

## Women's Political Representation in Post-Conflict Rwanda: A Politics of *Inclusion* or *Exclusion*?

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### Abstract

Though references abound to Rwandan women holding the world's highest percentage of parliamentary representation at 56%, what is rarely addressed is the confluence of two opposing trends in Rwanda's post-conflict environment: that the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF)-led government has advocated for women's greater political *inclusion* under the premise that women will 'better' the political climate, while simultaneously *excluding* any form of political dissent or ethnic identification. This article ventures into uncharted territory by asking two questions: first, does the discourse surrounding the Government of National Unity's (GNU) campaign to increase women's participation in formal politics uncritically assume that women parliamentarians will have a *different* relationship to politics, paring women representatives' identities down to non-ethnic female subjects, seen only as promoting peaceful reconciliation? Secondly, given what external actors increasingly term an 'authoritarian state' that lacks political space, does the notion that women will change the political climate have any substantive *meaning* in post-genocidal Rwanda? The answers to such queries show that viewing the Rwandan case with a critical and gendered lens generates deeper meaning for how women political representatives' identities can be dangerously frozen and 'subjectified' in post-conflict contexts; particularly those intent on building 'national unity' by way of quieting dissent.

*Keywords:* Rwanda, women's political representation, post-conflict, genocide intersectionality

### Introduction

One need not look further than recent news headlines regarding the status of women in Rwanda to note the international community's proclamation of the nation as a 'beacon of hope' for gender equality in Sub-Saharan Africa.<sup>2</sup> Such reports range from claims that women in post-conflict Rwanda are now the most politically represented women on the planet, holding the world's highest percentage of female parliamentarians at 56%,<sup>3</sup> to assertions that Rwandan women are now leading the rehabilitation of a nation left in tatters after 1994's horrific genocide. What is rarely addressed, however, is the strange confluence of two opposing trends in Rwanda's post-conflict environment: that the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF)-led government has advocated for women's greater political *inclusion* under the premise that women will 'better' the political climate, while simultaneously *excluding* any form of political dissent or ethnic identification.

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<sup>2</sup> Burnet, Jennie (2008)

<sup>3</sup> Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) (2010); McCrummen, Stephanie (2008); UNIFEM (2008); Kimanuka, Oscar (2008); Anyango, Gloria (2008).

This article therefore ventures into uncharted territory by asking two questions: First, does the discourse surrounding the Government of National Unity's (GNU) campaign to increase women's participation in formal politics uncritically assume that women parliamentarians will have a *different* relationship to politics? If so, to what extent does the Rwandan government pare women representatives' identities down to non-ethnic female subjects, seen only as promoting peaceful reconciliation? Secondly, given what external actors increasingly term an authoritarian state, does the notion that women will change the political climate have any substantive *meaning* in post-genocidal Rwanda? If there indeed *is* a lack of political space in Rwanda today, how does one examine the claim made by one unnamed Rwandese civil servant that "[the RPF] puts women in the National Assembly because they know they [the women] will not challenge them?"<sup>4</sup>

The answers to such queries show that viewing the Rwandan case with a critical and gendered lens generates deeper meaning for how women political representatives' identities can be dangerously frozen and 'subjectified'<sup>5</sup> in post-conflict contexts; especially those intent on building 'national unity' by way of quieting dissent.

### **Part I: The 'New Politically Represented Woman' as 'Subject' in Post-Genocide Rwanda**

Women look out for their interests and those of their children; they have a vested interest in peace... we will gradually begin to get more national opportunities. And if we're there, it will make a difference- a big difference.

Rwandan Lieutenant Rose Kabuye, 2004, 'Women Waging Peace'<sup>6</sup>

In 1998, Francis Fukuyama wrote that increased women's political leadership would foster a more cooperative and less conflict-prone world.<sup>7</sup> While those in the poststructuralist feminist camp might cringe at the essentialising tone of this statement, it seems as if his assertion is a moot point - 'women'<sup>8</sup> have yet to test Fukuyama's supposition, for women still remain grossly underrepresented, constituting only 18.6% of parliaments worldwide.<sup>9</sup>

Yet the RPF-led government of this small central African nation has put Fukuyama's call to task, implementing a series of mechanisms to increase women's political participation so that women now hold the majority of seats in the Rwandan Parliament.<sup>10</sup> Much of the GNU's discourse that led to this dramatic rise in women's representation depends upon the concept that 'women as a group' have a *different* relationship to politics and that increasing their representation will lead to better

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<sup>4</sup> Longman, Timothy (2006), p. 148

<sup>5</sup> I am working off of Butler's (1993) reworking of Foucault's theory of 'subject formation.' Butler analyses the discursive process that leads to 'subjectification,' noting that there is no pre-representational subject and that is not produced through a simultaneous repudiation of identities and discursive logics. See Butler, Judith, 1993, p. 3, 10,11.

<sup>7</sup> As cited in Hunt, Swanee (2007), p. 109

<sup>9</sup> Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2010.

<sup>10</sup> Powley, Elizabeth (2005), p.154-5.

governance and a more egalitarian society. This can be seen in the ways the rhetoric surrounding the RPF's campaign for greater women's representation pares women's identities down to 'nonethnic' subjects who are more prone to 'build peace.'

