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# **GENDER BALANCE AND THE MEANINGS OF WOMEN IN GOVERNANCE IN POST-GENOCIDE RWANDA**

JENNIE E. BURNET

## **ABSTRACT**

Across Africa, many countries have taken initiatives to increase the participation and representation of women in governance. Yet it is unclear what meaning these initiatives have in authoritarian, single-party states like Rwanda. Since seizing power in 1994, the Rwandan Patriotic Front has taken many steps to increase the participation of women in politics such as creating a Ministry of Gender, organizing women's councils at all levels of government, and instituting an electoral system with reserved seats for women in the national parliament. This article explores the dramatic increase in women's participation in public life and representation in governance and the increasing authoritarianism of the Rwandan state under the guise of 'democratization.' The increased political participation of women in Rwanda represents a paradox in the short-term: as their participation has increased, women's ability to influence policy-making has decreased. In the long-term, however, increased female representation in government could prepare the path for their meaningful participation in a genuine democracy because of a transformation in political subjectivity. The lasting repercussions of the 1994 genocide, the material realities of life in post-genocide Rwanda, and the greater representation of females in public life and political office have promoted a great deal of change in cultural and social conceptions of gender roles. With these changes has come a greater acceptance of women in positions of authority and of women as independent agents in the public sphere. This transformation in political subjectivity could prepare women to take a meaningful role in government should a real transition to democracy take place in Rwanda.

# GENDER BALANCE AND THE MEANINGS OF WOMEN IN GOVERNANCE IN POST-GENOCIDE RWANDA

JENNIE E. BURNET

Just nine years after a genocide in which at least 500,000 Rwandans, primarily Tutsi as well as politically-moderate Hutu, lost their lives, Rwandans went to the polls to elect a national parliament.<sup>1</sup> In September 2003, the population elected 39 women to the 80 member Chamber of Deputies through a tiered electoral system. Rwanda replaced Sweden as the country with the

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<sup>1</sup> Estimates of how many people died in the 1994 genocide vary widely. While how many died is irrelevant to whether or not the killings in Rwanda in 1994 were genocide, the issue is highly politicized so it is necessary to indicate the sources. The number I use here comes from Alison Des Forges, *Leave None to Tell the Story: Genocide in Rwanda* (Human Rights Watch, New York, NY, 1999), p. 15. For more on the numbers of dead see Scott Straus’s analysis in Scott Straus, *The Order of Genocide: Race, Power, and War in Rwanda* (Cornell University Press, Ithaca, NY, 2006), pp. 41-64.

highest percentage of females in its national legislature.<sup>2</sup> Many observers, including journalists, the Rwandan President Paul Kagame, the Minister of Gender and Women in Development, representatives of international NGOs and the United Nations, heralded the representation of women in the Rwandan parliament as the dawn of a new, more ‘peaceful,’ and ‘equitable’ age in Rwandan politics.<sup>3</sup> In the past 10 years, women’s participation in governance across the continent has increased dramatically. Several countries, including Rwanda, Uganda, Namibia, and South Africa, have instituted reserved seats for women or quota systems to insure the

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<sup>2</sup> Gretchen Bauer and Hannah Evelyn Britton, ‘Women in African Parliaments: A Continental Shift?’, in Hannah Evelyn Britton and Gretchen Bauer (eds), *Women in African Parliaments* (Lynne Rienner Publishers, Boulder, CO, 2006), p. 1. Since the parliamentary elections in 2003, the Rwandan Parliament has had the highest percentage of female representation in the world, ranging from 48.8 percent in 2003 to 42.3 percent in September 2006. The 2003 statistics are reported in Timothy Longman, ‘Rwanda: Achieving Equality or Serving an Authoritarian State?’, in Hannah Evelyn Britton and Gretchen Bauer (eds), *Women in African Parliaments*, (Lynne Rienner Publishers, Boulder, CO, 2006), p. 144, and they are widely cited by the Rwandan government in speeches and press conferences. The 2006 statistics are based on the author’s analysis of the Rwandan National Parliament membership list published on its website <http://www.rwandaparliament.gov.rw/> (25 September 2006).

<sup>3</sup> Longman, ‘Rwanda: Achieving Equality’, p. 133. For example, see Elizabeth Powley, ‘Strengthening Governance: The Role of Women in Rwanda's Transition’, (report, Women Waging Peace / Hunt Alternatives Fund, Cambridge, MA, 2003), available at [http://www.huntalternatives.org/download/10\\_strengthening\\_governance\\_the\\_role\\_of\\_women\\_in\\_rwanda\\_s\\_transi](http://www.huntalternatives.org/download/10_strengthening_governance_the_role_of_women_in_rwanda_s_transi) tion.pdf>, (21 January 2008), and see ‘Address by her Excellency President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf at the official opening of the Women Parliamentarians International Conference,’ (UNDP-Rwanda website, Kigali, Rwanda, 23 February 2007) available at [http://www.unrwanda.org/undp/Women\\_conf\\_Speeches\\_23-02-2007.pdf](http://www.unrwanda.org/undp/Women_conf_Speeches_23-02-2007.pdf), (9 August 2007)..

representation of women. A growing literature on women in governance has begun to assess the impact of women's increased representation.<sup>4</sup>

In this article, I explore two divergent, yet related phenomena in Rwanda. The first is the dramatic increase in women's participation in public life and governance. Since taking power in 1994, the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) and the Rwandan government have taken many steps to increase the participation of women in politics, creating a Ministry of Gender, organizing women's councils at the cell, sector, district and provincial levels, and instituting an electoral

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<sup>4</sup> See for example, Hannah Evelyn Britton and Gretchen Bauer, *Women in African Parliaments* (Lynne Rienner Publishers, Boulder, CO, 2006); Hannah Evelyn Britton, *Women in the South African Parliament : From Resistance to Governance* (University of Illinois Press, Urbana, IL, 2005); Anne Marie Goetz and Shireen Hassim, *No Shortcuts to Power: African Women in Politics and Policy Making* (Zed Books, Cape Town, South Africa, 2003); Aili Mari Tripp, 'Expanding "Civil Society": Women and Political Space in Contemporary Uganda,' *Commonwealth & Comparative Politics* **36**, 2 (1998), pp. 84-107; Aili Mari Tripp, 'Gender, Political Participation and the Transformation of Associational Life in Uganda and Tanzania,' *African Studies Review* **37**, 1 (1994), pp. 107-131; Ali Mari Tripp, 'The Politics of Autonomy and Cooperation in Africa: The Case of the Ugandan Women's Movement,' *Journal of Modern African Studies* **39**, 1 (2001), pp. 101-28; Aili Tripp, Dior Konate, and Colleen Lowe-Morna, 'Sub-Saharan Africa: On the Fast Track to Women's Political Representation,' in Drude Dahlerup (ed.), *Women, Quotas and Politics*, (Routledge, London, 2006), pp. 112-37; Aili Mari Tripp, *Women & Politics in Uganda* (University of Wisconsin Press, Madison, WI, 2000); Aili Mari Tripp, 'Women in Movement Transformations in African Political Landscapes,' *International Feminist Journal of Politics* **5**, 2 (2003), pp. 233-55; Drude Dahlerup, *Women, Quotas and Politics*, (Routledge, London, 2006); Aili Mari Tripp, 'Women's Movements and Challenges to Neopatrimonial Rule: Preliminary Observations from Africa,' *Development & Change* **32**, 1 (2001), pp. 33-54; Sylvia Tamale, *When Hens Begin to Crow : Gender and Parliamentary Politics in Uganda* (Westview Press, Boulder, CO, 1999).

system with gender quotas for the national parliament.<sup>5</sup> Discussions about female political participation in post-genocide Rwanda tend to assume that increased participation by women will lead to greater gender equality and a ‘better,’ more peaceful society, yet these changes have not necessarily increased the political power of women or led to more egalitarian notions of citizenship. The second phenomenon I will explore is the ways in which the Rwandan state has become increasingly authoritarian under the guise of ‘democratization.’ As a result of this increasing authoritarianism, female political participation represents a paradox in the short-term: as their participation has increased, women’s ability to influence policy-making has decreased. In the long-term, however, the increased participation of women could prepare the path for their meaningful participation in a genuine democracy. This article is based on ethnographic research conducted in urban and rural Rwanda between 1997 and 2007, including over a hundred interviews with the leaders and members of women’s civil society organizations, as well as ongoing documentary research conducted since 1996.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> The Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) is the current ruling party in Rwanda. Founded in Uganda in the late 1980s, the RPF grew out of earlier organizations of Tutsi exiles (such as the UNAR) whose intent was to return to Rwanda through armed resistance. The RPF ended the genocide in July 1994 by taking control of the country.

<sup>6</sup> The research was conducted over a series of field trips to Rwanda. Data were gathered through focus groups, formal interviews, conversations, questionnaires, participant observation, and documentary research among other means. In 1997 and 1998, the author made brief field trips (4 months and 3 months). In 1999 through 2001, the author conducted ethnographic research via participant observation in a rural community in southern Rwanda for 12 months and in a middle class neighbourhood in the capital city for 12 months. During that time, she made numerous trips to other regions of the country to conduct additional interviews and gather data. In 2002, she made two trips to Rwanda of six weeks each, and in 2003 a trip of two weeks. In 2007, she spent 4 weeks in Rwanda conducting

### ***‘Democratization’ in Rwanda, old and new***

What foreign diplomats, certain political scientists, and the Rwandan government have called ‘democratization’ in Rwanda is predicated on a linear transition paradigm where authoritarianism gives way to democracy, human rights abuses to the rule of law, and corruption to good governance.<sup>7</sup> According to this paradigm, the democratic transition process passes through a series of distinct stages: opening, breakthrough and consolidation.<sup>8</sup> In diplomatic and development circles, and particularly US foreign policy, elections are the fundamental component of democratic transition, often to the exclusion of other important aspects of democracy defined in political theory. Under this paradigm, Rwanda’s transition started well before the 1994 genocide with a political opening in 1989.

