

## Silence as a negotiation strategy in reaction to gender equality practices in rural Rwanda: Men's and women's dilemmas

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### Abstract

This article analyses how men and women in rural Rwanda perceive, experience and interpret the country's gender equality agenda. It also shows how they try to negotiate gender practices and relationships when such an agenda is implemented. Building on 32 group interviews with men and women in Kamonyi District, the narratives reveal that when gender laws and policies are implemented, both men and women experience gender equality dilemmas, worries and fears. The findings show that some men do not engage much in discussion with their wives out of concern to preserve their traditional and cultural social respect and self-esteem. As for women, if they try to initiate discussions and sometimes challenge their husband's ideas, the latter may interpret this behaviour as a sign of disrespect, which goes against Rwanda's cultural gender norms. The study found that some men are confronted with a feeling of loss of household authority, loss of self-respect and esteem, as well as a feeling of betrayal by the government. As for the women, they feel torn between old and modern practices. In order to deal with such concerns, men and women adopt a strategy of silence in the household as one of the means to cope with the newly created gender changes. Women's silence serves as a bargaining chip to keep their family intact and safe. The men adopt silence as a strategy to protect them from legal consequences and to resist gender equality practices. In the main, this study suggests that the negotiation process that is taking place between husband and wife may not succeed in altering existing unequal power relations.

### Keywords

Rwanda, gender equality, gender and development, silence, women, men

A month ago, my husband told me that he wanted to sell a plot of land. I told him not to sell it because it is very productive. I therefore refused to sell it. We had some quarrels and fights! Whenever I give him an idea that is different from his, he refuses to accept and he sticks to his own thinking. I am now in a fix! I don't know what to do because whatever I propose seems to challenge his power in the home. I have therefore decided to keep quiet to avoid arguing with him because if I argue, it brings conflict and quarrels in the home that sometimes involves our neighbours.<sup>1</sup>

Sometime back, I told my wife to sell one piece of our land and buy a cow. She refused. I insisted and she kept on refusing. I got angry and brought buyers home without her consent. After agreeing with the buyers about the price, my wife refused to put her signature for approval as required by law. I couldn't therefore sell the land. That evening, when I went for a drink with my peers, they laughed at me because I couldn't take a decision as a man in my own house. If I had sold the cow without her consent, the law would have taken its course against me and I would end up being punished. And now that I did not sell the cow, my peers are laughing at me! You see how gender equality is undermining me! In a situation like this, what can I do? I have finally decided to remain silent; I shall not eat her food and I shall avoid talking to her.<sup>2</sup>

From the above narratives, we see that it is not easy for many husbands and wives in rural Rwanda to cope with new gender equality practices at household level. It seems that the implementation of gender equality laws and policies has some implications as far as gender relations are concerned. Although Rwanda is often reported as a “success story” in designing and implementing gender equality laws and policies to address gender imbalances compared to most countries in the region (USAID, 2012; FAO, 2011; McAuslan, 2010; Burnet, 2011), the quotes above demonstrate that Rwanda's gender equality programme is confronted with some dilemmas. The quotes further reveal that both parties adopted a strategy of silence—as a cultural bargaining chip to facilitate negotiation (for women and men) and as a strategy to resist change (for men)—in order to cope with the newly created gender changes at household level.

In the feminist literature, women's silence has been explained differently. Some scholars like Parpart (2010) and Hansen (2000) see women's silence as a “survival” and “security” strategy while dealing with a difficult situation in an often masculinist, dangerous, and conflict-ridden world where speaking out can aggravate the problem. Similarly, the accounts of some women I interviewed indicate that silence helps them to avoid any further domestic problems that might arise. This experience resonates with a study conducted by Narayan (2000) in Bangladesh where women generally never argue with their husbands to avoid being battered by the latter. The same study reports similar cases in Jamaica where women do not dare report their husbands' abuse, fearing that the latter can abandon them. Others, like Kabeer (1997) argue that women's silence is a “disempowered failure,” as it shows women's failure to protest injustice in order to challenge masculinist power structures. Silence is “a symbol of passivity and powerlessness” (Gal, 1991:175) because women's ability to make choices and speak their minds is a proof of agency and empowerment and self-esteem. This is because they can speak about their challenges and make changes in their own lives (Galab and Rao, 2003). So, women who cannot speak out are seen as disempowered, unable to act and to effect change.

