



Dining for Women

Food for Thought

DECEMBER 2008

RWANDA KNITS

Rwanda

“The fact that we are so many has made it possible for men to listen to our views. Now that we’re a majority, we can do even more.” - Lawmaker, Espérance Mwiza

EDUCATIONAL THEME: Rwandan women and political empowerment

RELATED ISSUES AND DISCUSSION POINTS:

Following the 1994 genocide, 70% of the population *left behind* were women. Women then were acting as community leaders, financial providers and heads of households. The Government for National Unity – the transitional authority formed in 1994 – considered women an excluded group and understood their participation in governance to be essential for longer-term democratization and sustainable peace.

Rwandan women’s resilience and contribution immediately following the genocide promoted their acceptance into government. They contributed to the country’s physical reconstruction, social healing and reconciliation. Their efforts were recognized and institutionalized by the government which created a new constitution in 2003 requiring that women hold 30% of parliament seats. The fact that their inclusion in government is a nationally driven force strengthens Rwanda’s system even further. The systemization of women’s engagement in policy-making has clear benefits: endemic problems affecting the female population have a better chance of being addressed when they occupy top-ranking posts in the Government. By September 2008, a record 56% of parliamentary positions were held by women, including the speaker’s chair. Today, of the ten million Rwandan citizens, 55% are women. (*United Nations*)

I. WOMEN IN RWANDA

Discussion questions: What historical events, cultural norms, and/or political systems contribute to the stark difference between women’s representation in Rwanda and the U.S.?

❖ The 1994 genocide decimated Rwanda’s fragile economic base,

Fast Facts:

Rwanda:

55% women

Parliament:

56% women
including Speaker

United States:

51% women

Congress:

16% women
including Speaker

severely impoverished the population, particularly women, and eroded the country's ability to attract private and external investment.

- ❖ 90% of Rwandan workers are agricultural
- ❖ 60% of the population lives below the poverty line (compared to 12% in the U.S.)
- ❖ The literacy rate for women is 59.8 % (compared to 71% of men).
- ❖ 25% of women have never attended school (compared to 17% of men).
- ❖ Rural women's overburdened lifestyles and lack of access to income hampers their progress and keeps them entrenched in poverty. One Rwanda woman explains, "When one is poor, there is this feeling of lacking self-esteem. And poverty also forces women not to be involved in anything else apart from working for their household."

II. WOMEN IN RWANDAN GOVERNMENT

Discussion questions: What barriers do American women face in running for public office? How are these challenges similar/different than Rwandan women?

- ❖ Despite being one of the poorest regions in the world, the level of women's representation in parliament in sub-Saharan Africa is higher than in many wealthier nations. (*United Nations*)
- ❖ After the genocide, a new constitution was passed in May 2003. The Constitution of Rwanda provides for a 30-percent minimum quota for women in Parliament, or 24 seats. In the run-up to the September 2003 election, gender advocates called on parties not only to have equal representation of women and men in their party lists, but also to position women close to the top to ensure the presence of women representatives. The ruling party, the Rwanda Patriotic Front, placed a woman at the head of its list, and of the 42 seats it won, 17 went to women. Of the further 3 seats won by women in the general election, 2 went to the Social Democratic Party, and 1 to the Liberal Party. (*UNIFEM*)
- ❖ During the country's September 2003 general election, the first after the genocide, an additional 15 women were voted into non-reserved seats, bringing 39 into the lower house. In the upper house, 6 out of 20 seats are reserved for women. To attain this, Rwandan women lobbied heavily, helped to draft the new constitution and developed voting guidelines that guaranteed seats for women candidates. They were also able to push for the creation of a government ministry of women's affairs to promote policies in favor of women's interests (*United Nations*)
- ❖ As of the September 2008 elections, women hold a third of all cabinet positions, including foreign minister, education minister, Supreme Court chief and police commissioner general. And Rwanda's parliament last month became the first in the world where women claim the majority -- 56 percent, including the speaker's chair. (*Washington Post*) Note: more than 98 percent of the 4.8 million registered voters participated in the election.
- ❖ One result [of the increase in women's representation] is that Rwanda has banished archaic patriarchal laws that are still enforced in many African societies, such as those that prevent women from inheriting land. The legislature has passed bills aimed at ending domestic violence and child abuse, while a committee is now combing through the legal code to purge it of discriminatory laws. (*Washington Post*)
- ❖ In a report conducted by Hunt Alternatives Fund, the most commonly cited barriers to women's participation as candidates were:

