Gender Equality Policies in Rwanda: Public Relations or Real Transformations?

Petra Debusscher and An Ansoms

A later version of this article has been published by Development and Change, Vol. 44, No. 5 (2013)

ABSTRACT

This article examines Rwanda's gender equality policies with the intention to contribute to the ongoing debate in the literature on the meaning of gender equality initiatives in authoritarian states. The article evaluates the transformative potential of Rwanda's gender equality policies with reference to deep-rooted societal norms and practices within which gender inequalities are embedded. To this end, the article draws on in-depth interviews conducted in Rwanda with a range of stakeholders, as well as on documentary research. First, we explore the factors informing the Rwandan commitment to gender equality. Second, we discuss the positive developments this has brought about. We then distinguish five trends that threaten the transformative potential of Rwandan gender equality policies. We conclude that while a strong political will and target-driven policies offer opportunities for promoting gender equality, the transformative potential is jeopardized by (1) the dominance of an underlying economic rationale; (2) the neglect of the 'invisible labour' of women; (3) the formalistic implementation of gender policies and their focus on quantitative results; (4) the limited scope for civil society voices to influence policy; and (5) the lack of grassroots participation.

INTRODUCTION

The Rwandan genocide of 1994 is carved in our memories as one of the defining tragedies of the twentieth century. In the span of merely three months, at least half a million Tutsis and moderate Hutus were killed in a 'minutely prepared and callously executed' slaughter organized by a ruling group of 'Hutu Power' extremists (Pottier, 2002: 9: see also Des Forges, 1999).

Acknowledgements
The authors gratefully acknowledge the helpful comments received from the anonymous reviewers, as well as the respondents who participated in the interviews. They also thank the Research Foundation Flanders (FWO) for an international travel grant which made this research possible.

The Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) ended the genocide by defeating the ruling government's army and installing a new government. Observers have praised the Rwandan government for the speed at which the state was rebuilt and the delivery of basic services such as health, education and infrastructure was resumed. Today Rwanda boasts an efficient technocratic government, economic growth, low corruption levels and an ambitious economic modernization agenda which aims to lift Rwanda from a 'low-' to a 'medium-income country' (UNDP, 2007; World Bank, 2010). Other trends have been less encouraging, with several authors expressing their concern about an authoritarian state that restricts political liberties (Longman, 2011; Reyntjens, 2006, 2011). Freedom House ranks Rwanda as 'Not Free' and recorded 'a downward trend' as a result of the increased repression of 'opposition politicians, journalists, and civil society activists in the run-up to [the] deeply flawed August 2010 presidential election' (Freedom House, 2011: 15, 20). Since the elections, pressure on opposition political parties and civil society (see Longman, 2011; Reyntjens, 2011) has continued.

On the positive side, however, the government of Rwanda has created a favourable environment for enhancing gender equality. From early on, it has publicly expressed a strong commitment to expanding women's rights, and has taken numerous steps to increase women's political participation (Longman, 2006). However, concerns have been voiced about the actual 'significance of women's high levels of representation in parliament and other governmental institutions given the increasingly authoritarian nature of the Rwandan state since 1994' (Longman, 2006: 146). The hope remains that it will 'transform the nature of politics in Rwanda' (Longman, 2006: 145) and lead to 'meaningful participation' of women in the long term (Burnet, 2008: 361). However, at the same time, many doubts remain.

While existing literature focuses mainly on the significance of the increased political participation of women, this article will focus on Rwanda's broader gender equality policies and evaluate their transformative potential. *Transformative potential* refers to the policies' capacity to address the deeply ingrained societal norms and practices within which gender inequalities are embedded. The approach focuses on gender without dislodging women as the central subject; it recognizes that improving women's status requires an analysis of social and power relations between women and men, as well as the commitment and cooperation of men (Debusscher, 2011). A prerequisite for the 'transformation' of the development agenda is for

women, who are affected by development interventions, or their organizations, to have a voice '[in shaping] the objectives, priorities and strategies of development' (Jahan, 1995: 127). Such an agenda-setting approach 'implies the transformation and reorientation of existing policy paradigms, changing decision-making processes, prioritizing gender equality objectives and rethinking policy ends' (Walby, 2005: 323). A transformative approach is therefore different from an 'integrationist approach' which addresses 'gender issues within existing development policy paradigms' (Beveridge and Nott, 2002: 300) and promotes gender equality 'as a way of more effectively achieving existing policy goals' (Walby, 2005: 323).

An important aspect of transformative potential entails improving the 'ability on the part of poor women to question, analyse and act on the structures of patriarchal constraint in their lives' (Kabeer, 2005: 15). It is 'too simple to assume that the participation of women will lead directly to fundamental change in itself' and transform 'the hegemonic order' (Verloo, 2005: 348). This is because 'under conditions of inequality, deliberative processes will tend to serve dominant groups, and subordinated groups will not get the opportunity to properly think through and articulate their interests' (ibid.). In other words, the participation of women is a necessary but not sufficient requirement for transformation and countering 'ongoing hegemonization' (Verloo, 2005: 348). There should also be scope for non-elite actors to voice and promote their agenda of gender equality. The failure to consult with organizations working on gender equality undermines the transformative potential of the gender mainstreaming approach in two respects (Debusscher and van der Vleuten, 2012). Not only is the lack of inclusion of non-elite voices detrimental to women's empowerment, it also diminishes the relevance of policies. What shows up as a 'problem' and a 'solution' for policy makers is limited by their institutional culture and its predetermined goals. Clearly, this not only restricts the scope of policy making, but also the allocation of resources (Beveridge and Nott, 2002).

