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**Strengthening Governance: The Role of Women in Rwanda's Transition
A Summary**

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that have dramatically increased women's political participation. I will put these gains for women in the larger context of governance in Rwanda and concerns about democracy in that country.

2. Background

Much has been written and said about the genocide in Rwanda, but little of that analysis has examined the role of women and/or gender considerations. I know that this audience is familiar with the basic facts of the 1994 genocide, so I will provide only a brief history, emphasizing the role of women. In order to understand how women came to be 49% of

¹ All citations and a full bibliography can be found in that original paper, available at www.womenwagingpeace.net.

Parliament, it is critical to understand that the planning and execution of, as well as the recovery from, the genocide were gendered.

The 1994 genocide pushed Rwanda onto the world stage, provoking much analysis and some soul-searching on the part of the international community that had been unable to prevent the violence and was, ultimately, unwilling to intervene to stop the killing. Though not simply the result of “ancient hatreds” between the Hutu and Tutsi “tribes” as reported and repeated by many, the conflict in Rwanda predated the tragedy of 1994.

Stepping back a moment, then, to independence: When it came in 1962, Rwandan independence was as much an overthrow of the ruling Tutsi minority, which had consolidated its privileged status and exclusive access to power under the Belgian colonial regime, as it was an overthrow of European rule. In post-independence Rwanda, the Hutu majority established itself in the name of democracy as the new ruling elite. Over the years, discrimination against Tutsi persisted. In fact, part of what allowed the violence and extremism of the early 1990s to succeed was the tolerance by both Rwandan society and the international community of smaller-scale violence against the Tutsi minority in the decades since the independence movement. The violence of this period, though devastating and precedent setting, was not on the scale of 1994. Another significant difference between the violence of the earlier period and that of the genocide was the deliberate targeting of women during the latter.

3. Pre-Genocide Years: Social Tension, Civil War, and the Arusha Accord

Social tensions in Rwanda rose during the late 1980s and early 1990s. The harassment of women in pre-genocide Rwanda mirrors the experience of women in other pre-conflict settings. Repression and rape, a gendered expression of the rising extremism, became more commonplace. As the threat of civil war loomed in the early 1990s, Hutu extremists sought to carefully circumscribe women’s roles.

Hutu extremist propaganda targeted women. One popular tract, the “Hutu Ten Commandments,” was circulated widely and read aloud at public meetings. It portrayed Tutsi women as deceitful “temptresses” and urged Hutu women to protect Hutu men from treacherous influences. Three of the commandments addressed gender relations:

1. Each Hutu man must know that the Tutsi woman, no matter whom, works in solidarity with her Tutsi ethnicity. In consequence, ever Hutu man is a traitor:
 - who marries a Tutsi woman
 - who makes a Tutsi woman his concubine
 - who makes a Tutsi woman his secretary or protégé
2. Every Hutu man must know that our Hutu girls are more dignified and more conscientious in their roles as woman, wife, and mother. Aren’t they pretty, good secretaries and more honest!

3. Hutu women, be vigilant bring your husbands, brothers, and sons to reason!

In October of 1990, Rwandan exiles known as the Rwandan Patriotic Front joined together and invaded Rwanda from their base in neighboring Uganda. Targeting the authoritarian Hutu government led by President Habyarimana, the RPF demanded democratization and a solution for the hundreds of thousands of Tutsi refugees around the world who were prevented from returning to Rwanda. The ensuing civil war, which saw thousands of civilians displaced and killed, culminated in a ceasefire agreement signed in Arusha, Tanzania in July 1992. The Arusha Accord, including the ceasefire as well as political talks aimed at a peace accord and power sharing agreement, was negotiated throughout 1992 and 1993 but never fully implemented.

On the evening of April 6, 1994, President Habyarimana's plane was shot down during its landing in Kigali and the genocide began immediately thereafter. In an effort to stop the genocide, RPF troops began their invasion anew, and the civil war resumed, paralyzing the international community that was unable, and in many cases unwilling, to distinguish between genocidal violence and the civil war.

4. 1994 Genocide

The Rwandan genocide proceeded with unparalleled swiftness—upwards of 800,000 were killed in 100 days—and targeted the Tutsi minority and moderate Hutus throughout the country. The implementation of the genocide was also gendered.

