

Beyond the Genocide: In the Wake of Tragedy, an Analysis of the Factors that have led to Multi-faceted Gender Parity in Rwanda

By **Sabrina Gill**

*Content Warning:
Discussions of genocide,
rape, and sexual violence
towards women.*

“The 1994 Genocide against the Tutsi left the country shattered. Women took up new roles as heads of households and engage in rebuilding the country along with others. Gender equality and women’s empowerment is a cornerstone of the Government of Rwanda’s development strategy and a proven source of development progress.”

- *Republic of Rwanda
Government, 2017:02*

Gender parity and equity is a development priority

that we globally aspire to. When thinking of countries that model the ideal socio-political-economic environment for this, Nordic and other developed countries typically come to mind (The Telegraph, 2017). However, another trailblazing nation in this department -- that is not given enough recognition -- is the Republic of Rwanda.

In media and global studies, Rwanda is almost always discussed in the context of the 1994 Genocide. Even throughout the construction of this essay, it was difficult to find substantive litera-

ture that gave light to other aspects of Rwandan society and history, such as its rapid progression in gender mainstreaming. In a Forbes article entitled “Lessons from the World’s Most Gender Equal Countries”, only developed countries are given credit for their strides in gender mainstreaming. There is a blatant lack of recognition for the contemporary progressions of Rwanda, and the impressive developmental advancements that it has made despite this historical tragedy.

Before delving further into this topic, it is important to establish the definition and measurements of gender parity. While there are several indicators, we will be using the Global Gender Gap Index, published by

the World Economic Forum. This report examines the gender empowerment gap with regards to four specific categories -- economic opportunity, educational accessibility, health services, and political empowerment. With ‘1’ being complete gender parity and ‘0’ being the absence of, Rwanda scores in the top 10 countries with the lowest gap with a score of 0.80 (Business Insider, 2019). Thus, we will be examining a variety of multi-faceted factors that have led to gender equality, such as the ones quantified by the Global Gender Gap Index.

Rwanda’s gender parity will be discussed in relation to two main themes: the collaborative behaviour of Civil Society, and Intersectionality.

With regards to the collaborative behaviour of Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) in Rwanda, and drawing from class takeaways, many of these CSOs possess an attitude of liberal values and apolitical, collaborative behaviors. When discussing Rwandan gender equality in the context of the present and the future, we will be using the examples of the Rwanda Women's Network, a local CSO, and an international organ, UN Women, to further elaborate on this collaborative behaviour.

Intersectionality, the second major concept of this essay, is defined as "visualizing differentiated patterns of vulnerability...recognizing heterogeneity" (Kazue Takamura). This is important to bear in mind, as

various collaborative actors need to be mindful of the intersectional context of Rwanda. Giving recognition to vulnerability and gender imbalances during conflict is what makes Rwanda a unique case study.

This essay will first reflect on Rwanda's history, then look at current progress and initiatives, and lastly investigate the various future implications and limitations of gender parity in Rwanda.

Reflecting on history, the need for greater empowerment and accessible opportunities across various identities has allowed for the Rwandan government to effectively collaborate with international and local Civil Society actors, resulting in rapid,

sustainable, and intersectional gender parity across Rwanda.

The Past: Reflections on the Rwandan Genocide

To give greater context and understanding to modern CSO collaboration and intersectional frameworks, we must first reflect on the Rwandan Genocide of 1994, and the lessons learned that have helped to establish modern gender parity. The Rwandan Genocide was born out of long-standing tensions amongst varying groups with different identities. During the period of Belgian colonization, the “Belgians considered the Tutsis to be superior to the Hutus...they enjoyed better jobs and educational opportunities”. (BBC,

2011) Tensions culminated in 1959 with riots from Hutu clans, killing several thousand Tutsi, and granting the Hutu with greater social, political, and economic advantages. As such, when Rwanda gained independence from Belgium in 1962, the Hutu were dominant, and Hutu leader President Juvenal Habyarimana was put into power. Tensions grew over time, and Tutsi refugees located in Uganda formed the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF), led by the current Tutsi leader of Rwanda, President Paul Kagame. In 1994, President Habyarimana’s plane was shot down (although the actors and motivations behind this are still not clearly known), which instigated the rapid and

pervasive Rwandan Genocide. Between April to July of 1994, over 800,000 people were killed, and sexual violence against women was rampant. (Gervais, Ubalijoro, and Nhyiraba 2009: 14) An estimated 500,000 women were raped, where “rape was part of the genocidal plan and a tactic used for the systemic degradation of girls and women; perpetrators deliberately set out to infect female victims with HIV”. (Gervais, Ubalijoro, and Nhyiraba 2009: 14) The Genocide perpetrated the vulnerability of women, throughout its duration and for years to come. The Rwandan Genocide occurred out of long-standing divisions, killing and devastating thousands, and disproportionately targeting women.