1. Lack of self-confidence or an “inferiority complex” that prevents even qualified women from putting their names forward unless asked or invited by others
 2. Prevailing cultural beliefs and traditional attitudes
 3. Little information about election preparations and procedures
 4. Absence of programs or “special attention” directed at grassroots women to encourage their candidacy
 5. Weak support from men and families, or lack of cooperation between women and men that would allow women to participate in local decision-making positions
 6. Illiteracy and lack of education
 7. Poverty and the challenge of daily survival
 8. The burden of family responsibilities and other time constraints
 9. Poor access to sources of information, such as the media or information technology
 10. Incomplete information on national policies and programs (e.g., the Poverty Reduction Strategy, the Millennium Development Goals, and the government’s “Vision 2020” plan)
- ❖ *“We are always being asked why we are [the] first [nation to have a women’s majority],” said Speciose Mukandutiye, president of the Forum of Rwandan Women Parliamentarians, with a mischievous grin. “That’s the wrong question. Why not ask why the rest of the world is not here yet? More than half of the world is women. If democracy really works in those countries in the West, why are their parliamentarians not more than half women?”*

III. WOMEN’S ECONOMIC INDEPENDENCE & POLITICAL EMPOWERMENT

Discussion questions: How does economic independence influence women’s political empowerment and vice versa? How are programs like Rwanda Knits making an impact?

- ❖ A Rwandan woman, Jeanne Munekatete (age 29) said, *“I am not an educated woman, but Rwanda now is changing. People here, they know that a woman is the one who has always kept the family strong and safe and they want women to do the same for their communities,”* she said. *“Men are too impatient and hasty. Women listen more, they talk to everybody. In Rwanda, that is very important. If we stop ignorance and bitterness at the local level, that will move up all across the country.”*

In the words of several Rwanda Knits representatives, the opportunity to “own” their work has been life changing (*Rwanda Knits website*):

- ❖ One cooperative said their members are now able to purchase household items such as soap and can now shop at the local markets for food whereas before they had to grow most of what they can now buy, raising the economy of the area.
- ❖ Another group told how the younger women are now staying in the village to knit rather than having to leave to find work, often returning infected with HIV.
- ❖ A third group told how they found out about a craft market being held for tourists and sold \$60 (about two months’ wages) worth of knitted goods their first hour. And still another group told how knitting together in a group has helped each member talk about their problems and find solutions within the group.
- ❖ Still another told how their members are eagerly learning math skills to enable them to design knitting patterns. All this is in addition to the initial goal of earning an income.

VOICES OF RWANDAN WOMEN:

- ❖ *"What we have learnt as women is that you can achieve anything if you really want to. For example riding a motor bike used to be for men, but if you feel you like it then you can do it too,"* Diana Mukakabera, a courier in Kigali, tells Al Jazeera. *"All I hope for now is that one day I will save enough to buy my own bike, so I could work for myself. I would love to be free to ride a bike that was truly mine; that is my dream."*
- ❖ Half an hour back towards Kigali, as she sat having her hair straightened in a tiny roadside salon called Chez Anita, Florence Umutoni talked of this new Rwanda. *"In my grandmother's time, women were supposed to be in the house and not talk publicly,"* the 25-year-old said. *"Now the young girls see all these women in power and realise they can do anything. To succeed is no longer about physical force, it is about the force of your mind. We know we are capable of anything that men can do."*
- ❖ *"This was a broken society after the genocide,"* said Aloisea Inyumba, Kagame's former gender and social affairs minister, who was also a prominent official in his ruling Rwandan Patriotic Front when it was still a rebel group fighting the country's genocidal government. *"We made a decision that if Rwanda is going to survive, we have to have a change of heart as a society. Equality and reconciliation are the only options."*

VOICES OF RWANDA KNITS PARTICIPANTS



"I am married and have four daughters. My husband is an agriculturalist (farmer). He raises cows. The cooperative has helped to support my family. . . . I did not have a chance to go to school for very long. But, my role in the cooperative has enabled me to secure loans for my daughters' education and to repay on time. . . . Socially, participation in this cooperative has huge rewards. We can talk about our lives. We can talk about our problems. We get to meet new people."

~ SAFI, President, Nyagatare Women



"Before I joined the cooperative, I belonged to an association that made earrings from local grasses. After I went through the Rwanda Knits training, I realized that I had a chance to grow. Now I earn more money for my family. I have a good friends. Before, I made earrings at home. Now I come to the center and work with my friends. You can learn a lot from friends. A friend can help you see things differently. Friends can help you solve your problems. In a cooperative, you have a strong voice to manage the situations that come up."

Tell [the American supporters of Rwanda Knits] what happens on the ground. Tell them about our work together. Tell them how we live, what we are doing - how this cooperative makes us smile."

~ JOY MUKAMUMAMA, Auditor, Nyagatare Women

"I started coming here in 2007. I am not married yet. I wanted to be with other women, and find out what it's all about being in a large community . . . It gives me a feeling of solidarity. I have some income now . . . When you see us together, we are happy."

~ ODETTE, Vice President, Nyagatare Women



"Now I'm not lonely and [the cooperative] keeps me busy. Now I can teach my kids and my neighbors to knit."