## A. 'Difference' Feminism and Intersectional Identities

### Difference Feminism

In the discourse surrounding the GNU's campaign to increase women's political representation, there exists an uncritical assumption that Rwandese women representatives have a different relationship to politics and that their increased parliamentary presence will automatically improve the political climate. While this belief proceeds without sufficient interrogation in Rwanda, it has been one of the most disrupted concepts within Western feminist political theory, reaching back to the division between the 'difference' and 'equality' schools of feminist thought.<sup>11</sup> Those in the first camp have taken hold of the notion that women, by virtue of their capacity for motherhood, hold a sense of connectedness with others and therefore are more prone to transcend a "*political life dominated by a self-interested, predatory, individualism*" (Elshtain, 1982: 617.)<sup>12</sup> Those who utilise this 'difference' feminist argument to advocate for increased numbers of women in formal political life typically argue that the world would be more peaceful if women took the lead in creating policy, or as McAllister states, in 'reweaving the web of life.'<sup>13</sup>

The notion that women representatives are less self-interested and less prone to factionalisation becomes further heightened when it is contextualised in the post-conflict context of Rwanda. Therefore, the same 'difference' feminists who depict women politicians as being more 'peaceful' argue that women are inherently less warlike than men; that their maternalist pacifism engenders an aversion to war.<sup>14</sup>

On the other side of the feminist spectrum are those in the 'equality' school of thought, who believe that women who *do* become involved in formal politics will not put their 'femininity' above their particular political ideology; the implication being that women representatives will be just as prone to a self-interested and factionalised politics as 'political men.'<sup>15</sup> Hunt notes that the most visible female political leaders, including Indira Gandhi, Margaret Thatcher, and Golda Meir showed little interest in promoting issues of common concern to women.<sup>16</sup> One of the reasons 'equality' feminists have hesitated to utilise 'difference feminism' arguments is because such arguments often falsely assume that individuals can be grouped under the heading 'women' simply due to a shared set of anatomical attributes.<sup>17</sup>

As Dahlerup and Friedenvall have put it, "*One may argue that women as a group are both the Achilles' heel of the feminist movement and its raison d'être (Dahlerup and*

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<sup>11</sup> Lovenduski, Joni (2005), p. 2-4

<sup>12</sup> Elshtain, J.B. (1982), p. 617

<sup>13</sup> McAllister, Pam, (1982)

<sup>14</sup> Elshtain, J.B. 1983, p. 345

<sup>15</sup> Lovenduski, Joni, (2005), p.2

<sup>16</sup> Hunt, Swanee, (2007), p. 119

<sup>17</sup> Iris Marion Young defines 'women' as a *social group* that has a unique 'social perspective' due to its historically marginalised status. See I.M. Young (1989)

*Friedenvall, 31*).<sup>18</sup> The concept of ‘woman’ then becomes particularly paradoxical for those lobbying for women’s political participation, for in advocating women’s representation *by women*, referred to as ‘descriptive’ representation, proponents tend to elide other vectors of women’s ‘intersectional’ or multi-axial identities.

### **Intersectionality in Rwanda**

The theory of ‘intersectionality’<sup>19</sup> argues that those individuals dubbed ‘women’ may be more inclined to identify with other socially-attributed aspects of their persona, such as class, race, and ethnicity, to name a few.<sup>20</sup> Intersectionality is especially applicable to the Rwandan case, for as Sharlach writes, “In 1994’s Rwanda, a woman’s loyalty to her ethnic group almost always overrode any sense of sisterhood to women of the other major ethnic group (Sharlach, 1999, 388.)”<sup>21</sup> Yet, in the dense web of power relations that comprises contemporary Rwandan society, women’s *de facto* ethnic identification is shrouded under what Baines terms a ‘dark veil of silence.’<sup>22</sup> As Newbury and Baldwin have observed:

In Rwandan politics today it matters what a person’s (presumed) ethnic background is, where that person lived in Rwanda, and where that person came from if he or she is an exile who came home after the genocide.... Although Rwandan women have displayed a remarkable capacity to transcend differences and work together, distinctions based on ethnicity, class, region, place of origin, and life experiences remain salient (Newbury and Baldwin, 2000, p. 10).<sup>23</sup>

In all fairness, it is hardly surprising that the discourse surrounding women’s increased parliamentary participation in Rwanda fails to address such ethnic classification, as ethnicity is far beyond a ‘sensitive’ issue in the post-conflict state. Baines, who has written extensively on the intersection of ethnicity and gender in post-conflict Rwanda, writes that when she first embarked upon her fieldwork in the country, she was instructed by UN officials never to refer to Rwandese ethnic groups by name; only ‘old caseload returnees’ (Tutsi refugees in exile since 1959,) ‘new caseload returnees,’ (Hutu refugees who fled in 1994,) or ‘rescapes’ (Tutsi genocide survivors.)<sup>24</sup> Thus, in the void created by a deafening silence obscuring women representative’s ethnic identities, the ‘politically represented Rwandan woman’ is created as a new ‘subject’ to fill the non-ethnic space. Baines warns:

Ethnic tensions and discrimination are not transformed by policies of nonidentification; on the contrary, such a policy can make it more difficult to discern instances of discrimination. And so, while “new caseload returnees” and survivors might work alongside each other, tilling the soil together, lining up to participate in elections, they do so under a powerful panopticon where refusing to

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<sup>18</sup> Dahlerup and Friedenvall,(2005) , p.31

<sup>19</sup> Originally articulated by Kimberle Crenshaw (1989).

<sup>20</sup> Crenshaw, Kimberle (1989.)

<sup>21</sup> Sharlach, Lisa, 1999, p. 388

<sup>22</sup> Baines, Erin (2005), p.232

<sup>23</sup> Newbury, C and Baldwin, H (2000), p.10

<sup>24</sup> Baines, Erin (2005), p.230

at least mimic an embrace of the new national vision invites a likely violent outcome (Baines, 2005: 232).<sup>25</sup>

While Baines implies the dangers of the RPF's silencing of women representatives' intersectional identities, such essentialisation permeates the government's rhetoric for greater women's political representation.

