

# Women make leadership gains in Africa

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KIGALI, Rwanda -- Sweden and Norway once claimed the world's highest percentage of female lawmakers. Now that distinction belongs to an African nation: Rwanda.

Women in the tiny, land-locked country still recovering from a 1994 genocide hold 48 percent of the country's legislative seats. A woman heads the Supreme Court and half of the country's judges are women, as are half of its college graduates.

That, little by little, is bringing real change. Women and girls, who used to have no inheritance rights, now inherit equally with men. Rape, once rarely prosecuted, is commonly punished with sentences of up to 15 years in prison. And if a girl drops out of school, social workers show up at the family home to try to get her back in class.

"We are having a kind of revolution," said Sen. Odette Nyiramilimo, head of the Rwandan Senate's committee on social affairs and human rights. "The way of thinking and taking decisions is changing."

Bucking tradition, women are quietly and steadily assuming larger leadership roles across much of Africa. Liberia has Africa's first elected woman president, Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf, a former World Bank economist. Mozambique and Sao Tome and Principe have women prime ministers and South Africa and Zimbabwe have female vice presidents. Zambia has a woman running for president, Tanzania has a female foreign minister and women hold at least 30 percent of the legislative seats in Burundi, South Africa and Mozambique.

For the most part, that hasn't yet stemmed the most serious problems women face in Africa: poverty, AIDS, violence and lack of access to schools, health care, credit and other vital services. But Johnson-Sirleaf, Africa's highest-profile female leader, predicts that the growing number of women in power in Africa will in time bring real change.

"Because they're mothers, there will be stronger peace-building efforts," she told the Tribune during a visit to Chicago after her inauguration early this year. "There will be more attention on children and education" and a move away from heavy spending on militaries and defense.

In Liberia, "women are still far behind in all aspects" of life, she said. But a major reason she was elected in the war-fatigued country, she said, is that "everyone concluded that men had ruled the country for over 100 years and had failed."

Rwanda, which has made the greatest strides toward increasing female leadership in Africa, got its start in the aftermath of the 1994 genocide, which left 800,000 dead and the country with a surviving population that was 70 percent female.

Women, faced with hungry children and dead or jailed husbands, began venturing out of their homes to find work or start businesses. A new constitution for the first time set aside 30 percent of the country's legislative seats for them, and women began winning even unreserved seats.

The country now has a high enough percentage of women in office that it has been able to push through controversial reforms. Previously, a woman caught in an adulterous relationship automatically was divorced from her husband and lost rights to her children and home, while a male adulterer received no punishment. Today neither faces legal sanction and "it's up to the

couple to decide what to do," Nyiramilimo said.

Similarly, female dropout rates—once high in Rwanda—have plunged after the country's female minister of education began sending social workers to the homes of girls who quit school. The workers try to find schools closer to home for girls who had to walk too far, for instance, or impress on parents that educating girls is as crucial as educating boys.

The results are already evident in national statistics. Before the genocide, primary school enrollment was about 75 percent; today it is near 100 percent, Nyiramilimo said. Fifty-five percent of primary school graduates go to high school, up from 9 percent before the genocide. And women, who in 2000 made up 20 percent of university graduates, today account for 50 percent, according to government figures.

As more women are educated, family sizes also are falling, a crucial change in densely populated Rwanda. Since the 1980s, the average number of children has fallen from eight to six, and legislators hope to reduce the average to three by 2020, mainly by improving the educational level of Rwandan women.

Interestingly, men, once deeply resistant to allowing women to open businesses, join cooperatives or seek elected office, also are changing their attitudes, the senator said. With 63 percent of Rwandans living on less than \$1 a day—the United Nations poverty line—men are seeing that additional family income can be a big help. Today "women who bring money home are more powerful and respected," Nyiramilimo said. "And as women's status changes, so does that of their children."

Women in Rwanda, as in much of Africa, still face a disproportionate share of problems. Seventy-five percent of Rwanda's poor are women, and domestic violence, though declining, remains a major problem. As recently as 2002, Nyiramilimo herself couldn't get a home loan without her husband's signature.

Some of the country's new female legislators stand accused of being "quota" representatives lacking the knowledge or background to effectively serve as leaders.

"Not all women have enough capacity and skills," said Immaculate Ingabire, a women's activist in Kigali. "But not all men are capable to be good leaders either, and they're not challenged like women are."

Rwanda's successes have drawn the attention of other African women, who hope to replicate the changes at home, Nyiramilimo said. She said she thinks that some of the new laws in Rwanda may prove key to finally quickening the pace of development in Africa.

"If women and children get more power, the continent will develop," she predicted. "If all our children can go to secondary school and read and write, things will be different."

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