The data in this paper are drawn from face-to-face interviews with relevant stakeholders. In a first phase, we interviewed some major representatives of government, civil society and the donor community, all working on gender equality and frequently cited in the literature. After gaining initial access to organizations working on gender issues, snowballing proved to be an effective way of locating additional interviewees. Each interview took approximately eighty minutes and was conducted in English or French from 26 May–17 June 2011. Of the thirty-three interviewees, eleven were representatives of Rwandan civil society working on gender equality; eleven were government officials working on gender equality or

members of parliament; eight were staff members of embassies and international donor organizations; and three represented international non-governmental organizations working in the field of gender equality. Seven of the thirty-three interviewees were non-Rwandan and seven were male. All were guaranteed anonymity. As in all types of interviews, the method is vulnerable to the potential hidden agendas of interviewees. We therefore collected as much additional information as possible about our informants' networks and past activities, to better contextualize their narratives. The interviews were complemented by a review of official and unofficial government documents on gender equality and the extensive, in-depth rural field experience of one of the authors.

The purpose of this article is to evaluate the transformative potential of Rwanda's gender equality policies given the authoritarian characteristics displayed by the Rwandan regime. First, we explore the factors contributing to Rwanda's post-genocide commitment to gender equality. Second, we examine the positive effects of this commitment to policies advancing gender equality. Third, five prominent trends are distinguished in present-day Rwanda which hamper the transformative potential of Rwandan gender equality policies. In our conclusion we reflect upon the extent to which Rwandan gender equality policies succeed in challenging the deeply rooted societal norms and practices within which gender inequalities are embedded.

GENDER EQUALITY IN POST-CONFLICT RWANDA

In pre-colonial Rwanda men dominated much of social, economic and political life, although there were some 'limited avenues of power for women' (Longman, 2006: 134). In Rwandan society, women's ownership and inheritance of land was prohibited. Women were discouraged to voice their opinions and expected to defer to men. Nevertheless, they managed to exert substantial autonomy in their role as mothers and food producers, and could hold powerful religious positions (Longman, 2006; Uwineza and Pearson, 2009). During colonial rule, even these limited avenues of power were cut off and post-independence governments took little interest in the situation of women (Longman, 2006). This changed after the genocide when gender equality became a political issue at the highest levels of society. Several steps were taken to expand women's rights and increase the participation of women in politics. Three reasons can be advanced to explain this shift in the post-conflict period: (1) gender roles had changed during the period of conflict and intense violence; (2) the women's

movement played a very active role in the immediate post-war period; (3) post-genocide elites in leadership positions displayed a strong commitment to gender equality.

Changed Gender Roles

Several scholars have shown how the disruption of gender relations caused by prolonged conflict may actually offer 'significant opportunities' for transformation in post-conflict periods (Bauer and Britton, 2006: 11). The 'scattering of families and the expansion of families headed by women have created situations where women had either to participate in decision making or to make decisions themselves' (Bop, 2001: 23). Without downplaying the extreme physical and psychological hardships, as well as the dramatic demographic changes, that mark post-conflict settings, they do seem to an opportunity to transform social relations as all structures and social relations need to be rebuilt (Burnet, 2008). As case studies on Uganda, Chad, Sudan and Liberia demonstrate (Fuest, 2008; Pankhurst, 2002; Turshen and Twagiramariya, 1998), such a context creates space for new gender roles and debate about gender politics.

This seems to hold true also in the case of Rwanda. During the conflict, Tutsi and moderate Hutu men were largely targeted for murder, while women were subjected to grave sexual assault, torture and rape, the latter often leading to HIV infection. After the genocide, many women and children found were left to their own devices to rebuild their lives in a shattered country. In the immediate aftermath of the genocide, women and girls even made up almost 70 per cent of the population.[1] The men had been killed, were in prison or had fled the country. Women could therefore no longer rely on husbands or fathers for their livelihood; 'the old way of doing things was no longer an option' (Interview, 2011a). Women were forced to adopt new roles and assume 'male' responsibilities, such as building houses, speaking in public or milking cows. While we should not underestimate the extreme challenges women faced, the experience also effected a lasting and profound change in Rwandan gender relations which has resulted in an increase of women's participation in all spheres of public life (Burnet, 2008; Uwineza and Pearson, 2009).

[1] In the years that followed, this imbalance began to equalize, as refugees and internally displaced persons returned home. By early 1997, women constituted 53.7 per cent of the adult population (Burnet, 2008).

The Role of the Women's Movement

Immediately after the genocide, the country was in tatters and much of the basic services, including food, clothing and shelter were lacking. Women's organizations stepped in to fill this 'social void' (Bauer and Britton, 2006: 16) and provided much-needed basic services, as well as support and counselling to the traumatised survivors. Even though the women's movement in Rwanda predates the genocide, it grew significantly between 1994 and 2003 to become 'among the most active sector[s] of civil society' (Burnet, 2008: 372).

This is illustrated by the advocacy work of the women's movement around the 'Inheritance law' of 1999, the ratification of the new constitution in 2003, the land policy of 2004 followed by the organic land law of 2005, and the proposal on gender-based violence which became law in 2009.[2] The women's movement, led by the umbrella-organization PROFEMMES, has played a very active role in initiating and propelling forward gender policies. Amongst others, it conducted research and surveys, hired experts to assess existing laws and draft new laws, and organized numerous meetings with Parliament, the Supreme Court and the Ministry of Justice. These female lobbyists have applied various smart tactics. They set up 'alliances with men in government and the parliament', stressed the importance of 'valuing women and mothers in traditional Rwandan culture', and gave voice to poor rural women at parliamentary meetings so as to 'avoid being seen as the intellectual women of the women's movement who have no connection to real life in the communities' (Interview, 2011a). The 'Inheritance law' of 1999 which guarantees women equal rights to own and inherit property, specifically, is regarded as a key lobby achievement of the women's movement.