In 1989, several political parties, which had been dormant under the single-party state and dictatorship of President Habyarimana, re-emerged and began demanding political liberalisation. Along with a few civil society organizations that were also pushing for change, their pleas coincided with increasing pressure in the international community for authoritarian states to democratize. In many cases, this pressure tied political reforms to aid money, a particularly sensitive issue for the Rwandan government, as the country was almost entirely

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interviews and focus groups with women’s organizations, women members of government, and women leaders of civil society organizations.

<sup>7</sup> Filip Reyntjens, ‘Post-1994 Politics in Rwanda: Problematising “Liberation” and “Democratisation”’, *Third World Quarterly* **27**, 6 (2006), pp. 1103-17. See also Thomas Carothers, ‘The End of the Transition Paradigm,’ *Journal of Democracy* **13**, 1 (2002), pp. 5-21.

<sup>8</sup> Alicia Phillips Mandaville and Peter P. Mandaville, ‘Introduction: Rethinking Democratization and Democracy Assistance,’ *Development* **50**. 1 (2007), pp 5-13.

dependent on foreign aid. The movement by CSOs was consolidated in September 1990 with the publication of a memorandum, 'For multiparty politics and democracy'.<sup>9</sup>

On 1 October 1990 the country entered a civil war when the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) attacked Rwanda, and the civil war strongly influenced the political transition. Founded in Uganda in the late 1980s, the RPF's stated intention was to liberate the country from President Habyarimana's dictatorship. The civil war continued throughout the early 1990s until Habyarimana, facing dramatic losses as well as continued pressure from donors, was forced to the negotiating table. The 1993 Arusha Peace Accords brought an official end to hostilities and outlined a transition plan to move the country to multiparty politics and democratic elections.

The transition, which had been limping along, was brought to a dramatic and violent halt in April 1994 when Habyarimana was killed when his plane was shot down by unknown assailants. Immediately, Hutu extremists took control of the government and perpetrated a genocide against Tutsi and others defined as 'enemies' of the state. At the same time, the RPF resumed the civil war against the government army, which was also involved in the genocide. The genocide ended when the RPF took military control of the majority of the territory, driving the Hutu-extremist government, militias, and army into exile, along with nearly two million civilians.

On 19 July 1994, the RPF named a transitional government, which it called the 'Government of National Unity,' whose composition reaffirmed the RPF's commitment to power sharing outlined in the Arusha Accords. The RPF announced that the transitional government would remain in power for five years. As part of its reconstruction efforts, the Transitional Government undertook an ideological programme called 'national unity and reconciliation' to

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<sup>9</sup> Filip Reyntjens, *L'Afrique Des Grands Lacs En Crise. Rwanda, Burundi 1988-1994* (Karthala, Paris, 1994), p. 305.



build a ‘New Rwanda,’ a nation of one people who refused the ‘genocidal ideology’ of the past.<sup>10</sup> By 1995, however, it appeared that the RPF might not make good on its promises. Reports of extrajudicial executions, ‘disappearances,’ and several massacres of civilians emerged throughout late 1994 and 1995. In August 1995, several prominent Hutu politicians, including Hutu members of the RPF, fled into exile for fear for their lives. Hutu elites continued to flee through the late 1990s and early 2000s. In 2000, a wave of departures among Tutsi genocide survivors began.<sup>11</sup>

In 1998, the RPF had announced that the transition period would be extended five additional years to ensure the country’s security and a peaceful democratization process. The Party justified its position by citing multiparty politics as one of the principal causes of the rise of Hutu extremism and the 1994 genocide. This second round of ‘democratization’ was officially launched in 2001 when district level elections were held and a Constitutional Commission was appointed. In 2003, the new constitution was approved by national referendum in May, presidential elections were held in August, and parliamentary elections in September.

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<sup>10</sup> Jennie E. Burnet, ‘Whose Genocide? Whose Truth? Representations of victim and perpetrator in Rwanda’, in Alex Laban Hinton and Kevin O’Neill (eds), *Genocide: Truth, Memory and Representation* (Duke University Press, Durham, NC, in press).

<sup>11</sup> Human Rights Watch, ‘Rwanda: the Search for Security and Human Rights Abuses’, (report, Human Rights Watch, New York, NY, 2000), available at <[http://www.hrw.org/reports/2000/rwanda/Rwan004-04.htm#P121\\_15300](http://www.hrw.org/reports/2000/rwanda/Rwan004-04.htm#P121_15300)> (20 January 2008) and <[http://www.hrw.org/reports/2000/rwanda/Rwan004-06.htm#P182\\_27970](http://www.hrw.org/reports/2000/rwanda/Rwan004-06.htm#P182_27970)> (20 January 2008). pp. 121, 182.

Since this most recent ‘democratization’ process began in 1998, the RPF-regime has become more authoritarian.<sup>12</sup> This so-called transition ‘was in fact tightly controlled and resulted in greater consolidation of power by the RPF, even as it gave an illusion of power distribution’.<sup>13</sup> In the elections, RPF officials carefully selected candidates, and threatened or intimidated anyone else seeking office.<sup>14</sup> Local and national elections have been orchestrated from the ground up with the RPF’s pre-selected candidates assured of winning.<sup>15</sup> This consolidation ‘has been accompanied by an increasing intolerance for independent expression and political dissent’.<sup>16</sup> The RPF regime has systematically suppressed independent civil society organizations (particularly local human rights organizations) and destroyed any potential opposition political parties.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Filip Reyntjens, ‘Rwanda, Ten Years On: From Genocide to Dictatorship,’ *African Affairs* **103** (2004), p. 411; Filip Reyntjens, ‘Post-1994 Politics in Rwanda’; Longman, ‘Rwanda: Achieving Equality’.

<sup>13</sup> Longman, ‘Rwanda: Achieving Equality’, p. 146.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 147; International Crisis Group, ‘“Consensual Democracy” in Post-Genocide Rwanda: Evaluating the March 2001 District Elections,’ (Report, International Crisis Group, Brussels, Belgium, 2001).

<sup>15</sup> The orchestrated nature of elections is an open secret in Rwanda today. In interviews conducted in 2007, numerous citizens confirmed that while elections usually have a minimum of three candidates, the outcome is always predetermined. One interviewee recounted a story of an election in an *umudugudu* (‘village,’ the smallest administrative subdivision in Rwanda following the administrative reorganization of January 2006) in the capital, Kigali, where the citizens failed to elect the pre-selected candidate. The elections official who was overseeing the election declared, ‘No, no, no! You haven’t done it right. Let’s try again to see if you can do what we’ve asked.’

<sup>16</sup> Longman, ‘Rwanda: Achieving Equality’, p. 146.

<sup>17</sup> Among the first human rights organizations to be suppressed was the umbrella, CLADHO, which was infiltrated and dismantled from within in 1996. The most recent was LIPRODHOR, which was the only local human rights organization to report critically on the RPF regime and RPA. In 2003, the members of Parliament denounced

To quell protest from the diplomatic and international aid communities, the RPF has dressed its increasingly authoritarian governance in democratic clothing by promoting its policies as the best methods to ensure ‘security’ and ‘good governance’. In addition, the regime has increased the participation of all citizens in the political system through an elaborate local level administration, as well as a complicated, tiered electoral system for the Parliament and presidency. Finally, the regime has increased the representations of under-represented groups, particularly women and youth.

### ***The RPF and women in governance***

Although the RPF was made up of Rwandan exiles in Uganda, Tanzania, Burundi, and Zaire (now Democratic Republic of Congo) as well as Rwandans from inside the country that left to join their fight, its core leadership grew up in refugee camps in Uganda. As Longman notes, ‘The Ugandan origins of the RPF have deeply influenced its policies since taking power, including its policies on women’s rights and inclusion.’<sup>18</sup> President Paul Kagame and other RPF insiders had been officers in Museveni’s National Resistance Movement in Uganda and their

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LIPRODHOR as ‘promoting divisionism’ and a ‘genocidal ideology’ and called for a parliamentary commission to investigate it and several other NGOS. Virtually all of LIPRODHOR’s leadership and senior members fled Rwanda in June, July or August of 2003. While LIPRODHOR still exists, its current members and staff are members of the RPF who toe the party line. In 2001, the RPF regime quashed an initiative by former President (and former RPF member) Pasteur Bizimungu to found a new political party, charging him and his associates with treason. In 2003, the MDR was completely banned when a parliamentary commission found it guilty of promoting divisionism and a genocide ideology. This nail in the coffin lid followed the internal destruction of the party begun by Anastase Gasana in 1999.

