



## **Rwanda Rediscovered**

- By Vibeke Thomsen, GenderHopes

15 years. That's how long it took for my dream to come true. I first read about Rwanda in the late 90's, a few years after the genocide had taken place, and had since dreamed of visiting this part of East Africa, in the hopes of understanding its history, discovering its people and immersing myself in Rwandan culture.

At 1am and after 22 hours of traveling, my husband and I got off the plane and I was excited as a child. Our driver Innocent greeted us and drove us through Kigali to our hotel. As we passed the Hotel des Milles Collines, the UN Headquarters, the former house of President Juvénal Habyarimana where his plane was shot down, I remembered the countless books I'd read about Rwanda. In April this year, Rwanda marked the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the genocide that killed almost a million people in less than three months.

In a slightly macabre way, I was eager, curious, impatient to visit the places I had read so much about, but the next morning, we had a meeting scheduled with, amongst others, [Albert Nsengiyuma](#), the Minister of Education in Charge of Technical and Vocational Education and Training, [Michael Fairbanks](#), Founder of the SEVEN Fund and Senior Advisor to President Paul Kagame since 2001, and [Elizabeth Dearborn-Hughes](#), Co-Founder and CEO of the [Akilah Institute for Women](#), who was the initiator of this trip and who had brought us all together.

It didn't take long for me to understand how wrong I had been about Rwanda.

How my research, attention and interest had focused on the war, the role of the colonial powers, the genocides (Rwanda had already witnessed two genocides before 1994) and the ethnic tensions. During the meeting, I listened to fascinating people share their experience of Rwanda over the last 20 years, and realized that Rwanda had moved on, and done so much faster than the literature and news I was reading back home.

That's when I finally started to learn about the country that had always fascinated me.

In less than 20 years, Rwanda has become a model for reconciliation and economic development, not only for Africa, but also for the world and has become the 9<sup>th</sup> fastest-growing economy in the world. Paul Kagame was elected President in 2000 and shortly thereafter adopted [Vision 2020](#). This ambitious development program aims to transform Rwanda into a knowledge-based middle-income country. Its main objective is to reduce poverty, improve health outcomes and build a united and democratic country.

In many ways, Rwanda's record is impressive: 64% of Parliamentarians are women, the highest number in the world. Rwanda has reduced its fertility rate (4.6 children

per woman – compared to 6.1 in 2004) as well as its maternal mortality rate, with the majority of births now being attended by a skilled midwife or doctor. Literacy is over 70% and, according to the Millennium Development Goals, universal primary education has been achieved, for both boys and girls.

We had the chance to witness how Rwanda is working to modernize its tourism sector. Trekking to see the Gorillas in the [Virunga Volcanoes National Park](#), which borders Uganda and the Democratic Republic of Congo is a once in a lifetime, unforgettable experience. In the [Akagera National Park](#), elephants, lions, buffalos, zebras, and the richest birdlife in East Africa are being reintroduced to meet the demand for breathtaking safaris. In Kigali, numerous world-renowned chains are opening hotels.

Elizabeth Dearborn-Hughes, who had been living in Rwanda since 2006 witnessed these developments firsthand. Through her research, she noted however, the strong discrepancy between the needs of the private sector versus the skills students were learning in university. Many students were graduating with sociology, history or law degrees and were unable to find employment while the private sector was complaining that it couldn't find qualified personnel to hire.

With this in mind, Elizabeth co-founded with her husband Dave [the Akilah Institute for Women](#) in Kigali. The Akilah Institute is a college for women, with an innovative model, in the sense that students graduate with market-relevant skills to find meaningful employment in the fastest growing sectors of economy – or to launch their own venture, thanks to the entrepreneurship skills they gained. Akilah offers three majors: Entrepreneurship, Hospitality Management and Information Systems. Working in direct partnership with the private sector, Akilah boasts a 95% job placement upon graduation.



Meeting students at the Akilah Institute

We had the chance to meet with students and to witness first hand how attending Akilah has changed their lives and provided them with opportunities to escape poverty. [Nadine Niyitegeka, a graduate of Akilah speaks about how the college has impacted her life](#): “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”. She adds: “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”.

Akilah opened a second campus in January 2014 in Bujumbura, Burundi and aims to open more campuses in East Africa in the coming years.

Our trip also involved a visit of the capital Kigali and the neighboring Nyamata. In Kigali, we spent time at the Memorial for the 10 UN Belgian Peacekeepers, who were brutally murdered as the genocide started and at the moving [Genocide Memorial](#) where the remains of over 250.000 people are buried. In both places, my heart broke and holding back tears was difficult. The following day, we visited the city of Nyamata, 20 kilometers from Kigali. Our day started at the [Church of Nyamata](#) where 10.000 people had sought refuge but were murdered, most of them with machetes, on 10 April 1994. The clothes and belongings of the dead are still there, as is the blood-covered cloth on the alter. The skulls, remains and bodies of the dead are kept nearby, countless victims, some never identified.

When Kagame became President, he initiated a national reconciliation process. The process took its roots in using traditional values and practices to bring Rwandans together after the genocide and to provide a safe environment for Rwandan refugees to return to. [Gacaca courts](#) were established to allow perpetrators to be tried rapidly and fairly by their peers, hereby alleviating the burden on the national tribunals. Perpetrators, who had served their sentence, had not been genocidal leaders and had repented, were given the possibility of being released earlier from prison. Forgiveness, reconciliation and unity were the key words.

Our day in Nyamata – and last day in Rwanda - ended on that positive note. Our guide Francois, a former refugee who had grown up in Uganda, then took us to the nearby [Millennium Village of Mayange](#). We visited a reconciliation village where victims and perpetrators live and work together and we had the opportunity to conduct a joint interview with a genocide victim and a perpetrator who shared their stories, and their hopes for the future of their country. We visited a rural family, who showed us how they work together to cultivate their land, raise their livestock and subside from their agriculture. Our day ended with a visit to the local primary school, where smiling and welcoming children greeted us.

When we said goodbye to Francois, I couldn't help but ask him how Tutsis and Hutus could live together after the genocide. With a smile, Francois answered: “There are no such ethnic distinctions. We are all one Rwanda”.

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