Overall, it can be said that the involvement of women in Rwandan civil society paved the way for greater gender equality in the political arena in at least two ways. First, the significant role women played in service provision after 1994 created a 'positive image of women' (Interview 2011a). This has helped to underscore the legitimacy of women's political

[2] These important laws have significantly improved gender equality in the official policy framework. The 1999 inheritance law has established gender equality in land inheritance and ownership within formal marriages (for a critical reflection, see Ansoms and Holvoet (2008)). The 2003 Constitution reinforces the principle of gender equality and provides quotas of at least 30 per cent for women in decision-making organs. The land policy of 2004 and the 2005 organic land law contain provisions on gender equality in land rights (concerning registration and access rights). The 2009 GBV law sets out clear definitions of gender-based violence and introduced serious penalties.

participation and the importance of creating gender-sensitive policies. In the aftermath of the genocide, this 'credit' has given the women's movement greater room to manoeuvre and influence policy compared to other civil society organizations, such as human rights or indigenous rights organizations (Burnet, 2008). Second, the professional experience that women gained in the civil society sector offered a good foundation in preparation for entering politics and government administration (Longman, 2006).

Commitment to Gender Issues of Leading Post-genocide Political Elites

The ruling RPF's commitment to women's empowerment is a third factor that has contributed to increased attention to gender equality. The core leadership of the RPF was in exile in Uganda for a long period of time. During this time they were exposed to Ugandan policies, including policies on women's rights and inclusion (Longman, 2006). During exile, Paul Kagame and several of his associates were officers in Museveni's National Resistance Movement (NRM) and they have adopted many of its tactics and policies. Mirroring the Ugandan NRM, the RPF has mainstreamed women from early 1990, in both its political and armed wings. In this way, it clearly distinguished itself from the ruling MRND (National Republican Movement for Democracy and Development) party and opposition parties in Rwanda (Burnet, 2008). Since 1994, RPF-led governments have appointed women to important political and juridical positions, mainstreamed women within the party, and reserved a fixed number of seats for women in the national legislature (Burnet, 2008).

Apart from the RPF leaders, many more refugees returned to Rwanda from exile in Uganda, Zaïre, Tanzania and Burundi in the past seventeen years, bringing experiences with them from outside the country. Especially for a country like Rwanda which traditionally has been rather closed off from outside influences, this has had a tremendous impact. Many of the returned exiles now occupy positions in civil society, the ministries or in international organizations where their daily work is influenced by the ideas and perspectives they had been exposed to in neighbouring countries or the rest of the world (Interview, 2011b).

ACHIEVEMENTS IN TERMS OF GENDER EQUALITY POLICIES

Over the last two decades, a lot has been achieved within a relatively short pace of time. It seems that the top-down regime with a strong political will to promote gender equality has offered opportunities for promoting gender equality. The integration of gender equality in national policy is 'a fundamental principle within the Constitution' and is underpinned by President Kagame's statement that gender equality 'is everybody's business' and is 'critical to sustainable socio-economic development' (Government of Rwanda, 2009a: 6–7). Since the installation of the new government after the 2003 elections, about two-thirds of the cabinet has been female, demonstrating a genuine political commitment to placing women in high-level political positions. Furthermore, the 2003 Rwandan Constitution, around which the women's movement efficiently mobilized, guarantees that 'women are granted at least thirty per cent of posts in decision making organs' (Government of Rwanda, 2003). Accordingly, women took 48.8 per cent of the seats in the lower house in 2003, and about 40 per cent of the entire parliament (Chamber of Deputies and Senate). In the parliamentary elections of 2008, this increased to 56.3 per cent in the lower house, making Rwanda the first country in the world with a female majority in a national legislative chamber. Combined with the gender distribution within the Senate, this translates to 45 per cent female representation in the entire parliament (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2011).

In the aftermath of the genocide, the RPF reorganized the executive branch and created the Ministry of Gender, Family and Social Affairs which later became the Ministry of Gender and Family Promotion (MIGEPROF). For the first time in history, Rwanda had a ministry of gender equality and not just for women's policies alone (Burnet, 2008). In 1998, the Ministry organized elections in Rwanda to create a system that is representational at all levels of government: in the cellules and sectors, and at district, provincial and national level. The so-called 'Women's Councils' were conceived as consultative bodies to promote women's interests, and have functioned as a step towards reserving 30 per cent of seats for women in parliament. More recently, the Ministry of Gender and Family Promotion has been placed within the Prime Minister's office 'to ensure strategic coordination of policy implementation', again indicating the appreciation of gender equality at the highest political level (Ministry of Gender and Family Promotion, 2011).

Furthermore, gender equality occupies a central role in the Rwandan government's commitment and pursuit of an ambitious modernization policy. The government adopted a national gender policy in 2004, which is regularly updated and made concrete by three-year

strategic implementation plans. These plans include detailed gender performance indicators to achieve certain strategic objectives and clearly indicate the responsible ministries. For example, in the ongoing public sector reform, the Ministry of Economic Planning and Finance has adopted a gender budgeting programme and is making efforts to institutionalize it.

The Rwandan government displays a strong desire 'to transform Rwanda into a target-driven society from the highest to the lowest level' (Ansoms, 2009: 292), as well as to be accountable to donors (Renard and Molenaers, 2003). It seems that this has offered opportunities to develop gender policies. Mechanisms such as 'performance contracts' facilitate accountability on the part of policy makers and implementers in the area of gender equality. To collect and monitor data for target-driven and evidence-based policy making, a 'Gender Monitoring Office' was established in the 2003 Constitution and made operational in 2009. Its main task is to monitor gender indicators with reference to the country's national policies, programmes and projects. Notable in this regard is that the Gender Monitoring Office is not only conducting 'gender auditing' in the public sector, but also in the private sector, NGOs and religious organizations (Gender Monitoring Office, 2011).

Overall, it seems that the newly adopted roles of women in the post-conflict setting, combined with a government committed to gender equality, have translated in improved representation of women in governance and in the establishment of several national mechanisms to promote gender equality. At the same time, the meaning of these initiatives in an authoritarian state like Rwanda is unclear (Burnet, 2008; Longman, 2006). Is increased female political participation and gender-streamlined policy making adequate to overcome deep-rooted societal gender norms, structures and practices?