<sup>18</sup> Longman, ‘Rwanda: Achieving Equality’, p. 140.

experiences influenced the organization and tactics of the RPF.<sup>19</sup> The policies of Museveni and the NRM have continued to influence RPF policy in the post-genocide period. RPF policies vis-à-vis the inclusion of women in governance seem closely modelled on those of Museveni and the NRM. Museveni and the NRM took a two pronged approach in Uganda: (1) they mainstreamed women within the NRM and appointed women to important posts in the cabinet and Supreme Court, and (2) they set aside reserved seats for women in the legislature.<sup>20</sup> The Ugandan election structure is based on a complex combination of direct and indirect elections and an electoral college system.<sup>21</sup> Unlike Rwanda, however, Uganda has much greater freedom of expression and a more robust independent press.<sup>22</sup>

Similar to the NRM, the RPF mainstreamed women from the beginning, including them in both the political and armed wings of the Front during the armed struggle from 1990-1994. In this way, it distinguished itself from the opposition parties and the state MRND party in Rwanda.

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<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>20</sup> Aili Mari Tripp, 'Uganda: Agents of Change for Women's Advancement?', in Hannah Evelyn Britton and Gretchen Bauer (eds), *Women in African Parliaments*, (Lynne Rienner Publishers, Boulder, CO, 2006), p. 112.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 120-1.

<sup>22</sup> Freedom House ranked Accountability and Public Voice in Uganda 3.99 out of 7 (where 0 is the least free and 7 is the most free) in 2006, whereas for Rwanda in 2005 it was only 1.48 out of 7. For Uganda, see Nelson Kesfir, 'Country Report – Uganda' in Sanja Tatic and Christopher Waller (eds), *Countries at the Crossroads* (Freedom House, New York, 2007) available at <http://www.freedomhouse.org/template.cfm?page=140&edition=7&ccrpage=31&ccrcountry=127> (21 January 2008). For Rwanda, see Sara Rakita, 'Country Report – Rwanda' in Sanja Tatic and Christopher Waller (eds), *Countries at the Crossroads* (Freedom House, New York, 2007) available at <http://www.freedomhouse.org/template.cfm?page=140&edition=2&ccrpage=8&ccrcountry=105> (21 January 08).

Since taking power, the RPF has ‘publicly demonstrated a strong commitment to expanding rights and representation for women’.<sup>23</sup> In the aftermath of the genocide, the RPF took numerous steps to increase female participation in governance. Following its victory, it appointed women to high profile positions in the new government, as ministers, secretaries of state, Supreme Court justices, and parliamentarians. As part of the reorganization of the executive branch, they created the Ministry of Gender, Family, and Social Affairs (MIGEFASO). For the first time, Rwanda had a ministry dedicated not just to women, but also to gender. The ministry was reorganized in 1999 and renamed ‘the Ministry of Gender and Women in Development’ (MIGEPROF).<sup>24</sup> The ministry’s central mandates have been to integrate gender analytical frameworks into all policies and legislation, to reinforce knowledge of gender analytical matrices within state structures (including local administrative structures, the ministries, legislature, and judiciary) via training and education, and to promote gender equity.<sup>25</sup>

In early 1998, MIGEPROF organized ‘nationwide elections’<sup>26</sup> for representative leadership among women at all levels of government administration, from the cell up to the

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<sup>23</sup> Longman, ‘Rwanda: Achieving Equality’, p. 141.

<sup>24</sup> In French, *Le Ministère du Genre et la Promotion Féminine* (MIGEPROF), and in Kinyarwanda, ‘Minisiteri y’Iterabmere ry’Umunyarwandakazi.’ The Kinyarwanda title of the Ministry is literally, ‘The Ministry for the Promotion of the Female Rwandan.’

<sup>25</sup> Judithe Kanakuze, ‘Le Rôle De La Femme Dans Le Processus De Démocratisation Au Rwanda’ (paper presented at the Séminaire sur l’observation électorale par la société civile rwandaise / POER, Kigali, Rwanda, August 5, 2004), p. 4. Interviews by the author 1998, 1999, 2000, and 2001.

<sup>26</sup> It is debatable whether the term, ‘elections,’ is appropriate as they were held in open-air plenaries where women were asked to queue behind the candidate ‘of their choice.’ With the degree of social, political, and military control in Rwandan society, it is doubtful that anyone’s choice was freely made. Nonetheless, this style of ‘election’

national level.<sup>27</sup> Initially called ‘grassroots women structures’ and later renamed ‘women’s councils,’ the official purposes of the women’s councils were manifold, including to promote women’s interests in development, to advise local governance structures on women’s issues, and to teach women how to participate in politics. In fact, the women’s councils were the first to elect members of Parliament in 1998 when they elected two Women’s Representatives.<sup>28</sup> The women’s councils continued to elect these representatives until the transition to the new structures outlined in the 2003 Constitution. The women’s councils were joined by local leadership representing the entire population elected nationwide in 1999.

Yet, in 1998, most rural Rwandans (male or female, and even including some women who are members of them) did not understand the mission of most of the women’s councils.<sup>29</sup> Outside the few communes where NGOs were implementing women-in-development projects and used the structures to mobilize women, these structures existed in name only, or simply

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became the standard for local level elections when ‘democratization’ was initiated by the Transitional Government in 1999.

<sup>27</sup> One cell is composed of roughly 100-200 households. Rwandan administrative structure is extremely hierarchical and penetrates to the most basic level. The levels from smallest to largest are: ten houses (*nyumbakumi*), cell (*akagare*), sector (*umurenge*), district (*akarere*), province (*intara*), and national (*igihugu*). The names of certain of these designations were changed in English and Kinyarwanda with the administrative reorganizations of December 2000 and January 2006..

<sup>28</sup> The 1998 elections for women’s leaders were the model for local elections in 1999. In both elections, the population queued publicly behind the candidate ‘of their choice.’ The panel of candidates was selected minutes before the voting. There were no campaigns and no public debate about the candidates.

<sup>29</sup> The exception being certain positions that mirrored the appointed administrative positions (*responsable* and *conseiller*) that they replaced.

served as a channel to disseminate government directives from the top to the bottom. They were mere symbols of inclusion, which appeared to be in line with foreign aid ideas, rather than ‘grassroots structures’ feeding the will of the people upwards in the governance hierarchy. Cognisant of the lack of clear purpose for the women’s councils, in 1999 the Ministry announced the implementation of women’s development funds to be distributed through these structures as loans to finance income-generating projects. These funds were intended to penetrate to the lowest level (cell) of the administration, that is, directly to the ‘grassroots.’ In most communities where I conducted interviews between 1999 and 2001, local women did not know these funds existed or whether they were functioning in their communities. Generally, only a few elite women (who also held positions with the women’s grassroots structure at the commune level) knew anything about the funds.

Perhaps the area where the RPF’s pro-woman policies are most evident is in the legislative branch. Before the resumption of the civil war in 1994, few women had **ever** served as parliamentarians (see Table 1). The first Transitional National Parliament (TNP) appointed in 1994, included 10 women, including 3 of the 13 RPF deputies.<sup>30</sup> Between 1994 and 2003, members of the TNP were appointed by the Political Party Forum (a body widely perceived as a mechanism for RPF dominance) after being nominated by the political parties included in the government. Over time, the number of women in parliament increased (see Table 1). By 1999 over one quarter of parliamentarians were women and before parliamentary elections in 2003, women held 25.7 percent of seats in parliament.<sup>31</sup> The 2003 Constitution in Rwanda set aside 30 percent of seats in the parliament and **all other** decision-making bodies for women. President

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<sup>30</sup> Longman, ‘Rwanda: Achieving Equality’, p. 144.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*

Kagame and key ministry officials have ‘repeatedly articulated strong support for women’s role in government and society’.<sup>32</sup> [Table 1 goes here]

These revolutionary steps to increase female representation in governance have brought many accolades for President Paul Kagame and the RPF. In January 2007, Kagame was selected as the winner of the 2007 African Gender Award.<sup>33</sup> He was lauded for his leadership in efforts to integrate ‘women into the reconstruction process,’ to ‘fight against gender-based violence,’ and to protect ‘the rights of women and girls to equal education, economic development and ownership of property, particularly in rural zones’.<sup>34</sup> In February 2007, the Forum of Rwandan Women Parliamentarians hosted an international conference entitled, ‘Gender, Nation Building: The Role of Parliaments’.<sup>35</sup> Supported by the United Nations Development Programme, this conference brought over 400 delegates from around the world to Kigali to discuss the role of parliaments in promoting gender equality as a fundamental component of development.<sup>36</sup> Among the distinguished participants in the conference was Liberian President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, the

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<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 141.

<sup>33</sup> Kagame received the award on 12 December 2007 at a ceremony in Dakar, Senegal. ‘African Gender Forum and Award,’ African Gender Award website, December 2007, available at <http://www.africangenderawards.org/> (21 January 2008).

<sup>34</sup> ‘2007 Award Laureate,’ African Gender Award website, January 2007, available at <http://www.africangenderawards.org/award1.html>, (8 August 2007).

<sup>35</sup> ‘Background Paper: “Walking the Talk”,’ UNDP-Rwanda website, 22 February 2007. [http://www.unrwanda.org/undp/Women\\_Conf\\_22-23\\_02\\_2007.html](http://www.unrwanda.org/undp/Women_Conf_22-23_02_2007.html), (8 August 2007).