The end of the Genocide left Rwanda with the issue of post-conflict reconciliation and reconstruction. The nationwide slaughter ended in July 1994, when the RPF took over Kigali. Instability and insecurity are the typical features of a post-conflict state such as Rwanda. However, Kagame eventually became president, and the “RPF mainstreamed women from the beginning, including them in both the political and armed wings of the Front,” (Burnet 2008:365), and gender and development was made a priority. The first reasoning for this was the fact that “immediately after the killings, girls and women formed 70% of the entire Rwandan population.”

sexual violence against women was rampant. (Gervais, Ubalijoro, and Nhyiraba 2009: 14). It became a necessity for women to fill positions of power in the post-conflict recovery of Rwanda. Secondly, there was a nationwide attitudinal shift, where the “government undertook an ideological program called: ‘national unity and reconciliation’ to build a ‘New Rwanda’, a nation of people who refused the ‘genocidal positions of power in the post-conflict recovery of Rwanda. Secondly, there was a nationwide attitudinal shift, where the “government undertook an ideological program called: ‘national unity and reconciliation’ to build a ‘New Rwanda’, a nation of people who refused the ‘genocidal ideology’ of the past.”

(Burnet 2008: 365) Ensuring equitable treatment and resources across all identities was at the forefront of development priorities. Thirdly, these female leaders, in effective collaboration with CSOs, constructed strong institutions and equitable policy. Parliamentary quotas were introduced, in which women had to make up 30% of parliamentarians. Female political participation has gone above and beyond this, with women outnumbering men at 61.3%. (World Economic Forum, 2017) Other important policy, such as gender-based budgeting, reforming land-ownership rights, and paid maternity leave, have been integral to the empowerment of women in Rwanda since 1994.

(The Republic of Rwanda Government, 2017:8) Reflecting on Rwandan history allows for us to analyze our key themes of CSO collaborative behaviour and intersectionality. As women were the majority of the population post-Genocide, women began to instigate effective CSOs, as well as taking up positions of power on a multitude of other levels. The understanding of equitable rights and female needs was felt across all aspects of society, allowing for greater collaborations amongst CSOs and the state. Development priorities were aligned, where actors had an attitude of liberal values and apolitical, collaborative behaviours. Tangentially, intersectionality was at the forefront of these inclusive institutions and

policies. Rwandan women underwent a very unique conflict, resulting in unique patterns of vulnerability which needed to be addressed in Rwandan reconstruction. Rwandan institutions needed to account for war crimes, a majority female demographic, and the shifting labour force. The gendered impacts of the Genocide, as well as the context of post-conflict reconstruction, highlight the importance of collaboration and intersectionality when looking towards the current state of gender parity in Rwanda.

The Present: Current Initiatives and Actors

Rwanda's current advancements in gender parity are largely thanks to effective cooperation and

implementation by various actors. Locally, one of the major CSOs promoting gender equality is the Rwanda Women's Network (RWN). Their primary mission in Rwanda is to "work towards improvement of the socio-economic welfare of women in Rwanda through enhancing their efforts to meet their basic needs". (RWN, 2019) They have spearheaded a multiplicity of programs and projects, with various goals such as accessible physical and mental health care, quality education, economic empowerment, and protection from sexual violence. Another part of their mandate is "community mobilization spaces for women, including facilitating women through these community spaces to

connect with other women on key issues and support each other for collective change." (RWN, 2019) In this way, they effectively work on tangible projects to improve the accessibility of resources, and additionally foster solidarity and support amongst Rwandan women. RWN has been an effective grassroots organization in promoting collaborative behaviour. It is just one of the CSOs operating towards gender equality in Rwanda, of which "are primarily concerned by the implementation of the National Gender Policy". (Rwanda Ministry of Gender and Family Promotion, 2019) This is because "Rwanda is a difficult operational context for civil society and NGOs... [the] arrangements through which

civil society-state relationships can be negotiated remain...state-determined”. (Gready 2010: 656) Interestingly enough, Rwandan gender empowerment reforms can be argued to have been carried out through a top-down approach. In many cases, a top-down approach can go awry, but within Rwanda, as the state is run by predominantly women, this results in a ‘trickle-down effect’, where female decision makers implement equitable changes to the benefit of women across Rwanda. In this sense, there is greater shared empathy and openness to collaboration with local CSOs who can more effectively implement the measures detailed by sustainable national policies.

