

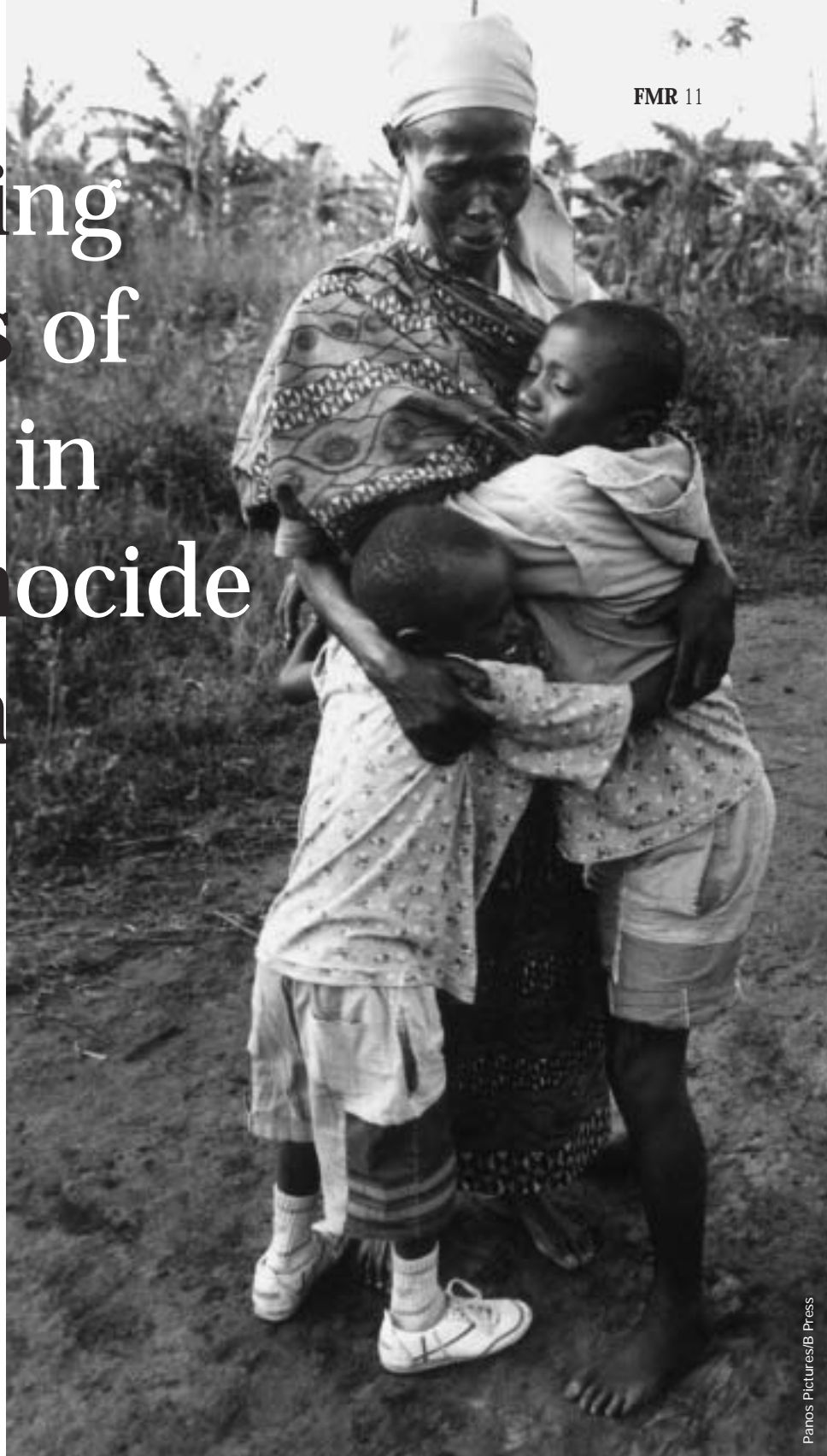
Redefining the roles of women in post-genocide Rwanda

by Diana Quick

In 1994 genocide shattered the foundations of Rwanda, unleashing violence, hatred and the murder of more than half a million people.