<sup>36</sup> ‘Women Parliamentarians International Conference under the theme “Gender, Nation Building and the Role of Parliaments”,’ UNDP-Rwanda website, 23 February 2007. [http://www.unrwanda.org/undp/Newsroom\\_story11.html](http://www.unrwanda.org/undp/Newsroom_story11.html), (8 August 2007).



first African woman ever elected president, whose speech to the plenary highlighted the usefulness of the RPF's pro-woman policies and its relatively new role as host to international conferences:

[government policies have encouraged] women not only to partake of the democratic process but also to be full participants in the governance of their societies and countries. This has facilitated networking at the grass-roots, local, national and international levels thereby creating an appropriate political environment that continues to nurture what you can proudly call your home grown democracy. ... In light of such achievements against the backdrop of your recent political past, we congratulate and encourage you for having risen up to the challenge of creating a network that has focused on a process of nation building underpinned by a gender perspective.<sup>37</sup>

Beyond an ideological commitment to promoting women's rights, the RPF's pro-woman policies gain a great deal of support for the RPF-regime from key decision-makers and influential personalities, such as President Sirleaf, in the international community. Influential international delegates to the numerous conferences in Kigali rarely know the details of recent Rwandan political history, and thus they develop a one-sided view of the RPF as courageous defenders of the Rwandan people who stopped the genocide, promoted female equality, and embarked on a path to democracy. As a result, many delegates leave Kigali as strong believers in and defenders of President Kagame and the RPF-regime.

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<sup>37</sup> 'Address by her Excellency President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf at the official opening of the Women Parliamentarians International Conference,' UNDP-Rwanda website, 23 February 2007.

[http://www.unrwanda.org/undp/Women\\_conf\\_Speeches\\_23-02-2007.pdf](http://www.unrwanda.org/undp/Women_conf_Speeches_23-02-2007.pdf), (9 August 2007).

Beyond these influential passers-by, the RPF's pro-woman policies, as well as its efforts to 'modernize' and 'rationalize' Rwandan society and the economy, give members of the diplomatic corps in Kigali liberty to overlook the regime's authoritarianism and human rights abuses. When human rights observers present evidence of serious human rights violations, such as extrajudicial executions or 'disappearances', diplomats often respond with an attitude of 'at least, it's not genocide,' and then enumerate RPF successes, such as promoting women's rights.<sup>38</sup>

### ***Women in civil society***

In post-genocide Rwanda, women's organizations have taken a leading role in rebuilding society and in helping women rebuild their lives. The proliferation of women's organizations since the late 1990s in Rwanda 'seems nothing short of remarkable'.<sup>39</sup> Women's organizations seemed to step 'in to fill a social void in the post-genocide period'; they helped to meet women's basic needs (food, clothing and shelter) and make up for the missing kin and social support systems destroyed in the genocide.<sup>40</sup> While none of these changes happened overnight, women's organizations have indeed served the needs of thousands of individual women.<sup>41</sup> The growth of women's organizations, as well as their mission to help the most vulnerable people in society (women and children), positioned them as among the most active sector of civil society between 1994 and 2003.

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<sup>38</sup> Interview with international human rights observer, May 2007.

<sup>39</sup> Catherine Newbury and Hannah Baldwin, 'Confronting the Aftermath of Conflict: Women's Organizations in Postgenocide Rwanda,' in Krishna Kumar (ed.), *Women and Civil War: Impact, Organizations, and Action*, (Lynne Rienner Publishers, Boulder, CO, 2001), p. 77.

<sup>40</sup> Bauer and Britton, 'Women in African Parliaments: A Continental Shift?,' p. 16.

<sup>41</sup> See Chapter 6 in Jennie E. Burnet, *Genocide Lives in Us : Amplified Silence and the Politics of Memory in Rwanda* (Ann Arbor, MI: UMI Dissertation Services, 2006), pp. 175-204.

Newbury and Baldwin attribute the proliferation of women's organizations in Rwanda to four key factors: the dire crisis women faced in the aftermath of the genocide, the historical vigour of women's grassroots organizations and farming cooperatives, monetary and technical support provided by the international community, and the policies of the Rwandan government.<sup>42</sup> As detailed above, women had little choice but to recreate their lives from 'less than nothing,' as more than one female genocide survivor described it to me. Yet the women's movement in Rwanda predates the genocide.

Early in the post-colonial period, the government of the First Republic supported social centres (*foyers sociaux*) for women in each prefecture. These centres focused on the needs of rural women, such as literacy and health education, but they also provided opportunities for leadership to the educated women who staffed them.<sup>43</sup> While the government of the Second Republic largely excluded women from governance or key posts in the ministries, farming cooperatives and grassroots-level church-related groups grew in number, thanks in part to the influx of international funding and technical assistance aimed at rural development.<sup>44</sup>

Following the Third United Nations Conference on Women, held in Nairobi in 1985, a women's movement began to emerge in Rwanda.<sup>45</sup> Several national women's organizations were founded in the late 1980s, including *Duterimbere*, a women's banking and micro-lending cooperative modelled on the Grameen Bank, *Haguruka*, an advocacy group for women and children's legal rights, and *Réseau des femmes œuvrant pour le développement rural*, an

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<sup>42</sup> Newbury and Baldwin, 'Confronting the Aftermath of Conflict'.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 99.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>45</sup> Kanakuze, 'Le Rôle De La Femme Dans Le Processus De Démocratisation Au Rwanda', p. 2.

organization that provided technical assistance to rural women's organizations. Following pressure from the nascent women's movement, the Habyarimana government created the Ministry for the Promotion of Women and the Family, whose primary mandate was to promote economic development to improve the status of women and children, in 1992.<sup>46</sup> The first woman prime minister in Rwanda, Agathe Uwilingimana, a member of the MDR opposition party, was appointed in 1993.<sup>47</sup>

Following the genocide, several women's civil society organizations restarted their pre-war activities. Many organizations began by taking a census of members and locating surviving members both inside Rwanda and in exile. In late 1994 and early 1995, they then sent members to the refugee camps and cities in eastern Zaire and Western Tanzania to convince exiled members that it was safe to return home.<sup>48</sup> In their appeals, the emissaries underscored the need for everyone to help rebuild the country. An unforeseen benefit of the women's micro-lending cooperative, *Duterimbere*, was that individual accounts at the organization's savings bank remained intact unlike accounts in some of the major commercial banks, which had been looted during the genocide.<sup>49</sup> These small savings accounts allowed many women and families to

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<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>47</sup> Prime Minister Uwilingimana was killed in the first days of the genocide in April 1994 so that she could not speak out against it. Although a Hutu, she was among the top priorities on the Presidential Guard's roster of people to eliminate. She was killed along with 10 Belgian peacekeepers that were part of the UNAMIR mission.

<sup>48</sup> Burnet, Jennie E. and Mukandamage, Jacqueline, 'Réseau des Femmes Œuvrant pour le Développement Rurale: An Organizational Case Study', (Organizational case study report, United States Agency for International Development, Washington, DC 2000).

<sup>49</sup> Interviews with account holders, Kigali, Rwanda, 1997, 1998, 1999, 2000.

restart small businesses destroyed during the war.<sup>50</sup> In addition, the organization's lending programme gave widows the capital necessary to start new businesses or rebuild their deceased husbands' enterprises.

Several new women's organizations were founded in response to the needs of specific categories of women. One of the most visible was the Association of the Widows of the April 1994, known by its French acronym *AVEGA-Agahozo*, which began as an umbrella organization for groups of genocide widows that had formed at the grassroots level. The national organization gave the genocide widows greater advocacy power and allowed international NGOs and bilateral aid organizations to channel humanitarian and development assistance to genocide widows and their children, known to be extremely vulnerable groups with dire economic, medical, and psychological needs. Other women's organizations were imported to Rwanda by long term exiles who returned to Rwanda after the RPF victory in 1994. One such organization, *Club Mamans Sportives*, a sports club that encourages urban middleclass and elite women to 'get active,' was founded in Burundi and imported to Rwanda by returnees.<sup>51</sup>

One of the key players in the post-genocide period was the women's umbrella organization, *Pro-Femmes Twese Hamwe*. Originally founded in 1992, Pro-Femmes grew from a base of 13 member organizations in the early 1990s to 35 by the end of 1996 and 41 by 2006.<sup>52</sup> *Pro-Femmes* undertook ambitious development and advocacy initiatives, coordinating efforts by constituent organizations. In the late 1990s, *Pro-Femmes'* leadership included a diverse group of

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<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>51</sup> Interviews, Kigali, Rwanda. 2002, 2007.

<sup>52</sup> Newbury and Baldwin, 'Confronting the Aftermath of Conflict', p. 101; *Pro-Femmes Twese Hamwe Home Page*, available at <http://www.profemme.org.rw/> (1 March 2006).