~ MARIAN, member, Nyagatare Women



The members of Nyagatare Women Co-op use knitting machines to create crafts (sweaters, scarves, skirts, etc.) for the local and export market. They work together from the Nyagatare Women's Center to solve the problems of poverty and coldness."

~ Nyagatare Women Cooperative mission statement (July 2008)

"We help each other when we sit together and knit"

~ Sifa, President, Nyagatare Women Cooperative (August 14, 2008)

"These workshops build upon the spirit of mutual assistance that is the foundation of Rwanda Knits. We learn from each other. I teach mission statements and budgets; my hosts [Hanson stays at members' homes during the sessions] teach me Kinyarwanda!"

~ Laura Hanson, Rwanda Knits

Cooperative Development Coordinator (August 2008)



"I think [Landrada] is an expert in cooperatives; She trains very well and she respects Rwandan traditions; She's a good mother; I wish I could meet her again; She's a down to earth woman; The person who trained us did so well, even better than I had expected; In short, we thank her."

~ Participants in the Rwanda Knits cooperative union workshop, speaking of facilitator Landrada of the Centre Iwacu (August 2008)

This quote is from Laura Hanson, the volunteer cooperative specialist who is returning to Rwanda in January, 2009.

"This one is American, like you!" Marian teased, pointing to a foreign-bred anomaly amidst her Rwandan herd. "He also is far from his family." We laughed, imagining the parallels between her cow's journey to these dry, hilly pastures and my own. Mine had taken a circuitous route via moto and the cooperative business workshop I was facilitating with Marian's knitting co-op in Nyagatare village. Now I found myself admiring the animals—central to local traditions like food, dowry, and

dancing—and thinking how this introduction to her cows exemplified the hospitality and kindness I experienced in Rwanda last summer.

Founding a community food cooperative in the United States and living with the general manager of the village co-op as a study abroad student in Botswana had brought me there. I wanted to know how the cooperative business model might work in other cultural contexts, especially post-conflict societies like Rwanda. Facilitating cooperative development workshops with Rwanda Knits showed me how working together can be a healing process. Its members, poor women from diverse backgrounds, envision a future of prosperity that depends on collaboration. Cooperative members see past their social differences by working towards a common goal.

I spent the summer of 2008 supporting the development of these cooperative businesses and will return to continue this work in January 2009. Ultimately, our vision is to engage all 29 nascent cooperatives of Rwanda Knits as they transition from community groups to full-fledged businesses. We embrace the philosophy of working together to heal. As each of these groups of women become networks of women entrepreneurs, they challenge ethnic and gender norms to set forth a new conception of what is possible in their communities. In this way, the women of Rwanda Knits remind me to “think globally, act locally.” We are all connected, regardless of our geographical origins. They teach me to delineate my local community by commonality of spirit. To act is to remember that the local and global must be inextricably intertwined in order to create a better world for our children.

Thus Marian’s American cow is my image of Rwanda Knits: a collectivity of women in the process of expanding their conception of community. And in doing so, they reach out to women like me, and make me feel at home in the herd no matter how far I am from my family.

MEETING RESOURCES

Rwandan Knits DVD: (on their website) Password is sweaters. Let video download for about 5 minutes. <http://homepage.mac.com/seegreen/rwandaknits/iMovieTheater37.html>

Radio program: Pacifica Radio KPFA (an NPR affiliate station) in Berkeley, CA broadcasted an 11-minute segment about the Rwanda Knits project on their show, *Full Circle* and includes an interview with Rwanda Knits' project manager, Geoffrey Katushabe and two of the Rwanda Knits' teachers, Esperance Nyirarusimbe and Furaha Mukamusoni <http://www.kpfa.org/archives/index.php?arch=19576> Scroll to 19 minutes and 23 seconds into the program to get to the interview.

YouTube video: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uSzGIfcR_w

Program Fact Sheet: download from Program Schedule page on DFW website

RECOMMENDED BOOKS AND LITERATURE:

Left To Tell, by Immaculee Ilibagiza, an excellent firsthand account of a Tutsi survivor of the Rwandan genocide. It tells her story about how the family operated before, during and after the genocide. She was able to survive by being hidden in a small bathroom with five other ladies.

Another resource about present day Rwanda is from Conde Nast Traveler Magazine, Sept 08 issue. There is an article on pg 206 entitled *The week of (not) living dangerously*. The author

tells of a gorilla safari adventure, but also describes the country trying to heal from the genocide.