THREATS TO THE TRANSFORMATIVE POTENTIAL OF GENDER EQUALITY POLICIES

This section critically assesses the transformative potential of Rwandan gender equality policies. Our approach to gender equality is that it is an end in itself, instead of being 'a way of more effectively achieving existing policy goals', or that it needs to fit 'within existing development policy paradigms' (Beveridge and Nott, 2002: 300). Furthermore, policy with transformative potential goes beyond an 'agenda setting approach' that includes women or their organizations in the shaping of development objectives and strategies (Jahan, 1995: 127). It should also provide scope for less powerful, 'non-hegemonic' civil society groups to

'think through and [publicly] articulate' their interests and gender equality agenda (Verloo, 2005: 348). Below, we discuss five trends that threaten a transformative Rwandan gender equality policy: (1) the dominance of an underlying economic rationale; (2) the neglect of 'invisible labour' in subsistence agriculture and care work; (3) a formalistic implementation of gender policies and their focus on quantitative results; (4) the limited space for civil society voices to influence policy; and (5) a lack of grassroots participation.

The Dominance of an Underlying Economic Rationale

According to the government's long-term development strategy 'Vision 2020', the 'new Rwandan society' involves the 'full development of human resources and emergence of a prosperous knowledge-based society', including the 'rapid development of entrepreneurship and a modern competitive private sector', 'a productive and high-value market-oriented agriculture' and 'a lower demographic growth rate' (Government of Rwanda, 2004: 4–5). Although gender equality is one of five crosscutting themes in Rwanda's long- and medium-term strategies, the actual integration of gender issues seems to be instrumental to the overall objective of economic development and societal modernization.

For 'Rwanda to compete effectively in the global economy' (Government of Rwanda, 2007: 59), the Rwandan government aims to create a 'knowledge based and technological led (*sic*) economy' (Government of Rwanda, 2009b: 10). It is a strategy strongly focused on producing a 'workforce capable of meeting labour market demand nationally, regionally and internationally' (ibid.: 7). This implies a significant growth in student numbers, both male and female, in relevant higher education institutions. Or, as the Economic Development and Poverty Reduction Strategy (EDPRS) states, 'the specific aims of higher education to achieve these priorities include achieving enrolment growth and gender equity' (Government of Rwanda, 2007: 59). According to the Ministry of Finance and Economic Planning, the promotion of gender equality 'facilitates economic growth and fast tracks (*sic*) poverty reduction' (Ministry of Finance and Economic Planning, 2011). Several gender equality programmes linked to the National Gender Policy are directly linked to economic growth objectives, notably programmes on 'Economic Empowerment for Employment, Growth and Markets', 'Skills for Knowledge-based Society' and on 'Private Sector'. The National Gender Policy serves 'as a tool to facilitate' the implementation of various short- and long-term government programmes, as well as achieving 'the nation's goal for sustainable development'

(Government of Rwanda 2009a: 13, 21). President Kagame clearly understands that from a 'cost-benefit framework', it would be unwise to waste 'more than half of [Rwanda's] capital investment [referring to the female labour force]' (Uwineza and Pearson, 2009: 16).

One of our informants stated that, in the view of policy makers, gender equality is 'about how much women can actually produce to contribute to the development of the country'. She cynically added that 'as long as you produce, you are a target of things [referring to policies], but what about other aspects of inequality?' (Interview, 2011c). Another member of the donor community confirmed this claim, stating that gender equality 'is not a policy priority for Rwanda. They have other priorities: "Vision 2020"' (Interview, 2011d). Indeed, when gender equality concerns compete with economic development and societal modernization objectives, as framed by the government, priority is given to the latter. We could cite three examples.

First, the Rwandan government's efforts to create a business-friendly environment and to attract large-scale, capital-intensive projects[3] have discouraged small-scale, often rural-based, informal sector initiatives. The government's strategy to formalize the informal sector has not only negatively affected local-level livelihoods (see Ansoms and Murison, 2012), it is likely to have widened social divisions in an already polarized system where there is a big gap between well-paid formal jobs and more generic low-paid jobs, such as care work and labour-intensive informal work. Given the gendered division of labour, where women are overrepresented in care and people-related work, it is likely that this approach has not only widened class divisions, but also deepened gender divisions (Perrons, 2005).

Even within the formal sector, the government's main focus is on market-based criteria, while social policies seem to be an add-on. For example in 2009, paid maternity leave for women working in the formal private sector was cut from twelve weeks to six weeks. This measure, which conflicts with ILO standards, was introduced in an effort to attract foreign investment and reduce costs for the private sector.[4] The women's movement unsuccessfully tried to prevent this law from being passed, arguing that it contradicts the commitment to equality in the Constitution and the National Gender Policy (Interview, 2011e). One activist stated that 'this is an aggressive law for a government that says it is gender sensitive' (Interview, 2011f), while several activists expressed disbelief at how this law could be passed in a country where women comprise over 45 per cent of parliament.

[3] For a critical analysis, see Gökgür (2012).
[4] Rwanda has not ratified the ILO convention 183 on maternity leave protection.

A final example of gender issues being subordinated to modernization objectives is the way in which the villagization policy is currently being framed. The villagization approach (or imidugudu policy) was originally part of a post-1994 policy package to deal with the resettlement of former refugees. However, it soon mutated into a top-down reorganization of the rural landscape, particularly in the eastern part of the country. Families were forced to move from scattered homesteads spread over the hills to grouped settlements, while housing in these new settlements was often of inferior quality. Several authors have pointed to the negative impact of such 'modernization' initiatives on the local quality of life (van Hoyweghen, 1999; Human Rights Watch, 2001; Leegwater, 2011; Newbury, 2011). The more recent version of the villagization policy is less strict: only newly established households are obliged to build their houses on specified communal sites. However, the price of land in those 'centres' and construction standards pose an obstacle to people who want to build a house and start 'adult live' (Sommers and Uvin, 2011). The policy has had a significant impact on young women in that it has made it difficult for them to find a suitable partner to start a family with. As a result, there is an increasing incidence of unmarried young mothers, a status often leading to social exclusion and marginalization (Ansoms and Murison, 2012). For men this has implied 'a failed transition to manhood' (Sommers, 2012) and self-perceived failure. This example illustrates that gender issues do not only concern women but also men.