Some women participated in the genocide alongside their brothers, fathers, and sons. They killed, tortured, informed, collaborated, and aided in communication with and between *Interahamwe*. As a group, women are not blameless. They did not, however, participate in the same numbers that men did. In fact, women represent only 2.3 percent of genocide suspects in Rwanda (3,442 of 108,215 imprisoned). For the most part, they were not planners or perpetrators of the genocide. Importantly, women are an important symbol of moderation in Rwanda today. They are trusted in the tasks of reconciliation and reconstruction in part because they have not been implicated in the violence to the same extent as men.

Despite not joining the violence in great numbers, women were certainly victimized. Targeted for not only their ethnicity but also their gender, women were subjected to sexual assault and torture. One of the first victims of the genocide, Prime Minister Agathe Uwiringiyimana, was the first woman to hold that post. In the years leading up to the genocide, she was frequently depicted in extremist literature and political cartoons as sexually promiscuous and a threat to the nation. Anthropologist Christopher Taylor suggests that, because she was a moderate Hutu, “her death owed as much to the fact that she was a woman, and a particularly articulate and outspoken one, as it did to the fact that she was a prominent member of the democratic opposition.”

Women who survived the genocide lost husbands, children, relatives, and communities. They endured systematic rape and torture, witnessed unspeakable cruelty, and lost livelihoods and property. In addition to this violence, women faced displacement, family separation, and food insecurity, all of which resulted in post-conflict psychological trauma. Their social structures were destroyed, their relationships and traditional networks were severed, and they were left to head their households and communities. Rwandans believe that in their victimization and endurance, women bore the brunt of the genocide and therefore deserve a significant and official role in the nation's recovery. So we see that the execution of the genocide was gendered, in terms of who participated and how people were targeted.

5. Aftermath of the Genocide

The genocide ended in July 1994 with the victory of RPF troops. In the immediate aftermath, the population was 70 percent female (women and girls). Given this demographic imbalance, women immediately assumed multiple roles as heads of household, community leaders, and financial providers, meeting the needs of devastated families and communities. They were the ones who picked up the pieces of a literally decimated society and began to rebuild: They buried the dead, found homes for nearly 500,000 orphans, and built shelters. With early and critical support from UNHCR, USAID, and UNIFEM (among others), women in Rwanda were leaders in reconstruction efforts.

Today, women remain a demographic majority in Rwanda, representing 54 percent of the population and contributing significantly to the productive capacity of the nation. A majority of the adult working population, they head 35 percent of households, are responsible for raising the next generation, and in this largely rural nation, produce the majority of all agricultural output. Quite simply, they are the majority constituency and the most productive segment of the population. Rwandan women play a vital role not only in the physical reconstruction, but also in the crucial task of social healing, reconciliation, and increasingly, governance. So we see that the immediate post-genocide reconstruction was gendered.

Once an opposition movement and guerilla army, the RPF is now a predominately (but not exclusively) Tutsi political party. It remains in power in Rwanda today. In its efforts to rebuild Rwanda, the RPF-led government has publicly committed itself to a platform of unity and reconciliation. Acknowledging the presence, needs, and potential role of this majority population, the government determined that women must be central to the process of governing, reconciling, and rebuilding the country. A number of women held critical positions within the ranks of the RPF. Such women have been appointed to strategic posts in the transitional government; more significantly, their presence has contributed to progressive gender policies within the administration.

Democracy in Rwanda faces many challenges. Among them are Rwanda's prolonged involvement in the Democratic Republic of the Congo's civil war, accusations of human rights abuses at home, the reintegration of accused *genocidaires*, and the challenge of

fostering political debate without a return to the extremism of the early 1990s. But on the key question of inclusivity, Rwanda's government has taken unprecedented steps to increase the participation of women and young people in governance. Joseph Sebarenzi, former Speaker of the Rwandan Parliament who is now in exile in the United States, acknowledges that, "gender representation in Rwanda is an undeniable fact and the government should be credited for it despite its poor record in democracy."

6. Why Consideration of Gender Issues Is Important to Good Governance

Considerations of gender—that is, the contributions of both men and women—are vital to governance in Rwanda for all of these reasons: the gendered nature of the Rwandan conflict; the perceptions that women are better at reconciliation; the critical role that women play in community security; and the experience of Rwandans, particularly at the grassroots level, that women are less corrupt than men.