SOCIALLY CONSCIOUS SHOPPING: Scarves from Rwanda Knits with special pricing for DFW members. (See the order form on the DFW website; Program Schedule page)

DINING WITH WOMEN: RWANDAN RECIPES

Ndizi na Nyama – Plantains with meat

Adapted From The Congo Cookbook at www.congocookbook.com

Ndizi is that Swahili word for plantains, which are widely used in Rwandan cooking, and Nyama is the word for meat. It is difficult to find recipes that are specifically Rwandan, but dishes similar to this one, as well as variations of it are made frequently by Rwandans and their neighbors. Normally, though, it would only be made with meat for a very special occasion, as it is too expensive to buy for most people, and cattle are thought of as a status symbol. So, in the spirit of “bush meat”, I made it with venison. Beef, lamb or even chicken thighs would work, too. Don’t be intimidated by the plantains – I had never cooked with them before, and if you used green plantains, they are JUST like potatoes, which are a reasonable substitute since Rwandans also cook with those. Just make sure you do not get plantains that are yellow and ripe – they will not work. Enjoy – this is really delicious!!

1c hot water

1 to 1-1/2 lbs. meat, your choice – venison, beef stew meat, lamb shoulder, boneless chicken thighs, cut into bite sized pieces

1t salt, more or less

1/2t black pepper

1/2t curry powder

cayenne pepper to taste

4T cooking oil (red palm would be most authentic, but whatever you normally use is fine)

1 large onion, thinly sliced

1T flour

½ to 1 - 14 oz. can of chopped tomatoes, drained, the higher amount if you like things tomato-y

1T tomato paste

1c regular or light coconut milk

1 bay leaf

2-3 green to very slightly yellow plantains, peeled and cut into large dice

Heat 2T of the oil in large heavy pan over medium heat and add about half of the salt, pepper(s) and curry powder. Cook briefly and add meat. Stir to cover the meat with the spices, and then add the bay leaf and hot water, being very careful as it may splatter. Bring to a boil, reduce heat to a simmer, cover and cook about 20-30 minutes. While meat is simmering, heat the other 2T of oil over medium heat in a skillet and add the onions. Cook the onions until they start to get soft, add the flour and stir well, continuing to cook for another minutes or two. Reduce heat, add tomatoes and tomato paste, stir well and cook for about 5 minutes. Reduce heat to lowest setting, stir in coconut milk, cover and simmer for 5 minutes, stirring occasionally. It will be thick. Turn off heat. Add plantains to the meat and cook about ten minutes until the plantains and done and the meat is tender. When the meat is done, remove the bay leaf and stir the onion mixture into the meat, adjust seasonings to taste. Serve with rice.

Rwandan Cabbage

Adapted from recipe at http://thefroelichs.org/solidarity_dinners.doc. Clicking on this will bring up several Rwandan vegetable recipes.

As you will see if you click on the above link it will lead you to several recipes for side dishes that are simple both in preparation and flavor. I chose the cabbage and it was beautiful – orange carrots, red tomatoes, whitish-green cabbage and I threw in some kale for dark green. I also threw in a few frozen peas since peas or beans are used at nearly every meal in Rwanda. A nice mild, delicious side to any meal. Sort of like winter coleslaw without the dressing.

1 onion, diced
½ head cabbage, cut into 1- inch pieces
a few collard or kale leaves, cut into one inch pieces
4 carrots, diced but not too tiny
½ can chopped tomatoes, drained, or more to taste
Handful frozen peas
2-3T oil of choice
Salt and lots of black pepper to taste

Heat the oil in a very large skillet over medium heat and add the onions. Saute for 5 minutes or so, then add the carrots, kale or collards, and cabbage, salt, pepper and a few tablespoons of water to prevent sticking, stir and cover. Turn heat up just a little and cook for about 10 or 15 minutes, stirring periodically and making sure nothing is burning or sticking, adding a little more water if so. Stir in the tomatoes and cook another several minutes, until all vegetables are cooked to your liking. Adjust salt and pepper. Serve warm.

Chicken with Tomato Sauce (serves 4) Very easy to make and good comfort food

1 chicken, cut into pieces
3T. oil
1 onion, thinly sliced
3 large tomatoes, mashed
2 stalks celery, cut into thin rounds
1t. salt
1 hot pimento or chili pepper

Fry the chicken in hot oil until golden. Remove chicken pieces and cook onions in the same pot. When they, too, are golden brown, return chicken pieces to the pot and add tomatoes, celery, salt and hot pepper. Reduce heat and simmer until chicken is tender. From Africa News Cookbook

RESOURCES

<http://www.idea.int/publications/wip2/upload/Rwanda.pdf>
<http://www.un.org/ecosocdev/geninfo/afrec/vol18no1/181women.htm>
<http://www.un.org/ecosocdev/geninfo/afrec/vol20no2/202-african-women.html>
<http://www.un.org/Pubs/chronicle/2003/issue4/0403p25.asp>
http://www.unifem.org/news_events/story_detail.php?StoryID=736
http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2008/10/26/AR2008102602197_pf.html
www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/rw.html
www.huntalternatives.org/download/1091_engendering_rwandas_decentralization.pdf