Though women's silence has been discussed in the feminist literature, men's silence is rarely discussed even though—as the narratives in this study show—it prevents some women from benefitting from the gender equality agenda and undermines government initiatives towards gender equality promotion. This article shows the impact of men's silence in reaction to the promotion of gender equality in households and explores how silence is used as a strategy of negotiating gender relations and/or resisting gender changes in rural communities in Rwanda.

A number of studies have analysed Rwanda's new gender equality laws and policies and how they are implemented (Bayisenge, 2015; Debusscher and Ansoms, 2013: 1123; Abbott, 2015), but do not adequately inform us on how couples negotiate new gender practices in daily life while implementing these laws. This study is therefore of interest because it provides a new insight on how couples in rural Rwanda are coping with new gender dynamics.

1 Woman, 38, V1, January 2013.

2 Man, 49, V4, April 2013.

This article draws on group discussions with men and women in Kamonyi District, one of Rwanda's rural areas. During group discussions, both men and women reported views and experiences that indicated dilemmas: worries, uncertainties and fears lived as a result of implementing gender equality laws and policies. Their narratives generated three themes that are useful in analysing how change in gender relations are perceived and negotiated in rural households: (1) joint decision-making over domestic property, (2) women's earnings and work outside the home, and (3) reporting domestic abuse to authorities. I argue that persistent unequal gender power relations in rural communities are not necessarily due to poor implementation of equality laws and policies as previous studies have revealed. Rather, as indicated by the narratives of the men and women interviewed, persisting gender inequality practices at household level are perhaps due to a number of dilemmas. These arise when new gender equality laws and policies are implemented.

This article follows a threefold arrangement. First, an analytical framework that guides the analysis of the interviews is provided. Second, the methodological approach used in the study is described. Third, the article discusses the empirical findings, applications and implications of the study in relation to the theoretical framework. Last, the article provides some concluding remarks.

### **Gender equality policy implications on gender relations**

The literature reviewed on gender and development (GAD) suggests that in some societies where people have competing social expectations about the position of men and women, implementing gender equality laws and policies that aim to create equal power relations can provoke social conflict if existing power relations are challenged or shifted (Razavi, 2007; Sweetman, 2013; Kabeer, 1997). In such a scenario, in order to solve or at least mitigate the conflict and allow for gender equality in power relations to happen, there is a need for a constant process of "negotiation and renegotiation" between the parties concerned before any decision-making can take place (Kabeer, 1997). "Negotiation" is defined as a joint decision-making process through which the parties involved discuss and resolve their conflicts in order to reach a mutually acceptable settlement (Kray and Thompson, 2005). Cornwall and Edwards (2010) supplement the above view by arguing that negotiation is an interactive process that leads to women's empowerment by increasing their room to influence decisions and participate in household welfare. Accordingly, women's ability to make choices enables them not only to have access to resources but also to control those resources and make decisions (Malhotra and Mather, 1997). Negotiation thus is considered as an indicator of gender equality.

In Rwanda, the 2003 constitution adopted in the aftermath of the 1994 genocide provides for gender discussions and negotiation. It provides that no man or woman may sell or give away any household property without the consent of the spouse (Organic Law, 2013). The constitution thus supports mutual or joint agreement between the parties concerned before conducting any transaction on household property. In the Rwandan context, negotiation is, therefore, seen as a household or family decision-making matter where husband and wife can jointly decide on household allocation of resources. Today, many women are claiming their new rights and space in terms of gender relations, especially those living in legal marriages demanding opportunities they did not have before. However, several studies show that some men tend to challenge this shift and see it as an erosion of their cultural gender privileges (Slegel and Richters, 2012; Manzi, 2014; Kagaba, 2015).

One could argue that in order to achieve a more equitable status in gender relations at household level, there is need for further discussions and negotiations between husbands and wives in order to solve their continuous conflicts. Yet some studies (Chant and Sweetman, 2012; Goetz, 1997; Rathgeber, 1989) point out that gender ideologies and social norms may hinder women's ability to negotiate and claim their rights within gender relationships. The literature on resistance also shows that the implementation processes can bring about resistance, which could undermine women's power and government initiatives towards the promotion of gender equality. For example, Scott (2008) highlights that there can be some unnoticed forms of resistance that are manifested as hidden transcripts or hidden tales and actions, which could undermine government initiatives or the dominant discourse of power. He considers some acts of daily resistance as coping mechanisms, which are, according to him, trivial acts that are not necessarily considered as real acts of resistance. In this article, the question of how gender practices are negotiated and renegotiated or resisted is largely about how men and women "cope" with gender changes in their households.

