

Case Study: Rwanda

Rwanda: Women Hold Up Half the Parliament

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In October 2003, women won 48.8 percent of seats in Rwanda's lower house of Parliament.² Having achieved near-parity in the representation of men and women in its legislature, this small African country now ranks first among all countries of the world in terms of the number of women elected to parliament.

The percentage of women's participation is all the more noteworthy in the context of Rwanda's recent history. Rwandan women were fully enfranchised and granted the right to stand for election in 1961, with independence from Belgium. The first female parliamentarian began serving in 1965.³ However, before its civil war in the early 1990s and the genocide in 1994, Rwandan women never held more than 18 percent of seats in the country's Parliament.⁴

The 1994 genocide in Rwanda, perpetrated by Hutu extremists against the Tutsi minority and Hutu moderates, killed an estimated 800,000 people (one-tenth of the population), traumatized survivors, and destroyed the country's infrastructure, including the Parliament building. Lasting approximately 100 days, the slaughter ended in July 1994 when the Tutsi-dominated Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF), which had been engaged in a four-year civil war with the Hutu-dominated regime of President Juvenal Habyarimana, secured military victory. Once an opposition movement and guerilla army, the RPF is now a predominately (but not exclusively) Tutsi political party. It is in power in Rwanda today.

During the nine-year period of post-genocide transitional government, from 1994 to 2003, women's representation in Parliament (by appointment) reached 25.7 percent and a new gender-sensitive constitution was adopted. But it was the first post-genocide parliamentary elections of October 2003 that saw women achieve nearly 50 percent representation.

The dramatic gains for women are a result of specific mechanisms used to increase women's political participation, among them a constitutional guarantee,

a quota system, and innovative electoral structures. This case study will describe those mechanisms and attempt to explain their origins, focusing in particular on the relationship between women's political representation and the organized women's movement, significant changes in gender roles in post-genocide Rwanda, and the commitment of Rwanda's ruling party, the RPF, to gender issues. It will also briefly introduce some of the achievements and challenges ahead for women in Rwanda's Parliament.

The Constitutional Framework

In 2000, nearing the end of its post-genocide transitional period, Rwanda undertook the drafting of a new constitution and established a 12-member Constitutional Commission. Three members of the commission were women, including one, Judith Kanakuze, who was also the only representative of civil society on the commission. She played an important role both as a 'gender expert' within the commission ranks and as a liaison to her primary constituency, the women's movement in Rwanda.⁵

The commission was charged with drafting the constitution and with taking the draft to the population in a series of consultations designed to both solicit input and sensitize the population as to the significance and principal ideas of the document.⁶ Although political elites controlled both the content and the process of the consultations with Rwanda's largely illiterate population, it was—at least on the face of it—a participatory process, and its participatory nature allowed for significant input by women and women's organizations.⁷

The women's movement mobilized actively around the drafting of the constitution to ensure that equality became a cornerstone of the new document. The umbrella organization, Collectifs Pro-Femmes/Twese Hamwe (Pro-Femmes) and its member NGOs brought pressure to bear on the process and carefully coordinated efforts with women parliamentarians and the Ministry of Gender and Women in Development.

Rwanda's new constitution was formally adopted in May 2003.⁸ It enshrines a commitment to gender equality. The preamble, for instance, cites various international human rights instruments and conventions to which Rwanda is a signatory, including specific reference to the 1979 Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). It also states a commitment to 'ensuring equal rights between Rwandans and between women and men without prejudice to the principles of gender equality and complementarity in national development'. Title One of the constitution also establishes, as one of its 'fundamental principles', the equality of Rwandans. This respect for equality is to be ensured in part by granting women 'at least' 30 percent of posts 'in all decision-making organs'.

It is important to note, however, that, although Rwanda's constitution is progressive in terms of equal rights, gender equality and women's representation, it is limiting in other important ways; specific concerns have been raised about restrictions on freedom of speech around issues of ethnicity.

