

# HerSTORY

Rwandan Women Changemakers



## Introduction: Herstory & the Rwanda Women's Alliance

Rwanda is known world-wide as a country that has enshrined gender equality in its laws and as a champion for the rights of women and girls globally. Yet the stories of the women in Rwanda who have, throughout history, advocated and organized for women's rights is less known. This book is the beginning of a journey of Rwandan women documenting their rich and inspiring contributions to the fight for women's rights and gender equality in all aspects of society. The profiles in this book honor and celebrate the many brave and visionary women who have contributed to this ongoing struggle. By sharing Rwanda's Herstory, the hope is to inspire and empower future generations of Rwandan women to continue the work of their predecessors and contemporaries, to create a more just and equitable society for all.

This book is part of an initiative by the Rwanda Women's Alliance - an alliance of diverse women in Rwanda who envision an equitable society where women's rights are recognized and fully enjoyed. Through the Rwanda's Herstory initiative the Alliance aims to strengthen solidarity between women organizing for their rights in all aspects of society and use it as an asset for collective action.

### About the publisher



**PUBLISHERS**

In 2015 Imagine We Rwanda, a woman-owned social enterprise, opened its doors to support Rwandan and East African storytellers and audiences. Through a dynamic social entrepreneurship model, the organization is designed to publish culturally relevant literature and support local content creators. Imagine We Rwanda also strengthens education in communities through book donations, school visits, and curriculum development while providing English language training to educators and creators. The unique sociocultural approach strengthens both the quality and quantity of creative and cultural works through its programs and publisher platforms that develop authors and tell African stories.

### Supporters

This initiative is possible through the support from the Swedish Government through Swedish development assistance and the Kvinna till Kvinna Foundation. Translation of this publication in French is made possible by the Embassy of France in Rwanda.





## To All Women

This book is dedicated to women all over the globe, both young and old, . May the fearless spirit, resilience, and transformative achievements of Rwandan women, who continue to shatter barriers and blaze new trails, ignite a spark within you. Let their courage become your inspiration, and their history be a testament to the will of womanhood, leading you to breakthrough limitations and create your own stories.



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# Ndabaga

In legends, she is a courageous woman who defied gender norms of the time to save her father and became a revered warrior. Her story has inspired generations of women to break barriers imposed by societal norms and to stand in their power.





Ndabaga, a woman of extraordinary strength and resilience, defied the constraints of her time and became an icon of feminist empowerment. It is said that Ndabaga was raised in the 1700s, an era of relentless conflict and war. Her father, like all healthy men of the time, was required by law to serve in the king's army until old age, a retirement granted only upon the arrival of a son to take his place. But Ndabaga had no brothers, and thus, her father was scorned and destined to die on the battlefield, his hopes of a peaceful retirement rendered impossible.

Watching her father's fate unfold, Ndabaga yearned for a way to relieve her father's burden, but the societal norms of the time offered no course of action for a daughter. The battlefield was a realm reserved for boys and men, who were believed to be the only gender with the physical strength and skills needed to be a warrior.

Undeterred by these limitations, Ndabaga embarked on a daring mission to redeem her father's fate. Disguised as a boy, she underwent intense training in traditionally male activities. She fearlessly mastered marksmanship, leaped over fences, tended to livestock, and slaughtered animals. She learned to wield a spear and a bow and arrow, and soon, she was outperforming the boys in her village.

To secure her place in the king's army, Ndabaga disguised herself as a man, binding her breasts and flattening her chest. Presenting herself before the king, she demonstrated her warrior skills. Impressed by her abilities, the king permitted her father to retire and return to his family, allowing Ndabaga to rise in the ranks of his service.

Finally, Ndabaga stood before her father in the king's palace, recounting her remarkable journey and declaring her intention to represent him there. Her extraordinary skills as a warrior left even the king in awe. When whispers and rumors about her gender began to circulate, Ndabaga fearlessly confessed her true identity. She explained that her actions were driven by her desire to rescue her father and remove the shame cast upon her family.

To everyone's surprise, the king's admiration for Ndabaga only grew, leading him to choose her as his wife. Inspired by her exceptional actions, he issued a decree for everyone at the palace to return to their families. Ndabaga's story, whether regarded as a fable or not, continues to captivate audiences. Many girls and women draw strength and empowerment from her journey, and her legacy lives on through initiatives that empower women and promote gender equality.

Ndabaga's tale serves as a testament to the power of women in breaking barriers and reshaping societies. It reminds us that women possess immeasurable strength, intelligence, and courage. In Ndabaga's story, we also find a blueprint for a future in which worth and opportunities are not determined by gender. It calls upon us to uplift and support one another, amplifying the voices of women in all spheres of life. By championing gender equality, we create a brighter and more inclusive world for future generations.




# Nyabingi

Nyabingi is known as a supreme deity and warrior and Muhumusa is the Rwandan-Ugandan who embodied the Nyabingi spirit. Muhumusa defied societal norms by fighting for her father's kingdom, earning the title of Goddess.







Nyabingi, meaning "mother of abundance" or "the one who possesses many things," was revered and celebrated as a supreme deity and captivating warrior. Around 1800, in the northern regions of Rwanda that were once the precolonial kingdom of Ndurwa, the veneration of the divine spirit of Nyabingi began. As a symbol of resistance and empowerment, one of the most striking narratives of Nyabingi's impact revolves around the story of Muhumusa, a Rwandan-Ugandan woman of the late 19th and early 20th century. Muhumusa was a renowned Nyabingi medium, a conduit for Nyabingi's spirit, and her story illuminates the revolutionary fervor associated with Nyabingi's name.

Nyabingi's story begins in an unconventional manner. Born to a servant in the royal household of King Ruganzu Ndoli in Karagwe Kingdom, Tanzania, she was raised in Uganda and grew to become a force that defied societal norms and expectations. Despite her humble beginnings, Nyabingi's spirit was indomitable. As a child, she fought valiantly for her father's kingdom, demonstrating extraordinary powers that transcended the physical realm and elevated her to the status of a revered goddess.

As legends tell, Nyabingi fought fiercely on behalf of her father, who remained in Karagwe. Her extraordinary powers elevated her status to that of a revered goddess, even after her passing. Following her father's reign, she ascended to the throne, earning popularity for her genuine rapport with her subjects. Many bold women warriors across Africa were driven by her mystical powers and her authority in combating colonial forces.

Believers brought offerings to mediums who would negotiate with the spirit of Nyabingi on the believer's behalf. The traditional practice of invoking her power consisted of "reasoning" sessions. It involved the use of chanting and drumming to reach states of heightened spirituality. The drumming, which is still seen in Rwanda today, was a form of spiritual communication but also as a form of rallying and community. Tribes such as the Shambo and Bgeishekatwa in neighboring Uganda harnessed her might to fight their oppressors. Queen Kitami of the Bgeishekatwa tribe, possessing a sacred drum of extraordinary power, embodied Nyabingi's influence. Similarly, Queen Matamba of Angola confronted the Portuguese in Nyabingi's name, displaying her potency beyond East Africa's borders.

In Ethiopia, Nyabingi's inspiration emboldened warriors to resist the British. Moreover, her impact reached the shores of Jamaica, where she played an instrumental role in the birth of Reggae music. The term "Nyabinghi" introduced to the country became synonymous with Rastafari beliefs, leading to the formation of a new religious movement. Nyabinghi gatherings and the distinctive drumming style became integral to their religious practices.

Tragically, Nyabingi's life was cut short by her cousin, who conspired with the King of Rwanda to kill her. Nevertheless, her spirit endured, residing in the hearts of both common people and kingdom rulers. Her legacy lives on, exemplified by the Nyakishenyi caves in South-Western Uganda. These sacred sites, where Nyabingi sought refuge on her way to Rwanda, continue to be revered by the Bacwezi and those who uphold traditional religion.


Nyabingi's name remains renowned, evoking admiration and courage. Her story represents a testament to empowerment, proving that fierce and fearless women have been present throughout history. The folklore of Queen Nyabingi holds immense significance in the histories of Uganda and Rwanda, symbolizing the fight for independence and justice from colonial rule. Women, and men, will cherish and safeguard Nyabingi's legacy for generations to come.



# Queen Rosalie GICANDA

Her grace and generosity remind us of the importance of treating everyone with kindness and respect, regardless of their status.





Gicanda was born in 1928 in Buganza, now Rwamagana District, in the Eastern part of Rwanda. She was the firstborn of five siblings, and her parents, Martin Gatsinzi and mother Mukwindigiri, later relocated to the area of Mutara, still in Eastern Rwanda. When she was just 14 years old, she met and married King Mutara III Rudahigwa, who had divorced his first wife, Princess Nyiramakomali.

As queen, Gicanda was known for her welcoming and generous nature. She warmly greeted everyone who came to the palace, regardless of their status. Her modesty, generosity, and kindness made her a beloved figure among those who knew her.

Tragically, Gicanda's life took a turn for the worse after her husband, King Rudahigwa, passed away in 1959, shortly before the monarchy was abolished. The king's death marked the beginning of a period of turmoil for the country, as mayhem ensued between the Hutu, Tutsi, and the Belgian administration. The country sought independence from Belgium, and the monarchy was completely abolished.

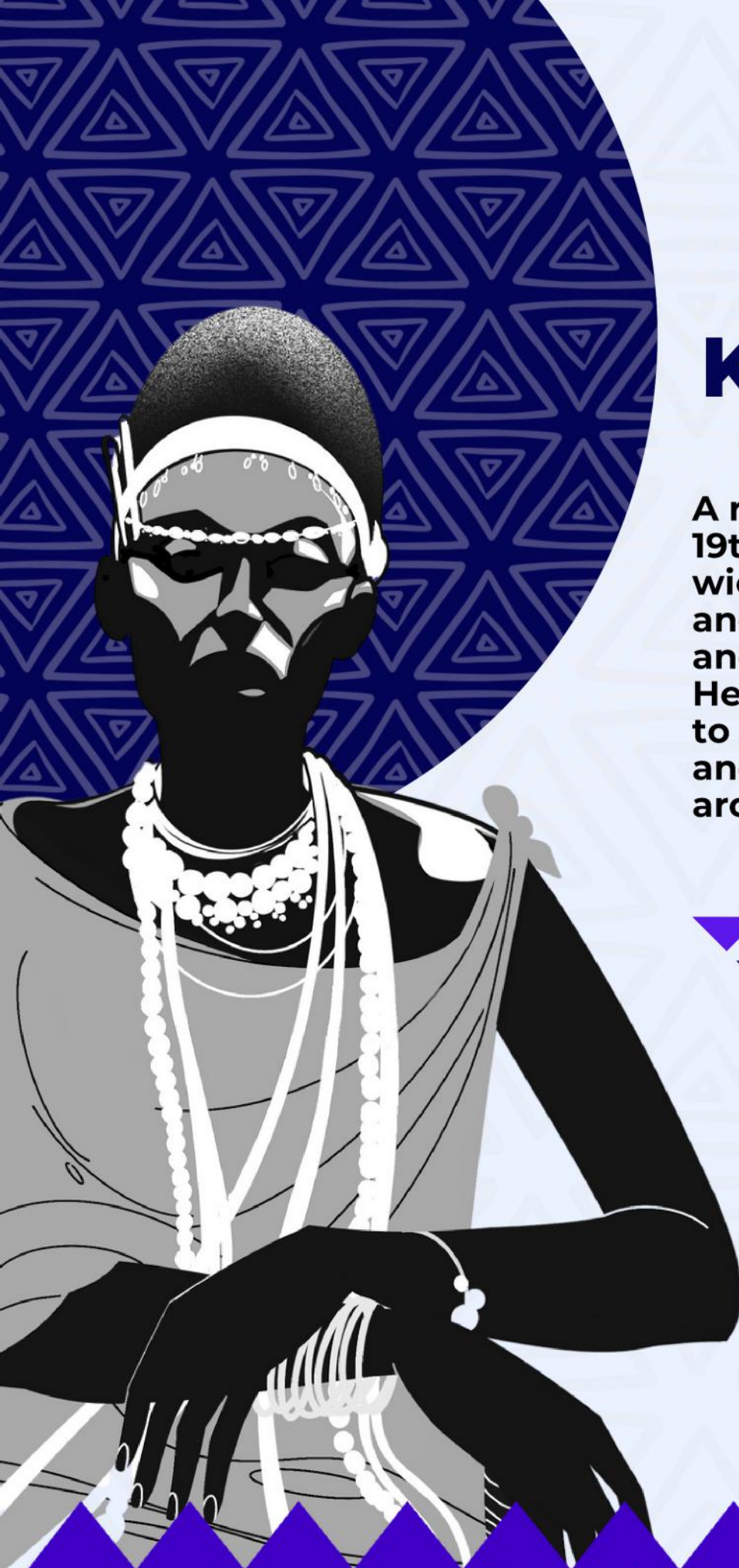
Gicanda remained at the palace for a few years before relocating to Butare town in the southern province, where she cared for her ailing mother. Even after leaving the palace, the queen maintained her humble and generous nature. People continued to seek her out, and she remained a beloved figure in the community.