The conflict in Rwanda was gendered; so must be the recovery. The genocide was not solely about violence between Hutu and Tutsi men. As described above, rape was used as a form of torture and sexual organs of both men and women were deliberately, brutally violated. The ideology of genocide dictates that one ethnic group's ability to reproduce most potently symbolized by the childbearing ability of women—must be extinguished. Therefore, gender-based and sexual violence was employed as a means of destroying the Tutsi community. Rwanda's recovery and reconstruction must address the gendered implications of this violence, such as considering the specific needs of widows and women whose husbands are in prison, survivors of sexual torture and rape, children born of rape, and HIV/AIDS infections resulting from the genocide.

The genocide in effect destroyed the social fabric in Rwanda. Demographics changed dramatically; women's roles in society and gender relations were fundamentally transformed. In the aftermath, women assumed non-traditional social and economic roles, stepped into the public sphere, and, as described above, took on new responsibilities. The genocide forced women to think of themselves differently and in many cases develop skills they would not otherwise have acquired.

In addition to highlighting that a gendered conflict must be addressed by a gendered peace, one of the most thought-provoking results of this research is the finding that many Rwandans perceive women to be "better" at forgiveness, reconciliation, and post-conflict peace building than their male counterparts. These perceptions are based predominantly on two notions. First, Rwandans believe that most of the consequences of war and violence fall on women and that they are therefore highly motivated to prevent conflicts. Circumstances of their lives and burdens they carry cause women to recognize their **interdependence**; such pragmatism allows them to work across ethnic lines more easily than men.

Second, many Rwandans interviewed for this study perceive women to be predisposed (culturally or biologically) to forgiveness and reconciliation.

Rwandans' perceptions about women's capacity for forgiveness seem to be substantiated by the reality of women's leadership in reconciliation activities. For instance, a UNHCR pilot project, the Imagine Coexistence Initiative, began without a specific gender mandate but included among its lessons learned that "in Rwanda, women have taken a lead role in coexistence and reconciliation work." At a workshop hosted in part by the Imagine Coexistence Initiative, key findings included the recognitions that women's groups are particularly effective in "inter-ethnic cooperative income generating activities; work in and outside of prisons; inter-ethnic associations; ... and inter-ethnic solidarity and complicity to enable women to carry out advocacy." Scholar Peter Uvin has also observed the potential for reconciliation among women. Regarding the future of Rwanda, he says, "There is hope in women because they are the ones who are forced to survive. There are stories of many women being ready to set aside real or imagined differences to *live*."

Even discussions of national security, traditionally a male arena, highlight the public recognition of women's contributions. A variety of government and civil society sources, both male and female, point to women in northern and northwestern Rwanda (Ruhengeri, Gisenyi, and Kibuye provinces) who have been instrumental in stabilizing border communities. These women are credited with convincing their husbands and sons living across the border in the Democratic Republic of the Congo to leave rebel groups and return to Rwanda to reintegrate.

This often-cited example of women in Ruhengeri, Gisenyi, and Kibuye demonstrates their critical role in maintaining the nation's security. Women are in a position to know their communities well and to serve as early warning of potential conflict. Ordinary civilian women at the grassroots level, as well as those serving in the Rwandan army and police force, are thus able to promote security. As a local government official in Kigali-Ngali Province put it, "If there are men who are planning war, who are planning genocide, the women know. They know better than [those men]. So they should be ready to say what is being prepared down there [at the grassroots level]."

Another perception of women, which is particularly common at the grassroots level, is that women are less corruptible than their male counterparts in local government. In focus groups conducted with women and men in two provinces, respondents frequently cited this as a reason why women should be involved in government.