The Quota System and Innovative Electoral Structures

Since the genocide, several innovative electoral structures have been introduced to increase the numbers of women in elected office.⁹ Towards the end of its transition period, Rwanda experimented with the representation of women in the Parliament. Two women were elected to the then unicameral legislature on the basis of descriptive representation, with a mandate to act on behalf of women's concerns. Those two women came not from political parties but from a parallel system of women's councils (described in more detail below) that had been established at the grass-roots level throughout the country.

The 2003 constitution increased exponentially the number of seats to be held by women in all structures of government.

The Senate

In the upper house of Rwanda's (now) bicameral legislature, the Senate, 26 members are elected or appointed for eight-year terms. Some members of the Senate are elected by provincial and sectoral councils, others are appointed by the president and other organs (e.g. the national university). Women, as mandated in the constitution, hold 30 percent of seats in the Senate.

The Chamber of Deputies

The lower house of the Rwandan Parliament is the *Chambre des Députés* (Chamber of Deputies). There are 80 members serving five-year terms, 53 of whom are directly elected by a proportional representation (PR) system. The additional seats are contested as follows: 24 deputies (30 percent) are elected by women from each province and the capital city, Kigali; two are elected by the National Youth Council; and one is elected by the Federation of the Associations of the Disabled.

The 24 seats that are reserved for women are contested in women-only elections, that is, only women can stand for election and only women can vote. The election for the women's seats was coordinated by the national system of women's councils and took place in the same week as the general election in September 2003. Notably, in addition to the 24 reserved seats in the Chamber of Deputies, the elections saw an additional 15 women elected in openly competed seats. Women thus had in total 39 out of 80 seats, or 48.8 percent.

The Women's Councils

The Ministry of Gender and Women in Development first established a national system of women's councils shortly after the genocide, and their role has since been expanded. The women's councils are grass-roots structures elected at the cell level (the smallest administrative unit) by women only, and then through indirect election at each successive administrative levels (sector, district, province). They operate in parallel to general local councils and represent women's concerns. The ten-member

councils are involved in skills training at the local level and in awareness-raising about women's rights. 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 links between the two systems.

Berthe Mukamusoni, a parliamentarian elected through the women's councils, explains the importance of this system as follows:

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.¹⁰

While the women's councils are important in terms of decentralization and grass-roots engagement, lack of resources prevents them from maximizing their impact and they are not consistently active throughout the country. Members of local women's councils are not paid, and because they have to volunteer in addition to performing their paid work and family responsibilities the councils are less effective than they could be. Nevertheless, women in these grass-roots councils have been successful in carving out new political space. And the 2003 constitution increased their importance by drawing on these structures to fill reserved seats for women in the Chamber of Deputies.

The Factors Giving Rise to Women's Increased Parliamentary Presence

The Women's Movement and Civil Society Mobilization

Immediately after the genocide, while society and government were in disarray, women's NGOs stepped in to fill the vacuum, providing a variety of much-needed services to the traumatized population. Women came together on a multi-ethnic basis to reconstitute the umbrella organization Pro-Femmes, which had been established in 1992. Pro-Femmes, which coordinated the activities of 13 women's NGOs in 1992, now coordinates more than 40 such organizations.¹¹ It has been particularly effective in organizing the activities of women, advising the government on issues of women's political participation, and promoting reconciliation.

Women in Rwanda's civil society have developed a three-pronged mechanism for coordinating their advocacy among civil society (represented by Pro-Femmes), the executive branch (Ministry of Gender and Women in Development), and the

legislative branch (Forum of Women Parliamentarians).

An example of the effectiveness of this mechanism is the process the Rwandan women's movement initiated around the ratification of the new constitution. To elicit concerns, interests and suggestions regarding a new constitution, Pro-Femmes held consultations with its member NGOs and women at the grass-roots level. They then met with representatives of the Ministry of Gender and Women in Development and the Forum of Women Parliamentarians to report members' concerns. Together the three sectors contributed to a policy paper that recommended specific actions to make the constitution gender-sensitive and increase women's representation in government, which was submitted to the Constitutional Commission. Once the draft constitution sufficiently reflected their interests, Pro-Femmes engaged in a mobilization campaign encouraging women to support the adoption of the document in the countrywide referendum.