## **B. RPF's Arguments for Increasing Women's Representation**

### **Women's Shared Experience of the Genocide**

Powley, a scholar who has written extensively on women's role in 'strengthening governance' in Rwanda, observes that the RPF often argues that women will have a different relationship to politics simply because they were disproportionately affected by the genocide itself:

In order to understand how women came to be 49% of Parliament, it is critical to understand that the planning and execution of, as well as the recovery from, the genocide were gendered (Powley, 2004, p.1-2)<sup>26</sup>

Evidence of the gendered nature of the genocide can be found in much of the Hutu extremist ideology used to promote the ethnic cleansing; portraying Tutsi women as seductresses who would use their sexuality to trick and entrap Hutu men, identifying even Hutus who married or associated with Tutsi women as traitors to their 'kind'.<sup>27</sup> Such discourse continued throughout the slaughter with the systemic use of rape as a weapon; as in many ethnic cleansings, rape was utilized as a means to humiliate and control the entire Tutsi population.<sup>28</sup>

The horrific killings of the genocide were carried out at an unparalleled pace, as more than 800,000 individuals were murdered in the span of only 100 days.<sup>29</sup> Though women did not participate in the genocide to the same degree as men, they were certainly not without blame, as women were both objects and agents of the genocide. According to an interview Sharlach conducted with genocide survivor Chantal Kayitesi:

There were some women who were very active in the genocide.... This shows that every time the woman is not a, not peaceful, like we think in our society. In the genocide, when the woman was not able to kill you, they refused you to go in the house. It was the...woman who refused other women to be in her house. If the husband accepted to put you in the house, the women refused. If you are

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<sup>25</sup> *ibid*, p. 232

<sup>26</sup> Powley, Elizabeth (2004), p.1-2. N.B. Powley writes in 2004, when women comprised 49% of the Rwandan parliament, at that point still notable as the only functional parliamentary gender parity in the world. In 2009, women comprise 56% of the Chamber of Deputies, the lower house of the Rwandan parliament, making it the only democratic decision-making body in the world in which women representatives outnumber the men.

<sup>27</sup> Nowrojee 1996; Powley, E (2004) p.3, Longman, Timothy (2006) p. 139.

<sup>28</sup> Nowrojee 1996

<sup>29</sup> *ibid*

going in the bush...they call the militia and say, "She is here." Women had a great role in the genocide here in Rwanda (Interview with Chantal Kayitesi, November 10, 1998)<sup>1</sup>

Yet, with the genocide's end in July of 1994, women were disproportionately burdened with rehabilitating what was left of the country. Women and girls - who at that point constituted 70 percent of the population- faced an almost insurmountable task in having to reweave decimated social structures and severed traditional networks. Women were left to assume multiple roles as heads of households, community leaders, and financial providers. They were quite literally left to pick up the pieces of their destroyed society, building shelters, adopting almost 50,000 orphans, and burying a near 1 million dead bodies.<sup>30</sup>

Thus, most Rwandans today acknowledge that women bore the brunt of the genocide, both in their sexual victimization and in their spearheading of Rwanda's social and economic reconstruction.<sup>31</sup> Furthermore, the lasting effects of the genocide on gender roles in contemporary Rwanda do not go unnoticed; today, women constitute a demographic majority in Rwanda at 54% of the population. Women head 35% of households, are primarily responsible for rearing the next generation of Rwandans, and produce the majority of the nation's agricultural output.<sup>32</sup> In sum, both in the immediate wake of the Rwandan genocide and today, women are seen as taking the lead in healing a nation permeated by loss and despair.

While the common experience of the genocide suggests that Rwandan women *will* have a different relationship to politics, the RPF has pared women's identities down to *women* representing *all Rwandan women* through its commitment to increasing women's political representation. This essentialisation dangerously elides women's *de facto* identifications as Hutu or Tutsi, as well as some of the more extremist women's roles in perpetrating genocidal violence.<sup>33</sup>

### **C. 'Women as Group': Rhetoric Prevalent in RPF Discourse Throughout Government and Civil Society**

#### **Constitution and 'Elections'**

Such essentialisation can be seen in the discourse surrounding the RPF's commitment to 'gender equality' as enshrined in 2003's constitution. The RPF first came to power in July of 1994, ending the genocide with its takeover of Kigali. By November of that year it had installed a 'Transitional National Parliament' that included ten women.<sup>34</sup> Over the next nine years, the number of women holding political office

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<sup>30</sup> Powley, Elizabeth, (2004), p.5.

<sup>31</sup> Faiola, Anthony (2008)

<sup>32</sup> Powley, Elizabeth (2004), p. 4

<sup>33</sup> Multiple scholars have found that certain women amongst the political elite were some of the most prominent perpetrators of the violence. Both Agathe Habyarimana, the President's wife, and Pauline Nyiramasuhuko, the female Minister of the Family and Promotion of Women were part of what was known as the 'little house,' or the small group of Hutu extremists who led the planning of the genocide. To this end, both women were complicit in encouraging the massacres of women and girls (Sharlach, Lisa (1999), p. 389; Nyiramasuko's name was taken from Ms. Magazine, 2005, p. 24.)

<sup>34</sup> Guichaoua, Andre 1995, pp.762-767

steadily increased to 25.7 percent just before the 2003 elections. Throughout the entirety of the transitional period, the GNU expressed a strong commitment to women's inclusion in politics, organizing 'women's councils' at the cell, sector, district, and provincial levels, establishing a Ministry of Gender, and implementing electoral gender quotas for the national parliament. The latter has become the most visible of such efforts, recently garnering an unprecedented 56% of seats for Rwandese women in the lower house of Parliament.<sup>35</sup>

Women representatives' demographic stronghold of the Rwandan parliament is partly the result of the GNU's commitment to women's political inclusion, as enshrined in Article 76 of the new Rwandan Constitution:

The Chamber of Deputies is composed of eighty (80) members consisting of:  
“... twenty-four (24) members of the *female sex* with two per Province and the City of Kigali elected by the Councils of Districts, of Cities, and of the City of Kigali, to which are added the Executive Committees of the women's organizations at the level of the Province, City of Kigali, Districts, and Sectors (The Constitution of Rwanda, 2003, p.18, *my emphasis*)”<sup>36</sup>

Yet the constitutional guarantee of gender equality still raises questions as to the substantive equality actually afforded through such mechanisms. Powley notes 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 (Powley, 2005: p.155)”

While Powley cautions against the constitutional restrictions on ethnic identifications and political dissent, one might question her assertion that the constitution supports 'gender equality'; that is, if 'gender' is taken as an analytical tool to examine all aspects of an individual's socially constructed identity, including her ethnic identification and even political leanings, and not as a mere synonym for 'woman.'<sup>37</sup> However, as scholars Devlin and Elgie found in a series of interviews with Rwandan MPs, though the interviewees often referred conscientiously to 'gender,' most seemed to use the term interchangeably with 'women.' As one MP put it explicitly, “*we say gender but we mean women*” (Devlin and Elgie, 2007:12).