However, tragedy struck in 1994 during the Genocide against Tutsis. Gicanda was among the first Tutsis to be murdered when the killers invaded Butare. She was captured by a group of soldiers and taken behind the National Museum, where she was shot. Her death left many in shock and marked the beginning of the mass killing in the Butare area.

Gicanda's mother was also murdered just two days later, and Butare experienced some of the worst atrocities committed during the genocide. The International Tribunal for Rwanda later found Capt. Ildéphonse Nizeyimana, the head of intelligence and military operations at an elite military training school, guilty of ordering the killing of thousands, including Queen Gicanda. Nizeyimana received a life sentence for genocide, crimes against humanity, and war crimes committed in the former Butare prefecture.

Gicanda's remains were initially buried in the backyard of her house before being moved to Mwima hill in Nyanza, where she was laid to rest next to the tomb of her husband. Her life continues to be remembered and celebrated every year on April 20th by relatives, friends, and family who gather at her tomb to pay their respects.


Despite the tragic end to her life, Queen Rosalie Gicanda's legacy endures as an inspiration to women everywhere. Her modesty, grace, and generosity remind us of the importance of treating everyone with kindness and respect, regardless of their status. Her life serves as a testament to the resilience of the human spirit in the face of adversity, and her memory will continue to



# Kanjogera

A remarkable leader in 19th century Rwanda who wielded significant power and influence as a queen and political strategist. Her story inspires women to assert their authority and shape the world around them.





Kanjogera, born in Rwanda around 1847, was a woman of remarkable power and influence. She came from the prestigious Bakagara lineage, descended from Rwakagara, and her determination to make her mark on the world was evident from a young age.

Married to King Kigeli IV Rwabugiri in 1861, Kanjogera quickly became the king's favorite wife, surpassing societal expectations and gaining unparalleled authority. She defied the submissive role expected of women at the time and embraced her dominance, even to the point where ordinary mortals rarely caught a glimpse of her. Kanjogera's bravery was legendary; once she fearlessly intervened in a dispute between the king and a palace beer maker, slaying the beer maker to protect her husband.

Kanjogera's influence extended beyond her role as queen. After the death of King Rwabugiri, she skillfully utilized her position as surrogate queen mother of Rutarindwa to overthrow Rutarindwa and crown her biological son, Musinga, as king. Throughout Musinga's reign, Kanjogera exercised great influence, ensuring that no decision was made without her consent. She actively engaged in political affairs and played an instrumental role in negotiating a treaty with the Germans, countering Belgian and British interference.

However, as colonists gained control over Rwanda, Kanjogera and her son's power began to wane. They were eventually removed from the center of power and forced to relocate to the southwestern region of the country. Despite these challenges, Kanjogera's legacy remains as a queen mother of immense political power.

In the chronicles of history, Kanjogera's story serves as a powerful testament to the strength, resilience, and influence that women possess. She shattered gender norms, asserting her dominance and shaping the political landscape of her time. Her legacy as a trailblazing feminist icon is a beacon of inspiration for generations to come and an inspiration for women to rise above limitations and embrace their power within.




# Agathe

## UWIRINGIYIMANA

Her heroic journey symbolizes the untapped potential within every woman, reminding us that strength, resilience, and visionary leadership can transform societies and overcome adversity.





Agathe Uwiringiyimana epitomized the unwavering spirit of equality. She fearlessly denounced all forms of division, boldly standing against the tides of turmoil and risking her life for her beliefs.

Uwiringiyimana etched her mark on history as Rwanda's first female Prime Minister, serving from July 17, 1993 until her untimely death in April 1994. Her exceptional journey began during her school days. Hailing from the hill of Muhororo in the Gisagara district, southern Rwanda, Uwiringiyimana displayed brilliance and chose to defy conventions by excelling in the field of sciences—a rarity for young girls at the time.

Renowned for her strength and efficiency, Uwiringiyimana had an unwavering passion for education. Her devotion to knowledge became the driving force behind her entry into politics in 1992, following a decade-long career as a teacher. As the Minister of Education, she fought for the rights of all students and advocated for women's rights. Her platform became a battleground against divisionism.

In 1986, Uwiringiyimana established a sorority and credit cooperative society among her colleagues at Butare Academic School, where she taught chemistry. This initiative caught the attention of Rwanda's leadership, leading to her appointment as a Director in the Ministry of Commerce three years later. Uwiringiyimana also joined the Republican Democratic Movement (MDR), an opposition party, in 1992.

During her tenure as Minister of Education, Uwiringiyimana pursued her values, centered on equality and the elimination of ethnic quotas in schools. She replaced the academic ethnic quota system with a merit-based approach, ensuring equal opportunities for all. Her courageous stance attracted danger to her doorstep, as armed men targeted her residence. Nevertheless, thousands of women in Kigali rose up in support, organizing powerful demonstrations to champion her cause.

Yet, the perils Uwiringiyimana faced then were merely the beginning, in a political career marked by relentless threats. Her opposition to those sowing divisionism in Rwanda subjected her life to constant jeopardy. Her defiance resonated at a time when ethnic tensions were at their peak, inciting further hostility from Hutu extremists. Tragically, when the 1994 Genocide against the Tutsi began, Uwiringiyimana was among the first to fall victim to the atrocities.

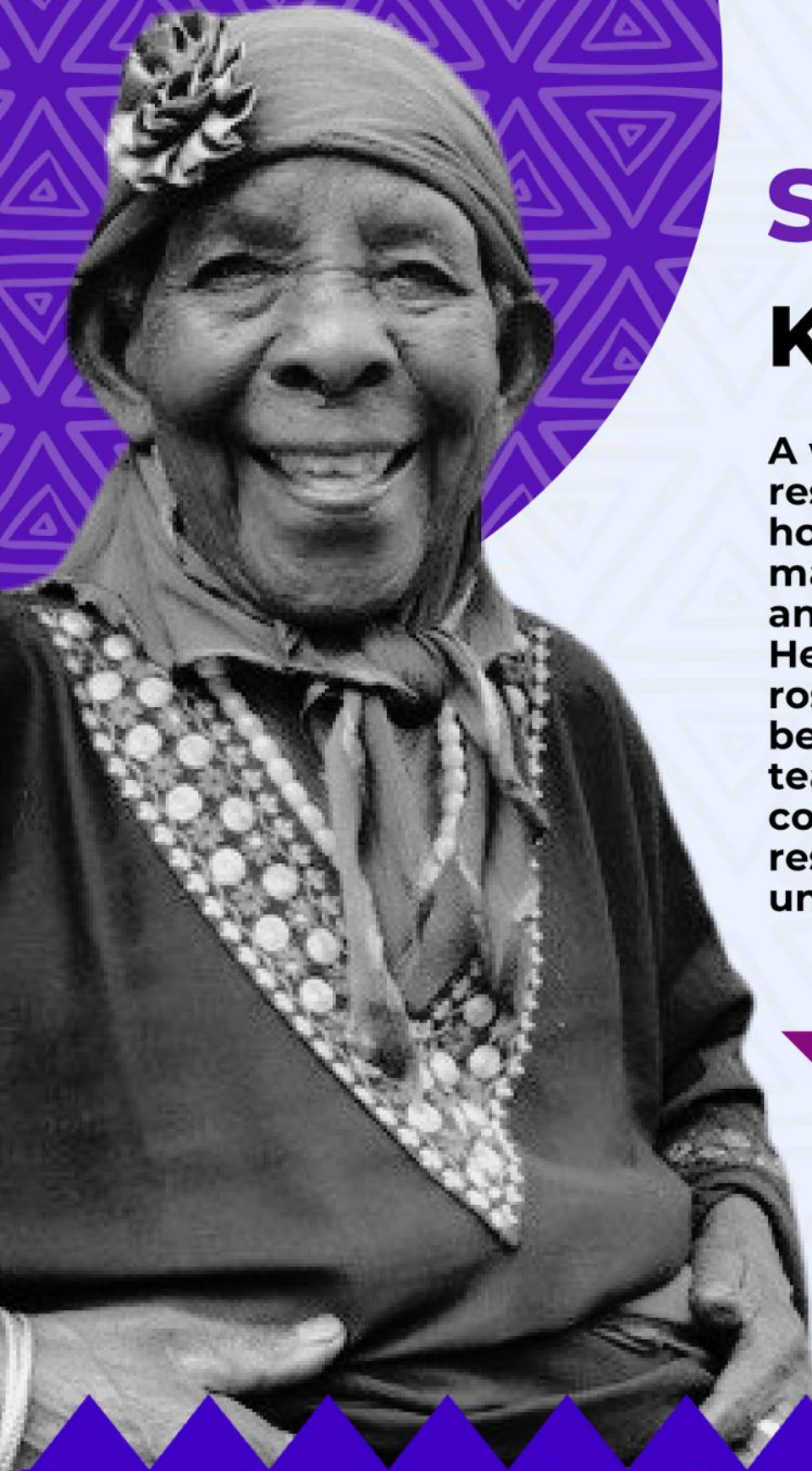
On the night of April 6, as President Habyarimana's plane was shot down, Uwiringiyimana remained the constitutional head of state. Her home quickly became besieged, despite the presence of Belgian peacekeepers, Ghanaian UN troops, and the Rwandan presidential guard. These efforts, however, proved insufficient to ensure her survival. On April 7, the former Prime Minister was assassinated, reportedly shot by the presidential guard.

Uwiringiyimana's commitment and choices during those tumultuous times embodied heroism in its purest form. Her character played a vital role in taming the animosity propagated by the regime responsible for the genocide. Her tireless efforts to reconcile ethnic differences within the country bore fruit.

Today, Agathe Uwiringiyimana stands as one of Rwanda's national heroes, forever remembered for her pioneering advocacy of women's rights and her instrumental role in advancing education. Her indomitable presence in the political arena inspired countless women to strive for greatness, igniting their aspirations for extraordinary achievements.

Uwiringiyimana was a founding member of the Forum for African Women Educationalists (FAWE), and her legacy there continues to shine brightly. In her honor, FAWE established The Agathe Innovative Award Competition, which funds projects aimed at improving education and creating income opportunities for African girls. Uwiringiyimana's resolute leadership and commitment to humanitarian values remain an inspiration to all.

Uwiringiyimana's strength lay in her intellect, talent and dedication to the cause of equality. She shattered stereotypes and proved that a woman's worth transcends superficial judgments. Her remarkable journey serves as a testament to the boundless potential that resides within every woman, waiting to be unleashed.



# Sula

## KARUHIMBI

A woman of courage and resilience who defied the horrors of the genocide by masquerading as a witch and saving over 100 lives. Her selfless acts of bravery rose above terror, leaving behind a legacy that teaches us to choose courage, humanity and resilience in the face of unimaginable violence.







In the quiet village of Musamo, an hour east of Kigali, lived a woman of exceptional courage and resolve. Her name was Sula Karuhimbi, born around 1925 into a family of healers, Sula's life was marked by turbulence and resilience in equal measure.

From a young age, Sula was a witness to the violent clashes between the two major ethnic groups in Rwanda during what was known as the Rwandan Revolution of 1959. Her early encounters with violence, and the resourcefulness she adopted in response, would lay the groundwork for her extraordinary acts of courage in later years.

In 1994, in the surge of the horrific genocide against the Tustis, Sula found herself an elderly widow in a nation spiraling into chaos. She used her home, her wit, and her courage to save lives as the massacres were occurring by masquerading as a witch—painting herself and her house with skin-irritating herbs and professing her home to be inhabited by ghosts. She warned the Hutu militias that attempting to harm the people sheltered within would incur the wrath of the gods, the ghosts and the spirits, effectively insinuating that they were "digging their own graves." This clever ruse, combined with her steadfast refusal to bow to bribes, kept the killers at bay.

As the genocide unfurled, Sula's house became a beacon of hope amidst the terror. Despite the danger, she protected her charges until the genocide ended with the entrance of Tutsi-led rebels into Kigali. In total, Sula sheltered over 100 people in her humble two-room mud house and even in a hole in her fields. Some of those she saved were babies, rescued from the arms of their dead mothers.

In the aftermath of the genocide, Sula revealed that her claims of witchcraft were merely a deterrent against attacks used to save lives. Her bravery was recognized in 2006 when she was awarded the Campaign Against Genocide Medal by President Kagame, a medal she wore at all times, even placing it under her pillow while she slept.

Yet, even after the genocide, Sula's life was marked by personal loss. She mourned the death of a son to the violence and a daughter she believed had been poisoned. Living in the same crumbling house she had used to shelter survivors, she continued to be a figure of strength and resilience in her community. The community she lived in upheld her persona as the "witch of Musamo" despite her repeated assertions that she was not, and had never been, a witch.