The gender and development approach-which analyses how gender roles are constructed in society, how gender relations and ideologies shape inequalities between men and women and how the unequal power relations of gender can be changed so that men and women can benefit equally within a specific society-provides a useful perspective when interpreting the narratives from the interviews I conducted with the respondents about their lives under the new gender equality laws and practice.

### **Interviewing men and women in rural Rwanda**

This article builds on a qualitative study carried out in Kamonyi district from January 2013 to May 2014. Kamonyi is one of the 30 districts located in Rwanda's Southern Province. The study sought to explore and analyse how people in rural communities lived and experienced the government agenda of gender equality and its implementation in the district. The main reason for choosing this district was that it was ranked by the Rwandan Government as the best-performing rural district in 2012. This was done on the basis of a four-point development criterion: justice, social welfare, good governance, and economic development (Rwanda Districts Performance Evaluation Report 2011-2012). In addition, this district was ranked best in terms of implementing gender equality-related activities. My choice of the best district was based on two factors. One, listening to men and women from a rural district that Rwanda considers a role model, to see if the lived experiences portrayed the image of Rwanda as a success story in creating a conducive environment for gender equality achievement in the region. Two, my interest was to investigate whether life in Kamonyi presented the best scenario in terms of rural gender equality, and if the reality on the ground would reflect that image.

I adopted a single case study methodology to explore the lived gender equality experiences of legally married men and women in post-genocide Rwanda. It aims to gain in-depth understanding of men's and women's experiences with gender equality practice in Rwanda. The study was restricted to legally married men and women because in Rwanda the entire package of the gender equality agenda is exclusively addressed towards solving the plight of legally married women (Daley et al., 2010). Hence, women living in polygamous marriages and consensual relationships are often excluded from the gender equality agenda and have no claim over their husband's property (Constitution of the Republic of Rwanda, Articles 21, 26). Given the above situation, I wished to understand how the married men and women try to negotiate gender relationships in their household where most of the impact of policy implementation made a difference.

Focus group discussions were used to generate data on how men and women expressed their views and experiences on the government agenda of gender equality. I conducted 32 group interviews with men and women, with in each group, between seven to nine respondents. In total, 263 participants participated in the study. Group discussions were organised separately according to gender and age. For men, there was one group with young married men aged 25–45, and a second group with older married men aged 46 or older. The two different age groups arose during the pilot phase of the research, when younger women showed reluctance to express themselves in the presence of more senior women. The same technique was used to form men's groups. The questions asked were the same for all groups. Focus group interviews provided space for ample discussions and exchange that exposed a variety of views and experiences in relation to the gender equality agenda. Here, it is important to mention that the government emphasis to encourage public debate on private matters helped me to access some of the participants' private lives in discussion groups because my respondents were already used to such discussions. It is possible that I would have obtained the same information by using individual interviews, but it is likely I would have missed out on the dynamic of exchanges and rich debates gained through the respondents' interaction. It is also important to highlight that during group discussions, I did not notice many difference between the stories of young and old participants, perhaps because traditional beliefs, perceptions and practices about roles and responsibilities in homes are the same, regardless of social categories and differences in the communities.

In short, listening to what the respondents chose to disclose while narrating their daily experiences about gender equality laws, it became apparent that the implementation of equality laws tended to create friction and dilemmas at various levels. However, it is important to mention that my position, as a young unmarried Rwandan woman who is both educated and urbanised, could have influenced what some men and women chose to tell. In any case, I accessed narratives that generated valuable insights about the respondents' lived



experiences on gender equality initiatives. Nevertheless, it is important to emphasise that the narratives used in the analysis are not the ultimate truth; rather, they are the representation of realities seen, lived and experienced by the respondents.

### **Men's and women's narratives about the gender equality agenda**

Three main themes emerge from the focus group discussions about gender equality lived experiences: (1) joint decision-making over domestic property, (2) women's earnings and work outside the home, and (3) reporting domestic abuse to authorities. In the next section, the respondents' accounts on these themes are presented and analysed.