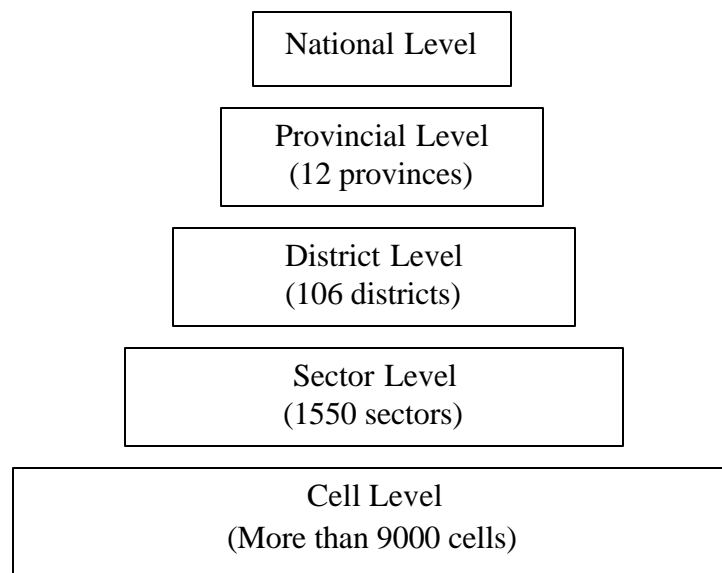
The government's decision to include women in the governance of the nation is based on a number of factors. The perceptions noted above, regarding women as "better" at reconciliation and post-conflict peace building, are a strong motivation. But the policy of inclusion also owes much to the RPF's exposure to gender equality issues in Uganda, where members spent many years in exile. Uganda uses a quota system to guarantee women's participation; in its parliament, one seat from each of 39 districts is reserved for a woman. Men and women in the RPF were familiar with this system, as they were with the contributions and successes of women in South Africa's African National Congress (ANC). RPF members witnessed, and embraced, notions of gender equality and this informed the development of gender-sensitive governance structures in post-genocide Rwanda. It is also important to note the critical importance of key, high-level women

within the RPF, and the influence they had in terms of women’s participation in post-conflict.

A final, more skeptical analysis of this policy decision charges that the government could be using the inclusion of women and youth as a means of diverting attention from the absence of more ethnically plural and representative government. Because the country is 85 percent Hutu, however, this argument is problematic. Decentralization and the inclusion of women and youth at every administrative level will necessitate the inclusion of the majority population. If decentralization were fully implemented, it would be difficult to maintain ethnic exclusivity in all the governing structures.

Rwanda’s commitment to the inclusion of women is evident throughout the government. At the level of national political leadership, the Rwandan government has made women visible with high-level appointments. In addition to these senior women, the government has attempted to address women’s concerns and gender implications in their policy planning. Rwanda is a signatory to various international instruments that uphold women’s rights, including the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948), the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) (1979), and the Platform for Action adopted at the UN World Conference on Women in Beijing (1995). Its Constitution, adopted in May of 2003 references CEDAW and commits to representation of women at at least 30%.

Finally, it has devised innovative structures to promote women’s participation in governance at all administrative levels—from the smallest cell to the sector, district, provincial, and national levels.



7. Two Electoral Innovations

1. A triple balloting system guaranteeing the election of women to a percentage of seats at the district level

In the sector and district elections in 2001, Rwanda introduced an electoral mechanism aimed at including women (and youth, who also have been defined as a formerly underrepresented group) in governance.

In these elections, each voter used three ballots: a general ballot, a women's ballot, and a youth ballot. In each sector, voters selected one person on each ballot, thus picking a general candidate (frequently, but not necessarily, a man), a woman, and a young person. Through a subsequent indirect election, a district council was chosen from candidates who won at the sector level. This district council included all of those elected on the general ballot, one-third of the women, and one-third of the youth. From that group, the district mayor and other executive committee officials were chosen.

This system has been successful at getting women into office: 27 percent of those elected to the district councils in 2001 were women. Women's participation in the executive committees remains limited, however, as they account for only 5 out of 106 district mayors. Only those who ran on the general ballot were eligible for this executive office.

Among the female district mayors, Florence Kamili Kayiraba, for example, explains that she was elected mayor because she came through the general ballot, which required candidates to have a higher level of education, instead of the women's ballot. She chose to run on the general ballot because she had the higher level of qualifications and could therefore leave space for others to run on the women's ballot:

If I had passed through the women's [ballot], it would have been easy for me because the competition would have been less ... there were very few women and many of them were timid and would not stand [against men for election] ... there was more competition in the general election, because there you meet men who have [previously] been in [public] service. It wasn't easy. But I felt it would be unfair [to run on the women's ballot] because I had the potential for standing in the general competition and could leave the other place for [a woman] who is a bit shy and cannot come up for the other post.