Sula Karuhimbi passed away peacefully at home in December 2018, leaving behind a legacy of resilience, courage, and humanity in the face of unthinkable violence. Her story is a powerful testament to the extraordinary strength of one woman, reminding us of the impact we can make when we choose courage over fear and humanity over hatred.




**Annonciata**

# **KAMARIZA**

**Her voice echoed through the darkness, uniting a nation in song. She showed us the power of music to heal, inspire, and ignite change. Her legacy reminds us that every voice, especially a woman's, has the ability to shatter barriers and shape a brighter future for all.**





Annonciata Mutamuriza, known as Kamaliza, was much more than a traditional musician. She was a composer, activist, and liberator who played a pivotal role in Rwanda's struggle for freedom.

In the 1980s and 1990s, Kamaliza's songs like "Humura Rwanda," "Kamaliza," "Nzakumara irungu," and "Nimuve mu nzira yemwe" filled the airwaves, ushering in a new wave of music that still resonates today.

Although her family fled to Burundi during the Tutsi massacre in 1959, Kamaliza's heart led her back to Rwanda, where she dedicated herself to her music.

In 1968, she went to live with her aunt in the Democratic Republic of Congo, where her musical journey began. Singing in church choirs, Kamaliza's extraordinary talent blossomed, captivating listeners with her powerful voice and fusion of traditional and contemporary melodies.

Over the years, Kamaliza's fame grew. Her musical prowess and genuine affection for people won countless hearts. When the liberation struggle for Rwanda began in 1990, led by the Rwandan Patriotic Front, Kamaliza courageously joined the cause. She fought on the frontline, holding the rank of Sergeant, while uplifting her fellow soldiers with her songs, providing solace and inspiration. Kamaliza also raised funds for the Rwanda Patriotic Front and participated in fundraising concerts, using her voice as an instrument of empowerment.

Even after the devastating 1994 Genocide against the Tutsi, Kamaliza's love for Rwanda and its people remained strong. She opened her home to orphaned children, caring for them through her organization, "Girubuntu Kamaliza." Through songs like "Humura Rwanda," she aimed to bring comfort and solace to those who had suffered unimaginable pain.

Tragically, Kamaliza's life was cut short in a car accident. After a week in a coma, she passed away in 1996—the same year that had brought her immense success. Her journey to the Netherlands to promote her CD, "Humura Rwanda," became her final moments, casting a shadow over her devoted fans.

The nation mourned the loss of a legend, for Kamaliza meant so much to the people of Rwanda. She was an entertainer, a source of solace, a fighter and a defender. Yet, it felt as though she had only just begun. Kamaliza selflessly lived her life, giving everything she had for others. Her extraordinary journey leaves profound lessons to be learned.

As one of Rwanda's most exceptional artists, Kamaliza's impact on the music industry and the country's development remains unparalleled. Even today, her legacy continues to shine.

In 2017, a heartfelt tribute was organized to honor her memory and acknowledge her significant contributions. Kamaliza's spirit resonates through Rwanda's musical landscape, inspiring generations of artists with her powerful voice, ability to bridge traditional and contemporary sounds and unwavering dedication to her country and its people.

She represents strength, resilience and artistic brilliance. Kamaliza shattered stereotypes, proving the immeasurable power and influence of a woman's voice. Her story reminds all women that they have the ability to create, uplift and effect change.

Through her music, Kamaliza entertained and empowered. She used her art to heal wounds, ignite hope, and unite a fractured nation. Her commitment to social justice, involvement in the liberation struggle, and support for the vulnerable exemplify her as a feminist trailblazer.

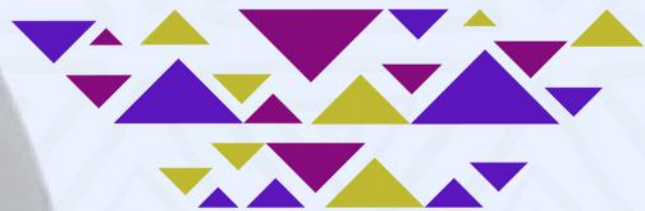
Kamaliza's star will forever illuminate the path for aspiring artists, encouraging them to leave their mark on the world. Her melodies will captivate audiences, her lyrics will inspire and her legacy will endure as a testament to the power of women's voices in the pursuit of equality and justice.




# Victoria

# NGANYIRA

Her captivating radio programs echoed the voices of the marginalized, shedding light on societal issues and empowering women, while her relentless pursuit of knowledge inspired generations of journalists.





Victoria Mukantagara Nganyira, a true pioneer in the field of journalism, left an enduring legacy as an extraordinary journalist. In the 1960s, a time when few women dared to enter this domain, Nganyira fearlessly ventured into the world of journalism, leaving an indelible mark on the profession. With over four decades of dedicated service, she contributed significantly to the shaping of Rwanda's media landscape.

Nganyira found her platform at Radio Rwanda, the sole radio station at the time, where she showcased her meticulously researched and evocative programs. Through shows like "Waruzi ko? Bana Tuganire" and "Jya Mbere Mwari w'u Rwanda," she captivated audiences, making a profound impact on society. A trailblazing figure in the era of analytical journalism, Nganyira fearlessly tackled stories that exposed various societal issues. She established herself as an influential force, firmly imprinting her name in the annals of journalistic history. Her accomplishments bear witness to her unwavering dedication and historical significance.

In 1964, Nganyira embarked on her journalism career at Radio Rwanda, forging a path for herself in a male-dominated industry. Her impressive journey spanned 45 years, culminating in her official retirement in 2009. Recognizing the need for specialized training, Nganyira pursued journalism education in Germany, as there were no journalism schools in Rwanda at the time.

Nganyira's daughter, Agnes Ngayira, fondly remembers her mother as a calm and hardworking woman who valued peaceful coexistence with others. Education held a special place in Nganyira's heart, as she continuously yearned for further academic pursuits even in her seventies, a testament to her lifelong love for learning.

Remarkably dedicated to her work, Nganyira found solace in various activities, ranging from tending to office duties to engaging in agricultural pursuits, reading books, knitting, and cooking. She embraced a life filled with continuous action, cherishing every moment and never allowing time to go to waste.

As a devout Christian who cherished education, Nganyira instilled in her children and grandchildren the desire to achieve the degrees she couldn't attain. Her commitment to the profession also inspired her daughter, Louise, to pursue a career in journalism. Louise recalls her mother's enthusiasm in imparting knowledge to newcomers in the field and her deep passion for the craft.

Through her program, "Jya mbere mwari w'u Rwanda," Nganyira aimed to empower women and girls, acknowledging their timidity in participating in decision-making bodies, public speaking, and even journalism itself. She used her platform to visit schools, engaging with young girls, particularly in the field of sciences, and encouraging them to match the achievements of their male counterparts. Nganyira sought out influential women, who shared their triumphs and breakthroughs across various fields, with the intention of inspiring and motivating other women to strive for more.

Nganyira's contributions to journalism were posthumously recognized when she received a well-deserved award, honoring her as one of Rwanda's outstanding journalists of all time. Her retirement ceremony highlighted her impeccable professional conduct, as she had never received a warning letter for misconduct throughout her illustrious career.


Victoria Mukantagara Nganyira, a true feminist icon, shattered stereotypes and paved the way for generations of women to come. Her talent, knowledge, and unwavering commitment to journalism inspire us all to embrace our own strength and pursue our passions relentlessly. Her legacy lives on, reminding us of the power of determination and the enduring impact of a single individual dedicated to creating positive change in society.



# Marie Immaculée INGABIRE

Her dedication to gender equality has transformed lives and inspired generations. Her fearless advocacy amplifies women's voices, empowering them to pursue justice and equality.





Marie Immaculée Ingabire, a fervent human rights activist, has dedicated her career to advancing gender equality in Rwanda. Her journey began amidst adversity; growing up as a refugee in Burundi, she experienced injustices firsthand, lacking equal access to education, healthcare, and other basic rights.

Ingabire's advocacy for women's rights was inspired by her mother, who courageously raised her children while living in Burundi and fought for their well-being. Witnessing her mother's resilience, Ingabire recognized the undervalued contributions of women and vowed to fight for their recognition and empowerment. Even during her university years, she championed the rights of women, advocating for their access to on-campus accommodation.

Returning to Rwanda after the devastating Genocide against the Tutsi in 1994, Ingabire believed her struggles were behind her. However, as a journalist, and later Chief Editor, at the Office Rwandaise de l'information, she witnessed the continued suffering endured by survivors as they tried to rebuild their shattered lives. Recognizing that the majority of survivors were women and children, Ingabire, passionately advocated for their cause, shedding light on the plight of women who had been raped or widowed during the genocide. She understood that rebuilding the nation required the active involvement of women in all aspects of society.

In 1995, Ingabire co-founded the Association of Female Journalists (ARFEM) to empower women in the media. However, her desire to bring about tangible change prompted her transition from journalism. Equipped with a law degree earned in France, she spearheaded efforts to reform matrimonial laws that disadvantaged women, addressing issues of inheritance and divorce. Through these efforts, Ingabire was a champion for women who had limited rights to land ownership and often faced deprivation in divorce settlements, including being denied custody of their children.

Ingabire has been a staunch ally to Rwandan women's civil society, dedicating her efforts to organizations such as Pro Femme Twese Hamwe, Rwanda Women's Network, and Haguruka, which provide legal assistance to women. Today, as an independent consultant specializing in gender issues, Ingabire's work extends to Transparency International, Rwanda chapter, where she serves as the chairperson. Her efforts include combating corruption by initiating a gender-based corruption program that offers research and legal aid to victims of gender-based violence.

As a leader in women's rights, Ingabire has represented Rwanda in high-level international forums, including the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995 and the International Conference on the Great Lakes Region, where she chaired the Regional Women's Forum.

Throughout her advocacy journey, Ingabire remains grateful for the evolving political landscape in Rwanda. While progress at the grassroots level may be gradual, she holds hope for a society that prioritizes gender equality. Ingabire encourages young girls to continue the struggle for gender equality, citing the progress made in the appointment of female governors and mayors but hopes to see more women in grassroots leadership positions where decision-making begins.

Marie Immaculée Ingabire has made an everlasting impact on Rwandan society through her steadfast commitment to the progress of women's rights. Her determination, enthusiasm, and transformative efforts have laid the foundation for a future characterized by inclusivity and fairness, serving as an inspiration for generations of women to follow.




# Daphrose

## MUKARUTAMAHA

Her story is a testament to the resilience and power of women to heal and rebuild in the aftermath of tragedy. Through the Duhozanye Association, she has provided solace, support, and economic empowerment to genocide widows and orphaned children.







Daphrose Mukarutamu emerged as a symbol of hope and resilience for the widows and orphans left devastated by the atrocities of the 1994 Genocide against the Tutsi, which inflicted unimaginable pain, instilling fear and despair while shattering social bonds within families and communities.

Having experienced the loss of her husband and several children during the Genocide against the Tutsi, Mukarutamu recognized that she was not alone in her grief. In November 1994, just a few months after the genocide, she founded the Duhozanye Association in the former Shyanda commune of the Southern Province. The association, aptly named to mean "console and comfort each other," aimed to provide solace and support for genocide widows, while also addressing the plight of countless orphaned children left homeless by the genocide.

Initially, the association brought together approximately 330 widows who courageously confronted their challenges and clung to the hope of a brighter future. Mukarutamu recalls the early days when they gathered, shedding tears together as they shared their experiences of unimaginable loss and suffering. The association became a crucial source of comfort and solace for its members, fostering emotional healing through unity and shared experiences.

Recognizing the need for financial support, they ensured widows returned to work by collaborating with institutions to offer them loans. Mukarutamu and other widow survivors defied gender stereotypes by rebuilding homes for widows whose houses had been destroyed and provided cows to sustain their livelihoods which they milked themselves. The association also established a training center that supported numerous genocide orphans in pursuing technical courses such as hairdressing, tailoring, and knitting. Additionally, they embraced the role of parents to the orphaned children, ensuring they returned to school and completed their education.

Nearly 30 years on, Duhozanye Association is going strong. Today, in the Gisagara District of the Southern Province alone, the association boasts a membership of over 3,000 genocide survivors. Many of the original widows, including Daphrose, are still involved. They now support different vulnerable women and girls in three other districts, offering counseling to survivors of gender based violence, and opportunities for economic empowerment. They have been clever to engage in economic opportunities, such as becoming distributors for Bralirwa, that sustain the association and generate income.

Mukarutamu's achievements extend beyond the association. She has held leadership positions at various levels, from the cell to the district. With her compassionate nature and innate leadership qualities, she played a crucial role in the reconciliation process, emphasizing the power of forgiveness and working towards peace and harmony in her community.