International CSOs, actors, and related initiatives have been largely helpful in gender mainstreaming in Rwanda. A major challenge to feminism that exists universally is the participation and support of men in the fight for gender equity. In Rwanda, “women’s awareness changed once and for all since all generations of women were affected by the experience of Genocide. However, for men, this meant confronting a new world order in terms of gender politics, something that older men find harder to accept.” (Wallace, Haerpfer, Abbott 2008: 119) To remedy this, the Rwandan Government has welcomed the support of UN Women, particularly with their “HeForShe” solidarity campaign. The mandate of HeForShe

details that it acts as “an invitation for men and people of all genders to stand in solidarity with women to create a bold, visible and united force for gender equality.” (HeForShe, 2019) In Rwanda, participation in this campaign is incredibly high, with 206,454 commitments to solidarity. In 2014, the Rwandan President Paul Kagame was selected as the HeForShe Global Champion, and stated that “as Rwandans, as a global community, we need every member of our society too use his or her talents to the full if we are ever to reach our development goals. I urge all men and boys to join me as HeForShe Champi-ons in support of our women and girls...” (The Republic of Rwanda Government, 2017: 11) The state and internati-

onal organisations, such as UN Women, have committed to three new commitments to be made by 2020 in Rwanda. This includes bridging the gender digital divide, triple STEM opportunities and education for women, and eradicating gender-based violence. In this way, international initiatives, and the willingness of strong institutions, have helped to not only provide accessible resources, but have also pledged to a commitment of changing culture. Shifting the culture of ingrained sexism makes for a more sustainable and long-term impact in the fight for gender equality in Rwanda and across the globe.

Presently, there are a variety of actors that engage in women’s em-

powerment in Rwanda, and together, they succeed in its successful implementation. The state acts as a strong, female majority institution, implementing successful equity policies. Local CSOs, such as RWN, help to provide the services and support detailed by these laws and bring women together to foster a greater sense of solidarity. International actors and initiatives, such as UN Women and the HeForShe movement, are helping to improve gender parity in the very-long term, by eradicating the inherent culture of gender discrimination. Efforts towards gender parity demonstrate the collaborative behaviour of CSOs, and the attitude of liberal values and apolitical, collaborative behaviours. Intersection-

ality has been at the forefront of these initiatives, as demonstrated by Kagame's three priorities, where Rwanda has identified unique patterns of vulnerability for Rwandan women and have made commitments to institutionalise these initiatives. Thanks to collaborative behaviour and prioritising intersectionality, there have been vast tangible improvements in the quality of life for women. Some examples include the fact that at present, female labour participation in Rwanda is at 86%, women are guaranteed three months of paid maternity leave, (World Economic Forum, 2017), and there is overall increased political and educational participation. Through collaborative behaviours and bearing in mind an intersectional

framework, various actors have been able to successfully promote holistic female empowerment.

The Future: Positive and Negative Implications

Collaborative CSO behaviour and intersectional initiatives possess a variety of possibilities for the future. Optimistically, Rwanda has constantly updated and implemented national strategic frameworks towards gender equity. From 2010-2017, the “7 Year Government Programme” was introduced, which pushed for greater attention to gender-based violence and female equity concerns (The Republic of Rwanda Government, 2017: 7). From 2013-2018, the “Economic Development

and Poverty Reduction Strategy” was introduced, particularly because “Rwanda has lifted people out of extreme poverty, paying particular attention to women, who form the majority of the poor.” (The Republic of Rwanda Government, 2017: 8) In this sense, we can again see the significant attention to intersectionality, with particular accommodation for poor women post-Genocide. This focus cuts across other important sectors, such as health care, whereby “linking efforts to strengthen [the] health system with a preferential option for the poor - a cross-cutting agenda known as the Economic Development and Poverty Reduction Strategy - Rwanda has amplified the impact of its health system investments.”

(Drobac, Naughton 2014: 60). Furthermore, the most recent development framework of Rwanda is Vision 2020, where there is a major push for efforts “against poverty and practice a positive discrimination policy in favour of women.” (The Republic of Rwanda Government, 2017: 7). Rwanda continues to prioritise gender in its long-term development goals, reviewing and reinstating new initiatives to create sustainable spaces and opportunities for the empowerment of women. With these commitments in mind, paired with the aforementioned implementation on the part of multiple actors, it is foreseeable that Rwanda will continue its positive trajectory of gender empowerment with its

updated and long-term development plans.

Despite these achievements, there are still major challenges to female empowerment in the foreseeable future of Rwanda. For example, one limitation is that Rwanda may experience is that of limited technical skills for vocational advancement. Although women participate greatly in the labour force, there is still much to be done about creating employment opportunities and adequate training outside of the agricultural sector. Although from 2002-2012, Rwanda saw an increase from 12% to 27% in agricultural to non-agricultural employment for women. (The Republic of Rwanda Government, 2017: 7) This number could potentially be much

higher and be conducive to overall development. Another hindrance is the “insufficient skills for gender analysis [that] make it difficult to identify key gender priorities and to propose appropriate interventions” (The Republic of Rwanda Government, 2017: 25). The aforementioned national frameworks for gender empowerment can only be developed with accurate and sufficient understanding of various problems and intersectional conditions. Without proper analysis, there could be important communities excluded from development discourse. Finally, another major challenge is the nuances of changing patriarchal culture. Although HeForShe is dominant in Rwanda, “studies within sociology

of gender further elaborate... [that] the granting of new rights to women on the basis of their gender marks the category of ‘woman’ as distinct... this further reinforces the idea that brings about the subordination of women in the first place -- that men and women are fundamentally different.” (Berry 2015: 4) A change in sexist culture has begun but will take several years before nuances in bias are explored and eradicated. There are potential future barriers to collaboration and intersectionality in Rwanda, such as its lack of technical opportunities for women, its gaps in gender analysis, and the nuances of discriminatory patriarchal culture.

