

A SPEECH ON THE DAY OF RECEIVING THE GUARDIAN INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT ACHIEVEMENT AWARD

- Guest of honour
- Distinguished guests
- Ladies and gentlemen.

On this day, I am overly proud and excited to receive this fabulous award. But first and foremost, I would like to pay tribute to SURF that nominated me.

However, I would like to assert that I am just a captain. The rest of the team that works for AVEGA is composed of many players. I mean, if we had not worked as a team, we would not have achieved our goals.

One million Tutsis were killed in the 1994 genocide in Rwanda. Of the 400,000 survivors, many are widows and orphans, as the killings targeted men first. There are nearly 60,000 widows, over 25,000 of which are in membership of AVEGA. Together we care for 65,000 orphans.

AVEGA-AGAHOZO was formed in 1995 by 50 widows to find solutions to our problems, not an easy task because we required support to address psychological, social, economic, political and financial needs.

I joined AVEGA as a widow in July 1995. I had worked as a volunteer who would go here and there motivating fellow widows, comforting them to help restore their hope in life. I travelled all over the Eastern Province either on foot, by bicycle or on board trucks in order to visit my fellow widows who were forlorn, engulfed by severe trauma and loneliness. I did my utmost to boost their morale. I felt I should do something, to bring a positive change in their lives.

I remembered how I suffered when I was in the bush hiding, carrying my youngest daughter of 2 months on my back. I survived not because I was stronger than others, but by the mercy of the almighty. As I survived I felt a responsibility for others less fortunate. I took in 8 orphans besides my own 6 children at home. It is not that we have many resources but it is for love and solidarity.

When AVEGA Eastern region was established in 1999 and I was nominated coordinator, it paved my way to advocate and do more.

I came close to them to listen to their problems. We developed a spirit of love and solidarity among widows and care for orphans. I did not hesitate a minute to advise, counsel, support, urge and motivate them. I did not think of working for money but to build in them a strong hope to live and make a positive change and solve some of the difficulties that other people thought to be insurmountable.

We have been fortunate to achieve much:

- Children (orphans) have been encouraged to go to school
- Many widows and widowers now have shelter
- Trauma sufferers have been counselled
- Widows have legal representation
- Widows and orphans who were raped and infected with HIV have access to life-saving antiretroviral treatment
- Poverty stricken beneficiaries receive social assistance to keep them alive
- Disabled beneficiaries receive assistance
- Widows now know their rights to property, land and security.

In spite of all of this, we still have a long way to go. Widows are growing older and older and therefore need regular support. Many have severe disabilities, chronic or incurable diseases, and also need constant support from AVEGA.

Orphans who are now heads of households with parental responsibilities need guidance and support. The problem of lack of shelter also remains a big problem, even if there is political will to handle this problem.

However with the support of a range of UK donors - Survivors Fund, Msaada, Comic Relief, Charities Advisory Trust, CAFOD, Sigrid Rausing Trust - we are making progress and helping more widows and orphans. With your support we can do even more, to help the widows in the Southern and Northern Regions of Rwanda where AVEGA does not yet have the capacity to reach.

Last but not least, I am extremely indebted to everyone who has made tonight possible. Thank you.

Your support is indeed gratefully received. Long live AVEGA's collaboration with you all! Long live our social ties! I wish everyone a happy night!