Nearly three decades since the tragic events that claimed so many lives, the remarkable story of Daphrose Mukarutamu and Duhozanye Association stands as a testament to the healing power of unity and the strength of women to rally together in solidarity. Daphrose's story shows us the power and importance of sisterhood, in the face of unimaginable adversity, to build community and restore hope.




# **Annonciata**

## **MUKAYITETE**

**She and her organization Réseau des Femmes-Rwanda have been relentless in their fight for women's rights, empowering women and driving societal change. Their legacy inspires us to break barriers, involve men, prioritize education, and work towards a future of true gender equality.**





Annonciata Mukayitete, a founding member of Réseau des Femmes-Rwanda, dedicated her life to fighting for women's rights in a society where they were marginalized. Growing up, she witnessed the limitations placed on women, from lack of leadership roles to being unable to own property or have a bank account without their husband's permission. Motivated by her own education and a desire for better opportunities for women, Mukayitete co-founded Réseau des Femmes-Rwanda in 1986.

The organization aimed to empower women by increasing their knowledge and skills and addressing the barriers hindering their development. They conducted research, shedding light on the challenges women faced, particularly in education, land ownership, health, human rights, and economic empowerment. Réseau des Femmes-Rwanda established branches such as Haguruka, offering legal support, and Duterimbere, promoting women's economic empowerment.

Réseau des Femmes-Rwanda worked tirelessly to advocate for women's rights and equality. They fought against gender-based violence, provided education on sexual reproductive health and rights, addressed teenage pregnancies, and promoted peace-building. The organization also offered training on food security, nutrition, and unpaid care work. They advocated for gender integration in organizations and projects, ensuring women's voices were heard.

Xaverine Uwimana, a member of Réseau des Femmes-Rwanda, emphasized the importance of involving men in the journey towards gender equality. Changing mindsets and encouraging positive masculinity were crucial to achieving lasting progress. Uwimana highlighted the need for equality in raising children and increasing women's representation in decision-making positions.

While facing challenges due to discriminatory governance, Réseau des Femmes-Rwanda persisted. They were fortunate to receive support from the current leadership, which propelled their efforts. Mukayitete expressed pride in the progress made by women in Rwanda, noting their engagement in various sectors, including security and entrepreneurship.

Looking ahead, Mukayitete emphasized the importance of education. By prioritizing education at all levels, from primary to university, girls could acquire the knowledge and skills necessary to participate in society and become confident decision-makers. Mukayitete encouraged young girls to seize the opportunities available to them, as women now have a say in politics and various domains.

Annonciata Mukayitete's dedication and Réseau des Femmes-Rwanda's tireless efforts have left an indelible mark on Rwandan society. Through their work, they have empowered women, raised awareness of gender-based challenges, and paved the way for a more equal future. Despite ongoing challenges, the future holds even greater promise for women in Rwanda, thanks to their unwavering commitment.




# Godielieve

## MUKASARASI

**In the face of unimaginable pain, She emerged as a beacon of resilience and compassion. Her story reminds us that even in the darkest of times, love, community, and the indomitable spirit of women can triumph over adversity and ignite a path of healing and empowerment.**





In the heart-wrenching landscape of post-genocide Rwanda, one extraordinary woman stood amidst the ruins, her name etched in the books of courage and compassion. Godelive Mukasarasi, lovingly known as Mama Sevota, emerged as a force of empowerment and resilience. Her dedication to uplifting widows and orphans in the aftermath of the 1994 Genocide against Tutsis has earned her the well-deserved title of 'righteous.' Her story is a narrative of love, community, and the indomitable spirit of women.

Born in 1959 in Gitarama, Muhanga District, Mukasarasi lived in a community where neighbors extended helping hands to one another. This ethos became the cornerstone of Mukasarasi's lifelong commitment to social work and charitable initiatives. For 25 years, she devoted herself to uplifting others, guided by her faith, love for her family and active engagement in society.

But it was the harrowing events of the genocide that would truly test Mama Sevota's spirit. In the midst of unimaginable despair, she turned to prayer, fervently beseeching God to protect her loved ones. Tragically, her own daughter became a victim of rape at the hands of the Interahamwe militants. Confronted with the aftermath of the genocide, Mukasarasi recognized an urgent need for an orphanage to provide care for children born from such unimaginable acts of violence. Witnessing the anguish of traumatized mothers struggling to cope with their children, she felt compelled to act.

Undeterred by the challenges ahead, Mukasarasi founded SEVOTA—a sanctuary of hope and healing. This group became a lifeline for widows, orphans, and children conceived through rape during the genocide. Through SEVOTA, Mukasarasi and her dedicated team provided emotional support, medical care, and assistance to those shattered by violence. Their mission extended far beyond individual healing; it encompassed a commitment to peace, nonviolence and reconciliation among Rwandans.

Mama Sevota's journey extended beyond the walls of SEVOTA. She and her husband made history by testifying before the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda (ICTR), standing against their mayor—a key orchestrator of the killings. This moment marked the first application of the 1948 Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide. Their Pursuit of justice brought a glimmer of hope to the nation.

Yet, Mukasarasi's personal losses threatened to derail her commitment. The loss of her daughter and husband at the hands of armed militias cast shadows of doubt. In these moments of despair, the women she fought for rallied around her, their support empowering her to rise above her grief.

Today, Mama Sevota's impact resonates through time. Her dedication and courage have garnered prestigious awards, including the 2011 Human Rights International Award and the 2018 International Women of Courage Award. The Rwandan government bestowed upon her the revered 'Umurinzi w' Igihango' pendant, recognizing her efforts in the pursuit of justice and healing.

Mukasarasi's voice echoes with a call for change. She emphasizes the importance of addressing sexual violence against women during and after conflicts, for the well-being of entire communities. SEVOTA continues to be source of empowerment, providing comprehensive support, medical care, and psychological assistance to survivors of sexual violence during the Genocide against the Tutsi.




# Mary

## BALIKUNGELI

As a catalyst for change, she uses her position as the Director and Founder of Rwanda Women's Network to shine a light on gender-based violence. She has shown unwavering dedication and a commitment to empowerment, transforming pain into leadership, creating safe spaces where women heal, unite, and become the driving force behind a more just and equal society.





Mary Balikungeri, the Director and Founder of Rwanda Women's Network, is a trailblazer who has committed to a lifelong pursuit of ending gender based violence (GBV) in Rwanda. Through RWN, she has empowered countless women, helping them break free from the cycle of violence and encouraging them to assume leadership roles within their communities. By amplifying their voices, Mary has brought attention to the urgent need for change.

Born in Rwanda, Mary was only six when the war against the Tutsi began and her family was forced to immigrate to Uganda. Growing up as a refugee she experienced injustice, but says she also got opportunities others didn't, like getting an education. After the Genocide against the Tutsi in 1994, Mary heard about unspeakable violence towards women and the many children left orphaned and felt she had to act.

In 1995 Mary returned to Rwanda and founded Rwanda Women's Network. She first focused on getting Rwandan orphans into homes. "My journey started from there, we started identifying women and families that were willing to take on orphans." Mary also created safe spaces for women who were victims of sexual and gender based violence who simply had nowhere to go. She wanted to give them an opportunity to heal.

From day one, Mary made sure safe spaces were also places where women come together to create a new future for themselves. Her wish was to offer women opportunities like she was offered, while living in the diaspora, to help them through the healing process, but at the same time, empower them and transform their pain into leadership as women of this country.

Mary and her organization aim to create empowered citizens, especially women and girls, who can champion change within their own communities by raising awareness and fostering a deeper understanding of GBV. They also foster collaboration between local authorities and community facilitators to eradicate GBV, which ensures the long-term sustainability and collective ownership of efforts. Under Mary's leadership, RWN ensures that messages from the communities on GBV also reach policymakers, by creating spaces for dialogue between civil society and government.

Mary has worked tirelessly to influence gender equality and women's human rights agendas on national, regional, and international platforms. As Chairperson of the African Network of Women Shelters and a board member of the Huairou Commission, she actively engages in international efforts to combat GBV. She is also a member of the UN Women VAW Peace and Security Reference Team and she regularly attends international forums like the UN Commission on the Status of Women. Today, Mary continues to advocate for safe spaces for GBV victims, pushing for the establishment of permanent shelters where women and girls can seek refuge, support, and collectively organize for change.

In recognition of her extraordinary work, Mary was honored with the prestigious 'Point of Light' award by Queen Elizabeth in 2018. This acknowledgment highlighted Mary's exceptional contributions and inspirational acts in supporting thousands of GBV victims. Through Mary's visionary leadership and tireless efforts, she has transformed the lives of countless women, leaving an indelible mark on Rwandan society and inspiring change around the world.




# Cecile

## KAYIREBWA

A landmark musician in modern Rwandan music with an illustrious career. She inspires future generations of young girls to embrace their creative talents and take charge of their careers.







Cecile Kayirebwa stands tall as one of the pioneering figures in the realm of modern Rwandan music. But her remarkable journey to global acclaim wasn't a stroke of luck or mere coincidence. A profound narrative exists behind her legendary songs, which effortlessly blend traditional and contemporary melodies, captivating hearts within Rwanda and beyond.

Since her childhood, music had been an inseparable part of Cecile's life. Born in 1946, Cecile grew up in a nurturing household, raised by parents who never imposed limitations, "My parents never restricted my potential due to my gender or any other talent," she affirmed. Even before completing her secondary education, she had already formed choirs and traditional dance troupes, thereby laying the foundation for her remarkable legacy.

Cecile's passion for music endured, even as she embarked on a career as a welfare officer following the completion of her studies in the 1970s. It was during this time that she serenaded Rwanda's last queen—Queen Rosalie Gicanda, during her visit in Rwanda. "Occasionally, my dance troupe and I would pay her a visit, entertaining her with our songs and dance. Her warm hospitality left an indelible mark on us," she reminisced. But her dreams faced a tumultuous interruption with the 1973 Rwandan coup d'état, known as the Coup d'état of 5 July. Faced with the perils of war, Cecile was forced to flee her homeland, seeking refuge in Belgium with her mother. There, she continued to use her voice as a singer for her fellow Rwandan diaspora members.

One pivotal encounter in Belgium changed the trajectory of Cecile's life. "I vividly remember meeting an artist who took me to a studio for the first time. I fell deeply in love. Never before had I experienced such profound joy, independence, and a profound connection to my creative spirit. That's when my career took a transformative turn."

Cecile and her spouse nurtured four children, who served as the wellspring of inspiration for many of her compositions, often becoming the central figures within her lyrics. She furthered her education at the Royal Museum for Central Africa in Tervuren, Belgium, delving into the rich tapestry of her cultural heritage.

In the mid-1980s, Kayirebwa embarked on her first tours across Europe and America as part of the group Bula Sangoma, culminating in the creation of their seminal album in 1985. "Undoubtedly, being in more liberal spaces brought advantages. People there possessed a deeper understanding of art, and societal stereotypes that confined women were fewer. I had the privilege of experiencing things that were unconventional for women back home."

Her unforgettable hit song, "Umunezero," resonated deeply with the Rwandan Patriotic Front, both during and after the Rwandan Liberation struggle. Her debut album, "Music from Rwanda," highlighted songs by Jean-Christophe Matata, demonstrating her artistic talent, followed by subsequent albums in 2002 and 2005. Every song, she admits, is a journey. "Each note I sing, whether it's Ibihozo, soothing lullabies for my children or a heartfelt tribute to my mother and our beloved nation, tells a story," she says with a soft smile.

Cecile's melodies have captivated hearts far and wide. Whether it was London's solemn BBC Holocaust Day, Mandela's Millennial birthday or New Year's Eve in Kigali, her music has enthralled audiences. Her six-decade journey has earned her the revered title of Africa's Best Traditional Female by the KORA All-Africa Music Awards in 2016.

Cecile's vision for her homeland is as harmonious as her music. She sees a place where emerging stars are nurtured, where inclusive leadership fosters an environment of growth and opportunity. "We must be the melody of change we wish to hear," she says, a glint of resolve in her eyes. "We hold the power to shape our futures, to orchestrate the transformation we desire."


Cecile's parting note is a rallying call for the young and especially the girls of Rwanda. In her eyes, they stand at the precipice of a world teeming with opportunities, growing in an era that offers security and support, and a technologically advanced platform ready to amplify their unique talents. "Now," she says, "it's your turn to make the world listen. Shine brightly on your unique paths of success."



# Felicite RWEMARIKA

She defied norms, broke barriers, and inspired generations. Her journey is a testament to the transformative power of resilience, determination, and the belief that every girl can rise, excel, and create lasting change through the unifying spirit of sports.





