In 1994, 10 percent of Rwanda’s population was slaughtered in a mass genocide over a period of 100 days. In the aftermath, Rwandans struggled to secure food and water, find loved ones, and rebuild a sense of security. Into this chaos stepped the women of Rwanda, who defied tradition to take on leadership roles and recovery efforts while dealing with individual and collective trauma and grief. *Rwandan Women Rising*, by Swanee Hunt, documents the remarkable stories, motivations, and lessons that these women experienced while working to rebuild their country and redefine what it means to be Rwandan.

In traditional Rwandan society, women wielded power from behind the curtain. Only men took on public-facing roles and those in positions of government or social authority were highly respected. Before the genocide, women were generally not encouraged to enter politics, attend school, or even express themselves in local public gatherings. But over 94 percent of those accused of perpetrating the genocide were male, and Rwandan women became the public voice of peace, reconciliation, strength, and integrity in the country. As Hunt writes, “If the Rwandan conflict was gendered, so has been the recovery.” In the midst of personal tragedy, Rwandan women radically changed the landscape of Rwandan politics, social services, families, community, and identity.

In *Rwandan Women Rising*, author Swanee Hunt, a former US diplomat and international advocate for women, brings together dozens of Rwandan voices to create a riveting chorus of grief, hope, and resilience. She provides helpful historical, political, and social context for each personal story but resists adding too much of her own analysis. Hunt does not offer generic answers or allow the reader to accept easy stereotypes. Instead, she challenges the reader to engage these women (and men) on their own terms.

Aisa Kirabo Kacyira left her veterinary practice to become a senator and then mayor of Kigali, the capital of Rwanda. Anne Marie Musabyemungu went after the perpetrating army hiding in the jungles of the Congo to find her husband and convince him to give up his guerilla fighting and return home (her efforts ultimately inspired hundreds of other former genocide soldiers to defect back to Rwanda). As a young woman, Aloisea Inyumba was so respected for her skills and integrity that she rose through the ranks to become the head of finance for the army in exile, ultimately serving as the minister of gender in the new government and the head of the National Unity and Reconciliation Commission.

Two decades after the genocide, Rwanda has rebuilt itself with dignity, honor, and determination. The country is now a role model for the region, with progressive stances on health care, education, and policy. But even more than national and international politics, this is a story of the empowerment of Rwandan women. Women spearheaded efforts to reunite families and care for orphans, bring counseling to traumatized survivors, build cooperative farms, develop and lead *gacacas* (local courts to try war criminals), establish policy protections for children, categorize rape as a war crime for the first time, expand health care and decrease childhood mortality, and reintegrate genocide perpetrators into Rwandan society. The scope and depth of these efforts is staggering.
In recognition of the needs of the new country, Rwanda’s government also established a quota for women in the lower house of parliament—30 percent of seats were now reserved for women. In the first post-genocide national elections in 2003, women decimated the quota to win 48.8 percent of the seats. In the 2008 elections, women captured 56 percent of the seats. With that vote, Rwanda became the first parliament in any country in history to hold a female majority.

This is an important book, both for its comprehensive introduction to a complicated time in recent history and its challenge to established American understandings of feminism, patriotism, faith, and hope. While many Rwandan women cited their Christian faith as a source of strength and Rwandan churches acted as sites of hope and community, the depths of reconciliation needed to heal the country challenge all previous conceptions of individual and communal forgiveness. The bravery Rwandan women showed in forgiving and reintegrating genocide perpetrators into the community was deeply inspiring and will move any Christian toward greater efforts of peace.

To be sure, this is a complicated book on a difficult subject and requires a commitment from the reader. But it is a commitment that is absolutely worth it. It can be tempting to simply categorize these stories as incomprehensible experiences happening to “other” people in “other” places. But the authentic voices present in these pages provide a rich and multi-faceted perspective that complements and expands our own. The voices of Rwandan women speak to all people, and readers may hear echoes of their own experiences in the stories of grief, despair, hope, empowerment, and reconciliation.

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