

First Lady Mrs Jeannette Kagame's remarks

at

**The 20th Anniversary of the Loomba
Foundation**

London, 23rd June 2017

**Our Gracious Hosts, Lord Raj Loomba and My Dear
Friend Mrs. Cherie Blair,**

Patron in Chief – Sir Richard Branson,

Patrons and Trustees,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Good Evening.

Let me begin by expressing my warm appreciation for the invitation to speak at this 20th anniversary of the Loomba Foundation. To be among like-minded spirits, who treasure the dignity of all human life and especially that of the most affected by social inequalities, is a true cause for celebration.

Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen,

We are all uncomfortably aware that discrimination and injustice have too often become a familiar experience for grieving widows across the world. After their husbands' passing, social and economic circumstances can dramatically worsen and create seriously unstable living conditions both for them, and the children left behind. It is often assumed that the uncertainty of their future is caused by the passing away of the family's main breadwinner, but the reality is that for these women, losing the men they loved – sometimes at a young age – creates a new status, one that goes beyond being left with fewer economic options, as they redefine themselves in a world in which the man they were building a future with, is no longer.

Sadly, the void left by their late husbands, can often make way for unfavourable social norms, that can just as 'effectively' perpetuate the cycle of violation of their basic human rights.

Esteemed guests,

Allow me to briefly pause, and say that I have heard good praise about the ***Loomba Foundation World Widows Report***, which captures data about the plight of widows and their children, that further informed policies from the United Nations and national governments, including the Sustainable Development Goals.

As well, this is an ideal opportunity to congratulate *Lord Loomba* and his wife *Veena*, for spearheading the cause of widows' care with such resolution and *Mrs. Cherie Blair*, the President of Loomba Foundation, for being a lifelong and formidable champion of women's rights.

I would also like to take a moment to acknowledge the important role played by the then-presiding Government of Gabon at the UN Security Council, for proposing the resolution, to observe the International Widows Day on 23 June, which was adopted by consensus at the UN General Assembly in 2010.

Dear guests,

On this International Day of Widows, which might not have been recognized without your tireless efforts, I am also honoured and grateful to have this platform to share Rwanda's story with you.

As you may know, this gala dinner comes during a period, when my country is going through a reflective time, over a somber chapter of its history.

For us, the International Widows Day resonates even more, as in our history, too many of our women saw their beloved husbands, and children, ripped away from their lives, during the terrifying 100 days of the Genocide against the Tutsi of 1994.

Indeed, our history will forever be marked by the immense loss and suffering, which was caused by hatred and resulted in the dehumanisation of millions in 1994. Now, and always, we vow to never forget what our people went through, and to never trivialise or bury their stories, as our way to give them back their dignity.

This is the reason why every year, for the past 23 years, we have observed 100 days of mourning in remembrance of the lives lost during the 1994 Genocide against the Tutsi, while celebrating the resilience and fighting spirit of survivors. For many Rwandans, including myself, this time helps not only to deconstruct the factors and ideology that led to the worst crimes against humanity committed on our land, but also to focus our minds on the work still needed to heal our mighty survivors, and rebuild a strong nation, in which no one will be allowed to dehumanise anyone else, ever again.

Esteemed Friends,

The 1994 Genocide against the Tutsi ravaged Rwanda, and indisputably, the lives of countless people. By the end of the Genocide:

- 1 million Tutsi and moderate Hutu men, women, and children had been brutally massacred;

- Hundreds of thousands of persons had been internally displaced, while 2 million people were used as shields by the extremist Genocidal regime and coerced into fleeing with them to a neighbouring country;
- Hundreds of thousands of women had been viciously raped and purposely infected with HIV/AIDS;
- And 50,000 widows and 75,000 inconsolable orphans were left alone.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

After the genocide, the pain of women continued to seep through the core of our society. Where once stood proud and strong-willed women, now stood women with broken souls. So very much had been taken away from them.

Think about it: they had lost children, husbands, property, and what ultimately allows each of us to stand tall with heads held high regardless of our circumstances, *they had lost their dignity*. As stated by Therese Mugorewera, a

Genocide widow, 'I hated my present and resented the thought of my future'. In the aftermath of the Genocide, our nation was left with what seemed as an insurmountable task to mend broken hearts, heal injured bodies and rebuild the fabric of society.

Honourable Guests,

To get back on our feet so to speak, we turned to the Rwandan culture for solutions, since it is a culture rooted in the value attached to the contribution of every single member of the community.

So in many ways, we have been capable of rising from our past, by taking a stand against any kind of marginalisation, and involving people and leaders alike, in decision-making processes at all levels. As ingrained by our culture, *the principles of collectiveness and inclusiveness were to be our building blocks towards a better tomorrow.*

It is with the same spirit that in 1995, fifty widows decided to found an association called AVEGA and address their

psychological, social, and financial needs. Today, with close to 20,000 women, AVEGA continues to support its members through income generating activities, psychosocial support and access to basic needs, such as education for children and universal healthcare for families. Widows are also benefiting from other national mechanisms, such as the Genocide Survivors Support and Assistance Fund (FARG), which currently helps respond to the socio-economic needs of Genocide survivors, in education, health, shelter, social assistance and income generation. Also, with the support of the Government and other partners, the AVEGA association is able to provide quality homes with caretakers for the widows.

Then in 1996, to strengthen our ancestral notion of unity among Rwandans, female members of the government, along with the wives of Government officials, including myself, joined together to form the **Unity Club**. Recently, we have also celebrated 20 years of promoting peace and working as one, for the sustainable development of our country.

In line with activities held during the commemorative period, we, at Unity Club, in partnership with AVEGA, and other organisations, will inaugurate next week the recently completed home, which will accommodate 108 surviving widows, and widowers, of the Genocide, in the Southern province of Rwanda.

Distinguished Audience,

Rwanda has made the experience that working together leads a group to its desired destination, faster.

We know that as a community, we are stronger in vision, number, and efforts.

We know that as a community, we help complement each other's strengths to achieve common goals for true socio-economic development.

We know that as a community, we believe in the philosophy of being "my brother's keeper".

As we mark International Widows Day, I urge all of us, to take this same philosophy to heart and continue to collectively support the fundamental rights of widows, and fight against any attempt to violate them.

Dear friends,

As I end my remarks, my wish is that we be reminded to hear those voices that cannot always be heard, but can surely be amplified by our efforts.

Let us be relentless in our determination to empower these women and support their right to, and dream for a better quality of life, for themselves and their children.

I thank you all for your kind attention, and once again, wish a happy 20th anniversary to the Loomba Foundation.