Rwandan women, including, Hutu, prominent Tutsi widows-of-the-genocide, and Tutsi returnees from long-term exile in Uganda, Burundi, and DR Congo. Despite the challenges of finding consensus, the organization focused on issues important to all women, like development, peacebuilding activities and inheritance rights. In 1996, the organization launched its Peace Action Campaign, aimed at promoting a culture of peace. Véneranda Nzambazamariya, president of *Pro-Femmes Twese Hamwe* in the mid to late 1990s, was one of the key initiators of the Peace Action Campaign; she was recognized for her peace activism and service to women with the Millennium Peace Prize for Women by UNIFEM and International Alert in 2001.<sup>53</sup> The members of *Pro-Femmes*, along with the Minister of Gender, Family and Social Affairs, led the advocacy initiative for the inheritance law, an initiative I explain in more detail below.<sup>54</sup>

International aid and technical assistance made key contributions to the growth of women's civil society organizations. Beginning in the early 1990s, the United Nations entities and bilateral aid organizations began targeting women and children for assistance in war torn societies. Rwandan women and women's organizations benefited greatly from this targeted aid. The international community provided millions of dollars of funding targeting women's issues and women's organizations. Over \$3 million dollars of USAID emergency assistance was directed through an experimental programme called Women in Transition (WIT).<sup>55</sup> The

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<sup>53</sup> Nzambazamariya died in the Kenya Airways crash off the coast of Côte d'Ivoire in 2000, so she received the award posthumously.

<sup>54</sup> Interviews with Pro-Femmes members and MIGEFASO/MIGEPROF officials, Kigali, Rwanda in 1998, 1999 and 2001.

<sup>55</sup> 'Transition Initiatives: Rwanda Women in Transition (WIT),' USAID, September 1999, available at [http://www.usaid.gov/our\\_work/cross-cutting\\_programmes/transition\\_initiatives/country/rwanda/wit.html](http://www.usaid.gov/our_work/cross-cutting_programmes/transition_initiatives/country/rwanda/wit.html), (7 March 2007).

programme sought to make small (in USAID terms) grants to local women's associations across the country. Between 1995 and 1999, the WIT programme made over 1,800 grants to associations in eleven of twelve prefectures of Rwanda.<sup>56</sup> Many international NGOs developed and supported gender training programmes (notably Oxfam) for government officials and leadership training for women elected to office (Women Waging Peace – the Hunt Alternative Fund).

Despite these significant contributions, the Rwandan women's movement in the mid to late 1990s should be viewed as being principally indigenous rather than simply driven by outside forces. While the Rwandan women's organizations would not have been able to make as much of an impact without international aid, the majority of the local organizations did not allow the agendas of international partners to drive their work plans. Many local women's civil society organizations were scrambling to negotiate the complex international aid systems so that they could become partners of international NGOs or direct recipients of international aid grants.<sup>57</sup>

Beyond the financial impact of the international community, the international women's movement provided inspiration and technical knowledge to Rwandan women (for instance, the various International Conferences on Women). Female leaders of civil society organizations in Rwanda were frequently sent to international conferences or educational exchanges where they met women from other developing nations who faced similar challenges. They returned

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<sup>56</sup> 'USAID/OTI Programme Summary Rwanda: November 2000,' USAID, November 2000

[http://www.usaid.gov/our\\_work/cross-cutting\\_programmes/transition\\_initiatives/country/rwanda/rwd2000.html](http://www.usaid.gov/our_work/cross-cutting_programmes/transition_initiatives/country/rwanda/rwd2000.html), (7 March 2007).

<sup>57</sup> Interviews with leaders of Pro-Femmes Twese Hamwe, AVEGA, Arfem, and Duterimbere, Kigali, Rwanda, 1997, 1998.

energized by their discussions with these ‘third world’ feminists.<sup>58</sup> In addition, they networked with feminists from Europe, North America, and Australia who had the resources to provide continuing assistance to Rwandan women’s organizations.

***Collaboration between women in government and civil society: the 1998 ‘inheritance law’***

In the 1990s in Rwanda, particularly after the genocide, women’s organizations had greater space in which to manoeuvre and advocate for women’s rights than many other civil society organizations, especially than local human rights or indigenous rights organizations. At the time, women’s organizations were largely perceived as apolitical by the government and the RPF. Since protecting women’s rights and promoting women’s involvement in the public sphere and governance were core components of RPF policy, the government did not step in to curtail the work of women’s organizations as it did with human rights organizations.

To understand the unique position of women’s NGOs in the late 1990s in Rwanda, it is important to understand something about the RPF’s conceptualisation of the relationship between civil society and the state. RPF leaders envision civil society as an extension of, rather than as a counter-balance to, the state. While this vision of civil society is antithetical to current political and democratic theory, it is a logical extension of the RPF’s African nationalism, which insists on ‘national unity’ and rejects critiques of government policy by outsiders (such as the United Nations or European or American governments) as ‘neo-colonialism’.<sup>59</sup> My first direct contact with this vision of civil society came in 2000 when I taught Public Administration

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<sup>58</sup> Interviews with Rwandan women participants, Kigali, Rwanda, 2001, 2002, 2007.

<sup>59</sup> This rejection of criticism is typical of post-liberation states. See Sara Dorman Sara Rich Dorman, 'Post-Liberation Politics in Africa: Examining the Political Legacy of Struggle', *Third World Quarterly*, 27/6 (2006), pp. 1097-100.



students at the National University of Rwanda. Several final-year students were examining various aspects of Rwandan ‘civil society,’ or what they were calling civil society, in their senior theses (*mémoires*). I was surprised to learn that these projects were looking at local level governance structures elected in 1999 rather than at local NGOs, church groups, or agricultural cooperatives. Rwandan professors at the University did not challenge this definition of state apparatuses as ‘civil society’; in fact, they perpetuated it in their lectures, in their mentoring, and in their oversight of senior theses. From this perspective, the ‘correct’ relationship between civil society and the state is one where civil society serves the ends of the state.

The RPF vision of civil society became codified into law in 2001, when the Transitional Government passed a law governing non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in Rwanda, including local and international NGOs as well as religious institutions. Among other things, this law gave government ‘authorities broad powers to control the management, finances, and projects of local and international nongovernmental organizations.’<sup>60</sup> Under the law, NGOs and their missions must be in line with government policy and their work plans must be executing aspects of the government’s strategic plan in areas related to the NGO’s mission. NGOs who do not comply can be (and are) denied registration or renewal of their registration. The women’s movement in Rwanda has been successful when it has aligned itself with the RPF’s vision of civil society.

An important piece of legislation passed in Rwanda in 1999 exemplifies the collaboration between women in government and civil society. The legislation, commonly referred to as ‘the inheritance law,’ was an amendment to the civil code which set up three matrimonial property

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<sup>60</sup> Human Rights Watch, *World Report 2002*, <http://hrw.org/wr2k2/africa9.html>, (8 March 2007).

regimes and made it legal for women to inherit property.<sup>61</sup> Although referred to as the ‘Inheritance Law,’ this law also gave women full legal rights to enter into contracts, seek paid employment, own property in their own names and separately from their husbands, and open bank accounts without the authorization of their husbands or fathers. Passed by the National Assembly in November 1999, the law dramatically reconfigured customary inheritance practices and gave girl-children equal rights with boy-children in matters of inheritance. For the inheritance bill, women’s organizations, the Ministry of Gender and Women in Development (MIGEPROF), and the Forum of Women Parliamentarians, a caucus of women parliamentarians created in the mid-1990s, worked closely together in formulating policy, crafting the text of the bill, and lobbying decision-makers in other ministries and within the inner circle of the RPF, referred to as the *akazu*, to pass the controversial bill.

This successful collaboration between women in civil society and government occurred while the government was not yet a nominal ‘democracy’ and still a power-sharing coalition between political parties whereby all members of the national government were appointed rather than elected. According to most observers it was a dictatorship, controlled by the inner circle of RPF leaders. So, how and why did women succeed in passing this legislation if there was no democracy? The first, and perhaps most important reason, was that then Vice-President Kagame and key members of the RPF, including several prominent RPF women (like Rose Kabuye and Aloysia Inyumba) recognized the need to protect the rights of the thousands of genocide widows and orphans and thus supported the policy. Second, female leaders in civil society, in the course of their organizing and providing services to members, had gained enough experience to know

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<sup>61</sup> Republic of Rwanda, ‘Law to Supplement Book One of the Civil Code and to Institute Part Five Regarding Matrimonial Regimes, Liberalities and Successions’, *Official Gazette of the Republic of Rwanda* 38, no. 22 (1999).

how to manipulate the state, even a repressive state, to achieve a common goal. As Bauer and Britton have noted, ‘rather than demonizing the state as an entity of oppression, women are increasingly moving from *resisting* the state to *using* the state’ in Africa.<sup>62</sup> Among these key leaders were many women who had been involved in civil society organizations and political parties in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Thus, they knew how to influence policy under a totalitarian state where the levers of power are hidden from public view. Third, these female lobbyists couched their advocacy to male audiences in terms of family-oriented, ‘motherist’ politics by appealing to the men’s sense of justice for their own mothers’ and daughters’ rights.<sup>63</sup> Fourth, in 1998 the TNP and ministries still included members of political parties other than the RPF, including the historically Hutu MDR opposition party. Thus, a diversity of views and interests in Rwandan society was represented in the government at that time. Since the women’s movement in Rwanda was unified on the inheritance issue, they were able to appeal to representatives of different political parties with a common message. Following the resignation of several prominent Hutu politicians in late 1999 and early 2000 (e.g., Prime Minister Pierre-Celestin Rwigema and President Pasteur Bizimungu) and the dismantling of the MDR political party in 2003, the view of a narrower segment of Rwandan citizens were represented in the government. Finally, the presence of women in government (in the ministries and parliament), along with their attendant ‘stamp of approval’ from the power holders who had appointed them,

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<sup>62</sup> Bauer and Britton, ‘Women in African Parliaments: A Continental Shift?’, p. 19.