### **'Women's Solidarity' Amongst Parliamentarians**

Another issue that emerged in Devlin and Elgie's study was the focus on 'female solidarity' between women parliamentarians.<sup>38</sup> These scholars repeatedly received unsolicited remarks referring to women's 'solidarity,' even though their study was crafted to examine the extent to which women's increased representation in Rwanda had affected any substantive change in policy outcome:

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<sup>35</sup> IPU, 2008

<sup>36</sup> The Constitution of Rwanda, 2003, p.18

<sup>37</sup> Squires, Judith (1999)

<sup>38</sup> Devlin & Elgie, (2007), p.12; Schwartz, Helle (2005) p.38

Several interviewees spontaneously and openly declared that they put the promotion of women ahead of party politics.<sup>39</sup> It was repeated in several of the interviews that the women were a team and acted as a unified lobby on gender issues (Devlin and Elgie, 2007, p.12)

Devlin and Elgie found that the maintenance of ‘female solidarity’ within the Rwandan parliament emerged as one of the female deputies’ utmost priorities.<sup>40</sup> In fact, some of the women MPs noted that they had tried to recruit women substitutes so as not to suffer a drop in ‘group’ numbers.<sup>41</sup>

Perhaps Rwandese women parliamentarians have most visibly demonstrated their strong commitment to ‘women’s solidarity’ through the Forum of Rwandan Women Parliamentarians (FFRP),<sup>42</sup> a women’s caucus formed in the mid-1990s.<sup>43</sup> The FFRP has worked closely with women’s civil society organizations such as Pro-Femmes on a number of different issues, including the revoking of pre-genocidal laws that had prohibited women from inheriting land.<sup>44</sup> Powley and Pearson demonstrate the role of the FFRP in bringing women deputies together to draft the 2006 bill combating gender-based violence. They note that the drafting process was “highly participatory” in that women parliamentarians capitalized upon a strong relationship with their female constituents to solicit input and sensitize citizens to the bill’s content.<sup>45</sup>

Certain advocates of special group representation for women might interject here to note that such a communicative relationship between women deputies and their constituents can actually function to *circumvent* charges that the identities of women representatives are being essentialised. Briefly, feminist political theorists such as Young and Mansbridge theorise that historically marginalised groups such as ‘women’ are best represented by ‘women’ *only if* ‘representation’ is viewed as a processual relationship between a woman representative and her female constituency, rather than a relationship of mere substitution.<sup>46</sup> Mansbridge argues that descriptive representation promotes *optimal* representation when placed in contexts of ‘historical communicative mistrust’:

Representatives and voters who share some version of a set of common experiences and the outward signs of having lived through those experiences can often read one another’s signals relatively easily and engage in relatively accurate forms of shorthand communication (Mansbridge, 2001: 21).

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<sup>39</sup> For example, Devlin & Elgie’s interviews with Mukandora, Deputy Berthe Mukamusoni interview, 26 June 2006, and Deputy Esperance Mwiza interview, 28 June 2006.

<sup>40</sup> Devlin and Elgie, 2007, p.12

<sup>41</sup> Devlin and Elgie, 2007, p.12

<sup>42</sup> *Forum des Femmes Rwandaises Parlementaires* Powley and Pearson (2007), p. 6

<sup>43</sup> Longman, Timothy, 2006, p.145

<sup>44</sup> Powley, E (2004)

<sup>45</sup> Powley, Elizabeth and E. Pearson, E (2007), pp.17-21

<sup>46</sup> Young, I.M. (1997); Mansbridge, J. (2001). P.19

One could construe Rwandan women's common experience of the genocide as an instance in which such a processual definition of 'representation' between a woman representative and her female constituency would circumvent Mansbridge's 'historical communicative mistrust,' particularly in light of the sexual violence women suffered from at the hands of men. Yet the question 'mistrust of whom' still remains in the post-genocidal Rwandan case; if Mansbridge bases her promotion of women's descriptive representation on women's historical oppression by, and subsequent mistrust of men, can this theory apply in a post-genocidal context in which Hutu extremist women were also perpetrators of genocide launched against Tutsi and moderate Hutu women?

## **Part II. Utilisation of the 'Politically Participatory Rwandan Female Subject' in an Increasingly Authoritarian State**

Now fourteen years after the genocide, Rwanda's 'Government of National Unity' disseminates rhetoric abundant with references to 'democracy' and 'reconciliation' whilst embarking upon policies pointing to a dictatorial regime intent on the exclusion of political dissent and the consolidation of power.<sup>47</sup> Paradoxically, the RPF's 'democratisation' discourse has relied heavily upon the increased *inclusion* of women in its parliamentary ranks alongside the systemic *exclusion* of ethno-political dissent.<sup>48</sup> As aforementioned, the RPF's promotion of women's greater representation has been grounded in the assumption that the 'nonethnic woman representative' as *subject* will have a different relationship to politics, and therefore that women's greater inclusion will 'better' the post-conflict political climate. While the regime's cursory usage of the 'difference' feminist argument is problematic in that it falsely freezes women's intersectional identities, this utilisation is further compounded with the RPF's implicit and uncritical coupling of women's increased parliamentary presence with 'the guise of democratic transition.