Through the coordination mechanism that Pro-Femmes has forged with women in the executive and legislative branches of government, the women's movement has an increasingly powerful voice. A 2002 report commissioned by the US Agency for International Development (USAID) recognized the significant challenges faced by Rwandan civil society, including limited capacity, problems of coordination, and excessive control by the government,¹² but commended the significant role Pro-Femmes plays in shaping public policy. The study concluded that women's NGOs are the 'most vibrant sector' of civil society in Rwanda and that 'Pro-Femmes is one of the few organizations in Rwandan civil society that has taken an effective public advocacy role'.¹³ Its effectiveness is a result of a highly cooperative and collaborative relationship forged with women in government. Unfortunately, the close relationship has also compromised Pro-Femmes' independence and ability to criticize the government.

Changing Gender Roles

In addition to an effective women's movement, the dramatic gains for women in Parliament can also be traced to the significant changes in gender roles in post-genocide Rwanda. Women were targeted during the genocide on the basis not only of their ethnicity, but also of their gender: they were subjected to sexual assault and torture, including rape, forced incest and breast oblation. Women who survived the genocide witnessed unspeakable cruelty and lost husbands, children, relatives and communities. In addition to this violence, women lost their livelihoods and property, were displaced from their homes, and saw their families separated. In the immediate aftermath, the population was 70 percent female (women and girls).¹⁴ Given this demographic imbalance, women immediately assumed roles as heads of household, community leaders and financial providers, meeting the needs of devastated families and communities. The genocide forced women to think of themselves differently and in many cases develop skills they would not otherwise have acquired. Today, women remain a demographic majority in Rwanda, comprising 54 percent of the population and contributing significantly to the productive capacity of the nation.

The overwhelming burdens on women and their extraordinary contributions are very much part of the public discourse in Rwanda. In April 2003, speaking about the parliamentary elections, President Paul Kagame said, 'We shall continue to appeal to women to offer themselves as candidates and also to vote for gender sensitive men who will defend and protect their interests'. He continued, 'Women's under-representation distances elected representatives from a part of their constituency and, as such, affects the legitimacy of political decisions . . . Increased participation of women in politics is, therefore, necessary for improved social, economic and political conditions of their families and the entire country'.¹⁵

The Commitment of the Rwandan Patriotic Front

The Rwandan Government, specifically the ruling RPF, has made women's inclusion a hallmark of its programme for post-genocide recovery and reconstruction.¹⁶ This approach is novel in both intent and scope; it deserves further study in part because it contradicts the notion that the inclusion of women is solely a 'Western' value imposed upon developing countries.

The government's decision to include women in the governance of the country is based on a number of factors. The policy of inclusion owes much to the RPF's exposure to gender equality issues in Uganda, where many of its members spent years in exile. Uganda uses a system of reserved seats to guarantee women 20 percent of the seats in Parliament: one seat from each of the 56 electoral 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). Within its own ranks, too, women played a significant role in the success of the movement. They played critical roles from the RPF's early days as an exile movement through the years of armed struggle. Such involvement provided them with a platform from which to advocate for women's inclusion during the transitional phase and consolidate their gains in the new constitution.

The RPF's liberation rhetoric was embraced by its own members and was applied to the historic exclusion of women as well as the Tutsi minority; this gender-sensitivity is now government policy. As John Mutamba, an official at the Ministry of Gender and Women in Development explains, 'Men who grew up in exile know the experience of discrimination . . . Gender is now part of our political thinking. We appreciate all components of our population across all the social divides, because our country . . . [has] seen what it means to exclude a group'.¹⁷ RPF members who embraced notions of gender equality have informed the development of gender-sensitive governance structures in post-genocide Rwanda.

During the transitional period, before quotas were established in Rwanda, the RPF consistently appointed women to nearly 50 percent of the seats it controlled in Parliament. Other political parties lagged behind in their appointment of women, and therefore women never made up more than 25.7 percent of the Parliament during the transitional period.¹⁸

The RPF dominated the transitional government and consolidated its grip on power in the August 2003 post-transition election of President Paul Kagame and the installation of a new Parliament in October 2003. The RPF, together with its coalition, controls 73.8 percent of the openly contested seats in the Chamber of Deputies. The women's seats were not contested by political parties, but observers charge that a majority of the women in the reserved seats are also sympathetic to the RPF. Freedom House, in its most recent survey of nations, ranked Rwanda as 'not free', with concern about political rights and civil liberties.¹⁹ This puts Rwandan women and the women's movement in a precarious position, as they owe their ability to participate in democratic institutions to a political party that is less than fully democratic, and cannot be truly independent of the state.

