Twenty-five years ago, my native country of Rwanda faced a genocide that killed nearly one million people. Over the course of 100 days, thousands of women were raped and killed, children were smashed against walls, and men were slaughtered—all
because they were members of the Tutsi ethnic group.

I was just a baby, born in 1994 during the genocide. My parents and other members of my family were massacred, and I became one of the hundreds of thousands of orphans left behind in a country where streets were littered with corpses and rivers were filled with blood.

After the genocide ended, Rwanda was devastated. Schools, hospitals, and banks were destroyed. The government could not provide even basic services. It was one of the most dangerous places in the world to visit.

An aunt took me in, and I lived with her for much of my childhood. Even though she strove to love me as her own, life was not easy. Like most of our neighbors, we lived in poverty and opportunity felt distantly out of reach.

As a teenager, I was one of the lucky few children admitted to the Agahozo-Shalom Youth Village, a place where orphaned and vulnerable children live, heal from the trauma of the genocide, and get an exceptional four-year high school education. The Village is not just a boarding school—it is a home for the hopeless, a community that restored my rhythm of life and equipped me with the ability to dream and achieve.

With the guidance of our “mamas”—women who often lost their own children in the genocide and who care for children at the Village as their own—the girls and women of the Village are building a new generation of female leaders in a country where the status of women is advancing, but complicated.

Women have more than 60 percent of the seats in Parliament, and the government has passed legislation to give greater equality to women, including focusing on girls’ education. But at the same time, girls are still expected to put housework ahead of schoolwork, and women are vulnerable to sexual violence, unintended pregnancy, and HIV. Girls in Rwanda are at such a disadvantage that they make up two thirds of the students at the Village.

THE SCHOOL SYSTEM IGNORED THESE CULTURAL FACTORS THAT LED GIRLS TO DROP OUT, WHICH LIMITED EDUCATION’S POTENTIAL TO TRULY SOLVE POVERTY.

Before I went to live at the Village, I grew up in a community where education, especially for girls, was undervalued. Very few girls graduated from high school, and those who did got a low-quality education. Many girls in Rwanda begin dropping out of school around the age of 11, when they are given a heavier share of household chores. Some of my friends found comfort in early marriage and left school. Others dropped out during unintended pregnancies, simply because they lacked the financial resources to afford a basic female need: birth control. The school system ignored these cultural factors that led girls to drop out, which limited education’s potential to truly solve poverty.
As a teenager, I didn’t have the power to change government policies, but I believed I could make a change in my local community. That led me to co-found a group called Females Solidarity Legacy (FSL) to start empowering girls in the Village. One of our first goals was improving sex education to decrease the rate of unintended pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections. We also initiated programs that enhanced women’s leadership and entrepreneurship skills. By the time I graduated from the Village, FSL had more than 100 members and managed to contribute to the reduction of unwanted pregnancy in our community. Since then, the group has expanded beyond the Village and now leads community service projects and mentorship programs for local middle school girls.
I was fortunate to receive a scholarship to attend Agnes Scott College, a women’s college in Atlanta. Being away from home and in the company of my fellow classmates—all smart, driven women wanting to make a mark on the world—gave me a new perspective on the place where I grew up. I observed even more gaps that needed to be filled if I wanted to inspire other young women to pursue careers they’re passionate about and make a difference in their own communities.

In 2017, I received a scholarship from my college to start a project called Lift Her Up that would advocate for youth development and women’s education in Rwanda. The pilot program aimed at organizing extracurricular activities that enhanced social change through art, entrepreneurship, and career readiness. Throughout that first summer, 120 students in the Village participated and learned how to enhance their business development skills and how leadership and entrepreneurship are catalysts for social and economic change.
The students who participated in Lift Her Up were so inspiring that I wanted to use what I learned to continue making an impact. Through the support of the Davis Projects for Peace, I co-designed and implemented a 10-day summer camp in the Village that focused on storytelling for peace and empowerment. This project provided a platform for 26 young women to share their stories of the socio-economic inequalities that existed within their communities and then engage in a conversation around them. Together, we thought critically and creatively about ideas that could be efficiently implemented to address and eradicate those disparities and ultimately create a more progressive and peaceful community.

Something incredible happened over those 10 days. These girls, as they shared their own experiences of social inequality, began to change. The shy girls opened up about everything from learning resiliency after domestic violence to pushing past their own insecurities. The more assertive girls listened, empathized, and offered emotional support. Everyone committed to the group that they would find solutions to the structural barriers in Rwanda that threatened to keep them—along with their sisters, cousins, and friends—from achieving their dreams.

This year, I turn 25. As I revisit my childhood, I feel honored to have grown up in post-genocide Rwanda, as my country wrestled with the realities of justice and forgiveness. I am an eyewitness to the progress that my country has made, in securing futures for orphaned children, in strengthening the role of women, and in rebuilding and creating opportunity after devastation. My own journey is one of the many stories of its investment. It is from this experience that I know how progress gets made. Progress is the work of individuals. It accelerates and scales when those individuals join together to create a shared vision, then work together to make it real.

I am proud of the impact that Lift Her Up is making in the lives of young women so far. But I am also committed to continuing this work to make an even larger impact on the issues that still affect women in Rwanda. Even though we’ve taken real strides toward equality, women in my country have a long way to go. Only 14 percent of girls complete secondary school and a minuscule three percent complete four years of higher education. Gender-based violence remains tragically common. According to a United Nations report, in 2014, at least two in five women experienced physical violence by age 15, and one in five has experienced sexual violence. And while things have improved when it comes to reproductive health, greater education and access are sorely needed. Young, single women have a difficult time getting contraception, and nearly half of pregnancies among Rwandan women overall are unintended.

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Progress on these entrenched social issues will take longer than a generation, and that’s why I feel such a responsibility to pass on what I have learned to girls growing up today. If my work at the Village has created a ripple of change, a thousand girls across the country would create a wave.

PEACE GRACE MUHIZI
Peace Grace Muhizi is currently a senior at Agnes Scott majoring in International Relations with a concentration in Economic Development.

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