The GNU has silenced both political dissent and ethnic identification, as demonstrated by the RPF's numerous human rights abuses and systemic lack of political space. Furthermore, the RPF has tethered women's greater political representation with the process of 'democratisation,' which is problematic for two reasons. First, women's much-touted attainment of more than fifty percent of the Rwandan parliament has in effect been the result of a non-democratic regime's promotion of 'gender equality,' as will be discussed below. Secondly, though it is too soon to decipher whether women's demographic stronghold of the Rwandan parliament will lead to an opening up of political space, it is safe to say that even the 2003 elections' ushering in of the world's only functional gender parity has had little impact on the RPF's *exclusion* of ethnopolitical dissent. This is evidenced by the fact that even though women have constituted a critical mass within the lower house of parliament since 2003, there have been no substantial changes in policy outcomes that move beyond 'women's issues,' or that disrupt the RPF's agenda. These argumentative strands can be woven together to seriously question RPF assertions that women's greater presence has led to a greater tolerance of difference, a higher propensity to build and maintain peace, and an automatic translation to the advancement of democratic ideals.

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<sup>47</sup> Reyntjens, Filip (2004), p. 177

## A. RPF's Increasingly Authoritarian Practices under the guise of 'Democratisation'

### The Rise of A Single-Party State

In the early 1980s, a group of exiled Tutsis residing in Uganda joined hands to form the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF), the political arm of the Rwandan Patriotic Army (RPA), which in 1990 would fall under the leadership of General Paul Kagame, now the President of Rwanda.<sup>49</sup> When the RPF took over Kigali in early July of 1994 to end the genocide, it initially showed a great commitment to power-sharing between Hutus and Tutsis, creating a multiparty transitional government entitled the 'Government of National Unity.' This first government included both Hutu and Tutsis in high-ranking positions; the president, prime minister and ministers of justice, interior, and foreign affairs were Hutu, while the speaker of the national assembly was Tutsi. Yet this diverse composition never made it past the infancy stages of the transitional government; in 1995, five of the most illustrious Hutu in the government resigned in protest due to what they claimed was a lack of substantive power.<sup>50</sup>

Even if one were to apply a skeptical lens to such claims, it would be hard to argue against overwhelming evidence that power has increasingly been concentrated in the hands of the RPF. A number of amendments unilaterally made by the RPF have introduced a strong executive headed by President Paul Kagame and have redrawn the composition of parliament so that the RPF now dominates the government.<sup>51</sup> For example, a study conducted by Gakusi and Mouzer finds that the RPF now occupies a disproportionately large portion of governmental posts.<sup>52</sup>

*-“Of Rwanda’s 12 préfets, 7 are Tutsi, there are 5 ‘returnees’, and 11 of the 12 préfets are members of the RPF;”*

*-“Of the 12 Commissioners on the NURC, 9 are Tutsi, and there are 4 ‘returnees’;*

*“Of the 22 Supreme Court judges, 14 are Tutsi and 15 are ‘returnees’<sup>53</sup>*

In all fairness, one must concede that the RPF inherited a devastated country rife with security concerns, in which Reyntjens argues necessitated a trade-off between control and freedom:

...the RPF initially seemed to waver between, on the one hand, political openness and inclusiveness (witness the setting up of a government of national union and the return to Rwanda of a number of non-RPF civilian and military office-holders) and, on the other, a violent mode of management and discriminatory

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<sup>49</sup> Gourevitch, Philip (1998), p. 210

<sup>50</sup> Longman, Timothy (2006), p.146.

<sup>51</sup> Reyntjens, Filip (2004), p. 178

<sup>52</sup> As cited in Zorbas, Eugenia, 2004. Also see International Crisis Group, (2001)

<sup>53</sup> Gakusi and Mouzer, 28, “Tableau 2: Appartenance ethnique et politique de hauts fonctionnaires et de responsables d’entreprises,” as cited in Eugenia Zorbas, (2004), p.44. International Crisis Group, (2002), p.

practices (witness the large number of civilians killed by the RPF...(Reyntjens, p.179.)<sup>54</sup>

Yet since the initial stages of the transitional government, the RPF-dominated 'Government of National Unity' has moved away from ethnic inclusion and political openness, leaning increasingly towards a policy of discrimination rife with human rights abuses.

### **'National Unity': A Guise for 'Tutsification' and Exclusion of Political Dissent?**

The papering over of women representatives' *de facto* identities in today's Rwanda should give the international community great cause for concern. However, it must also be noted that a resounding silence has been imposed over *any* ethnic cleavages that, for all intents and purposes, still exist amongst Rwandese citizens. In line with the RPF's ideological promotion of 'national unity,' a new identity has gained a foothold throughout every aspect of social life; that of the *Banyarwanda*; or the unified 'people of Rwanda.' This new identity of 'national unity' has been part and parcel of the Rwandan government's self-proclaimed move towards 'democratisation.' In addition to the RPF's essentialisation of the 'woman representative' as the nonethnic and politically conciliatory '*Banyarwanda* subject,' the regime has harnessed this identity as a means for moving beyond what President Kagame articulates as the:

...prolonged periods of corrupt and repressive regimes [in Rwanda that] saw the entrenchment of 'divide and rule' as the principle of governing... (Baines, 228).<sup>55</sup>

Any form of dissent that threatens this *Banyarwanda* identity is swiftly outlawed, as the RPF increasingly charges any individual who expresses disagreement with GNU policies 'divisionist' and subsequently a *genocidaire*.<sup>56</sup> This governmental policy is exemplified through a number of high-ranking politicians who have expressed dissent in the past and have since been quieted. For example, when former President and Hutu RPF member Pasteur Bizimungu attempted to set up a new political party in 2001, he was placed under house arrest and accused of supporting genocide.<sup>57</sup> Another voice of dissent that has since been silenced was that of former MDR<sup>58</sup> leader and independent presidential candidate Faustin Twagiramungu, who served as Prime Minister in Rwanda's first post-genocide transition government.<sup>59</sup> As one of the Hutu leaders who had resigned from the government in 1995 in protest over what he claimed was a lack of substantive power, Twagiramungu attempted to run for the presidency in the 2003 elections until he was disallowed from campaigning and subjected to a very public 'shaming' in which he was accused as a *genocidaire* sympathizer.<sup>60</sup>

As *The Economist* recently reported:

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<sup>54</sup> Reyntjens, p. 179

<sup>55</sup> Baines, Erin, interview with Paul Kagame, 2000

<sup>56</sup> Longman, Timothy (2006), p. 146, Frontline, (2005,) p.8

<sup>57</sup> Longman, Timothy (2006), p. 146; ICG (2001), p.22

<sup>58</sup> 'MDR' stands for '*Mouvement démocratique républicain*,' the main opposition party, was critical of the RPF even as early as 1994 (Reyntjens, 178-9).

