

Nora Segurola Larrinaga Human Rights Best Practices

## Human Rights Best Practices and Gender Equality In Rwanda

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[lines=2]When thinking about human rights, it is rather easy to think about the abuses and atrocities that occur throughout the world, rather than focusing on human rights victories and success stories. We live in an overly hyper-focused world on negativity. Often when we turn on the news, we solely hear about the bad things that occur around us. I believe that although this is necessary, we must also center our attention on the positive occurrences around the world. The World Economic Forum has shared its annual Global Gender Gap Report, where it ranks countries based on their degree of women's participation in the economy, education achievements, and their health and political involvement. Rwanda, an underdeveloped country in the east of Africa, has been ranked fourth for gender equality. Rwanda is the only African country in the top 10, while the US comes in at number 49 (World Economic Forum, 2021).

Gender equality is a highly important aspect within human rights. It determines the outcome and development of the economy, and its impacts can have immense effects on the growth of the nation as a whole. It is necessary to note that gender equality encompasses fundamental human rights and is essential to achieving full human potential, sustainable development, and a peaceful society. A lack of female empowerment is directly correlated to the economic status of a country; a lack of education, leads to lower pay, and this spirals into women staying home, unable to contribute to the overall economic growth of the nation. It is no question that empowering women spurs productivity and economic development. An increase in female participation

increases the economic standing of a country. Additionally, money and resources in the hands of mothers also promote an increase in expenditures on children, allowing for a better standard of living in the critical years of child development. Women and girls represent half of the world's population and, therefore, also half of its potential. However, the demographics of Rwanda look a little different. In 1994, Rwandan society was left in utter chaos. With death tolls roaming around 800,000 to 1 million, Rwanda's population of 5.5 million became 70 percent female. These women were predominantly uneducated or raised with any career-oriented expectations. It is important to highlight that women owning land or working a job outside their home was completely unheard of during pre genocide Rwanda. Just like World War II led to an increase in working women, the genocide in Rwanda similarly opened it to Rwandan women.

However, in contrast to common practice, the call for equality within the Rwandan women was not led by thousands of females but by one man. This man was President Paul Kagame. He has been the man in charge of leading the country since his army stopped the genocide. "Kagame decided that Rwanda was so demolished, so broken, it simply could not rebuild with men's labor alone. So the country's new constitution, passed in 2003, decreed that 30 percent of parliamentary seats be reserved for women" (Warner, 2018). Additionally, the government began encouraging the education of women. These women were appointed to leadership positions, including government ministers and police chiefs. "Kagame vowed to not merely play catch-up to the West but leapfrog ahead of it" (Warner, 2018). The country successfully embraced Kagame's policies and went beyond his mandatory minimum, leading to an astonishing 48% of parliament seats going to women in 2003. In 2020 that number raised to 61.3% (World Bank, 2018). Today Rwandan politics is cited as a model of gender inclusiveness.

This radical change within the structure of Rwanda's political frame was predominantly due to the nature of Rwanda's leadership. Kagame, a strong military ruler who "allows little dissent or free speech. His word — and his vision — are often the country's command." Kagame's strong popular mandate for sweeping change essentially allowed for the end of the Rwandan Genocide. However, although this was clearly effective on paper, can a country truly shift its cultural ideals by one man? If we take a look at the women's movement in the USA, this proved to be an indication that only after decades of fighting, envisioning what a better life could look like, and launching a movement could make change occur. In other words, never with-

out struggle. This aggressive shortcut through history led to other issues.

Justine Uvuza, a Rwandan who grew up in a refugee camp in Uganda, moved back to post-genocide Rwanda in 1994 and wondered if such actions could ever occur. Uvuza worked in the Rwandan government, working for Kagame promoting the pro-women policies. When she was getting her Ph.D. at Newcastle University, she wondered how much progress had been made. This led her to return to Rwanda to interview female politicians about their lives. Not simply about their public positions but also about their private lives, with their husbands and children.

Justine Uvuza found that in essence, no matter how powerful these women were in public and how intellectually challenging and important their positions were within their labor, that power did not extend into their households. "One told me how her husband expected her to make sure that his shoes were polished, the water was put in the bathroom for him, his clothes were ironed," Justine says. And this husband wanted not only his shoes laid out in the morning, but his socks placed on top of the shoes. And he wanted it done by his wife, the parliamentarian. These female figures were expected to perform and comply with ceremonial domestic duties. "It was rarely an option to outsource such tasks to a maid or get your husband to shoulder more work at home." Some of these women feared violence from their husbands if they didn't comply with these expectations, and one said that she had felt so trapped, she had contemplated suicide (Uvuza, 2014).

Justine added to explain that for some of these women, "the very real strides that they were making outside the home could feel less like liberation and more like a duty to be fulfilled." Being a "good Rwandan," as she termed it in her research, meant both being patriotic — serving her country through her public work and career — but also being docile and serving their husband. As a result, Justine said, "a female politician could stand up in parliament, advocating for issues like stronger penalties for sexual violence and subsidized maxi-pads for the poor, but find herself scared to speak out about the oppression in her own home."

Justine would end each interview asking these female legislators what seemed to her to be an obvious question: "Would they support a Rwandan women's movement? A movement to change not just the public roles for women but to re-evaluate gender relations on all levels? Would these powerful Rwandan women be willing to stand under the banner of feminism?" Almost all of the women said no. Feminism? "That's not Rwandan," they told her. "That's for Westerners" (Uvuza, 2014).

However, it is important to note that Justine was not shocked. In fact, she had held the same views earlier in her life. She says that “because of the way that gender equality came so rapidly to Rwanda, from the outside in, with no psychological buildup or women’s liberation movement, it was harder for these politicians to talk about equality without appearing disloyal, not just to their spouses but to their country.”(Uvuza, 2014) In turn, this leaves for a complicated situation between what looks “good” on paper regarding the rates of gender equality and the reality of what Rwandan women face within their households.

I keep coming back to the question; Is Rwanda a best practice success story? In my opinion, I believe that yes, although it may not be perfect, through small actions like these, Rwanda is increasing its proliferation of female power through the Rwandan political system. It is certainly not a traditional way of approaching the issue, it certainly does not portray the desired outcomes in the domestic lives of these females. However, these high authoritative positions in government will increase the female education rates in the future leading to a higher female workforce. This will eventually slowly begin to shift the cultural standings of females in society. In conclusion, it is important to note that there is definitely a lot of work to be done, however, Rwanda should also be seen as a country to look up to in terms of participation rates. Rwanda has come a long way, with time and progress, these females will continue and empower themselves. I am hopeful that this is, and will be a good example of a coming of age human rights best practice.

## References

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