Kayiraba cites lack of experience and fear of competing, campaigning, and marketing themselves as reasons many Rwandan women are still reluctant to stand for office. As one of only five women mayors, she feels a responsibility to be a model for other women and to encourage them to stand for office. It is imperative to have more women in office, she feels, because they are responsible, committed, and often perform better than men because they have the "patience of listening to [their] citizens." Women in government are more accessible to their constituents, she argues, especially female constituents:

It is not easy for a man to be approached, but it is easy for women. Especially by fellow women. I get so many women coming up, telling me their personal problems, the conflict between the families ... that kind of thing, a problem, financial issues ... they will tell me their problems. For example, the Vice-Mayor in charge of Social Affairs is a man but they don't go to [him], they come to me. Then after I have listened to them, I either call him or take that person to him and say, 'Please look into that matter and see what we can do to help.' [Women] are more comfortable coming to me [first] than coming to the person in charge of that very [issue].

In brief, the introduction of triple balloting in March 2001 guaranteed that women would constitute at least 20 percent of district-level leadership. It also provided room in the system for women who were not comfortable challenging men directly in elections. They were able to compete against other women and gain experience campaigning and serving in government.

2. A parallel system of women's councils and women-only elections guaranteeing a women's mandate for all elected bodies

The second structure that Rwanda has established is the parallel system of women's councils. Women's councils are grassroots structures elected at the cell level **by women only** (and then through indirect election at each successive administrative level), which operate parallel to the general local councils and represent women's concerns.

The Ministry of Gender and Women in Development established the women's councils shortly after the genocide, and their role has since been expanded considerably. These 10-member councils include representatives for legal affairs, civic education, health, and finance. Rather than a policy implementation function, these councils have an advocacy role. They are involved in skills training and making local women aware of their rights, as well as in advising the generally elected bodies on issues that affect women and taking women's concerns to them. These councils ensure that women's views on education, health, security, and other issues are articulated to local authorities. While the women's councils are important in terms of decentralization and grassroots engagement, lack of resources prevents them from maximizing their impact. Members of local women's councils are not paid, and because they must volunteer in addition to performing their paid work and family responsibilities, the councils are less effective and less consistent than they could be. Nevertheless, women in these grassroots councils have been effective in carving out new political space.

The head of the women's council holds a reserved seat on the general local council, ensuring official representation of women's concerns and providing a link between the two systems. These parallel women's councils exist at the local, provincial, and national levels. Rwanda's new constitution, ratified in May 2003, demonstrates a dramatic commitment to women's councils and women's elections: beginning with the September

29, 2003 elections, 24 of 80 seats in the lower house of Parliament derive from the women's elections.

Berthe Mukamusoni, one of the parliamentarians elected through the women's councils by the women of the country, explains the importance of this system:

In the history of our country and society, women could not go in public with men. Where men were, women were not supposed to talk, to show their needs. Men were to talk and think for them. So with [the women's councils], it has been a mobilization tool, it has mobilized them, it has educated [women] ... It has brought them to some [level of] self-confidence, such that when the general elections are approaching, it becomes a topic in the women's [councils]. 'Women as citizens, you are supposed to stand, to campaign, give candidates, support other women.' They have acquired a confidence of leadership.

In September 2003, women in Rwanda earned 49% of seats in Parliament: 24 seats in the lower house set aside for the women's election, others elected through political parties, and still others by appointment to the upper house.

Women in most parts of the world face barriers to political participation and elected office in terms of both access and capacity/education. In Rwanda, barriers to access have been largely removed, but attention must be paid to training and education for women candidates and women elected officials in order to strengthen their capacity and help consolidate these gains.

8. Broader Context

In conclusion, Rwanda has achieved near parity in its Parliament. It is critical to highlight these successes for women's political participation in Rwanda, but also to understand it in the broader context of democratic reform (or lack thereof) in Rwanda. Democracy in Rwanda is threatened by the dominance of a single party, the RPF, and increasingly, by a Tutsi minority. There are significant concerns about the lack of civil liberties and democratic freedoms. In the fall 2003 presidential and parliamentary elections, human rights groups noted limits on campaigning and access to the media; restrictions on freedom of assembly, freedom of speech; intimidation at the polls; and suspect candidate identification. So these two electoral models – triple balloting and a parallel system of women's councils – are offered not as evidence that Rwanda is fully democratic, but rather as innovative and creative mechanisms designed to bring women into the process – important in their own right. They have been successful in Rwanda precisely because they are indigenous or "home grown" solutions; but there may be elements of these systems that are helpful in other contexts, that may be adapted and adopted.