<sup>59</sup> Zorbas, Eugenia, p. 43; ICG, Reyntjens, p.180

<sup>60</sup> Zorbas, Eugenia, p.43; Longman, Timothy (2006), p. 147;

...[Kagame's] prime goal is to maintain his Tutsi government in power until it is certain that the Tutsi people will not be massacred again. Anyone who poses the slightest political threat to the regime is dealt with ruthlessly (*The Economist*, 2008)<sup>61</sup>

While the GNU's much-touted moves towards democratic and decentralised governance exist on a nominal level, many reports confirm the 'disappearances' of those who have attempted political or ideological moves outside of central governmental control.<sup>62</sup> Human Rights Watch has compiled a long list of 'disappearances' of Rwandan citizens accused of 'divisionism,'<sup>63</sup> including the disappearance of Dr. Leonard Hitimana, an MDR deputy. Though the RPF has repeatedly referred to the genocidal nature of the MDR party, which has since been banned, Dr. Hitimana is widely known for having tried to save Tutsis during the genocide and has also testified against accused *genocidaires* at the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda. Furthermore, scores of ordinary citizens, both Hutu and Tutsi alike, have been imprisoned and held incommunicado, without consideration for due process of law. Though such human rights abuses have long been perpetrated against Hutu citizens, the RPF is now also targeting Tutsi survivors of the genocide who express any sort of opposition to RPF politics.<sup>64</sup>

Forums within civil society that have expressed opposition to government policies have also been openly targeted by the regime and subsequently subsumed under RPF control. In fact, the fusing of civil society with the RPF has reached such epic proportions that now any activity at the grassroots level has been rendered completely without autonomy from governmental control. For example, Longman found that in 2004 the only remaining civil society organization left in Rwanda was the human rights organization 'League for the Protection of Human Rights in Rwanda,' or LIPRODHOR. However, after the leaders of LIPRODHOR were accused of supporting divisionism by a parliamentary commission established to target such organizations, it was effectively disbanded.<sup>65</sup>

While these are hardly the practices of what a conventional understanding of 'democracy' would term a democratic state, many external and internal actors have dubbed Rwanda as on the path towards 'democratisation'; a problematic characterization that has grave implications for greater women's representation in Rwanda today.

## **B. What is the Meaning of Greater Women's Representation in a Single-Party State?**

### **Rwandese Women Representatives as Promoting 'Democratisation'?**

Most external observers note that the Rwandan government's claims of successfully moving the nation forward along the path towards democratic governance

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<sup>61</sup> *The Economist*, 2008.

<sup>62</sup> Baines, Erin 2005, p. 233, Human Rights Watch, (2000) 'Assassination of Assiel Kabera and Murder of Antoinette Kagaju'

<sup>63</sup> Reyntjens finds that RPF charges of 'divisionism' were defined as "being in opposition to or even simply expressing disagreement with government policies (Reyntjens, 2004, p. 184).

<sup>64</sup> Human Rights Watch, '2000' intro

<sup>65</sup> Longman, Timothy (2006), p. 148-9

are based on Huntington's 'transition paradigm' of 'democratisation.'<sup>66</sup> The 'transition paradigm,' canonical for political scientists and international development practitioners alike, assumes that a nation undergoing political transition will proceed towards democratic governance when democratic rule, freedom, good governance, and the rule of law are able to trump authoritarianism, oppression, human rights abuses, and corruption.<sup>67</sup> Yet in light of the RPF's oppressive practices, *inter alia* human rights abuses and quieting of political dissent, the current authoritarian nature of the regime hardly falls within the parameters of democratic governance.

Multiple scholars see women's greater representation in both civil society and democratic decision-making bodies as harbingers of democratic governance.<sup>68</sup> Jaquette notes that multilateral and bilateral donors are exerting an increasing amount of pressure on developing countries to increase women's political participation, particularly on nations emerging from conflict such as Rwanda. Women's political participation is seen as a means of promoting this 'transition paradigm' and subsequently for securing its status as a 'donor darling'<sup>69</sup> for procuring international aid.<sup>70</sup> It can be said that the RPF has utilised women's greater degree of political representation in part as a guise for other aspects of the 'transition paradigm' in which it has failed. These failures can be exemplified in three particular instances: the 2003 elections, or the very way in which women first came to occupy half of Rwanda's parliament;<sup>71</sup> women's complicity in the fusion of civil society with the government; and women parliamentarians' inability to promote tolerance for ethnic and political dissent.

### **The Parliamentary 'Elections' of 2003**

According to Reyntjens, "...the parliamentary elections confirmed the image of a cosmetic operation for international consumption" (Reyntjens, p. 186). International observers reported that the parliamentary elections were marred by the manipulation of ballot-box stuffing, lack of secrecy of the vote, and a lack of transparency in the counting procedure.<sup>72</sup> For example, the EU Observation Mission questioned the legitimacy of the RPF's garnering 40 out of the 53 seats up for contestation, pointing out that the RPF had dominated most of the seats already.<sup>73</sup> With the RPF winning two-thirds of parliamentary seats, the majority of remaining posts went to the Liberal Party (PL-10%), and the Social Democratic Party (PSD-12%.) Multiple sources have confirmed that these are the only other significant parties outside of the RPF coalition, both of which are

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<sup>66</sup> Huntington, Samuel, 1991.