Achievements and Challenges Ahead

In addition to performing all the functions their male counterparts do, women in Rwanda's Parliament have formed a caucus, the Forum of Women Parliamentarians, with international funding and support. This is the first such caucus in Rwanda, where members work together on a set of issues across party lines. Member of Parliament (MP) Connie Bwiza Sekamana explains, 'When it comes to the Forum, we [unite] as women, irrespective of political parties. So we don't think of our parties, [we think of] the challenges that surround us as women'.²⁰ The Forum has several roles: it reviews existing laws and introduces amendments to discriminatory legislation, examines proposed laws with an eye to gender sensitivity, liaises with the women's movement, and conducts meetings and training with women's organizations to sensitize the population to and advise about legal issues.

A key legislative achievement was the revoking of laws that prohibited women from inheriting land in 1999. Rwandan women parliamentarians, particularly the 24 who specifically represent the women's movement but also those who contested open seats and represent political parties, feel that it is their responsibility to bring a gender-sensitive perspective to legislating.

As elsewhere in the world, there are challenges related to descriptive representation. Many of the new parliamentarians are inexperienced legislators and have to overcome stereotypes about their (lack of) competence as leaders and their supposed naiveté, as well as some resistance to the fact that they owe their positions to the new quotas. There is an obvious status difference between those seats that are reserved for women and those that are gained in open competition with men, at both the local and the national levels.

It is also problematic, in the long term, to consider all Rwandan women a single constituency. Currently, the women's movement is represented most effectively by one organization, Pro-Femmes, and there is a great deal of consensus among women parliamentarians about the needs and priorities of women. In a mature democracy, however, women disagree on policies and desired political outcomes, even those, such as the use of quotas, which directly affect women's access to power. Perhaps because the

quotas are so new and because the dominant voices in the women's movement supported their introduction so vigorously, there has not been public dissent within the movement about their utility.

There is, however, a sense, as in many other parts of the world, that quotas, reserved seats and descriptive representation are only a first step. Aloisea Inyumba, former women's minister, explains that at this point in Rwanda's development the new electoral mechanisms in Rwanda are needed to compensate for women's historic exclusion: 'If you have a child who has been malnourished, you can't compare her to your other children. You have to give her a special feeding'.²¹

It also remains to be seen what impact women will have, particularly on those issues that are not traditionally 'women's issues'. These women carry a double burden, as they must find ways to insert a gender perspective into a new range of issues—foreign affairs, for example—and yet remain loyal to their constituency of women in a country where the basic development needs are so great and women still lag behind men in terms of rights, status, and access to resources and education.

Conclusion

The representation of women in Rwanda's Parliament can be seen in the larger context of two trends: the use of quotas in Africa; and the post-conflict situation. The rate of increase of numbers of women in Parliament has been faster in sub-Saharan Africa in the last 40 years than in any other region of the world, primarily through the use of quotas.²² And, according to the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU), in the last five years post-conflict countries have 'featured prominently in the top 30 of the IPU's world ranking of women in national parliaments', and these countries have been effective at using quotas and reserved seats to 'ensure the presence and participation of women in [their] newly-created institutions'.²³

The ten years since the Rwandan genocide have been ones of enormous change for all Rwandans, but most dramatically for women. Rwanda is still vastly underdeveloped and the great majority of Rwandan women are disadvantaged vis-à-vis men with regard to education, legal rights, health and access to resources. Furthermore, the nearly equal representation of men and women in Rwanda's Parliament has been achieved in a country that is less than democratic and where a single political party dominates the political landscape.