#### ***Joint decision-making over domestic property***

With regard to joint decisions over domestic property, the narratives expressed different and opposing views and experiences. Women were excited that not only did they have access to property ownership enshrined in Rwanda's gender equality legislation on inheritance, but they also hailed the fact that they were now part of the decision-making process on household/domestic property. Evidence in this regard is shown in their testimonies, as three women explain:

Oh! Now things have changed. A woman has the right to inheritance and property in the house. The law is very clear. They have explained it to us. Before equality came, it was difficult for us because there were no laws to protect us, but now it is good. We have acquired value.<sup>3</sup>

Today a man owns 50 per cent and a woman 50 per cent of the family property, as long as you are married. It is not like in the past where married women had no rights to property. I don't know how the people who live in towns value their land but for us here, if you have more land or you buy new land, you are considered rich because you have something with value. We did not study and we do not have jobs. We do agriculture (...). Land is our gold here.<sup>4</sup>

Even if my husband wants to sell the land or give it to a friend without my consent, he cannot do so because the land title bears both my husband's name and mine. He will still need to ask me to sign for him to be able to sell that land, a thing that was not there before.<sup>5</sup>

These narratives show that women have access to property ownership—a thing that protects them against gender inequality in terms of access to the family assets—and they enjoy equal rights in decision-making on matters of management, use and control of household assets, as long as their marriage is officially recognised. When the female respondents were asked to compare the current situation with that of the pre-genocide period (i.e. for those who experienced and lived through it), they reported a significant positive change in their status.

Although the men interviewed expressed concern about women's rights in decision-making about household property, many appreciated women's rights to access family property, notably land. This change was multiplying family possessions (as will be discussed further below). Two men explain this as follows:

When I got married to my wife, she didn't have the right to inheritance. She didn't bring anything home. She only brought her clothes. Now because of equality, she went back to her parents and she claimed her portion of land. It is very good. Our family property has increased.<sup>6</sup>

You are young and, maybe, you don't know. In the villages (rural areas), when you have a big portion of land, you are seen as rich. Land is our money. So if your wife can bring land home, it is very good.<sup>7</sup>

3 Woman, 28, V3, March 2013.

4 Woman, 36, V4, April 2013.

5 Woman, 62, V3, March 2013.

6 Man, 56, V3, March 2013.

7 Man, 47, V3, January 2013.

These positive statements were often countered by complaints. Female respondents reported that, in practice, some husbands tended to resist equal decision-making in the household because it reduced men's status as the customary authority in the household. The challenge to customary authority was reported as a frequent cause of family problems in men's stories. The attempts by women to challenge the traditional power relations were often interpreted by the men as disrespectful behaviour that contradicted Rwandan tradition and social norms. According to these norms, women were not allowed to challenge any idea proposed by their husbands. Four women explain what happens whenever they try to challenge their husbands about the issue of decision-making:

Even if I try to make him understand something, he thinks I am disrespecting him and then a fight starts. He starts telling me that equality has made me foolish.<sup>8</sup>

It is not only you! For me, whenever I try to convince him about something and he does not agree, he says it is equality that is making me do that.<sup>9</sup>

Men want to keep the cultural rights that a man can do all he wants in the home and they ignore that things have changed. Men are like that but not all of them. But many men are like my husband. I cannot hide it because my friends here know. A man thinks that if he asks a wife about something on which they should make a decision, he thinks he is underrating himself because, in the past, he used to decide without asking or consulting anyone.<sup>10</sup>

You are joking (...) you don't know men. Even if you quarrel with and yell at him, he cannot give up or accept that you can also discuss things. Men are like that, though not all of them. Some men do not want to give up; they stick to their decisions. So if you continue to quarrel with him, he can even hit you. Instead of arguing with him, you simply keep quiet and he does whatever he wants because he will never give up. What can you do? There is even a time you keep quiet (you do not respond to his questions) and he says you despise him. Men are complicated people.<sup>11</sup>

As the women point out, when a wife tries to challenge her husband's decision, this results in quarrels. Traditionally, women were not encouraged to speak publicly, especially in the presence of men, and women who dared to challenge this tradition were considered insolent (Uwineza and Pearson, 2009). It appears that the law providing access to ownership is working for these women in terms of paper ownership to land. However, when it comes to the specific provisions that challenge household gender roles, women do not necessarily benefit from the right to make household decisions on assets. Hence, it can be concluded that persisting expectations of men's authority can infringe on the new powers given to women as partners in decision-making on household property.