<sup>67</sup> Reyntjens, Filip (2006), p.1103; Burnet, Jennie (2008), p. 361;

<sup>68</sup> Carothers, Thomas (2002), p. 53; Jaquette, Jane (2003), p. 332

<sup>69</sup> Beswick, Danielle (2007)

<sup>70</sup> Women's political participation as a condition of international development aid, while increasingly utilized, is by no means new. See Carothers, 1999: p.53

<sup>71</sup> It must be noted here that as of the elections held from 15-18 September, 2008, women won 56% of seats in the Chamber of Deputies, though it is too soon to decipher whether this majority will affect any substantive change in policy that falls outside of the RPF's agenda. This discussion, therefore, reflects only those policy changes- or lack thereof- that have occurred since the last elections held in 2003; one in which women won 56% of seats within the Chamber of Deputies- then the world's only functional parliamentary gender parity.

<sup>72</sup> 'Déclaration préliminaire. Le calme et l'ordre règnent, la démocratie n'en est pas pour autant pleinement assurée' (Kigali, 3 October 2003) as cited in Reyntjens, (2004), p. 186

<sup>73</sup> Longman, Timothy (2006), p.144

rarely critical of the RPF and typically work in tandem with them.<sup>74</sup> As Reyntjens contends, “all the elected candidates form part of one and the same alliance (Reyntjens, 2004: p.186.)” Longman supports Reyntjens’ statement by asserting that the Rwandan parliament cannot be considered a true forum for debate; rather, it can be characterised as a thin guise for total government control.<sup>75</sup>

The systemic lack of political space and diversity in Rwanda can also be found in the fusion of grassroots organizations with the Rwandan government itself. For example, the amalgamation of women’s civil society organizations (CSOs) with the Rwandan government cements women representatives’ *de facto* complicity with a regime that has painted a veneer of ‘democracy’ over distinctly undemocratic processes. As Baines finds:

’Partnerships’” between women’s organizations, grassroots associations, and the GNU problematically fuse civil society to the new Rwandan state, and the government’s vision of a unitary, nonethnic nation. As a result, civil society has virtually no space in which to engage in dialogue necessary for recognizing and moving beyond historical differences that have so violently excluded different ethnic groups in the past (Baines, 2005, 221.)

In concluding that women did not attain nearly fifty percent of the Rwandan parliament via a fully democratic process, nor that there exists room within women’s civil society for the promotion of ethnic tolerance or political freedom in Rwanda, how must one assess the RPF’s claim that women’s greater political representation automatically furthers the country along a path towards ‘democratisation’? The only other way in which this claim could be validated would be if one were to prove that women representatives have even minutely destabilized the authoritarian status quo within parliament itself.

### **Substantive Change in Policy Outcomes?**

In a study examining the effect of women’s increased representation in the Rwandan parliament, Devlin and Elgie found that Rwandese women MPs had a different political ‘style’ than men- working more closely with grassroots women and placing more of an emphasis on ‘female solidarity’ when working to pass particular pieces of legislation. Women MPs have worked closely with women’s CSOs to add new ‘women’s issues’ to the policy agenda, such as HIV/AIDS, a Gender-Based Violence amendment, and increased property rights for Rwandese women. Yet Devlin and Elgie found little evidence that women’s increased representation had augmented policy outcomes to any significant extent, e.g. to any level that moves outside of the RPF’s policy parameters.

This is not to say that women’s increased representation in Rwanda has been without value. The specific pieces of legislation women MPs *have* spearheaded are of great consequence to the women of the country, as these legal achievements include important milestones such as the 2003 Inheritance Act that eradicated pre-genocidal legal restrictions on women’s rights to inherit land outside of their fathers’ or husbands’ approval.<sup>76</sup> In addition, Devlin and Elgie found that some of the more experienced

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<sup>74</sup> <sup>74</sup> Longman, Timothy (2006), p.144; Reyntjens, Filip (2004) p. 186; ICG (2002)

<sup>75</sup> Longman, 2006, p. 148

<sup>76</sup> *ibid*

women MPs have actually spent *less* time working on ‘women’s issues,’ so that “...some women are moving to become ‘parliamentarians’ rather than constituency workers (Devlin and Elgie, 2007: p.11).” While the legislative attainments of Rwandese women MPs should not be discounted, it is important to note that their successes have primarily focused upon reforms of benefit to *women*. This is hardly surprising in a system dominated by the RPF, as the lack of political freedom severely limits women’s ability to influence policy seen as running counter to the RPF’s agenda.<sup>77</sup>

To give a contrasting argument due consideration, some scholars have defended the RPF’s efforts for greater inclusion of women in Rwandese political life. For example, Powley attempts to debunk the notion that the RPF could be including women “...as a means of diverting attention from the absence of more ethnically plural and representative government” (Powley, 2004, p.8.). She argues that if the decentralisation programme that has already been initiated is allowed time to flourish, there is no way that the government could remain ethnically exclusive. Yet, folding back to the previous argument, this ethnic exclusion is exactly what *is* occurring in Rwanda, through both a ‘Tutsification’ and ‘RPF-ization’ of political power.<sup>78</sup> If the population of Rwanda today is 85% Hutu, how can a government that is dominated by a party ruled by Tutsi elite be considered ‘representative’? Recounting the Gakusi and Mouzer study, alongside multiple other sources that confirm this ‘Tutsification’ of political power in Rwanda,<sup>79</sup> what does it mean to praise a parliament that prides itself on ‘gender equality’ whilst increasingly excluding those of ‘new caseload refugee’ dissent? Aren’t women representatives not only ‘women,’ but also ‘Hutu,’ also ‘Tutsi,’ also invested in protecting human rights and the freedom to express independent political belief?

