

Opinion: Canada should encourage Rwandan genocide survivors to pursue post-secondary education



**MOSES GASHIRABAKE, SPECIAL TO
MONTREAL GAZETTE**

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SECTIONS

A woman takes part in a Rwandan genocide memorial rally on Parliament Hill, Monday April 7, 2014.

FRED CHARTRAND / THE CANADIAN PRESS

Canada's parliamentary subcommittee on international human rights is presently exploring long-term effects on survivors and children born of rape after the 1994 genocide in Rwanda. As a lucky survivor of that genocide, I am deeply appreciative of my new country's efforts. Canada, however, can do more.

This year, April 7 marks 21 years since the start of the atrocious genocide that cost 1 million Rwandans their lives and left behind countless wounded survivors. Today, some of those survivors, like me, call Canada home. Those survivors of the 1994 slaughter in Rwanda face varying degrees of social, economic and psychological challenges.

Chief among those challenges relate to socio-economic opportunities — more specifically, access to post-secondary education. Regardless of the fact that a meagre percentage of Rwandans in Canada have attained incredible successes in academia or business, and some are still healing from the effects of 1994, many remain boxed out of key areas of Canada's social and economic life.

The most affected are young people under 30. They often opt for low- and medium-paying jobs instead of pursuing a university degree or other long-term investments. As special groups' funding for post-secondary education was significantly cut by Canada in 2008 (and some provinces in years that followed), available bursaries and scholarships opportunities are scarce today. Genocide survivors and other special groups remain underfunded.

According to the last Canadian Council on Learning report, Canada indeed has very high participation rates in post-secondary education. Over 50 per cent of Canadians between the ages of 25 and 34 have completed a post-secondary program of education, compared to an average of slightly above 30 per cent among all OECD countries. These are impressive numbers.

Post-secondary participation, nonetheless, still remains low among some demographic groups in Canada. Students from low-income families with little or no history of higher education participation in their family, refugees, survivors of genocides, those with disabilities and Aboriginal students still face challenges that I have directly witnessed over the past seven years.

The problem of low post-secondary participation is even more complicated for new young Canadians and permanent residents who

fall in the “genocide survivor” category. Despite substantive constitutional guarantees, former refugees and genocide survivors are alarmingly under-represented in Canada’s post-secondary institutions.

Canada’s Charter of Rights and Freedoms guarantees equality among all Canadians. In particular, section 15 (2) of the Charter affirms Canada’s commitment to the amelioration of conditions of disadvantaged groups due to race, national or ethnic origin, colour, religion, sex, age or mental or physical disability. Even though education is a provincial matter, the federal government can step in through targeted scholarship funding opportunities for very disadvantaged groups.

The discontinued \$2.5 billion Millennium Scholarships were an excellent example of a federal program that substantially funded post-secondary education across Canada. The scholarship program which targeted over 100,000 financially disadvantaged Canadians was unfortunately not renewed by the Harper government after its 10-year mandate expired in 2008.

The current Canada Students Grant Program is not only limited in funding but is also not fundamentally targeted to disadvantaged groups. The program also lacks national coverage. Why not bring back the glory of the former Millennium Scholarships?

As a young Canadian who has benefited from scarcely available merit-based scholarship opportunities, I believe my country can do more to encourage members of disadvantaged groups in attaining higher education. Special funding through scholarships and bursaries specifically targeting deserving survivors of genocide alongside other disadvantaged Canadians will ease access struggles by these groups.

That, in turn, will ensure Canada enjoys an equitable socio-economic future.

Moses Gashirabake is currently pursuing double B. C. L and LL.B. law degrees at McGill University. He was named a Global Shaper by the World Economic Forum in 2014.

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