



GENDERHOPE
WORKING TO END GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE

Interview of the Month
Nadine Niyitegeka, Communications Associate,
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1. GenderHopes: You are a graduate of the Akilah Institute for Women. Can you tell us more about how Akilah has impacted your life?

Nadine Niyitegeka: Akilah has really impacted my life, because before I joined at Akilah, I didn't have any future, and I didn't know how I could afford any other university. I lived with my mother who was always struggling to meet basic needs, and without education, I would never have been able to escape from that poverty. Akilah also opened my eyes to the different opportunities women have in the country, and I discovered hidden talents I never knew about, such as leadership, public speaking, and communication skills.

I have also met some really great people and made great connections. Being selected as an Akilah ambassador in Malaysia and Hong Kong, I was able to meet women who have really inspired me. I will be going to the United States soon, to represent Akilah and help with fundraising tours. Traveling abroad and meeting people who have such different outlooks on life is something that most girls in Rwanda or Africa in general don't get, so I am very grateful and I feel that it has changed me and the way I view the world. Sometimes, my family and community say they don't even recognize who I am any more – I take that as a compliment and a measure of how far I've come!

2. What were some of the biggest challenges you had to overcome as a woman, when starting your studies at Akilah?

Women in Rwanda are often still held to different standards and treated differently because of traditional male-centered social values and roles. For instance, girls often fear to speak up or form independent opinions. For me, being in Akilah's all-female environment, it was easier to grow and become more independent, but it was still challenging to really stand up and let my voice be heard at times.

Of course not all men are keeping women from developing themselves. In fact, one of my greatest motivators was a good family friend who believed in me and helped me prepare for applying to and studying at Akilah. However, society in general can be discouraging to women, and of course I experienced some of this and had grown up with those expectations.



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3. You are now the Communications Associate at Akilah and you must have heard many inspiring stories through your work at Akilah. Can you share some with us?

Before joining Akilah I had another big opportunity at a famous international hotel chain (JW Marriott). But I decided that working at Akilah was a better opportunity, because I am very happy to see other girls' lives being transformed every day, just like mine, when they join Akilah.

For instance, I remember a classmate of mine, Vestine, who wanted to start a business. Without any training, she had nowhere to go, but thanks to the opportunities available at Akilah, she found out about a large entrepreneurship competition. She worked very hard on her business plan, and eventually won the competition, allowing her to travel to the United States with prize money.

There is a student I met who is a genocide survivor. She had no one, and lost all hope, with the feeling that her future was destroyed. Thanks to Akilah, she now feels like she has a family again. The social support and the skills development have made her very passionate about building her own country and rebuilding a future for herself.

Assoumpta is an entrepreneurship student who shared with me her story of growing up in a family with four brothers. She never had the same opportunities, as she was told that it was her task to stay at home and do household chores. However, she was still passionate about knowledge and curious about technology, sneaking onto her brother's laptop to learn by herself. Without guidance or teachers to help her, she couldn't fulfil her potential. Akilah has allowed her to learn much more, and dream bigger, and she is planning to open up a software company in her village.

4. What do you see as the biggest challenges for women in Rwanda today? How do you think these can be overcome?

I've already talked about this a little when I mentioned my own problems, and through the stories of the girls I've met studying and working for Akilah. It is very hard still for girls to grow up and become independent thinkers with big plans, big dreams, and big opportunities. This is because of the roles that society in Rwanda often still forces girls into. This is especially the case in the countryside. I think we need to really focus on the development of the lives of rural women in Rwanda.



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Luckily, Rwanda is also moving ahead very fast, with many new female role models emerging in politics, business, and even on the smaller scale when women take up good positions in tourism, ICT, or other service jobs.

Akilah is helping transform these girls' lives, but in order to overcome the difficulties faced because of culture, we need to start earlier by teaching parents and kids about gender equality and the importance of education.

I hope Akilah will expand so that many more girls across Africa can have the same access to education and opportunities.

Girls need to learn how to speak their minds, and the rest of society needs to learn to listen to them when they do.

5. Is there anything special you would like to tell our readers about Rwanda?

You should come visit! Rwanda is a very beautiful country, which has made huge steps in renewing and rebuilding after the hard times it has passed through. It's not at all what you first think of when you hear the word "Rwanda". Forget everything you know! Rwanda is a country that is starting to give big opportunities to women. It is a very secure, safe, and business-friendly country. You can walk alone at night and no one will bother you. The country is growing economically, and you can feel that people are optimistic and hard-working because of it.