These three examples illustrate that gender issues as such are not a policy priority. Gender equality is promoted as long as it coincides or advances the main objectives of the government which focus on economic development. If this is not the case, it is ignored. Rwandan policy makers' obsession with economic development targets can be explained by the fact that this is their major strength. Whereas post-1994 achievements in terms of political governance are limited to non-existent, Rwanda's post-1994 track-record in terms of macro-economic stability and growth has been impressive. To ensure the continuity of aid flow, maintaining this record it is of crucial importance to the Rwandan government (Ansoms and Rostagno, 2012). The transformation of deeply rooted gender inequalities is secondary to this objective.

Neglecting 'Invisible Labour': Subsistence Agriculture and Care Issues

A second factor that hampers gender equality is that government policies do not take into account the importance and challenges of particular occupations which are less visible in the

public sphere, but which are of crucial importance from the perspective of local livelihoods and overall well-being. In this regard, two occupations in particular where women play a major role can be cited: subsistence agriculture and care work.

One of the aims of 'Vision 2020' is to move beyond 'past delusions of viable subsistence-based agriculture' towards 'productive high value and market oriented agriculture' (Government of Rwanda, 2000: 18). Agricultural policies aim to achieve agricultural modernization, intensification, professionalization and enterprise development through strategies that promote monocropping and regional crop specialization, land registration and the consolidation of plots, as well as a market-orientation in all production activities (Ansoms and Rostagno, 2012). Ansoms has analysed elsewhere that these policy objectives are not in the interest of smallholder peasants. In fact, modernization objectives expose smallholders to excessive risks that are contrary to their priority to minimize risk (Ansoms, 2010).

These policies also have important gender dimensions given that subsistence production is largely the domain of female farmers. Traditionally, women have always been very active in the production of staple foods that feed the family, whereas cash crop production and marketization is generally considered to be men's business (De Lame, 2005). De Lame explains how, in the pre-genocide context, the increasing monetization of the economy affected peasant women on two counts: 'they were losers at home, but gained nothing in the outside world' (ibid.: 76).

Contemporary agrarian modernization policies risk having a similar effect as they fail to fully take account of 'the gendered structure of labour and time allocation' in agricultural activities (Ansoms and Holvoet, 2008). As noted by Ansoms and Holvoet (2008:), 'given the enormous time and work burden that women face in terms of reproductive activities, it is obvious that they do not compete on equal terms with men in the productive arena'. As a result, policies that push farmers into a market-oriented maximum-productivity logic — without paying particular attention to gender dimensions — will most likely have a negative impact on the position of women in the context of intra-household relations.

Another invisible occupation in which women are overrepresented — which is again largely ignored by the Rwandan government — is care work (household tasks and care for family and community members). The Rwandan government does not question the unequal division of care work in Rwandan society, nor is care work explicitly valued. Although unpaid and informal care workers are subsidizing the economy, this contribution is excluded from the definition of work in national accounts and its implications for inequality are not

discussed. As put by a Rwandan gender activist: 'we should capture this work in the GDP. Household chores are part of the system [and] are part of development' (Interview, 2011g). A Rwandan policy maker commented on this, saying that the idea was 'discussed, but that it is too complicated' (Interview, 2011h).

In Rwanda, care work also has a distinctive class dimension. Many families of the upper and middle classes have one or more 'house girls (or boys)' to perform household chores. These labourers are often young and uneducated. They work without a contract which implies they often receive a very low salary[5] and endure bad working conditions. Most gender activists in government and civil society interviewed were not critical of this system — and were even making use of it — but other gender activists were highly critical. One activist described the situation as 'exploitation' and urged the government to 'look for ways to protect them [referring to household personnel]' (Interview, 2011g).

Another problematic aspect is that the government is relying heavily on civil society to deliver services in care work. The organizations of several of the local civil society representatives interviewed were frequently involved in projects delivering basic care services. One of our interviewees explained that 'someone has to do it…you cannot leave these poor women to their misery' (Interview, 2011e). Examples include medical and psychological care for rape victims, seeking shelters for victims of domestic violence, or setting up home-based care systems for bedridden patients in the local community. Local NGOs mostly work with volunteers (mostly female) who they organize and train in delivering care. Government support for such activities was often non-existent. Some of our interviewees were very critical about the government's failure to accept responsibility. [6]

The neglect of these 'invisible' labour occupations in which women are overrepresented is surprising given their contribution to local livelihoods and the overall well-being of the population. The silence on these issues not only legitimizes the unequal division of labour between men and women, it also devalues such work and overlooks its connection to development in general. The fact that subsistence agriculture and care work are not part of the urbanized life world of policy makers could explain their relative blindness to the interests of these 'invisible labourers'. This clearly illustrates how class differences intersect with gender inequalities. The ambitions and perspective of the elite — men and women — are oriented towards a modern 'knowledge-based' society. Their reality is therefore far removed

[5] Domestic workers are not entitled to a minimum wage or to some time off because they are not protected by Rwandan labour law. Interviewees reported that house boys or girls earn around a tenth of the average salary of a civil servant working in a ministry. Sometimes this is even less.
[6] For example, Interview (2011i).

from the on-the-ground realities of the majority of the Rwandan population (Ansoms, 2009) — and of the majority of Rwandan women engaged in subsistence agriculture and care work in particular.

A Formalistic Implementation of Gender Policies and the Focus on Quantitative Results

A third aspect jeopardizing the transformative potential of policies on gender equality is their rather formalistic and macro-level operationalization. Several interviewees were cynical about Rwanda's commitment to gender equality stating that 'the government needs to go beyond good laws and women in parliament' (Interview, 2011f). In our interviews, Rwandan activists pointed out that despite the establishment of gender-sensitive structures, the resources to make them function were lacking. A good example of this is the Ministry of Gender and Family Promotion. At the time of our research (2011), MIGEPROF had a staff of about thirty. Of those, only four were responsible for gender issues (of which two were not paid by the government but directly by the United Nations), while the remaining twenty-six were focusing on children's rights and family policy.

