News



Sacred Heart of Jesus Sr. Rosemary Nyirumbe (second from right) speaks on a panel during a July 18 side event hosted by the Women in Faith Leadership and sponsored by Conrad N. Hilton Foundation at the Women Deliver 2023 Conference in Kigali, Rwanda. The panel also included, from far left: Srs. Jane Wakahiu of the Little Sisters of St. Francis; Hedwig Muse of the Little SIsters of Mary Immaculate of Gulu, Uganda; and Francisca Ngozi Uti of the Handmaids of the Holy Child Jesus. (GSR photo/Doreen Ajiambo)



by Doreen Ajiambo

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Kigali, Rwanda — July 19, 2023

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Thousands of global leaders and women religious attending the Women Deliver 2023 Conference (WD2023) in Rwanda's capital city of Kigali have called on all countries to emulate Rwanda regarding gender equality and women's empowerment.

The conference, which is taking place July 17-20 at the Kigali Convention Centre, is focused on gender equality, health, and the rights and well-being of girls and women. The convening has attracted more than 6,000 people across 165 countries, including religious sisters, civil society, world leaders and women's rights organizations. More than 200,000 people are daily joining the meeting online through the virtual conference.

During a side event on July 18, organized by the Conrad N. Hilton Foundation for Women in Faith Leadership Fellowship, religious sisters said that Rwanda, one of the poorest countries in the world, was setting an example regarding gender equality. They urged all leaders and advocates worldwide to emulate the country and advance gender equality in their nations.



A banner of the Women Deliver Conference at the Kigali Convention Center in Rwanda, held July 17-20. The conference theme is "Spaces, Solidarity, and Solutions." (GSR photo/Doreen Ajiambo)

The landlocked East African country of more than 13 million people is renowned as a leader in gender equality and women's empowerment, especially in political participation. The United Nations Women report shows that women in Rwanda hold 61% of parliamentary seats and 52% of cabinet positions. Women are also represented almost equally in other levels, such as state appointments, private sectors, civil society, and various national and village layers.

The country has also made significant progress in reducing maternal mortality rates and eradicating gender-based violence. The development led to the Global Gender Gap Report ranking Rwanda as the first country to achieve gender balance on the African continent and No. 7 globally.



Notre Dame Sr. Gina Marie Blunck, executive director of Conrad N. Hilton Fund for Sisters (GSR photo/Doreen Ajiambo)

"I am here to see what Rwanda did to bring them to a point where it's considered one of the top 10 countries in the world regarding the place of women and culture and equality," said Sr. Gina Marie Blunck, a member of Sisters of Notre Dame and the executive director of Conrad N. Hilton Fund for Sisters. "I don't have an answer on how Rwanda made it to the top, but I am here at the conference to find the answer."

Blunck urged religious sisters, all leaders and advocates attending the conference to learn about Rwanda's achievements over the last decades and apply them in their various fields of work or ministries. She said the Hilton Foundation has for years funded sisters in their ministries to reach out to more vulnerable people, including women and girls in society.

"The sisters are women who are always on the ground; they never leave," she said. "For example, during the COVID-19 outbreak, the Catholic sisters remained when other humanitarian organizations left different countries. We realized, as Hilton, that if there are people who need to be supported to help others are sisters."

Maliha Khan, Women Deliver's president and CEO, has repeatedly said the East African nation won the bid to hold this year's conference because of its efforts in governance to achieve equal rights for both men and women.

As this year's conference theme is "Spaces, Solidarity, and Solutions," Khan noted that all world leaders and advocates in attendance would aim to enable inclusive and co-created spaces that foster solidarity for sustainable solutions on gender equality.

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Sr. Jane Wakahiu, associate vice president of program operations and head of the Catholic Sisters Initiative at the Conrad N. Hilton Foundation (which funds Global Sisters Report), said the conference had presented an opportunity for religious sisters and other world leaders to learn from Rwanda's achievement in gender equality and women's empowerment.

"Sisters are learning much through interaction with other women who are addressing similar issues in their local communities, including [female genital mutilation], early marriages, girl child education, and stories of success from women who have broken the glass ceiling," said Wakahiu, a member of the Institute of the Little Sisters of St. Francis, Kenya.

She noted that Rwanda succeeded in women's rights because of the support and goodwill of the government.

"Rwanda has demonstrated that change is possible through the implementation of policies that positively support gender equality and lead to improving life for all — the reason Rwanda has recorded a decline in maternal mortality rates arising from women's improved access to quality and affordable health care," Wakahiu said.



During a July 18 side event of the Women Deliver 2023 Conference in Kigali, Rwanda, Sr. Jane Wakahiu explains an image in which a woman is breastfeeding a newborn baby lying on the floor. Wakahiu, of the Institute of the Little Sisters of St. Francis, also highlighted some of the challenges women in poverty experience. (GSR photo/Doreen Ajiambo)

Other nations could learn something from Rwanda, she added: "That it takes a village to raise a child. And for women and girls to succeed, all must work together for the common good of the community and society at large."

Sr. Agnes Lucy Lando of the Sisters of Mary of Kakamega said sisters and all leaders convening in Kigali could learn "something special" from Rwanda on gender equality and women's empowerment.

She said this year's theme was appealing and informative to stakeholders promoting women and girls' equal enjoyment of all human rights, including freedom from all forms of violence, equal participation in decision-making, and sexual and reproductive rights.

"The theme of the conference appeals to me as a sister," said Lando, a communication and media studies professor currently serving as the director of research and graduate studies at Daystar University in Kenya. "So, from this conference, people are going to understand 'space.' What is my space in society? What is the woman's space in society? What's the man's space in society, and what's the youth's space in society? So that I don't jump into your space and leave my space vacant."



Mary of Kakamega Sr. Agnes Lucy Lando addresses religious sisters during the side event hosted by the Women in Faith Leadership Fellowship on July 18 during the Women Deliver 2023 Conference in Kigali, Rwanda. (GSR photo/Doreen Ajiambo)

Still, the emphasis on solidarity reminds one that "you can't do it alone," she continued. "I hope that when we come out of this conference, men and women from different organizations will create partnerships and collaborations. We have different problems that affect us, so from here, I am learning that we must find solutions to our problems together."

Lando reminded religious sisters, world leaders and women advocates to emulate Rwanda by including men as they push for women's rights. "I believe we must move together as a community because women have brothers and sisters, husbands, and fathers who form the basic nature of life; therefore, if we want to move forward with women's rights, we must carry our male counterparts along," she said.

In the meantime, Lando urged world leaders to help fight all forms of violence against women and girls and give women a chance to ascend into leadership positions at various levels to promote gender equality.

"In Rwanda, women hold important positions in the government and perform equally as men," Lando said. "The lesson is clear that given a platform, women can do it. I can deliver as a woman when given a platform and opportunity."

Related: Women's rights advocates, sisters gather in Rwanda for gender equality