Felicite Rwemarika is a champion for gender equality in sports in Rwanda. Following the 1994 Genocide against the Tutsi, she dedicated her life to supporting female victims and founded the Association of Kigali Women in Sports (AKWOS). Through AKWOS, she advocates for gender equality using sports as a tool for peace-building, conflict resolution, and economic development. Her efforts have earned her recognition as a prominent member of the International Olympic Committee.

Rwemarika's journey to success is filled with significant achievements. In 2017, she became the first female Vice President of the Rwanda National Olympic and Sports Committee. She also served as the President of the Women's Football Commission at the Rwandan Football Federation. Despite facing challenges and being labeled as the "mad woman" for her relentless advocacy, Rwemarika fearlessly defied cultural norms to empower women and girls through sports.

Born in 1958, Rwemarika grew up in a family that discouraged her from participating in sports because they believed it violated traditional norms. However, she found solace in watching her father play football and volleyball and eventually embraced sports and dance. Delaying her return to Rwanda until 1994, she pursued nursing studies and later graduated with a diploma in Business Administration. Rwemarika also completed the FIFA leadership development program.

Married to a dentist who joined Rwanda's liberation forces, Rwemarika cared for their four children while witnessing the transformative power of sports. She formed the first girls' football team under AKWOS in 1997, facing resistance from the community. Despite challenges, her cause received support from visionary leaders who embraced inclusivity, with the government becoming a supporter. Over the years, women's participation in sports has become normalized in Rwanda, thanks to Rwemarika's efforts.

Rwemarika collaborated with the Ministry of Education to establish a scholarship program for schoolgirls involved in athletics. She also ensured the presence of women's teams in every district, particularly reaching rural women. The National Champions League, a popular football tournament in Rwanda, owes its success to Rwemarika's pioneering spirit.

Beyond sports, Rwemarika campaigned for women's desks in provincial government offices and dedicated budgets for women's sports activities. She provided training initiatives for female referees and coaches at local and national levels. Moreover, she integrated important messages about gender violence, HIV/AIDS, and agriculture into football games, using the teams as vehicles for economic and educational progress.

Rwemarika's impact extends to economic empowerment. She organized women's groups into farming businesses, allowing their participation in collective agribusiness ventures that improved their living standards.


Through her journey, Rwemarika embodies strength, resilience and empowerment for women and girls in Rwanda and beyond. Her commitment to gender equality and the power of sports continues to inspire generations. Rwemarika encourages young people, especially girls, to leverage inclusive leadership and technology to overcome challenges and make a difference in the world.



# Donatilla KANIMBA

Her work is a beacon of hope for the visually impaired community. Her advocacy and determination have created opportunities and shattered stereotypes, proving that with equal rights and support, individuals with disabilities can thrive and contribute to society in remarkable ways.





Donatilla Kanimba, the Executive Director of Rwanda Union of the Blind (RUB), has dedicated her life to challenging misconceptions and advocating for the rights of visually impaired individuals, particularly blind women, in post-genocide Rwanda. Co-founding RUB in 1995, Kanimba aimed to create a platform for blind and partially sighted individuals to voice their challenges and seek solutions.

One of the first obstacles they tackled was the exclusion of blind people from education. Although some attended primary school, they were denied secondary education due to the inability to take primary leaving exams. Determined to fight for their right to education, Kanimba and RUB approached the government to demonstrate that blind students could pass exams when properly prepared. In December 1995, all blind students who took the exams triumphed, leading to increased enrollment of blind students in secondary schools and universities. RUB's advocacy also highlighted the importance of providing access to education for blind individuals, leading to the establishment of more schools for the blind.

Recognizing that education plays a pivotal role in widening horizons and fostering self-belief, Kanimba emphasizes that education is a right for all Rwandans, including those with visual impairments. Furthermore, RUB introduced rehabilitation programs, offering opportunities for economic empowerment among the visually impaired. Programs like farming and knitting enable blind individuals to compete for tenders, fostering financial independence and inclusion in the workforce.

Kanimba understands the unique challenges faced by blind women, who often face stigma and are discouraged from social interactions. This stems from the fear that blind women may burden their families if they become mothers. In contrast, blind men are encouraged to marry and rely on their spouses for care. RUB strives to eliminate this stigma and empower blind women to reject feelings of uselessness and dependency, working towards a society that values their contributions.

Kanimba's ultimate vision is to ensure equal rights and opportunities for all individuals with visual impairments. She believes that they should have access to education and employment without additional expectations or burdens. She advocates for the inclusion and integration of blind people into society through education and rehabilitation, aiming to empower them to be self-reliant. Kanimba emphasizes that if assistance is needed, it should be on their own terms.

With great spirit and tireless efforts, Kanimba has transformed the perception of disability in Rwanda. She has shattered stereotypes and paved the way for a more inclusive society that recognizes and celebrates the talents, knowledge, and skills of visually impaired men and women. Her power and dedication reveals the limitless potential of every woman.




# Aloisea

## **INYUMBA**

**From a refugee camp to the halls of power, her journey is a testament to the untapped potential within us all and the transformative power of determined leadership.**





Aloisea Inyumba, a remarkable visionary, dedicated her life to advancing the role of women in Rwanda's development. As a strong and resilient leader, she fearlessly broke barriers and shattered stereotypes, leaving an indelible mark on her nation's history. Her story is one of triumph over adversity and unwavering commitment to gender equality.

Born in Uganda on December 28, 1964, Inyumba's journey began in a refugee camp, where her family sought refuge from the political upheaval and oppression faced by the Tutsi minority in Rwanda. Raised by her courageous mother, she grew up with five siblings, their lives forever shaped by the horrors of past Tutsi massacres. Despite their painful past, Inyumba's family managed to escape, a testament to their strength and resilience.

Inyumba's dedication to her homeland took shape during the late eighties when she joined the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) while residing in Uganda. Serving as the finance commissioner, she played a pivotal role in organizing fundraising campaigns to support the liberation of Rwanda. Her unwavering belief in the power of her nation and its people drove her relentless efforts to find homegrown solutions to the challenges plaguing Rwanda.

After the RPF brought an end to the 1994 Genocide against the Tutsi, Inyumba was appointed as Minister of Gender and Family Promotion. In this influential role, she spearheaded a far-reaching program aimed at empowering women and involving them in the country's rebuilding process. The aftermath of the genocide had left countless women and children in dire circumstances, devoid of resources and hope. Inyumba became their steadfast advocate, guiding them through their grief and trauma, and inspiring them to envision a brighter future.

In addition to empowering women, Inyumba championed social and emotional support systems, ensuring the proper burial of lost loved ones, placing orphans in loving homes and facilitating the entire process of reconciliation. Her impact on Rwanda's recovery, particularly for women and children who had suffered immensely, cannot be overstated.

With an unyielding belief in the untapped potential of women, Inyumba created a national women's network that provided a platform to address family and property issues arising from the genocide. Her unwavering resolve to see women rise from their tattered circumstances and pursue daring positions in society transformed lives and shattered glass ceilings. She recognized that women's active participation, particularly at the grassroots level, was key to achieving sustainable reconstruction and healing.

Inyumba's influence extended far beyond Rwanda's borders. In addition to her ministerial position, she served as a senator, a provincial governor, and a member of the African Women Advisory Committee, and also sat on the advisory board of Women for Women International. Her exceptional service and unwavering dedication to her country made her a driving force in Rwanda's progress.

Inyumba's profound love for her nation was evident in the selfless acts and the sacrifices she made. Through her tireless efforts, Rwanda made significant strides in poverty alleviation, increased access to education and enhanced the representation of women in parliament and senior government positions. As the country healed and moved forward, its people gained access to vital healthcare services, witnessing an overall improvement in their quality of life.

Tragically, Aloisea Inyumba's inspiring life was cut short on December 6, 2012, when she succumbed to throat cancer. Her passing was mourned across the nation, and she was granted a state funeral at the Parliament building. Although her physical presence may be absent, her legacy lives on as a beacon of hope, courage, and empowerment for generations to come.

Aloisea Inyumba will forever be remembered as a pioneer in the advancement of women's rights and a catalyst for change. Her unwavering determination and visionary leadership continue to inspire women around the world to break free from societal constraints and claim their rightful place in shaping the future.

Inyumba's remarkable accomplishments serve as a powerful reminder that strength knows no bounds. She defied the limitations placed upon her as a refugee and a woman, transcending adversity to become a force of transformation. Her story resonates deeply, not only with Rwandan women but with women everywhere who strive to overcome obstacles and make their voices heard.

Her commitment to gender equality and social justice continues to reverberate in Rwanda's ongoing journey towards progress. Through her advocacy, women were empowered to take on leadership roles and contribute to the country's development in unprecedented ways. Inyumba understood that the path to a brighter future lies in the hands of both men and women working together, their collective strength propelling Rwanda towards greater heights.




# Dative

## MUKESHIMANA

Her grassroots initiatives have sparked a ripple effect of positive change, uplifting thousands of women from poverty and fostering sustainable development. Their economic empowerment is a catalyst for social progress and gender equality.





In an era dominated by traditional gender roles, a visionary group of twenty-nine women joined forces to establish an organization dedicated to empowering women based on their accomplishments and true selves, rather than their appearances.

Their aspirations extended far beyond societal expectations—they aimed to foster social, intellectual, and above all, economic empowerment for women. They envisioned a world where women owned businesses, led successful enterprises and independently support themselves and their families.

In 1987, Duterimbere was born with the mission to demonstrate the invaluable roles and capabilities of women in development. These trailblazers took up the mantle of advocating for women's rights. Dativa Mukeshimana, the Executive Secretary of Duterimbere, said the organization's founders sought to elevate the living standards of women through economic empowerment.

"Back then, women were often reduced to beggars, pleading for everything from their husbands, especially in households facing dire poverty. This caused strife within the home. Thus, they believed that by educating women and teaching them economic skills, women could earn respect from their spouses and society. This would also lay the foundation for women to assert their rights, whether within their homes, communities or the nation at large," she passionately states.

Recognizing that economic empowerment would grant women a voice to express their concerns, challenge violence and even pursue political leadership, Duterimbere equipped women with various skills. They provided training in entrepreneurship, guiding women on starting and sustaining profitable businesses, and imparting financial management expertise.

Through grassroots initiatives, they reached out to low-income households, contributing to improved living conditions and fostering sustainable development through economic activity.

"We collaborate with local authorities to identify women who would benefit from our projects. We secure funding, offer training and raise awareness. We guide them in selecting business ventures that suit their strengths and assist in creating business plans. Finally, we connect them with financial institutions where they can access loans," explains Mukeshimana. "We also educate them on taxation, savings and financial institutions. We continue to support them until they possess the necessary skills, then we move on to others."

To ensure long-lasting impact and sustainability, Duterimbere established Duterimbere IMF, a financial institution that provides easy access to loans. With over 50,000 beneficiaries, the institution operates across all provinces, maintaining a steadfast commitment to women's economic empowerment.

Reflecting on over three decades of operation, Mukeshimana emphasizes the transformative effects witnessed in the lives of countless women. They have established themselves and their families, empowering them to fight for their rights.

Starting with just twenty-nine members—remarkable individuals like Athanasie Mukabagwire, Leoncie Mukamisha, Zaina Nyiramata, Annie Mugwaneza, Felicula Nyiramutarambirwa—the organization has now grown to include over 800 members. To reach women throughout the country, Duterimbere has expanded its presence by establishing branches in various districts.

Looking ahead, Duterimbere envisions extending its influence beyond national borders, aiming to empower women in the region and across the globe.

"In a globally connected world, we must expand our horizons to continue empowering our beneficiaries. Our goal is to facilitate contracts between women and employers with significant markets both in Rwanda and abroad," reveals the Executive Secretary. "Additionally, we aim to establish an incubation center and organize exhibitions to promote their products effortlessly. Our focus is to foster self-reliance."

Mukeshimana advises women to seize the available opportunities actively and with unwavering determination. She emphasizes that their potential knows no bounds.

"Regardless of extreme poverty or violence, women must rise above circumstances and stand tall. They should never doubt their capabilities or let anything hold them back. With every step they take, they can achieve their dreams."


In this journey towards empowerment, Duterimbere stands as a shining example of what women can accomplish when they unite and work toward a common goal. It is a testament to the strength, resilience and intelligence of women. Through their unwavering dedication, Duterimbere has transformed lives and shattered societal norms.



# Solange **AYANONE**

**Through the lens of media, she challenges gender biases and empowers women to reclaim their narratives, inspiring a generation of female journalists and transforming the media landscape.**





Solange Ayanone, a strong and determined woman, grew up in a family of six girls and one boy, where boys were esteemed above girls in their community. Despite this gender bias, her father believed the power of education would earn respect for his daughters. When Solange's dream of becoming a journalist was ignited in 1992, after high school, she embarked on her journey by joining radio and receiving training in journalism.