With regard to the men's narratives, their concerns emphasised that rights for women in the decision-making process regarding household property "give too much power to the women and create a feeling of frustration among men that nothing can be decided without the full consent of the latter" (Organic Law, 2013). The accounts of men reveal that a challenge to traditional social norms has been a major cause of friction in many families. Consequently, men report that they have been deprived of their value, authority and status as men, both at individual and community levels. This is associated with loss of manhood and self-esteem in the home and among peers. This is how two men express these ideas:

(...) But imagine yourself as a man who cannot make any decision in the home until your wife says yes. This is really ridiculous! Do not smile. It is a real problem. A man in the house without any power to make final decisions is like a photo on the wall in the house. And if you try to decide, for example, to sell something at home or even buy it without her consent, she alerts

8 Woman, 32, V1, January 2013.

9 Woman, 28, V1, January 2013.

10 Woman, 59, V2, February 2013.

11 Woman, 47, V2, February 2013.

the local leaders.<sup>12</sup>

If you can't make any decision in your house as a man, even your friends will not take you as a serious man. You look like a child in front of them. If you go to the village trading centre<sup>13</sup> to have a beer, you become a subject of discussion among peers. They see you as *inganzwa* [a husband who follows the wife's orders]. It is so shameful. We [men] are in trouble these days.<sup>14</sup>

The above respondents seem to affirm that gender equality belittles them in front of their wives; it makes society view them as good for nothing. When a man cannot take decisions in his home, his peers socially underrate his status. As mentioned earlier, traditionally, all power regarding major decisions in the home belonged to men. So, if there is a law against this practice, this can be interpreted as an attempt to destroy the culture that seeks to protect men's power and privileges over women. Rwandan cultural expectations assume that a man should make unilateral decisions in the home. Consequently, such a culture prevents women from resorting to the new laws on equal participation in decision-making. Here again, the lived experiences of men portray gender equality principles on decision-making in homes as an obstruction to some practices traditionally sanctioned by culture.

Rwanda's social norms, according to which women cannot challenge their husbands, seem to still be intact. This is corroborated by the Rwandan saying that "Nta nkokokazi ibika isake ihari" (A hen can't crow in the presence of a cock), meaning that a woman is supposed to be silent in the presence of men, and that only men are allowed to speak on behalf of the family and community. This proverb is still entrenched in the mindset of many Rwandans and is frequently used in men's and women's interactions as a way of emphasising that men and women have different roles and positions in the household and community. The social norm that men cannot be challenged by women is also illustrated in another saying: "Imfizi ntiyimirwa" (You cannot prevent a bull from doing what it wants in the herd). Add to this another saying: "Uruvuzze umugore ruvuga umuhoro," which translates as "A woman's opinion always causes problems."

These gendered beliefs affect women's rights in the decision-making process and can leave them with no say in the household. Such a mindset leads to negative consequences regarding the implementation of laws and policies on gender equality. These norms could influence women in their ability to negotiate and exercise their rights and power within the household. As the accounts of their experiences show, men and women pay a high price while adjusting to the new gender equality roles at household level.

However, men and women both tell about how they use silence as a strategy to covertly negotiate gender equality practices at household level. A female respondent said:

A week ago my husband wanted us to buy rabbits and I told him that we cannot buy them because it is dry season and we cannot get grass for them to eat. He didn't want to understand me. I didn't say much; I only showed him the possible problems. In the evening when he came, he insisted that we should buy them. I decided to keep silent to avoid arguments. Two days later, he came and told me that he decided not to buy the rabbits. I didn't ask him anything to avoid provoking him. I have seen that when I speak less, it is sometimes helpful. If, for example, he wants to sell a plot of land or a cow or goat, even if I keep quiet and do not give him my consent he cannot do it because I will need to sign for him. So, if I keep quiet and talk less, it sometimes calms him down. Men don't like to be shown that women are smarter than them. When you keep quiet and do not argue with him, you can avoid many things.<sup>15</sup>

A man in a different village explained what he does, in most cases, to dissuade his wife from taking household decisions:

12 Man, 48, V3, March 2013.

13 This refers to a "trading centre" where social gatherings take place; here, people in rural communities socialise and have beer, sell vegetables and fruits, especially in the evening after work.