<sup>63</sup> Interviews by author, 1998 and 2000.

meant that women had access to decision-makers throughout the government.<sup>64</sup> Although women constituted less than 25 percent of parliament at the time, the presence of women in parliament and elsewhere allowed both women in government and in civil society to advocate for the inheritance bill in all corners of the government.<sup>65</sup> The success of women in these advocacy efforts suggests that limited forms of democratic participation are possible under an authoritarian government.

### ***Emasculation of the women's movement***

The Rwandan women's movement continued to succeed in gaining protections of women's rights and participation in government through the Constitutional process from 2001 through 2003. Judithe Kanakuze, a long-term leader in the Rwandan women's movement, was appointed to the Constitutional Committee and took an active role in ensuring inclusion of numerous gender-sensitive clauses in the constitution. The most notable of these was the establishment of quotas of 30 percent for the inclusion of female representatives in all decision-making bodies. As a result, women held 48.8 percent of positions in the National Parliament following national elections in 2003.

With all the women in governance in Rwanda today, one might think that the situation of women would be improved. Yet, as Longman argues, it is questionable whether the increased

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<sup>64</sup> Longman for example, states that the leaders of Pro-Femmes *Twese Hamwe*, 'identified the presence of women in parliament as an important factor in getting their legislation passed.' Longman, 'Rwanda: Achieving Equality', p. 145.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 144.

representation of women in executive, legislative, and judicial branches has any meaning given the increasingly authoritarian nature of the Rwandan government.<sup>66</sup>

In the short-term, the women's movement in Rwanda has been set back for three main reasons. First of all, the net result of so many women being included in all levels of government is that the most vibrant leaders of women's civil society organizations left to take positions in the government. According to one woman leader,

When the time came for elections in 2003, everyone was saying to us, 'You women keep yelling about women's rights and including women in government. Now you've gotten what you want so you need to come and be candidates.' Since 2003, most of the key women leaders left for the government. Those of us who did not join the government had to turn our attention to other things, like going back to school or taking care of our private affairs.<sup>67</sup>

Thus, many women's civil society organizations were faced with a vacuum in leadership. The women who stepped in to take their places were either not as well equipped to advocate on contentious women's issues (such as land rights) or were more interested in personal gains, particularly those who stepped into well-paid staff positions. Many of the younger women who stepped into these positions were better educated than the women they replaced since they had university degrees.<sup>68</sup> Although these younger women were better educated, they lacked the

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<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>67</sup> Interview, Kigali, June 2007.

<sup>68</sup> Under the Habyarimana government, very few women managed to enter the National University of Rwanda, but in the New Rwanda the government has raised the minimum qualifications for civil service positions and civil

critical experiential knowledge of how to lobby a non-democratic government and how to negotiate the levers of power. Furthermore, many of these women were RPF cadres so they were more interested in implementing policy than influencing it.

An example of the impact of this transition on women's civil society organizations is the self-destruction of one of the oldest women's organizations, *Réseau des femmes œuvrant pour le développement rural*, between 2003 and 2007. Many of the 'old-guard' who had been members since before the genocide resigned their positions in 2003 to join the government while others went back to school. When the new Executive Secretary began embezzling funds and taking credits in the organization's name, no one noticed. By the time members realized what had happened, the organization was several millions of Rwandan francs in debt, had lost its headquarters building, and had to lay off its entire staff.

A final reason the women's movement has been set back is that women have not found a unifying issue to rally around since the promulgation of the inheritance law in 1998. Land tenure and land use are among the most volatile political issues in Rwanda today, and the present situation poses the risk of widespread violence.<sup>69</sup> Given that the vast majority of Rwandan women are subsistence farmers and that women, and female-headed households in particular, are among the people most vulnerable to losing access to land, it would seem that land rights would

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society (including the international NGOs) has followed suit. In Rwanda today, many women undertake university studies.

<sup>69</sup> Herman Musahara and Christopher Huggins, 'Land Reform, Land Scarcity and Post-Conflict Reconstruction: A Case Study of Rwanda', in Christopher Huggins and Jenny Clover (eds), *From the Ground Up: Land Rights, Conflict and Peace in Sub-Saharan Africa*, (Institute for Security Studies, Pretoria, South Africa, 2005), pp. 269-346; Alison Des Forges, 'Land in Rwanda: Winnowing out the Chaff,' *L'Afrique des Grands-Lacs, Annuaire 2005-2006* (2006), pp. 353-71.

be an obvious rallying issue for the Rwandan women's movement.<sup>70</sup> However, the women's NGOs and MIGEPROF have refused to define land as a women's issue since the initial steps to develop the land policy and law in 1997. When lobbied by LandNet to address the draft land policy and laws, representatives of MIGEPROF said that land is an issue for all Rwandans, not just women.<sup>71</sup> As a result of LandNet's advocacy efforts, undertaken without support from women's civil society organizations or MIGEPROF, the final version of the 2005 Land Law stated that the Inheritance Law guaranteed female equality vis-à-vis property, including land. In practice, however, women face substantial obstacles when attempting to actualize their inheritance or land rights, and the 2005 Land Law did not offer women any relief and may in fact make them more vulnerable.<sup>72</sup>

Given the volatility of the issue, it is likely that women's NGOs and women in governance did not define land as a women's issue in order to avoid coming into conflict with the interests of the RPF and the *akazu*. Furthermore, since the majority of women for whom land is a life and death issue are poor, rural women, the primarily middle-class and urban elite, women's civil society organizations and their membership may not have perceived land as a women's issue since it was not an issue directly relevant to their leaders. The failings of the

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<sup>70</sup> Jennie E. Burnet and Rwanda Initiative for Sustainable Development, 'Culture, Practice and Law: Women's Access to Land in Rwanda,' in Lynne Muthoni Wanyeki (ed.), *Women and Land in Africa: Culture, Religion and Realizing Women's Right's*, (Zed Books, New York, NY, 2003), pp. 176-206; HRW, 'Uprooting the Rural Poor in Rwanda,' (report, Human Rights Watch, New York, NY, 2001).

<sup>71</sup> MIGEPROF's response was baffling given its robust program of gender trainings and mission to mainstream gender in all government programs.

<sup>72</sup> Johan Pottier, 'Land Reform for Peace? Rwanda's 2005 Land Law in Context,' *Journal of Agrarian Change* **6**, 4 (2006), p. 533.

women's movement in Rwanda vis-à-vis the land bill demonstrate the limited impact that increased female participation in governance has had since 2003.

Increased female participation in governance has had a number of negative consequences. First of all, across the African continent, the engagement of more women in the legislative, judicial, and executive branches of government, as well as in the grassroots administrative structures, has resulted in a loss of human capital from the vibrant civil society organizations.<sup>73</sup> While younger women with university educations are taking their places, the movement of experienced women into government has left women's organizations with fewer experienced female leaders.<sup>74</sup> Given the difficult political terrain, the loss of experienced leaders lessens the effectiveness of advocacy on hot button issues, like land use, as the 'new' civil society leaders do not have the *savoir faire* to manoeuvre behind the scenes.

Second, increased female participation in governance risks hindering the cooperation between women in civil society and women in office—cooperation that was vital in the creation and passage of the Inheritance Bill.<sup>75</sup> In Rwanda, some women feel as if their colleagues who have been elected to office, accepted a government post, or joined the RPF political party are no longer engaging in activism on behalf of women's interests.<sup>76</sup> Since 2001, female Parliamentarians have voted for bills which destroyed the one remaining opposition party, which gave the President and the RPF powerful tools to root out dissension, which eliminated an

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<sup>73</sup> Bauer and Britton, 'Women in African Parliaments: A Continental Shift?', p. 28.

<sup>74</sup> Interview with leader of a national women's organization, Kigali, November 2003.

<sup>75</sup> Bauer and Britton, 'Women in African Parliaments: A Continental Shift?', p. 28.

<sup>76</sup> Interviews with members of women's organizations, Kigali, Rwanda, April 2002, July 2002, November 2003.



autonomous civil society, and which eliminated public space for criticism of the government, the RPF, or their policies.

Another risk of female legislative representation is that it ‘may be used by political leaders and parties to legitimize their agendas’.<sup>77</sup> According to some analysts, the RPF regime has used female-friendly policies to achieve its own ends. Having designated women’s representatives in Parliament and other branches of government is a way of ensuring loyal RPF representatives who are not officially ruling party representatives. Tripp has documented an analogous situation across the border in Uganda.<sup>78</sup> Many Rwandans I spoke with in 2007 voiced the sentiment that Members of Parliament do not do anything except collect their salaries and enjoy the other benefits of their position (such as a stipend, a loan for a car, and money for petrol) and show up occasionally to ‘vote’ on issues that have already been decided within the RPF. While the factual accuracy of this portrait is difficult to document, it is apparent that both female and male representatives in government who fail to toe the RPF line are forced to resign.<sup>79</sup>

### ***Transformation in Political Subjectivity***

Although the female-friendly policies of the 2003 Constitution may not prove to be a boon to women in the short term, the prospects for meaningful input by women in the long term remain good. As Aretxaga argues ‘political processes ... are en-gendered’ even in contexts

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<sup>77</sup> Bauer and Britton, ‘Women in African Parliaments: A Continental Shift?’, p. 22.

<sup>78</sup> Tripp, ‘Uganda: Agents of Change for Women's Advancement?’, pp. 130-1.