Reports from human rights and humanitarian organisations and global media helped communicate the tremendous pain endured by Rwandan women and girls targeted by gender-related violence.¹

Two years after the genocide it was estimated that 54% of the population were female and that 34% of households were headed by women (60% of female-headed households were headed by widows). The role being played by women and girls to redefine gender roles in order to participate alongside men in the rebuilding of Rwandan society has been little documented. Their remarkable courage gives reason for renewed hope after the tragic events in Rwanda. Through thousands of grassroots associations, connected by networks throughout the country² they have begun to rebuild their lives: reconstructing their homes, building centres for sur-



Egide, 14, and Mbonigaba, 8, are re-united with their mother after more than six months' separation.

vivors of genocide and rape, learning to read and write, returning to school, acquiring new skills, participating in political life and forming local businesses. This work is promoted by the Ministry for Gender and Women in Development (MIGEPROFE). Ministry representatives in each prefecture and commune work with local government officials to raise awareness of women's issues. MIGEPROFE also

works to support the women's grassroots organisations, 15,400 of which have been set up since 1994.³

The international community has played a key role in supporting women and their organisations. Among the initiatives are UNDP's Trust Fund for Women, USAID's Women in Development programme and UNHCR's Rwanda Women's Initiative (RWI). Launched by High Commissioner Madame Ogata during

the mass returns of refugees in 1996, the RWI was established to promote the 'empowerment of women' in economic, social and political life. Its objectives parallel those of the Bosnia Women's Initiative.⁴ Working across the country in partnership with women's associations and MIGEPROFE, the RWI has supported 'needs-based' projects in literacy and education, income generation and skills training. RWI has also supported psychosocial centres and helped rebuild women's centres and shelters. The RWI has also had a longer-term, more strategic focus, working to raise public awareness of gender issues by media campaigns, workshops and conferences and efforts to build the capacity of MIGEPROFE and women's associations.

A recent report by the Women's Commission for Refugee Women and Children highlights the strengths and weaknesses of RWI and draws out lessons for other post-conflict women's initiatives. Among the key findings are:

- With its powerful emergency response capacity, UNHCR is one of the UN agencies best equipped to quickly mobilise resources nationwide. Women's initiatives can enhance the agency's protection and assistance functions by fostering closer relations with return communities (experience has demonstrated that women are more willing than men to become involved in inter-ethnic activities); promoting women's participation in political institutions and the peace process; and supporting women's work that directly benefits the family and community.

- The role and scope of the Rwanda Women's Initiative is still not fully recognised or valued by senior UNHCR staff. RWI has not been prioritised at headquarters level where resource decisions are made. Despite the enormous promise shown by the RWI, at the end of 1997 funding was only

10% of that requested. The RWI's original vision had to be revised, severely limiting its scope and reach within rural areas.

- As Rwanda has moved from a state of emergency towards formulation of long-term developmental goals, RWI has worked toward meeting both women's immediate needs and building the capacity of government ministries and associations working with Rwandan women. The developmental impact of these efforts is perhaps under-appreciated.
- UNHCR's post-conflict work is enhanced when there is coordination with other in-country UN agencies.
- Articulation and communication of RWI objectives and results should be strengthened. Lines of responsibility for implementing and monitoring the objectives of RWI, as well as reporting on its impact, have been weak. Gender mainstreaming will not occur without greater coordination and collaboration between UNHCR field and HQ staff.
- Post-conflict women's initiatives offer scope for UNHCR to imple-

ment the agency's commitment to gender equality and improve its protection and reintegration capacities by involving local women and men, girls and boys.

- In order to bolster the relationship between women's initiatives and post-conflict gender mainstreaming, there must be greater clarification of the goals and objectives of Women's Initiatives in relation to UNHCR's mandate and more effort to resource specified resource and technical needs.
- The Women's Commission for Refugee Women and Children has found that although gender analysis was implicitly applied in women's projects, it has not been explicitly articulated in planning, reporting or evaluation.

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1. Evidence in these reports aided the success of lobbying to persuade the International War Crimes Tribunal for Rwanda to include rape as a war crime.
2. See Catherine Newbury & Hannah Baldwin *Aftermath: Women's Organisations in Postconflict Rwanda*, Center for Development Information and Evaluation, USAID. Working Paper No 304, July 2000, p2.
3. *Ibid.*
4. The Bosnia Women's Initiative was created in 1996, with an initial \$5 million contribution from the USA, to provide opportunities for women in Bosnia Herzegovina to become full participants in the economic recovery of their country.



Joanne Omang