Also in other ministries, several of the structures that have been put in place existed only in name. For example, several of the first-generation 'gender focal points'[7] were not aware that they had been appointed to these roles (Interview, 2011b). Theoretically, the second-generation gender focal points were the Ministry's Directors of Planning, but in practice the role was frequently passed on to a junior member of staff with no previous experience in gender issues. Staff trainings on gender-responsive budgeting, arranged by the Ministry of Economic Planning and Finance, did not mean that participants were actually capable of implementing gender budgeting in practice.

Another example — also relevant in the rural setting — concerns the Women's Councils (see above), whose 'significance has been undermined by the fact that all but the highest level positions are voluntary' (Women for Women International, 2004: 34). As MIGEPROF does not have a budget to assist Women's Councils materially or financially, the representatives work as unpaid volunteers who 'are expected to spend a considerable amount

[7] The main responsibility of a focal point 'is to ensure that gender is mainstreamed in policies, programs and projects of their respective institution and to ensure that budget allocation considers the concerns of men and women in all sectors. They also have to advocate for disaggregation of data by sex within their respective sectors and assess the capacity needs in gender mainstreaming within their respective institutions' (Ministry of Gender and Family Promotion, 2010: 9–10).

of time, and sometimes even their own resources' (Women for Women International, 2004: 34). Activists questioned the sincerity of the Rwandan government's commitment to gender equality, explaining that 'it [referring to the organization of Women's Councils] is an issue of resources. Showing that you are committed means allocating resources' (Interview, 2011f). In addition, although the Women's Councils should serve as channel through which information from the grassroots level is communicated to top decision-making bodies and vice versa, in practice it seems to be 'more a top-down instrument' (Interview, 2011g), useful 'when you need a message to be transmitted … to the local level' (Interview, 2011j) as 'the central levels are not listening to the local levels' (Interview, 2011c).

Another illustration of the formalistic operationalization of gender equality policies is the obsession of policy makers with statistics. As one donor interviewee commented: 'There is a lot of marketing. They have to sell Rwanda, and in order to sell something you have to make a nice picture. Gender equality is part of this. But they only want the numbers' (Interview, 2011c). This statement was echoed by another activist who remarked, 'many people would say: we have achieved gender equality, many people think it is about numbers. But that is not gender equality. Not for me' (Interview, 2011f). Another interviewee remarked that the gender discourse is embraced because gender is 'in fashion' and it 'attracts donor money' (Interview, 2011b). As Rwanda depends heavily on donor funding for its government budget, it is argued that 'the power of the purse' (Interview, 2011b) is the most important motivation for adopting gender equality policies.

Whilst these statements appear rather cynical, it is true that donors strongly encourage target-oriented development policies (not only in the domain of gender) that explicitly link policy objectives to strategies to outcomes — preferably measured quantitatively. This leads to the blind implementation of policies focused on targets while neglecting the processes through which results are achieved (Ansoms, 2009). For example, one of the 'achievements' regularly cited during interviews at the ministries was the decrease in the rate of gender-based violence (GBV) in the wake of the adoption of a new policy on Gender-based Violence. Several observers have however been highly critical of interpreting the numbers as an 'achievement'. Some claimed that policy makers are too easily satisfied, suggesting that a good GBV policy would result in an *increase* in the rate of reports.

Donor encouragement of target-oriented development policies also explains why Rwandan policy makers focus largely on quantitatively measurable policies with a high 'public relations' potential. For example, next to the proportion of women in parliament (56.3 per cent), statistics that are often cited to demonstrate achievements in the area of gender

equality include the relatively low maternal mortality ratio (540 versus 619 per 100,000 births in sub-Saharan Africa, 2008); an extremely high percentage of pregnant women paying at least one visit to a prenatal care unit (96 per cent in Rwanda versus 74 per cent in sub-Saharan Africa, 2005–2009); and a relatively high number of births attended to by skilled health care personnel (52 per cent versus 48 per cent in sub-Saharan Africa, 2005–2009) (World Bank, 2011). Interestingly, these indicators are central to the newly defined gender inequality index of the UNDP's *2011 Human Development Report* (UNDP, 2011).

These appraisable achievements are at least partly the result of a strictly implemented policy that obliges all Rwandans to take out medical insurance for pregnancy or illness under the *mutuelle* system — which has led to an increase in the use of health facilities (Saksena et al., 2001). However, no attention at all is paid to the significant financial burden of the *mutuelle's* fees on households' limited resources. Moreover, the fee, generally 1000 Rwandan Francs per household member for ordinary smallholder farmers, has recently (in June 2011) been raised to 3000 Rwandan Francs per person per year. This compulsory fee competes with many other financial obligations (land registration, costs for meeting government-defined building standards, costs for cooperative membership, etc.) that weigh heavily upon people's resources (Ansoms and Murison, 2011).[8]

Thus, although a number of mechanisms are in place and gender seems to have been mainstreamed to a certain extent at the various levels of policy making, the actual implementation of gender equality policies is formalistic. Progress is defined mainly in terms of quantitative gender statistics; a target orientation which lacks the deeper content to tackle deeply ingrained societal gender norms, structures and practices.

Limited Space for Civil Society to Influence Policy

A fourth factor diminishing the transformative potential of Rwanda's gender equality policies is the limited scope for civil society participation in policy making. The Rwandan government employs a wide range of strategies to manage and control the functioning of civil society.[9] For

[8] Results from this research on rural livelihoods will be published in the near future.

[9] For example, some members of civil society complained about the 'Joint Action Development Forum' (JADF). This is a 'semi-autonomous institution' under tutelage of the Ministry of Local Government that monitors and coordinates the work of civil society on the district level to achieve 'improved service delivery and economic development'. Although this seems to differ from district to district, several respondents mentioned they had to pay a significant fee to participate in the JADF.

NGOs or civil society representatives 'who step out of line', and are classified as a threat, 'there is a price to pay' (Gready, 2010: 642). For instance, in 2003 and 2004, the 'government cracked down on, suspended and expelled NGOs or their staff' (Gready, 2010: 642). The government further uses co-opted umbrella structures to keep control over the activities of smaller-scale organizations (Gready, 2010).

