremely hard. Gone are the 'business as usual' days when men and boys were the only ones who went to school, gained employment, owned all the assets. Gone are the days when women stay home to cook, clean and have only children.

With a population of 52% women, there was the conviction that freeing the productive and creative energies of women was fundamental, to the much-needed social transformation of Rwanda.

For the case of Rwanda, there was no alternative because we had just emerged from an atrocious genocide. We were faced with the complex task of healing wounds as well as building basic infrastructure, all at the same time. We understood how expensive a price we had paid; and how difficult it would be to repair the ruin. There was so much need and every effort counted. And so women became a powerful force for change, from the smallest village council to the highest tiers of national government.

We saw that without a deliberate effort, it would be an uphill task to reverse centuries of gender imbalance. It became, and still is today, a constitutional requirement to have 30% women in decision-making positions in the public sector.

With this in place, Rwanda managed to enjoy the highest female legislative representation worldwide at 64%; 40% of the cabinet is made up of women and the judiciary has 40% women as well.

Discrimination or exclusion for any citizen is punishable by Rwandan law. With a sense of dignity and self worth, Rwandan women have been given a chance to contribute to nation building.

Distinguished audience,

Allow me to highlight some of the good progress we are experiencing in favor of women. These all have a direct correlation with reducing poverty.

On the Education front:

Not only has Rwanda achieved universal education; but, girls' enrolment rate at primary school is at an impressive 98%. Boys follow closely behind with an enrolment rate of 95%. Primary education is compulsory and free in public schools.

Between 1960 and 1990 only a mere 2,500 students graduated from university; over the last 20 years around 84,000 students have graduated from tertiary institutions. This is

30 times the amount of graduates; we had just 2 decades ago! Unlike in yesterday's Rwanda, today's Rwanda promotes education for every single child.

The challenge now is quality – meaning the government is focused on providing more and better trained teachers, sufficient school materials and appropriate school infrastructure.

Another area that we need to improve on is ensuring that the education students receive, directly correlate with labor market demands.

On the Employment front:

Article 37 of the constitution states that ‘persons with the same competence and ability have the right to equal pay for equal work without discrimination.’

In the late 90's an ‘inheritance law was passed granting equal inheritance rights to sons and daughters’.

On the Poverty reduction front:

In only 5 years, between 2008 and 2012 Rwanda was able to lift 1 million people out of poverty. This is significant given that poverty bore the face of women.

### On the Healthcare front:

In regards to maternal health, HIV+ pregnant women and their children, have access to PMTCT services in 85% of our health facilities. Because of the success of Prevention of Mother to Child Transmission of HIV, we have managed to take the next step and eliminate the transmission.

Rwandan women are now delivering their babies in health facilities, as opposed to at home, and this has contributed significantly to a reduction in maternal mortality; putting Rwanda on track for MDG4 (reducing child mortality) and MDG 5 (improving maternal health).

Rwanda has also instituted a system of maternal death audits, which investigates the circumstances surrounding a woman's death during childbirth and recommends practical solutions for preventing future fatalities to communities and health facilities.

These modest improvements make us optimistic. It is clear that the country has set all the wheels in motion; the positive contributions women have made to different aspects of society have won them the confidence of Rwandan men and society at large, who now view women as true partners in nation building.

Yes, we as women have a more central role; however, I challenge each one of you here to think about what we are doing with this space and support? This is where we still have work to do. Allow me to share some of my thoughts on this:

One day, unknowingly, my two children illustrated the importance of choice. My 21-year-old daughter had had a tough week at school; she came home and complained that it was all too much to manage.

Her younger brother, about 16 years, spontaneously responded: 'You women raised your voices, ventured out, and asked to be empowered, do you want to get an education and work, or do you want to stay at home? Make up your mind'.

This amusing exchange is a reminder that we should make the best of the opportunities and carry our responsibilities with grace. While there is comfort in being looked after; we have to choose either 'to be looked after or 'to be active partners'. We cannot have the best of both worlds.

As a parting thought, ladies and gentlemen,

I have come to appreciate the importance of applying the right collective mindset, for the attainment of real societal transformation. As we can see, the prominent role of women in Rwanda today is due to conscious decisions, made by the post-genocide leadership. However, it also takes the acceptance of society to make the process complete.

Distinguished audience,

I wish you all fruitful deliberations and now have the pleasure to officially declare this conference on Women and Poverty, with a human rights perspective open.

Thank you for you kind attention.