Solange's passion lies in utilizing media as a catalyst for change within her community. She is known for speaking up against the societal issues that affect women and girls in Rwanda. Her commitment to gender activism was awakened when she attended the World Conference on Women and the Adoption of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action in 1995. This experience sparked her interest in contributing to women's empowerment.

As a journalist, Solange actively participated in training sessions and produced programs dedicated to promoting gender equality in the media. Her personal experiences shaped her determination to provide women with a platform to express themselves freely. Her own home became a testament to this empowerment, as she ensured her children were treated equally, a noble agenda embraced by her husband.

At the age of 52, Solange Ayanone serves as the Managing Director of Afri-Media Ltd, an organization focused on media, communication and event management. Additionally, she holds the position of country coordinator for Women in News, a powerful partnership working to bridge the gender gap in news media.

Solange acknowledges the remarkable strides Rwanda has taken since the adoption of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action in 1995. The increased representation of women in parliament has led to significant changes in laws. In the past, only the men appeared on property certificates, preventing women from accessing loans. Now, property is shared equally, and joint management is embraced. Women enjoy equal access to education. Furthermore, a law combating Gender-Based Violence has been enacted, punishing perpetrators and discouraging violence against women. The appointment of female vice mayors responsible for social affairs and economics is another triumph Solange celebrates.

Although progress is being made, Solange envisions more women assuming leadership roles in local government. She firmly believes that women, being closer to citizens, must be adequately represented. Drawing from her experience, Solange emphasizes the role of community radio stations in empowering women. Phone-in programs, in particular, offer a crucial platform for women to voice their concerns and opinions. However, efforts must be made to encourage women to speak out more and ensure that programs specifically cater to their needs.

In her advocacy work, Solange highlights the gender disparity within the media industry. In media houses, women hold only 5 percent of all positions, and male voices continue to dominate media content. Solange calls on journalists to take initiative by seeking out more female interviewees. Even talk shows intended for women often feature more male commentators, indicating the need for change.

Solange stresses the importance of empowering girls through education and fostering an environment that encourages their self-expression. She advocates for comprehensive gender equality training for local authorities, as their influence greatly impacts society.

Solange Ayanone's journey is an inspiring testament to the power of media in promoting gender equality and empowering women. Her determination and advocacy have left a lasting imprint on Rwandan society, paving the way for a more inclusive and equal future.




# **Carole**

## **KAREMERA**

**Her boundless talent as an actress, musician, and director has reshaped Rwanda's cultural landscape. As a visionary leader and activist, she empowers artists, defends creative freedom, and cultivates a Rwanda where women's art flourishes, nurturing a vibrant sense of belonging and shared joy.**





In the creative sector, they call her “the “mountain and emotional mover” or “Calorie” and describe her as the most uncompromising, dedicated and unstoppable artist of her generation in Kigali.”

Carole Umulinga Karemera is a renowned actress, musician and director, who has made significant contributions to the world of arts in Rwanda and beyond. Born of Rwandan parents and raised only by women in Belgium, she grew up alongside the greatest Rwandan traditional artists who passed on to her this unconditional love for the arts and culture. Carole K. is the first Rwandan to receive her education at the prestigious Royal Conservatory of Music and Drama in Belgium where she honed her acting, music and directing skills.

Carole K. made a name for herself in acclaimed theatrical, music and dance productions, such as “Rwanda 94” by Jacques Delcuvellerie, “Scratching the innerfields” by Wim Vandekeybus, “We call it love” by Felwine Sarr and she performed in the most prestigious theaters and festivals from UK to Japan, Australia to U.S, India to Venezuela or South Africa. Her exceptional talent attracted some of the greatest directors such as Peter Brook who cast her in "Battlefield" which captivated audiences around the world.

Her career in the film industry truly began in 2004, playing leading roles in award-winning films such as "Sometimes in April" by Raoul Peck, "Sounds of Sand" by Marion Hänsel. She received awards, including Best Actress, Best one woman show, Best theater production.

In 2007, Carole K. co-founded Ishyo Arts Centre, a women-led organisation that serves as a creative hub for professional artists, cultural experts, creative entrepreneurs and whose main goal is to make culture accessible to everyone. Today, Ishyo is known as one of the most dynamic arts organizations, driving advocacy, capacity building and cultural policy programs and as a Rwanda's major player in arts creation, production and touring.

Carole K. is the producer of Kina Festival, dedicated to arts for young audience; Home sweet home festival creating plays for people's homes, Kuya Kwetu festival supporting emerging artists and experimental practices. Her personal artistic work currently focuses on participatory arts, arts for young audience, arts-sciences projects.

In addition to her artistic pursuits, Carole K. is an activist defending creative freedom and cultural rights who sits on boards of Africa World Heritage Fund, Assitej Rwanda and African Cultural Policy Network. Previously, she held the position of Deputy SG at Arterial Network (the largest pan-African network of artists and cultural experts) and worked as culture expert for Unesco, ACP-EU regional projects.

Throughout her journey, Carole K. trained and mentored numerous Rwandan artists and managers who are today's leaders in film production, stand up comedy, theater and music. In 2018, in Tunisia she received an award for her outstanding contribution to the development and enrichment of Africa's creative sector. Her passion, resilience and pursuit of artistic excellence have led her to this illustrious career she has enjoyed for 25 years and her commitment to promoting culture in Rwanda has and will inspire women in the arts for generations to come.


She hopes to see this Rwanda, where women will cultivate art like they cultivate sorghum, because it equally keeps intact the feeling of being alive, of belonging and the joy of sharing that allows our soul to see and inhabit the world differently.



# Sophie NZAYISENGA

Her transformative journey defies expectations, showcasing the power of breaking barriers. Mastering the Inanga with determination, she inspires us to fearlessly pursue passions, shattering societal limitations imposed upon us.





Sophie Nzayisenga, the renowned 'Queen of Inanga,' is an icon of empowerment who broke barriers in the world of music. With her powerful mantra, "A shared gift paves the way and creates a bright future." At 45 years old, she emerges as a force to be reckoned with in the world of traditional Rwandan music. Sophie's extraordinary connection with the Inanga began at the age of six, when she discovered an affinity for the instrument. By the time she turned nine, her performances surpassed the boundaries of her homeland, captivating audiences across continents. From that point on, she embarked on a journey that would see her grace stages in 25 American states, tour Europe three times and leave an indelible mark on the hearts of music lovers in various African nations.

But Sophie's path was not without its challenges. In a society where traditional gender norms were deeply entrenched, venturing into the world of the Inanga was considered a realm solely for men and the elderly. "My father, an intelligent and esteemed Inanga player, as well as my maternal grandfather and uncle, all held a deep connection to this instrument. Growing up, the Inanga was a familiar presence in my life, and it was only natural that my curiosity led me to learn it. My father, recognizing my determination, provided invaluable support, dedicating his time to teach me. Even before I could write, he penned songs for me," she reminisces.

Undeterred by societal expectations, Sophie fearlessly blazed her own trail. She shattered the glass ceiling, proving that gender is no obstacle to passion and talent. Her mere presence as a young girl playing a traditional instrument astonished many, challenging conventions and opening doors for countless others to follow their dreams.

Sophie's artistry extends beyond mastering the Inanga; she is a gifted songwriter and singer, her compositions carrying the essence of her people's stories and struggles. Her music not only fulfills her own artistic spirit, it provides a livelihood for her and sustains her family. Her commitment and dedication to preserving Rwandan cultural music are a testament to her strength and resilience.

Today, Sophie proudly holds the title of the 'Queen of Inanga,' a fitting tribute to her remarkable achievements. Yet she remains humble, acknowledging that mastery is an ongoing journey that demands continuous learning and countless hours of hard work. She recognizes the importance of blending tradition with innovation, infusing modern sounds into traditional melodies to captivate audiences across generations.

Sophie's journey transcends music itself. She is a symbol of empowerment for women around the world, a living testament to the fact that talent knows no gender. Her spirit serves as a rallying cry for all those who dare to challenge the status quo and defy societal limitations.




# Pamela

## GIRIMBABAZI

**Her journey from a young swimmer to the first female president of the Rwanda Swimming Federation is a testament to her determination and passion. She is breaking barriers, challenging stereotypes, and inspiring a new generation of female athletes to pursue their dreams fearlessly.**







Pamela Girimbabazi's is a pioneer in the field of sports in Rwanda, breaking barriers to represent Rwanda multiple times in Olympic swimming competitions and most recently, becoming the first female president of the Rwanda Swimming Federation.

Girimbabazi's passion for swimming began at a young age, thanks to her parents who encouraged her to actively engage in sports activities. She played basketball in school and began swimming as a child. She dedicated her holidays to improving her swimming skills, and by 12, she was already excelling in national swimming competitions. She represented Rwanda in the Olympics multiple times, even carrying the country's flag in 2008. After completing her studies, she became involved in swimming clubs, mentoring young athletes.

Girimbabazi made history in 2020 when she became the first female president of the Rwanda Swimming Federation. Becoming the president of the federation was a significant milestone for Girimbabazi. As a female leader, she aimed to inspire others and prove that being a woman does not hinder leadership abilities, although she experienced this discrimination first hand when some questioned her skills to lead based on her gender. Girimbabazi also took pride in being chosen to meet renowned athletes and saw it as an inspiring moment for Rwandan swimmers.

As president of the federation, Girimbabazi has focused on organizing swimming competitions with increased female participation. Cultural and societal stereotypes that women cannot swim or participate in sports, expensive pool fees, and women's discomfort with swimwear due to societal body shaming, are obstacles she has identified for many women in Rwanda.

Along with other female colleagues in the federation, she is actively working to break these stereotypes and misconceptions. They are using mainstream and social media to spread awareness about the benefits of sports, particularly swimming, for women's physical and mental well-being. She encourages parents to support their daughters in joining swimming.

Pamela Girimbabazi's achievements in swimming, coupled with her role as the first female president of the Rwanda Swimming Federation, serve as an empowering example for future generations of female athletes in Rwanda. Her legacy lies in her commitment to breaking barriers in sport, and leadership, and inspiring girls and women to follow their passions.




# Sylvie

## NSANGA

Throughout her journey, Sylvie encountered discriminatory cultural practices against women, such as dowries and marital prerequisites. These experiences further motivated her to challenge and change the unjust norms using her education and privilege.





Sylvie Nsanga is a prominent feminist who utilizes digitalization to champion the rights of women and children. Her activism originated in Eastern DRC, where she witnessed severe inequalities in her community. The sight of children living without basic necessities and not attending school deeply affected Sylvie. She was disturbed by the systemic injustices faced by women, such as labia elongation and domestic violence. Gender bias was prevalent even in schools, where girls were relegated to cleaning duties. These harsh realities fueled Sylvie's activism.

In 2000, Sylvie relocated to Rwanda, opening new avenues for her pursuit of equality. Her unwavering dedication led her to become the Minister of Gender in the student council, where she prioritized the needs of female students, particularly those from rural areas. Despite facing resistance, Sylvie stood firm.

After university, Sylvie assumed the role of Secretary General for the Rwanda National Youth Council, where she pushed for gender considerations in youth programs. She also co-chaired the inaugural Girl Education Task Force under the Ministry of Education, collaborating with organizations like UNICEF and the Imbutu Foundation to combat school dropouts among girls and establish the first-ever girls' education policy in Rwanda.

Throughout her journey, Sylvie encountered discriminatory cultural practices against women, such as dowries and marital prerequisites. These experiences further motivated her to challenge and change these unjust norms using her education and privilege.

Sylvie's activism has now embraced the digital platform, where she fearlessly confronts issues affecting women and children. She believes it is essential to utilize this platform to combat sexism, promote equality, address the impact of abuse on children, teach consent, and empower them to stand against predators. Despite facing cyberbullying and attempts to silence her, Sylvie stands her ground, drawing inspiration from her ancestors who resisted oppression. She sees herself as carrying the torch passed down by brave women who fought tirelessly for the freedoms enjoyed today. Sylvie refuses to be intimidated by sexists and narcissists, considering it her duty to support victims and empower the next generation.

While acknowledging the advancements made by institutions like the Ministry of Gender and Family Promotion in Rwanda, Sylvie recognizes the persistent challenge of patriarchal culture, emphasizing the gap between policy and practice. To achieve real change, she believes societal practices and attitudes must be transformed. Sylvie advocates for equal opportunities for women and men, challenging those who seek to maintain a society where men control women. She calls for a comprehensive understanding and dissemination of laws and policies to ensure that all citizens, especially women, are aware of their rights. Furthermore, she emphasizes the need to address issues of unpaid care, as gender equality should not place additional burdens on women.

Sylvie Nsanga continues to be an inspiring figure, utilizing her privilege and resilience to persistently challenge oppressive norms, advocate for women and children, and uplift future generations in the unwavering pursuit of equality.