As mentioned by Gready (2010: 641), 'the current regime's preferred *modus operandi* for civil society remains service delivery and gap filling' (see also Longman, 2011). The 'civil society development' section under the 'Government Programme 2010–2017' seems to confirm this, stating that 'Government will continue to support civil society for it *to work for the public interest*' and that civil society will be encouraged 'to avail action plans for national development basing (*sic*) *upon Government programmes*' (Government of Rwanda, 2010: 21, emphasis in original). However, several of the representatives of the women's movement we interviewed see their role differently, stating that 'our objectives are not those of the government' (Interview, 2011a). They want to be able to 'critically analyse what is being done and how things should be done' (Interview, 2011i).

Indeed, although service delivery is critically needed in a country with so many people lacking basic services, such practice is draining civil society's energy from their research and advocacy role. Donors too are playing their part in this worrying trend. For example, civil society projects, funded by important donors such as USAID, are distributed through the Ministry of Local Government. As a result, civil society organizations must be on good terms with the ministry and work on topics related to government goals in order to receive funding. One of our interviewees mentioned: 'But we don't work for local government, this should be separate' (Interview, 2011l).

When the government is not used as an intermediary between donors and civil society recipients, similar problems arise. The majority of Rwandan civil society organizations rely on small, short-term grants (e.g. six months) from international NGOs, received after replying to a call for applying for projects on a designated theme (for example HIV/AIDS). The problem is that such projects have short time frames and do not allow organizations to engage in serious policy monitoring or advocacy. As one civil society representative put it: 'a lot of

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This prevents smaller NGOs from working in several districts. Or as put by a gender activist: 'we are bringing in ideas and money. We should not be paying to work there!' (Interview, 2011k). Furthermore one respondent stated that she feared she would not get the yearly permit for her NGO from the Ministry of Local Government if she did not join the JADF in every district (Interview, 2011l). See also National Decentralization Implementation Secretariat (n.d.) 'Developing Capacity for Joint Action Development Forums in Rwanda'. http://www.impactalliance.org/ev_en.php?ID=49454_201&ID2=DO_TOPIC

organizations are submitting project proposals, but are not involved in research. That is where the funding is. [As for] advocacy and research, [...] no one is willing to fund that' (Interview, 2011g). In addition, the financial conditions donors impose for projects are often very strict. Although this is understandable from the donors' financial management perspective, in practice this means that an organization's running costs are not or insufficiently included. 'It is tricky. How can we implement a project if we cannot pay administration, salaries, rent, paper, coffee, water...?' (Interview, 2011g). Several interviewees cited difficulties in accessing funds (strict conditions, complex procedures and high costs linked to proposal writing), and many were expressing their desire for funding that is 'accessible and predictable' (Interview, 2011g).

It seems from the interviews that the lack of predictable and accessible funding, the emphasis on service delivery, combined with the government's management and control strategies, is gradually limiting the scope for civil society's involvement in policy monitoring, lobbying and advocacy. One gender activist stated that 'we [the women's movement] are not as dynamic as we used to be with the inheritance law' (Interview, 2011i). Another confirmed this, saying that 'civil society was much more active [in research, advocacy and lobbying] ten years ago than it is now' (Interview, 2011b). The two recent unsuccessful lobbying and advocacy campaigns (on maternity leave and on marriage age)[10] seem to illustrate this.

Our interviews revealed that some organizations do have direct access to government officials and seem to have easier access to funding mechanisms. This confirms Gready's findings that spaces for civil society are '*ad hoc* and personalized, rather than based on institutional relationships between society and the state in which individuals and groups can demand access to rights as citizens' (Gready, 2010: 642). However, for gender equality policies to be transformative, such ad-hoc government–civil society interactions are not sufficient. Indeed, 'transformation (of the hegemonic order) will not occur through the mere participation of women, as this participation under conditions of inequality will be readily absorbed. Instead, what is needed to make gender equality policies truly transformative is 'a strategy of empowerment by organizing space for non-hegemonic actors to struggle about the (promotion of the) agenda of gender equality' (Verloo, 2005: 348).

[10] In 2011 a legislative proposal was launched to lower the legal age of marriage from twenty-one to eighteen. Rwandan women's organizations were strongly against this, calling it a 'regressive law' as it 'discourages girls from staying in school'. Several women's organizations tried to influence policy making by issuing a joint statement and appearing in the media. Policy makers however did not respond to their arguments and rejected their request to consult with the women's movement.

Lack of Grassroots Consultation

The argument above is closely linked to the final aspect that undermines the transformative potential of gender equality policies: the scope for grassroots participation in the formulation of gender policy is extremely limited. Or as one respondent put it, the 'Grassroots population must also play an active role in gender promotion. This is what we have to try to achieve. On the higher level it is good, but we need a bottom-up kind of approach, where people are aware of their rights, attitudes and understanding' (Interview, 2011g). Other respondents confirmed the need for more local-level 'civic participation' and stressed that leaders should 'listen more to the demands of the people' (Interview, 2011f). Others said that gender equality policies are elite driven. In their view, the lack of meaningful consultation with the grassroots was hampering the effectiveness of policies, and even harmful to achieving equality goals. Someone mentioned: 'The elite wants to go very — very — fast, but without consulting with the population, this can have an adverse effect. For example the GBV law, I have a feeling that in the communities — because the law is strict and not explained enough — this can cause troubles' (Interview, 2011b). One activist remarked that although there is a national gender policy and some macro-level statistics are improving, the situation of the majority of rural women has not improved: 'On the local level, we don't see any of this. Rural women are literally working day and night. What is happening to ease their burden? Nothing. Why are there so many poor women? Politics needs to be there for the people' (Interview, 2011e).