<sup>79</sup> Interviews, Kigali, Rwanda 2007 and United States of America 2005, 2006.

where women are excluded from the *real politics*.<sup>80</sup> Female engagement with political processes, whether formal (as in the case of Rwanda) or informal (as in the case of Northern Ireland in the 1970s), transforms not only the political processes but also the constitution of women's identities, subjectivities, and agencies. Thus, the long-term potential benefit of greater female participation in governance in Rwanda is the transformation of women's political subjectivity and Rwandan culture.

The presence of women in the legislative, executive and judicial branches of government marks a significant departure for Rwandan society and the collective cultural imagination. These women's representatives have transformed what is possible for 'daughters' [*abakobwa*] and 'wives' [*abagore*]. According to custom, daughters and wives were subordinate to (and by corollary protected by) fathers (or brothers) and husbands. A wife could speak publicly on behalf of the family in her husband's (or father-in-law's) absence, yet she was perceived as his second and not as an independent, autonomous agent. Whether customary gender roles have **always** relegated wives to a secondary position behind husbands is up for debate. As Oyewumi argues in the case of Yorubaland, the application of the category 'women' in Rwanda, and the resulting perception of females as inferior in post-colonial Rwanda, may be largely a product of the colonial encounter.<sup>81</sup> Whether the subordination of females to males is entirely a result of colonialism, the work of Jefremovas makes it clear that colonialism weakened the customary

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<sup>80</sup> Begoña Aretxaga, *Shattering Silence: Women, Nationalism, and Political Subjectivity in Northern Ireland* (Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ 1997), p. 6.

<sup>81</sup> Oyeronke Oyewumi, *The Invention of Women: Making an African Sense of Western Gender Discourses* (University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, MN, 1997).

powers and rights of daughters and wives.<sup>82</sup> Yet, in Rwanda today wives and daughters are accorded the right to speak publicly, whether or not they are elected officials or government functionaries. While there are still those Rwandans (male and female) who speak against female equality and who label independent or outspoken women as ‘loud’ or ‘loose,’<sup>83</sup> these voices are no longer met with social silence or tacit approval. Instead, they are pointed out as ‘un-evolved’ points-of-view, which hearken back to the ‘Old Rwanda.’

Second, the inclusion of women in governance has changed public perceptions of women in governance roles and opened the doors to greater individual freedom for women in other aspects of their lives. In recent years, several scholars, including myself, have argued that violent conflict, and the attendant disruptions in gender relations, can provide ‘new opportunities to articulate debate about gender politics as well as for individual women to live in a different way’.<sup>84</sup> This situation is true of Rwanda in the aftermath of the 1994 genocide when Rwandan women found themselves in a difficult situation.

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<sup>82</sup> Villia Jefremovas, *Brickyards to Graveyards: From Production to Genocide in Rwanda* (State University of New York Press, Albany, NY, 2002) pp. 84-5.

<sup>83</sup> For an in depth exploration on the uses of ideal types of the ‘timid virgin’ and ‘virtuous wife’ to control women’s agency in pre-genocide Rwanda, see Villia Jefremovas, ‘Loose Women, Virtuous Wives and Timid Virgins: Gender and Control of Resources in Rwanda,’ *Canadian Journal of African Studies* **27**, 3 (1991), and Jefremovas, *Brickyards to Graveyards*, pp. 97-108.

<sup>84</sup> Donna Pankhurst, ‘Women and Politics in Africa: The Case of Uganda, in Karen Ross (ed.), *Women, Politics, and Change*, (Oxford University Press, Oxford, UK, 2002), p. 127. See also Drude Dahlerup, *Women, Quotas and Politics* (Routledge, 2006), Krishna Kumar, ‘Civil Wars, Women, and Gender Relations: An Overview’, in Krishna Kumar (ed.), *Women and Civil War: Impact, Organizations, and Action* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 2001), pp. 5-26, Spyros A. Sofos, ‘Inter-Ethnic Violence and Gendered Constructions of Ethnicity in Former Yugoslavia’,

The genocide and civil war brought about a dramatic demographic shift in the composition of Rwandan society. In the immediate aftermath of violence in 1994, the population had become predominantly female. Human Rights Watch estimated that 70 percent of the population inside Rwanda in 1995 was female.<sup>85</sup> As internally displaced persons and refugees returned home, this demographic shift slowly began to equalize. A demographic survey conducted in late 1996 and early 1997 established that the overall sex ratio (number of males per 100 females) for the Rwandan population was 86, meaning that women constituted 53.7 percent of the adult population, an abrupt shift from the estimate only 1-2 years earlier.<sup>86</sup> While the 2002

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*Social Identities*, 2/1 (1996), pp. 73-91, Aili Tripp, Dior Konate, and Colleen Lowe-Morna, 'Sub-Saharan Africa: On the Fast Track to Women's Political Representation', in Drude Dahlerup (ed.), *Women, Quotas and Politics* (London: Routledge, 2006), pp. 112-37, Meredith Turshen and Clotilde Twagiramariya, *What Women Do in Wartime : Gender and Conflict in Africa* (New York: Zed Books, 1998).

<sup>85</sup> Human Rights Watch, 'Shattered Lives: Sexual Violence During the Rwandan Genocide and Its Aftermath,' (Report, Human Rights Watch, New York, NY1996). At that time, the vast majority of the Rwandan population lived in exile in refugee camps in eastern Zaire and western Tanzania. They had fled Rwanda from July-October 1994 when the RPF took control of the Rwandan territory.

<sup>86</sup> Office National de la Population (ONAPO), 'Final Report, Socio-Demographic Survey 1996,' (Ministry of Finance and Planning, Kigali, Rwanda, 1998), p. 18. In late 1996 and early 1997, the refugees returned en masse when the *Alliance des Forces Démocratiques pour la Liberation du Congo* (AFDL) and the Rwandan Patriotic Army (RPA) attacked the camps to force them to close. The AFDL was a purportedly indigenous rebel movement, led by Laurent Kabila and backed by the Rwandan and Ugandan militaries, that attacked Zaire in 1996 with the goal of overthrowing Mobutu Sese Seko's government. The RPA was the military wing of the post 1994 Rwandan government. With the approval of the new constitution in 2003, it was renamed the Rwandan Defence Force (RDF). It is unclear to what extent the ONAPO study included Rwandans returning from exile en masse in late 1996 and 1997. Yet, a significant part of this jump could be attributed to the large influx of predominantly 'Tutsi' exiles who

Rwandan National Census reported the overall sex ratio as 91.25 (meaning that 52.2 percent of the total population was female, compared with 51.2 percent in 1991), the sex ratio for people 17 years or older was 87.07 nationwide, a notably larger gap.<sup>87</sup> Although these overall figures may not sound very dramatic, in specific age brackets in specific communities, the absence of men is much more notable. For example, in my own census of a rural community in Butare prefecture in 2001, adult women comprised 55.6 percent of the adult population. Yet in the 40-50 year age bracket women were 65.4 percent.<sup>88</sup> The 2002 Rwandan National Census reported the lowest sex

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Although far less dramatic than the situation in 1994-1995, this demographic imbalance has grave consequences for single women and widows. Very few have the opportunity for a real marriage. For the 20-24 year old age group the sex ratio drops to 71, and for the 25-29 year old age group it is only 69 (ONAPO 1998:18).

<sup>87</sup> Republic of Rwanda, Ministry of Finance and Economic Planning, and National Census Commission, ‘Report on the Preliminary Results: The General Census of Population and Housing: 16-30 August 2002,’ (Government of Rwanda, Kigali, Rwanda, 2003), pp. 17, 39 (Table 19).

<sup>88</sup> I defined ‘adult’ as over 20 years of age. The actual percentages for all of these studies could be even higher as many women with husbands in prison report their husbands as members of the household in surveys. Similarly, women are often reluctant to indicate that they are heads of household even when their husbands are not present (whether because they are dead, in prison, missing, or polygamous and residing with another wife.) Polygamy is illegal in Rwanda (and condemned by the churches), but it has some social recognition and precedence in certain Rwandan traditions.

ratio (77.94) for those 17 years of age or older in Kibuye prefecture.<sup>89</sup> As a result of these demographic changes, many ‘wives’ and ‘daughters’ found themselves without the ‘traditional’ protection of ‘husbands’ or ‘fathers’.

Beyond these dramatic demographic changes, the harsh material realities of post-genocide Rwanda created an entirely new context for kin and social relations. The civil war and genocide produced over two million refugees along with hundreds of thousands more internally displaced persons. The economic and physical infrastructure had been destroyed at every level. Many survivors had nothing left—no clothes to wear or food to cook, much less a pot in which to prepare it. Survivors, particularly women, found that ‘traditional’ ways of life and modes of being were no longer possible.

Following the genocide, many Rwandan women found themselves as heads of household, whether because their husbands were dead, in exile, in prison, or in military service with the RPF. According to Rwandan custom, women rely on men for access to the means of livelihood.<sup>90</sup> Yet in the aftermath of the genocide, women took on new roles in the domestic and public spheres that Rwandan society had previously not ascribed to them. These roles included everyday tasks customarily taboo for women, like putting roofs on houses, constructing enclosures around houses, or milking cows, and additional roles in society, such as head of

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<sup>89</sup> Republic of Rwanda, Ministry of Finance and Economic Planning, and National Census Commission, ‘Report on the Preliminary Results: The General Census of Population and Housing: 16-30 August 2002,’ p. 39 (Table 19).