# Gaudence

## MUSHIMYIMANA

**Her unwavering dedication exemplifies the transformative potential within every individual. As a passionate advocate for gender equality and the rights of women with disabilities, she inspires us to break barriers, foster inclusivity, and create a world where everyone's voice is heard and valued.**





Gaudence Mushimiyimana is a passionate advocate for gender equality and has dedicated her life to championing the rights of women with disabilities. A woman with a disability herself, Gaudence, along with 14 other women with disabilities, co-founded UNABU - the Rwandan Organization of Women with Disabilities, in 2004. Through UNABU, Mushimiyimana sought to foster economic independence, provide access to justice, promote leadership skills among women with disabilities, and provide safe spaces for women to become agents of change.

UNABU initially focused on combating gender-based violence and raising awareness of the rights of women with disabilities. They collaborated with organizations like Haguruka and the Legal Aid Forum to amplify their impact. Recognizing the financial dependency of many disabled women, UNABU introduced an economic empowerment program that provided financial literacy, business skills, and seed capital for starting businesses or vocational training.

To ensure inclusivity, UNABU formed partnerships and developed disability mainstreaming programs. They trained stakeholders in women's empowerment, gender equality, and the prevention of gender-based violence. UNABU also established a leadership program for disabled young girls, fostering resilience and educational success.

Working across 12 districts with over 13,000 women in self-advocacy groups, UNABU has improved the self-esteem and participation of women with disabilities. In 2021, more women with disabilities participated in leadership roles, representing their community at various levels. Mushimiyimana believes education is a basic human right that opens doors to better opportunities and leadership positions.

Mushimiyimana emphasizes the need for tailored programs and the removal of discriminatory laws, policies, and strategies. She envisions an inclusive society where specific needs are considered, enabling accessible services for all. Through her unwavering dedication, UNABU has created opportunities, raised awareness, and sparked lasting change. Mushimiyimana's vision of equal opportunities for women with disabilities continues to inspire future generations.




# Esther

## MBABAZI

Armed with knowledge and a decade of experience in aviation, Mbabazi uses her platform to empower young girls, encouraging them to pursue their dreams fearlessly.





Esther Mbabazi made history as the first female pilot at RwandAir over a decade ago. Recognizing the significance of her role, she knew that she had a responsibility to pave the way for future generations of women in aviation.

Growing up with a trailblazing mother who was one of the first female electrical engineers in Uganda, Esther understood the importance of breaking barriers. Her mother enrolled her in a mixed school, which provided the education and confidence to compete on equal footing with boys. This upbringing equipped Esther with the belief that she was not inferior when entering male-dominated spaces like the cockpit.

However, her journey was not without challenges. Esther faced an uphill battle of having to prove herself, putting in twice the effort as her male counterparts. It required unwavering determination and persistence. But she realized that merely establishing herself was not enough. True progress could only be achieved by advocating for women's rights in the workplace.

Esther firmly believes that airlines should not only be willing to hire women but also implement policies and training programs to support women's entry into aviation. As a trailblazer, she feels a duty to address these issues directly, ensuring that the challenges she faced do not persist for future generations. She understands that women must work not only for themselves but also for those who will follow in their footsteps, setting a precedent for positive change.

Her passion for aviation was ignited by a friend who shared an inspiring story about a female airline pilot she had met at a conference. Today, armed with knowledge and a decade of experience, she uses her platform to empower young girls, encouraging them to pursue their dreams fearlessly.

Esther's journey is a testament to resilience and empowerment. As the first female pilot in Rwanda, she defied gender norms and shattered stereotypes. Her unwavering dedication and courage continue to inspire women, demonstrating that their strength, knowledge, and skills have the power to surpass any limit.

In the pursuit of gender equality in aviation, Esther reminds us that merely granting women a seat at the table is insufficient. Companies must establish systems that enable women to thrive and reach their fullest potential, fostering an environment of growth and support. It is through such measures that women can truly be empowered to effect tangible change.

Esther Mbabazi's story is a testament to the transformative power of breaking barriers. Not only has she paved the way for aspiring female pilots, but she also serves as a role model for all women striving to overcome societal limitations. Her legacy will continue to inspire and shape the future of aviation, and other male-dominated industries, for generations to come.




# Hassna MURENZI

**Her work with FADA ignites a powerful movement for equality and empowerment. By embracing diverse voices and dismantling barriers, they illuminate a path towards a future where every individual is respected, valued, and free from discrimination.**







FADA (Feminist Action Development Ambition), an organization founded by the visionary Hassna Murenzi, has become a beacon of empowerment for vulnerable women and a platform for unity against gender-based violence and discrimination. Embracing the voices of sex workers and LGBTQ individuals, FADA has evolved into a force challenging societal norms and promoting sustainable development.

Hassna's journey towards founding FADA was marked by hardship and discrimination. As a high school student in Rwanda, she was expelled due to her 'western manners,' a term wielded as a prejudiced insult. Left with no clear direction, Hassna faced the harsh realities of the job market, where her individuality was further penalized. Repeatedly, potential employers discriminated against her, claiming that while they were seeking female employees, she did not fit their preconceived mold.

A lifeline appeared in the form of a childhood skill; Hassna had learned to ride a motorbike as a young girl. Unforeseen then, this talent became her means of survival when all other avenues closed. Her resilience and drive led her to defy gender norms and make moto driving her livelihood and inspiring other women to pursue careers in the male-dominated field of motor riding.

Motivated by her own experience, Hassna has used FADA as a platform to raise awareness about the struggles faced by the queer community, intertwining this advocacy with social and economic empowerment initiatives. Through FADA, Hassna has helped equip women with the necessary skills and permits to infiltrate the sphere traditionally dominated by men. The impact has been transformative, with many women overcoming adversity to establish businesses, becoming drivers and motorcyclists. Yet, Hassna understands that empowerment extends beyond economic independence. Her organisation addresses the daily discrimination and violence faced by LGBTQ individuals whose education, livelihood opportunities, and other basic rights have often been denied to them, resulting in a vicious cycle of poverty. FADA seeks to break these chains of systemic oppression and advocate for the inclusion of queer voices within women's rights spaces. FADA also creates safe spaces for sex workers and young girls, including teen mothers, to learn about sexual and reproductive health, receive guidance on legal matters, human rights, and entrepreneurship, so they have the tools to carve their own paths in society.

Aware that societal acceptance is a gradual process, Hassna fosters patience and understanding. She believes that the lack of awareness about the needs of LGBTQ and other marginalized communities in Rwanda stems more from misunderstanding than hostility, and with continuous engagement, FADA can enlighten society and dispel damaging myths.


The vision of Hassna Murenzi and the unwavering commitment of FADA work hand in hand to empower women, embrace queer voices, and challenge discrimination. By fostering collective strength and disseminating knowledge, they have illuminated a path towards equality and are paving the way for transformative change.



# Isaro

**Her passion illuminates a path of acceptance and empowerment for transgender individuals in Rwanda. Through advocacy, education, and resilience, she strives to create a future where every person can live with dignity, and pursue their dreams without discrimination or barriers.**





In a time when transgender people in Rwanda face significant challenges with recognition and acceptance, Isaro has dedicated herself to fighting for the rights and welfare of transgender individuals in Rwanda. One of the main issues she addresses is the need for recognition and acceptance of transgender individuals and their right to pursue education, decent work and to contribute to society. Recognizing the challenges faced in this, and the lack of support for the transgender community, Isaro dedicates her time and efforts to ensure thriving and fulfilling lives for people in her community.

Societal acceptance of transgender people remains a difficult journey. Transgender individuals struggle to complete education and secure jobs due to biases and judgments based on physical appearance. Students, including herself when she was in school, often faced bullying and struggled to adapt in educational settings, and had to abandon their education due to overwhelming discrimination. Now Isaro advocates to institutions like the Ministry of Education, addressing the obstacles transgender individuals face in completing their studies and securing gainful employment.

To foster acceptance and understanding, she believes in engaging in open dialogue and raising awareness about transgender issues through social media. Through her advocacy journey, Isaro has faced challenges, including conflicts and obstacles that hinder her ability to organize gatherings to discuss issues affecting transgender communities. Despite these challenges, she believes it is important to fight for support, education, and safe spaces for transgender individuals in Rwanda.

While recognizing the ongoing struggle and lack of recognition, Isaro remains optimistic, viewing the process as a journey. Isaro's ultimate goal is to empower transgender individuals to attain education, secure employment opportunities, and lead dignified lives. She embodies strength, resilience, and determination, and remains committed to paving the way for a brighter future for all transgender people in Rwanda.




# Jemima

## KAKIZI

A visionary artist using her brushstrokes to empower women and redefine the presence of females in the art world.





Jemima Kakizi, a visionary artist, radiates a vibrant smile that reflects her sunny personality. For nearly a decade, she has immersed herself in the world of arts, using sketching and painting to depict the diverse shades of life in Rwanda. Through her artistic endeavors, clothing designs and curated exhibitions, Kakizi is on a mission to empower women and elevate their presence in this field.

As a visual artist and curator, Kakizi describes art as her way of life—a means of self-expression that allows her to perceive the world through her own lens, creating the desired images and portraits that reflect her vision. Art, she believes, possesses a magical quality; it is a universal language that enables her to advocate for change and communicate various experiences and emotions.

Though Kakizi has been pursuing art since 2013, it was in 2020 that she fully committed herself to it, realizing that true progress as an artist demanded unwavering dedication. This journey has brought immense growth, as she has become acutely aware of the challenges faced by women in the field, with visibility being the most significant hurdle.

Determined to address this issue, Kakizi conceived the idea of curating all-female exhibitions, creating platforms that not only amplify women's visibility in art but also open doors to countless opportunities. Rejecting the passive approach of waiting for male artists to invite female artists, she took the lead, vowing to organize these exhibitions herself.

Since its inception last year, the all-female exhibition has provided a platform for talented artists like Shemsa Neza, Lynka Lydie and Louise Kanyange to showcase their remarkable work. This exhibition takes place in two phases: a fixed exhibition and a mobile one held in schools and various centers.

"Ignorance regarding our presence in the art world is still pervasive," Kakizi remarks. "When I started curating exhibitions, many people approached me specifically in search of female artists. Many remain unaware of the existence of women artists. This is not just a challenge in Rwanda but a worldwide issue. Even in art history, the spotlight has consistently favored men, despite women's undeniable contributions. We have always been here."

Gender inequality continues to cast a shadow over our society, hindering women in both their professional and personal lives. As an artist, Kakizi finds inspiration in these struggles, using her creative platform to shed light on these issues and catalyze change.

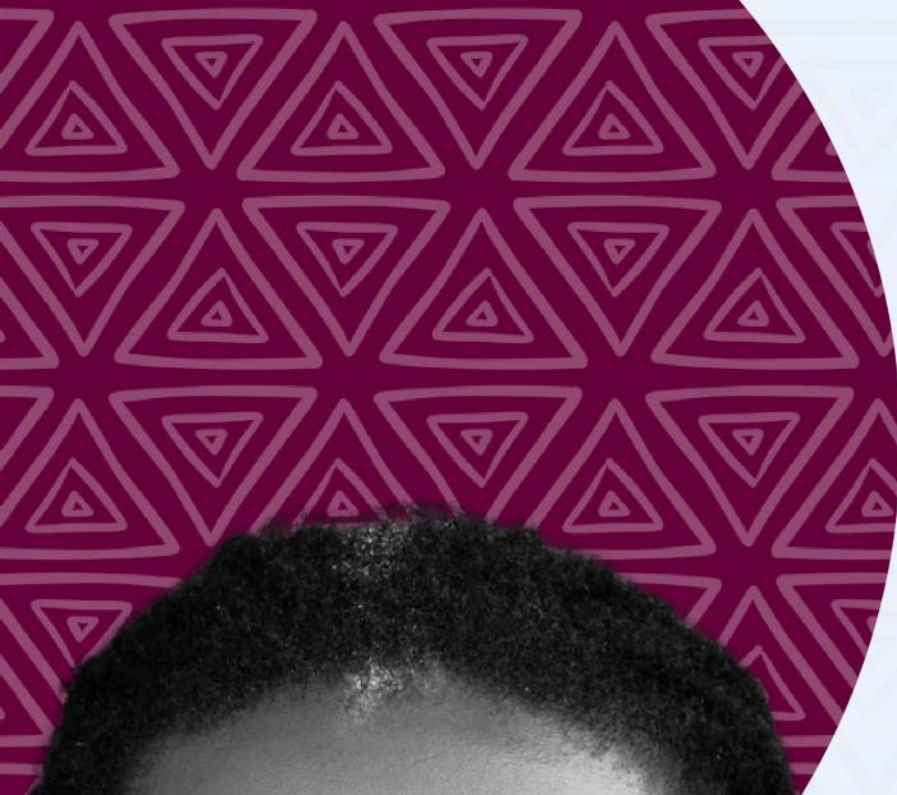
She recounts a project in which she empowered women to confront the limiting mindsets that injustice had instilled within their community. Through discussion, they shared their struggles, life experiences and hopes for the future. Among the participants was a 63-year-old woman who had never explored art until then. With training, she discovered the ability to sketch images that conveyed her unique story—a truly empowering experience.