Despite these challenges, women are beginning to consolidate their dramatic gains, with the new gender-sensitive constitution of 2003 and parliamentary elections that saw them earn 48.8 percent of seats in the Chamber of Deputies. These successes were the result of the specific circumstances of Rwanda's genocide, the quota system, and a sustained campaign by the women's movement in Rwanda, in collaboration with women in government and with the explicit support of the Rwandan Patriotic Front. The Rwandan case provides us with examples of gender-sensitive policy making and innovative electoral mechanisms that could be models for other parts of the world.

Notes

- ¹ This case study draws on and excerpts previously published material by the same author. Powley, Elizabeth, 2003. *Strengthening Governance: The Role of Women in Rwanda's Transition*. Washington, DC: Women Waging Peace; and Powley, Elizabeth, 2005. 'Rwanda: La moitié des sièges pour les femmes au Parlement' [Rwanda: half the seats for women in Parliament], in Manon Tremblay (ed.). *Femmes et parlements: un regard international* [Women and parliaments: an international view]. Montreal: Remue-ménage.
- ² Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU), 2003. 'Rwanda Leads World Ranking of Women in Parliament', 23 October. See <<http://www.ipu.org/press-e/gen176.htm>>.
- ³ 'Africa: Rwanda: Government'. Nationmaster, <<http://www.nationmaster.com/country/rw/Government>>.
- ⁴ Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU), 1995. *Women in Parliaments 1945–1995: A World Statistical Survey*. Geneva: IPU.
- ⁵ Judith Kanakuze, personal interview, July 2003.
- ⁶ 'Legal and Constitutional Commission', <<http://www.cjcr.gov.rw/eng/index.htm>>.
- ⁷ Hart, Vivien, 2003. 'Democratic Constitution Making'. United States Institute of Peace, Special Report 107, <<http://www.usip.org/pubs/specialreports/sr107.html>>.
- ⁸ Constitution of the Republic of Rwanda, <http://www.cjcr.gov.rw/eng/constitution_eng.doc>.
- ⁹ For a more complete description of electoral mechanisms designed to increase women's participation, including triple balloting in the 2001 district-level elections, see Powley 2003, op. cit.
- ¹⁰ Berte Mukamusoni, personal interview, translated in part by Connie Bwiza Sekamana, July 2002.
- ¹¹ For more information on women's NGOs in Rwanda, see Newbury, Catharine, and Hannah Baldwin, 2001. 'Confronting the Aftermath of Conflict: Women's Organizations in Postgenocide Rwanda', in Krishna Kumar (ed.). *Women and Civil War: Impact, Organizations, and Action*. Boulder, Colo.: Lynne Rienner Publishers, pp. 97–128.
- ¹² 'Rwanda Democracy and Governance Assessment', produced for USAID by Management Systems International, November 2002, p. 35.
- ¹³ 'Rwanda Democracy and Governance Assessment', op. cit., p. 37.
- ¹⁴ Women's Commission for Refugee Women and Children, 1997. *Rwanda's Women and Children: The Long Road to Reconciliation*. New York: Women's Commission, p. 6.
- ¹⁵ 'Rwandan President Urges Women to Stand for Public Office'. Xinhua News Agency, 23 April 2003, <<http://www.xinhua.org/english/>>.
- ¹⁶ Rwandan Government, 'Good Governance Strategy Paper (2001)', <<http://www.rwanda1.com/government/president/speeches/2001/strategygov.htm>>.
- ¹⁷ John Mutamba, personal interview, July 2003.
- ¹⁸ Powley 2003, op. cit.

- ¹⁹ Freedom House, *Freedom in the World 2004*, <<http://www.freedomhouse.org/research/freeworld/2004/table2004.pdf>>.
- ²⁰ Connie Bwiza Sekamana, personal interview, July 2002.
- ²¹ Aloisea Inyumba, personal interview, July 2002.
- ²² Tripp, Aili Mari, 2004. 'Quotas in Africa', in Julia Ballington (ed.). *The Implementation of Quotas: Africa Experiences*, Stockholm: International IDEA.
- ²³ Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU), 2004. 'Women in Parliaments 2003: Nordic and Post-Conflict Countries in the Lead', <<http://www.ipu.org/press-e/gen183.htm>> (accessed 8 September 2004).