<sup>90</sup> Burnet and Rwanda Initiative for Sustainable Development, ‘Culture, Practice and Law: Women's Access to Land in Rwanda,’ p. 11, Human Rights Watch, ‘Shattered Lives: Sexual Violence,’ p. 19.

household or government administrator.<sup>91</sup> Many Rwandan women took on primary economic responsibility for their households because their husbands were either absent or unable to do it. Prior to the genocide, Rwandan law forbid Rwandan women to engage in commercial activities, enter into contract, or seek paid employment without authorisation from their husbands.<sup>92</sup> In practice, many husbands (and even most husbands in the cities) allowed and even encouraged their wives to work because it benefited the whole family, but the husbands often controlled the women's salaries or profits from commercial endeavours. Female-owned businesses were vulnerable, in practice and by law, to plunder by their husbands (whether to support their own businesses, their drinking, or even their mistresses) or to complete takeover.<sup>93</sup>

With the disruption in gender relations, some women found the freedom to pursue careers or commercial activities without these risks. Yet, this 'opportunity' to challenge customary notions of womanhood and women's roles in the family and community should not be portrayed too rosily, as some journalists and feminist policy analysts have tended to do. For peasant women in rural areas, the absence of husbands increased the burden of crushing poverty as well as social isolation. Farming without their husbands' labour resulted in a heavier workload and lower yields, as well as reduced social status in the community where no one had the 'time' to hear about or assist with 'widows' problems' as more than one widow described it to me.<sup>94</sup> The

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<sup>91</sup> Interviews with members of *Duhozanye*, a widows-of-the-genocide association in Save commune, November 1999.

<sup>92</sup> HRW, 'Shattered Lives: Sexual Violence During the Rwandan Genocide and Its Aftermath,' p. 22.

<sup>93</sup> Jefremovas, 'Loose Women, Virtuous Wives and Timid Virgins: Gender and Control of Resources in Rwanda'; Jefremovas, *Brickyards to Graveyard*, pp. 97-108.

<sup>94</sup> Although women's labour accounted for 60 to 70 percent of agricultural labour inputs before the genocide, men were responsible for the heaviest physical labour such as breaking up new or fallow ground and for managing cash

lack of income from husbands' labour in the cash economy left widows and prisoners' families destitute without the necessary cash to pay for health care or school fees. For middle class and elite women, their new found 'freedom' was bittersweet. Even the most successful business women lamented the heavy burden of bearing sole financial responsibility for themselves and their children—not to mention the social, emotional, and psychological consequences of widowhood or single motherhood.<sup>95</sup> As time has gone on, the most difficult burden for many has been solitude. Many female genocide survivors report that the perpetrators who killed their husbands and children spared the women by saying, 'You will die from solitude'.<sup>96</sup> In 2007, a widow-of-the-genocide whose two surviving children were away studying abroad wrote me, 'I'm becoming old, and I'm bored a lot here in [town where she lives]. I'm beginning to feel bad being alone.' The understatement of her phrasing only emphasized her suffering. Another widow, who had had a series of intermittent, clandestine relationships with married men and even a Roman Catholic priest, stated her physical needs to me in surprisingly straightforward declaration, 'I burn for a man.' Her expression of physical solitude in a Western idiom sounded like a direct challenge to Rwandan ideals of chastity and emotional reserve for 'daughters' and 'widows'. The possibility that she could imagine stating her desires so matter-of-factly, in a way so antithetical to Rwandan cultural ideals of femininity, points to a transformation in subjectivity.

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crops (especially coffee). Réseau des femmes œuvrant pour le développement rural, 'Profil Socio-Économique De Da Femme Rwandaise', (report, Réseau des femmes œuvrant pour le développement rural, Kigali, Rwanda, 1991).

<sup>95</sup> Interviews by author, various locations in Rwanda between 1997 and 2003.

<sup>96</sup> Anne Aghion, 'Gacaca: Living Together Again in Rwanda?', (Documentary film, First Run/Icarus Films, New York, NY, 2002).



A third effect of the inclusion of women in governance structures is the increase of the numbers of women with leadership and governance experience. Even if their leadership and governance skills are acquired in a non-democratic system, the same skills will be relevant should the RPF open the doors to more genuine democratization with meaningful competition between political parties, a free media, and a civil society with the capacity to counterbalance state power. Thus, in the long-term greater female representation could pave the way for meaningful participation of women in a more democratic political system because a great deal of change in cultural and social conceptions of gender roles manifested in the acceptance of women in positions of power (like Mayors, local government authorities, or *Gacaca* judges) as well as the acceptance of women as independent agents in public fora (such as witnesses in *Gacaca* hearings or speakers in government council meetings at all levels).

### ***Conclusions***

The lasting repercussions of the 1994 genocide, the material realities of life in post-genocide Rwanda, and the greater representation of women in public life and political office have promoted a great deal of change in cultural and social conceptions of gender roles. With these changes has come a greater acceptance of women in positions of authority and of women as independent agents in the public sphere. Through its policies, the RPF has linked gender equality to nationalism. As a whole, the top-down gender initiatives of the RPF have had a positive impact on gender equality and have transformed the collective cultural imagination: ‘wives’ and ‘daughters’ have a wider range of socially circumscribed agencies in the ‘New Rwanda’, and they are conceiving of themselves and their agencies in the world differently. Increased female political participation in Rwanda represents a paradox in the short-term: as their participation has increased, women’s ability to influence policy-making has decreased. In

the long-term, however, increased female representation in government could prepare the path for their meaningful participation in a genuine democracy because of a transformation in political subjectivity.

This case of an authoritarian, single-party state pushing for greater gender equality highlights a few key points relevant to political theory and democratization studies as well as to the increasingly female political representation across Africa. First of all, even in an authoritarian state, policy can be influenced by interest groups (such as women) who have access to decision-makers and who have the political savvy to operate the hidden levers of power. Second, the emphasis on elections in lieu of other aspects of democratic governance may reduce rather than increase the capacity of interest groups to shape policy. Third, top-down gender initiatives, even when implemented by authoritarian regimes, can lead to transformations in political identities, subjectivities, and agencies. Finally, these transformations in political subjectivity may pave the way for effective engagement in democratic governance should it emerge.

**Table 1. Women in Rwandan Parliament (1961 – 2008)**

		Total Members		Female Members	
		N	N	%	
1961	First Legislative Assembly <sup>‡</sup>	44	0	0	
1965	Legislative Assembly <sup>‡</sup>	47	1	2.1	
1969	Legislative Assembly <sup>‡</sup>	47	0	0	
1973	No legislative assembly existed <sup>‡</sup>	NA	NA	NA	
1982	National Development Council <sup>‡</sup>	64	4	6.3	
1983	National Development Council <sup>‡</sup>	70	9	12.9	
1988	National Development Council <sup>‡</sup>	70	11	15.7	
1994	Transitional National Parliament <sup>‡</sup>	70	8	11.4	
1994	Transitional National Parliament <sup>\$</sup>	NA	10	NA	
1999	Transitional National Parliament <sup>\$</sup>	NA	NA	<25	
2002	Transitional National Parliament <sup>*</sup>	74	17	23	
2003	Transitional National Parliament <sup>\$</sup>	NA	NA	25.7	
<b>2003</b>	<b>Parliament (both houses)<sup>\$</sup></b>	<b>106</b>	<b>48</b>	<b>45</b>	
<b>2003</b>	<b>Chamber only<sup>\$</sup></b>	<b>80</b>	<b>39</b>	<b>48.7</b>	
<b>2006</b>	<b>Parliament (both houses)<sup>†</sup></b>	<b>104</b>	<b>44</b>	<b>42.3</b>	
<b>2006</b>	<b>Chamber Only<sup>†</sup></b>	<b>78</b>	<b>35</b>	<b>44.8</b>	
<b>2008</b>	<b>Senate<sup>€</sup></b>	<b>26</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>34.6</b>	
<b>2008</b>	<b>Chamber<sup>¥</sup></b>	<b>77</b>	<b>36</b>	<b>46.8</b>	
<b>2008</b>	<b>Parliament (both houses)<sup>€,¥</sup></b>	<b>103</b>	<b>45</b>	<b>43.6</b>	

**Notes:** Bolded text indicates composition after national elections.

<sup>‡</sup> According to Aloys Muberanziza, 'L'accès des femmes aux fonctions parlementaires au Rwanda', *Dialogue*, **231** (2003), pp. 3-25.

<sup>\$</sup> According to Timothy Longman, 'Rwanda: Achieving Equality', p. 144.

<sup>\*</sup> According to Elizabeth Powley, 'Strengthening Governance: The Role of Women in Rwanda's Transition', p. 27.

<sup>†</sup> Compiled from Rwanda Parliament website, Electronic document, available at <http://www.rwandaparliament.gov.rw/>, (5 October 2006).

<sup>€</sup> Compiled from "Abaseneri" Umutwe wa Sena website, available at <http://www.rwandaparliament.gov.rw/SE/rw/compo/index.htm> (21 February 2008).

<sup>¥</sup> Compiled from "Abadeputi" Umutwe wa deputi website, available at <http://www.rwandaparliament.gov.rw/CH/rw/compo/index.htm> (21 February 2008).