Limited grassroots participation in policy making is not specific to the development of the gender agenda. In other policy areas, grassroots participation often takes the form of mere information sharing — or rather the passing on of information without the possibility for bottom-up reflection. This may be explained by the fact that urban-based elites, often born and raised in a neighbouring country, have few links with rural peasants born and raised in Rwanda. Their detachment from the rural setting — in particular from the constraints faced by female smallholder farmers (as mentioned above) — has generally resulted in a negative perception of farmers' knowledge and know-how (Ansoms, 2009).

Indeed, several gender activists criticized the women in parliament for 'not being close to the population' (Interview, 2011l). While some respondents were saying that women parliamentarians are not active nowadays because 'they have gotten too comfortable in their positions' (Interview, 2011m), others blamed the election system where candidates are more accountable to the party [referring to the RPF] than to voters (Interview, 2011f). The same

argument applies to the mostly urban-based civil society organizations: they are often managed by the same kinds of urban elite. Even more local-level intermediary structures such as the Women's Councils cannot bridge the gap between decision makers and the grassroots. Respondents observed that, apart from a lack of funding, the Women's Councils are 'government-made', thus 'not self-made, and therefore not sustainable' (Interview, 2011i).

CONCLUSION

The aim of this article was to contribute to the ongoing debate in the literature on the meaning of gender equality initiatives in an 'authoritarian single-party state' (Burnet, 2008: 361). Whilst existing literature tends to focus on the significance of the increased participation of women in governance, this article has examined Rwanda's gender equality commitments and evaluated the transformative potential of Rwanda's gender equality policies. For policies to be transformative the process should be inclusive – it must allow marginalized voices to name and challenge existing power relations. In this way formerly disempowered women or their organizations participate by questioning, analysing and acting upon patriarchal constraints in their lives. Such an 'agenda-setting approach' (Jahan, 1995: 127), where women have a voice in shaping development objectives differs from an 'integrationist approach' which addresses gender equality within dominant development paradigms, 'as a way of more effectively achieving existing policy goals' (Walby, 2005: 323). To fulfil its transformative potential, scope has to be created for participation, not only of the established order, but also of 'non-hegemonic actors' so as to give them the opportunity to voice their opinion and take part in determining the gender equality agenda (Verloo, 2005: 348).

Our analysis has led us to conclude that the transformative potential of Rwandan gender equality policies is limited. It is undeniable that the political will of the Rwandan government to promote certain aspects of gender equality is strong. Target-driven policies enable the monitoring and control of concrete results, and accountability of those who implement policy. But at least five dynamics hamper the transformative potential and sustainability of Rwanda's gender equality policies.

First, it seems that the role of gender equality policies is instrumental, serving 'as a way of effectively achieving existing policy goals' that are related to economic growth and modernization. Women are integrated into education and employment policies 'in order to match industrial requirements with relevant skills supply' (Government of Rwanda, 2009b:

34), and are used strategically as 'an untapped resource [that] can provide an economic contribution to development' (Moser, 1993: 2). Moreover, when gender equality objectives enter into competition with development and modernization goals, they are ignored. Such an instrumental approach to gender equality stands in opposition to a transformative paradigm which views gender equality is a good in itself to be approached holistically.

Second, the neglect of subsistence agriculture and care work — occupations in which women are overrepresented — indicates that policy makers prefer to leave certain 'existing gender and power relations' intact, thus ignoring 'one of the big causes of gender inequality' (Interview, 2011n). Whether the neglect of 'hidden labour' is for strategic reasons or not, it illustrates that not all (gender equality) objectives are prioritized equally. That fact that the visions and ambitions of the elite do not match the on-the-ground needs of the majority of the Rwandan population, illustrates how class differences intersect with gender inequalities. This too hampers the transformative potential of gender equality policies.

Third, a number of policies and structures that have been set up seem to be rather formalistic. Observers have stated that policies are in place to please donors and attract funding. As structures seem to have been set up to 'appear democratic' (Longman, 2006: 148) without significant investments to fully realize their potential, their contribution to the transformation of gender relations will be limited. In addition, policy makers' obsession with quantitative targets leads to the blind implementation of results-oriented policies that fail to address deeply ingrained societal norms, practices and power structures within which gender inequalities are embedded.

Lastly, and perhaps most importantly, the scope for civil society advocacy or participation through bottom-up feedback structures is limited. While in theory some scope is provided for grassroots feedback through the Women's Councils, in practice the structure is a top-down instrument. Although some forms of *ad hoc* participation does occur through personalized networks, there is no opportunity for non-hegemonic actors whose 'objectives are not those of the government' (Interview, 2011a) to challenge the form and content of gender equality policies.

Overall, we may conclude that Rwanda's gender equality policies have been more than a public relations exercise. The authoritarian governance structure — in combination with a strong political will to adopt gender equality policies — has resulted in the rapid, swift and thorough implementation of certain gender equality policies. This has had positive results, for example in terms of women's political participation, gender mainstreaming of the overall policy framework, and in terms of maternal health. However, a true transformation of the

deeply rooted societal norms and practices within which gender inequalities are embedded has not yet been realized. In our view, it is highly questionable whether this can be achieved within the context of an authoritarian governance model characterized by extremely limited scope for bottom-up participation, combined with a profound gap between the life worlds of the elite and the majority of women. Taking into account dimensions such as class, location and ethnicity therefore seems to be of crucial importance to further refine the understanding of the meaning of gender, and the policies that are required to realize gender equality in Rwanda.

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Petra Debusscher is a postdoctoral fellow of the Research Foundation Flanders (FWO) at the Department of Political Sciences of Ghent University, Universiteitstraat 8, 9000 Ghent, Belgium. Her research interests include gender equality policies, international and EU development cooperation, (transnational) women's organizations and gender mainstreaming. E-mail: petra.debusscher@ugent.be

An Ansoms is assistant professor in development studies at the Université Catholique de Louvain, Place des Doyens 1, 1348 Louvain-la-Neuve, Belgium. She holds a PhD in economics and is involved in research on poverty and inequality in the Great Lakes Region. She is particularly interested in the challenges of rural development and agrarian change in land-scarce (post-)conflict environments. E-mail: an.ansoms@uclouvain.be