The future of Rwandan gender parity holds a

variety of positive and negative outlooks, of which collaborative behaviour and intersectionality should be at the forefront. With regards to aggregate long-term development frameworks, there must be greater attention to intersectionality amongst women -- particularly with women who have children from Genocidal acts of rape, female sex workers, and very young women who are the heads of households. Collaborative behaviour could be better established, where CSOs and joint state policy help to address these unique patterns of vulnerability. When analysing potential future limitations, these challenges can again be addressed by bearing in mind the importance of collaboration and intersectionality. CSOs have

the potential to create spaces for women to build up their technical skills, and potentially create more jobs to better gather national data and statistics. The culture of discrimination against women impacts the vulnerability of women altogether and taking the time to recognise the intersectional nature of discrimination allows for a better understanding of the diversity of gendered issues.

Conclusion

From the 1994 Genocide and looking towards the future, Rwanda has effectively taken steps to collaborate with CSOs, give recognition to intersectional needs, and mainstream gender equity.

In the past, the impacts of the Rwandan Genocide disproportionately impacted women. As women were the majority of survivors, they grew to occupy positions of power and promote strong institutions and have created sustainable policy and programs to further development initiatives.

Presently, a combination of local CSOs, the state, and international UN organs have helped to implement effective actions towards gender parity. CSOs help provide resources as dictated by the state, the state propagates inclusive policy, and welcomes the support of HeForShe in shifting discriminatory culture. In the future,

collaboration amongst these actors and a greater recognition of intersectionality needs to be at the front of long-term plans. This is to overcome potential challenges, such as a greater need for technical capacity and training, a lack of coherent analysis, and a better understanding of the nuances of vulnerability in societal discrimination. Reflecting on history, the need for greater empowerment and accessible opportunities across various identities has allowed for the Rwandan government to effectively collaborate with international and local Civil Society actors, resulting in rapid, sustainable, and intersectional gender parity across Rwanda.

Bibliography

BBC News. (2011). Rwanda: How the genocide happened.

Berry, E. (2015). When 'Bright Futures' Fade: Paradoxes of Women's Empowerment in Rwanda. *Signs*, vol. 41, no. 1, pp. 1–27. JSTOR

Burnet, E. (2008). "Gender Balance and the Meanings of Women in Governance in Post-Genocide Rwanda." *African Affairs*, vol. 107, no. 428, pp. 361–386.

Business Insider. (2019). The global gender gap will take more than 100 years to close — here are the countries with the highest and lowest gender gap around the world.

Cnn.com. (2019). Rwandan rape survivors and their children, 25 years later.

Drobac, P, et al. (2014). "Health Equity in Rwanda: The New Rwanda, Twenty Years Later."

Harvard International Review, vol. 35, no. 4, pp. 57–61.

Forbes.com. (2018). Lessons from The World's Most Gender-Equal Countries.

Gavin, H. (2017). Mapped: The best (and worst) countries for gender equality. [online] The Telegraph.

Gervais, M, et al. (2009). Girlhood in a Post-Conflict Situation: The Case of Rwanda." *Agenda: Empowering Women for Gender Equity*, no. 79, pp. 13–23.

Gready, P. (2010). You're either with us or against us': civil society and policy making in post-genocide Rwanda. *African Affairs*, vol. 109, no. 437, pp. 637–657.

Rw.one.un.org. (2019). Gender Equality. ONE UN Rwanda.

Rwandawomennetwork.org. (2019). About Us | Rwanda Women Network.

The Republic of Rwanda, (2017). From Victims to Leading Actors: Rwanda's Gender Dividend, 1-25.

The State of Civil Society in Rwanda in National Development Civil Society Index Rwanda Report. (2011). Conseil de Concertation des Organizations d'Appui aux Initiatives de Base.

UN Women. (2019). Revisiting Rwanda five years after record-breaking parliamentary elections.

Wallace, C, et al. (2008). Women in Rwandan Politics

and Society. *International Journal of Sociology*, vol. 38, no. 4, 2008, pp. 111–125. JSTOR

World Economic Forum. (2019). How Rwanda beats the United States and France in gender equality.