### **Conclusion: Equality vs. Difference; Inclusion vs. Exclusion**

The RPF’s contrasting drives for ‘women’s *inclusion*’ and ‘politico-ethnic *exclusion*’ strike a familiar chord within feminist political theory’s long-running, love-hate relationship with ‘equality’ and ‘difference.’ On the one hand, feminists *should* be at the ready with praise for Rwanda’s attainment of the world’s only functional parliamentary gender parity, as it seemingly overnight has accomplished the ‘gender equality’ feminists in Western democracies have been working towards for decades. On the other hand, some feminists might frown upon the relatively undemocratic means by which Rwandan women have ascended into the lofty halls of formal politics, as well as the way in which the RPF has pared women down to nonethnic subjects who are fundamentally driven to create peace and reconciliation.

The intent of this discussion is not merely to criticise the RPF’s essentialisation of women representatives’ identities, as such a critique could be launched at most pushes for women’s greater political inclusion in Western democracies today. However, there is merit in highlighting the ways that the Rwandan government has boosted the identity-axis of ‘woman’ up, while sweeping that of ‘Hutu’ or ‘Tutsi’ under the proverbial rug. Furthermore, the applicability of what Western feminist political theory has developed regarding the discourses of ‘difference’ and ‘equality’ *vis-à-vis* women’s increased

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<sup>77</sup> Longman, Timothy (2006), p. 149

<sup>78</sup> Reyntjens, Filip (2004), p. 187

<sup>79</sup> Longman, Timothy (2006); Reyntjens (2004): p. 188; Baines, Erin, (2005) Human Rights Watch, (2000), International Crisis Group, (2002) Zorbas, Eugenia (2004)

political representation remains questionable when used as a lens to examine the Rwandan case. One must keep in mind that the canonical discourses on 'equality' and 'difference' have been theorised in stable democratic contexts; e.g. not in a fledgling democracy such as Rwanda whose government must strike a balance between tolerance of ethnopolitical *dissent* and a disavowal of ethnic hatred and discrimination. The Rwandan post-conflict environment, therefore, leads to new paths of investigation in terms of how such theories can be destabilised and regenerated to further an understanding of women's political representation in non-Western contexts.

In querying the extent to which the RPF supports women's increased political representation because it assumes women representatives will be 'malleable' enough not to destabilize the authoritarian status quo, this discussion has come full circle back to the discourses of 'equality' and 'difference.' The RPF has been mistaken in appealing to a fixed, biologically determinist conception of 'woman' in its campaign to increase women's political representation. This is not only because the GNU has pared women representatives' multi-axial identities down to unilateral 'peaceful' and 'nonethnic' female subjects, it has also banked upon women's 'different' relationship to politics in order to render their supplication to authoritarian rule.

To argue against the RPF's utilisation of the 'difference' feminist school of thought to boost women's greater political participation is not intended to lessen the importance of Rwandan women's shared experience of a *gendered* genocide. Often those who take the opposing stance to 'difference feminist' arguments fall prey to the false pretence of arguing for women's equal political participation under a banner of 'gender-neutrality;' an abstract notion of citizenship that many feminist political theorists view as the root cause of the continuing andocentrism of modern day political institutions.<sup>80</sup> The reality of the Rwandan case is that women *have* suffered the horrors of the genocide 'as women;' but they have also suffered through the systematic butchering of their people as 'Hutus', as 'Tutsis'; as victims *and* perpetrators of the killings; a fact that is all too forgotten in Rwanda's contemporary landscape of a 'unified sameness.'

What is more troubling than the 'equality' and 'difference' debate within feminist circles, however, is the realisation that the flag of 'gender equality' in Rwanda is waved high with flying colours- while calls to 'ethnic tolerance' and 'political freedom' are simultaneously shrouded under a dark veil of silence. Brown in particular has wondered why the 'woman question' is so frequently addressed alongside references to 'equality' while discourses of ethnicity are relegated to the sphere of 'tolerance.' She concludes that while the discourse of 'equality' most often assumes an umbrella of 'sameness' under which sexual difference can be subsumed, the rhetoric of 'tolerance' is employed to control an ethnic 'difference' that is seen as more threatening to a unified nation.<sup>81</sup> Brown's observation has an *almost* perfect fit with the Rwandan case - Rwandese women representatives have been essentialised under a 'unified sameness,' as the epitome of the female *Banyarwandan* subject seen as promoting peace, yet have not been constructed as 'different' enough to destabilise the RPF's tight grip over state power. In contrast, ethnic identification has been discursively constructed as a force so dangerous that it threatens

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<sup>80</sup> Phillips, Anne (1999)

<sup>81</sup> Brown, Wendy, (2004) p. 1

the very security of the 'new' and 'unified' Rwanda- here misaligning with Brown in that ethnicity is not only not 'tolerated;' it is *disavowed*.

In a society such as post-conflict Rwanda, in which the discursive construction of gender is inextricably linked with ethnopolitical cleavages, one should take pause to think on whether the goal of 'gender equality' has been *substantively* achieved in the world's only democratic-decision making body in which women outnumber men. For aren't 'women' also 'Hutu,' also 'Tutsi'? Don't they have the 'equal' right to express political dissent, even if it goes against the RPF's agenda? If 'gender equality' *vis-à-vis* women's political representation is to be attained in Rwanda, women need to be afforded the political space to transform the oppressive policies of the single-party regime. 'Women' can unite together to transform the Rwandese political climate; not as 'women,' not as 'nonethnic' subjects who express a maternal altruism towards all, but as individuals coming together to further the ideals of democratic freedom. Veneranda Nzambazamariya, the Rwandan winner of the Millennium Peace Prize for Women, spoke these words to women survivors in the immediate aftermath of the genocide, though they might be more applicable today: "*Let yourselves be consoled, you have been sacrificed by systems it is necessary to change. Unite so as to transform problems into opportunities for action.*"<sup>82</sup>

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<sup>82</sup> As quoted in Baines, Erin, (2005), p. 220

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## Endnotes