Issues such as teenage pregnancy and the various challenges faced by women can be effectively addressed through art. Kakizi believes that art provides the most profound form of education, as the messages created through artistic expression are etched forever in our minds, ensuring lasting impact.

"Addressing the barriers that hinder women's success in the art field must be our primary focus," she emphasizes. Women artists need role models and support. We must recognize that women face numerous obstacles, such as the expectation to withdraw from their careers after childbirth. These barriers deter many talented women from sharing their worth, perpetuating the notion of a male-dominated industry.

Reflecting on her own journey as one of few women artists, Kakizi acknowledges the daunting nature of her path. She persevered despite industry challenges and the discouragement of those around her. From a young age, Kakizi had a passion for creation, even when others doubted her abilities. She refused to let their words define her.

She encourages fellow female artists not to be defined by societal expectations or the limitations others impose. True courage lies in believing in oneself and embracing one's unique talents and passions. "I am here because I love art, because I believe in its transformative power and the positive change it can bring about. My contribution paves the way for future generations to freely pursue art as a full-time creative endeavor without worrying about financial constraints."




# Hope

## AZEDA

In her hands, arts become a force of empowerment, reshaping Rwanda's identity and uniting communities in a shared journey of healing and hope.





Hope Azeda is a name that resonates with creativity and empowerment in Rwanda. Her remarkable achievements in the arts, particularly through her work with Mashirika performing arts and the Ubumuntu arts festival, have propelled her to global heights and made her an indispensable figure in the country's creative industry.

Born and raised in Uganda as a refugee, Hope learned the values of perseverance and the strength of familial bonds during her challenging childhood. Her parents, Norman and Beatrice, forced to flee Rwanda in 1959 due to ethnic tensions, instilled in her a sense of hard work and resilience. Amidst the political turmoil in Uganda, her family constantly sought safety and stability from the frequent coups d'état.

Hope's true passion for the arts emerged during her time at Namasagali College, where she discovered the captivating world of music, dance, and drama. Enchanted by the tales of Rwanda's beauty, she decided to uproot her life and move there in 1998. The challenge was daunting, as she faced unfamiliarity with the local area and languages, and the painful reality of losing many relatives during the 1994 Genocide against Tutsi.

The Genocide left an indelible mark on Hope's soul and became a profound source of inspiration for her writings. Fueled by her passion for artistic expression and a desire to connect with fellow artists, she founded the Mashirika Performing Arts Media Company. Collaborating with institutions like the Aegis Trust and the Ministry of Justice, Mashirika has produced thought-provoking films, plays, and performances that delve into the complex issues surrounding the Genocide, the Gacaca proceedings, and the importance of unity and reconciliation.

Mashirika has revolutionized the world of theatre in Rwanda through innovative use of interactive and forum theatre, showcasing the power of performing arts as a tool for social transformation and employment. They have successfully demonstrated that theatre can be both entertaining and impactful. The company has actively participated in various events, including the Kwita Izina annual event, The Youth Connect Summit, and CHOGM, among others.

In 2015, Hope launched the Ubumuntu Arts Festival, now an annual celebration of humanity. The festival brings together artists from diverse backgrounds, providing a platform for creatives to connect and share their stories. Through their work, they promote awareness and understanding of global tales of humanity and foster healing and peace-building in the aftermath of violence.

Hope's performances aim to touch the hearts of her audience, tackling subject matters that call for the essence of humanity. Despite facing setbacks and challenges as a woman, she has always remained resilient and driven. She emphasizes the need to reclaim the narrative of women as victors and to challenge the mindset of victimhood. Through her work, she has advanced women's rights and empowerment, challenging cultural barriers and inspiring women to embrace every opportunity that comes their way.

Looking ahead, Hope envisions a future where integrity, equality, and support for one another are central. She recognizes that talking about change is one thing, but taking action is essential. Hope Azeda continues to leave a lasting imprint on society, inspiring others with her unwavering dedication to the arts, her commitment to empowering women, and her belief in the transformative power of creativity.




# Isabelle KAMARIZA

Her work with Solid Africa, feeds more than just hungry stomachs. It feeds hope, dignity, and the belief that every individual deserves nourishment and care.







Isabelle Kamariza, the president and founder of Solid Africa, had a transformative journey that led her to become a champion for the less fortunate. While studying law in Brussels, Isabelle discovered that her true calling extended beyond the courtroom. After soul-searching and immersing herself in the teachings of the Bible, she realized that caring for those in need was the true measure of humanity.

Motivated by the belief that even a single euro could make a difference, Isabelle and her friends started supporting over 200 individuals. Their impact quickly multiplied, reaching over 500 people. Encouraged by their success, Isabelle returned to Rwanda in 2009 and founded Solid Africa, a social enterprise focused on eradicating nutrition insecurity in hospitals.

The inspiration for Solid Africa came from Isabelle's encounters with patients who were both ill and lacking food. One young woman with a heart condition, who couldn't accept food from churches or well-meaning individuals due to being an orphan, left a lasting impression on Isabelle. Determined to address this urgent issue, Isabelle launched Solid Africa, initially helping two patients but later expanding their reach.

Today, Solid Africa provides nourishment for over a thousand patients daily, driven by empathy and determination. They not only provide sustenance but also tailor food to each patient's specific health needs. Solid Africa prioritizes empowering women and children through programs like Gemura-Food for All, which assists low-income patients burdened by hospital bills. They cover expenses and transportation fees, ensuring patients can return home with renewed hope.

Initiatives such as Kiza-Medical Expenses alleviate the financial burden of essential medication not covered by insurance, supporting individuals facing socio-economic challenges. Solid Africa also provides crucial medical aids like crutches and wheelchairs, aiding patients in their recovery.

Through the Sukura-Hygiene program, Solid Africa ensures that patients have access to essential hygiene products, safeguarding their health and facilitating recovery. Isabelle emphasizes that their work fosters solidarity and empathy within the community. Heartwarming stories abound of discharged patients expressing gratitude by sending harvests to help others. This circle of compassion inspires individuals to strive for a better future.

Isabelle envisions expanding Solid Africa's reach to cover all public hospitals, ensuring no patient lacks access to nourishment. Currently operational in five public hospitals, her vision is a future where every individual, regardless of their circumstances, can receive the sustenance they need to heal and thrive.

Isabelle Kamariza's journey exemplifies resilience, empathy, and determination. Through her unwavering commitment to feeding and empowering vulnerable patients, she has redefined compassion's boundaries. Solid Africa has created a ripple effect of positive change, lighting the path towards a more equitable and nourished society. Isabelle's inspiring story reminds us that with passion and determination, we can make a lasting impact on the lives of others.




# Blandine

## UMUZIRANENGE

She is the visionary mind behind Kosmotive, revolutionizing menstrual hygiene through affordable reusable pads, education and empowerment. She strives for a world where no woman or girl is held back by period poverty, challenging stigma and transforming lives.





Women and girls in Rwanda, and around the world, are grappling with the silent crisis of period poverty - meaning they lack access to sanitary products, menstrual hygiene education, toilets, handwashing facilities, or waste management. The dated and harmful perception of menstruation as 'dirty' continues to be a source of shame, disrupting education, future prospects, and self-esteem.

Umuziranenge Blandine, a true visionary, recognized this harsh reality and took a bold step forward by establishing Kosmotive, a remarkable social enterprise dedicated to ending period poverty. Her mission was clear: to shatter the silence surrounding menstruation and provide a sustainable solution for those who could not afford sanitary products.

Beginning her journey in 2014, Blandine's initial focus was on empowering mothers, women, and young girls by providing vital health information. She started an editorial line, Kosmos, a groundbreaking magazine centered around maternal and child health, including menstrual health. This platform not only offers crucial knowledge but also serves as a means to introduce innovative products.

In 2017, during her research for an article, Blandine made a startling discovery: 18 percent of young Rwandan girls were missing school due to the lack of access to sanitary wear. Blandine knew that addressing period poverty and stigma associated with menstruation was essential for achieving gender equality.

Blandine set to work designing Kosmopads, an eco-friendly, cost-effective and reusable sanitary pads designed to revolutionize menstrual hygiene. Crafted from purpose-designed cloth, she ensured the pads were comfortable and breathable, and available in different sizes to accommodate varying menstrual flows. Blandine designed the pads to have a lifespan of two years and adhere to the guidelines of reusable pad production.

But Kosmotive's mission extends beyond manufacturing pads; it embraces open discussions and education about menstruation. Before distributing Kosmopads in communities and schools, Blandine and her team conduct empowering sessions that break down barriers, challenge stigma and address the multifaceted challenges associated with periods and the proper use of reusable pads. Understanding that financial constraints may still hinder access to their products, Blandine forged partnerships that enable the distribution of pads free of charge. Partnering serves a dual purpose for Kosmotive: ensuring the sustainability of their vision in terms of quality and impact while fostering a community of empowered women. By encouraging those who can afford the pads to purchase raw materials, Kosmotive ensures a self-sustaining model that also ensures a significant number of girls, especially those in rural areas, have access to these life-changing products. continually aids those who cannot afford them.

Blandine's fervent hope is to create a world where no woman or girl is held back by period poverty. Under her leadership, Kosmotive's will continue providing affordable sanitary pads, normalizing menstruation and erasing the age-old stigmatization.

Umuziranenge Blandine is proof that a single individual can ignite a movement that changes lives. Blandine recognized that the time for change is now, and her story proves the power to make a difference lies within each and every one of us.




# Aline

## BERABOSE

**Empowered women empower the world. Her dedication to gender equality and women's healthcare shines brightly. Her journey reminds us that by breaking barriers, challenging taboos, and embracing collaboration, we can create a future where every woman's voice is heard and valued.**





Aline Joyce Berabose, 'Bose,' is an exceptional advocate for gender equality and women's healthcare, a passionate feminist activist and an entrepreneur who draws inspiration from her mother's strength. Bose's many endeavors include co-founding a period poverty organization to hosting the first Rwandan podcast focusing on women's issues. Today, she spearheads LUNA Africa, a pioneering telehealth service for women. Bose's personal story is one of resilience and unwavering commitment to women's empowerment.

Bose was raised by a single mother who, after surviving the 1994 Genocide Against the Tutsis, pursued higher education, instilling in her daughter the same spirit of resilience and determination. From her mother, Bose learned the strength of women and began questioning the systemic disparities that marginalize them.

During a leadership course in Kenya, Bose personally experienced sexual harassment, which opened her eyes to the dismissive attitudes prevalent in society towards women. A fellow course member, a woman from Ethiopia, stood firm against the mistreatment and inspired Bose to take a stand against such behavior. This encounter ignited her passion for feminism and motivated her to challenge societal barriers, including the taboo surrounding menstrual care and its impact on women's healthcare access.

Inspired by her newfound activism, Bose co-founded iMatter Initiative, where she and her team provided thousands of free sanitary pads to dozens of schools in the country, advocated for VAT exemption in Rwanda, raised awareness about menstrual health and shattered the stigma surrounding menstruation. Bose's commitment to raising awareness about women's issues then found another platform in Breaking Silences, the first Rwandan podcast of its kind.

Inspired by a growing swell of feminists in Rwanda, Bose established a venture that would encompass her knowledge and experiences. In 2022, she co-founded LUNA Africa, a local start-up revolutionizing women's healthcare through telehealth services. Bose understands the lingering sense of insecurity that women often face due to experiences of assault and harassment accessing different services. Her vision is for women to feel secure internally, culturally and religiously. Through LUNA Africa, Bose creates secure community platforms for anonymous discussions on various topics of women's safety and wellbeing. She also advocates for open conversations about postpartum depression, menstruation, and other aspects of women's health.

Bose's journey as an entrepreneur dedicated to revolutionizing women's healthcare is only the beginning. She envisions a comprehensive system that supports women throughout their lives, from their first period to menopause and beyond. Recognizing the significant physical and emotional changes women undergo, she advocates for a healthcare system tailored to their specific needs.


Bose is a proud feminist, who is "constantly learning and growing." She actively seeks diverse perspectives and, as she approaches her 27th birthday, she aspires to share her valuable experience and mentor young feminists in high school. She believes that bridging the gap between seasoned feminists and young gender-rights activists is crucial, as is fostering collaboration between government institutions and activists. Bose believes that feminism is a fundamental act of patriotism.

Aline Joyce Berabose's commitment to women's healthcare and gender equality stands as a testament to the strength and potential of every woman to embark on a journey to transform society. As a young feminist activist, Bose's future is bright; filled with resilience and determination to create lasting change for women in Rwanda and beyond.



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# HerSTORY

Rwandan Women Changemakers