14 Man, 47, V3, March 2013.

15 Woman, 29, V2, February 2013.

Sometimes when you tell your wife two to three times about your plans and you see that she doesn't want you to realise it, instead of fighting, and inviting the intervention of local leaders, you leave her alone by keeping silent. You decide not to talk to her at all for some days. This means that you do not eat her food; you come home late in the night, sometimes drunk; you open the door and go to bed without asking her for anything. You live in your home as if you do not exist and you show her that you are always furious. When your wife discovers that you have spent three days without eating at home, she can change her behaviour. I have tried that and it has worked. If you avoid interacting with her, she gets affected and is obliged to change.<sup>16</sup>

As the narratives above reveal, silence appears to be a common strategy that both men and women use to covertly negotiate their relations and practices in their households. For women, as the narrative above indicates, the strategy of silence has two functions. First, they keep silent because they do not have a choice, and any attempt by them to challenge their husbands can bring more problems than solutions to their relationships. The second function is that women keep silent to avoid disputes as a cultural bargaining chip to invite their husbands to give a second consideration to the decision in question.

As for men, keeping silent in the home has three functions. The first is that silence discourages women from exercising their rights in the decision-making process. As the narrative indicates, silence is another way to undermine women's attempts to exercise equal power in the household. Men also use silence as a bargaining strategy that allows them to remain unchallenged within their households in order to maintain their cultural and traditional supremacy. Men's silence can also be interpreted as a strategy of resistance to changing traditional practices.

### *Women's earnings and work outside their households*

A substantial number of women report that, as a result of their work, they are happy to generate income that contributes to household survival. This permits them to be part of the planning process in the household. In turn, some women say this earns respect from their husbands. Two respondents offer testimonies of how their value in the household had been enhanced:

Now look! Before equality came, a woman used to stay at home and ask everything from her husband but nowadays we also go out to look for jobs and get paid in cash. The work is exhausting but it is good because I get paid and I can buy some needed items.<sup>17</sup>

To add to what my friends have just said, when you get paid in cash, your husband cannot even despise you because you are contributing something to the family's welfare. You are still young, you don't know anything! In our community a woman is valued if she brings something home. The cash I bring every Friday helps me to be able to plan together with my husband. We sit together and everyone brings what he has earned and then we plan. If I were able to get work every day, that would be very good.<sup>18</sup>

As the respondents put it, the money they earn can place their family in a better position. A woman can now plan with her husband, something that she could not do with empty hands before. Although working outside the home increases the latter's workload, some of the women interviewed were eager to do such work because of the benefits they get.

Equally, men appreciate women's opportunity to earn money and bring some income home, especially as this makes men feel relieved from the burden of being sole breadwinners for the family. One male respondent explains this as follows: "The development of the household is now for both husband and wife. We can now plan together." In addition, another respondent corroborates the statements above, saying that if their wives do not bring any cash home, there is no way they can develop the family. He had this to say: "We plan jointly because we both have money and can suggest how to use it. If she doesn't have anything, what can she say?"

16 Man, 52, V3, March 2013.

17 Woman, 30, V1, January 2013.

18 Woman, 44, V1, January 2013.



In spite of the appreciation of women's earnings, there were also some negative concerns voiced, pointing to a dilemma resulting from the employment of women. Many of the women interviewed, especially those belonging to the younger generation, explained that when they work outside their homes and meet other men in their workplaces, this creates feelings of mistrust and worry for their husbands. The husbands then often falsely accuse them of secret relationships with other men. Some women explained this as follows:

I can give you an example. I got a job on a construction site as a porter together with some other people, including men. But now at home it has become total war. Now my husband accuses me of sleeping with men I spend the day with at my place of work. Where does he get that from? Nowhere! He did not even see me with any man but because I work and talk to them, he thinks I sleep with them. Don't you see that this is a big problem?<sup>19</sup>

If you go home and tell him 'Look! This is what I earned this week, now let's plan for it,' he gets excited, but if he sees me talking to another man and laughing even with those men I work with, he has a problem. If I dare to go to a bar and buy a beer, eh! That's when the war starts.<sup>20</sup>

According to women's statements, employment earns cash and contributes to the household, but the men abhor the idea that women should be in social contact with men outside the home. This experience can again be attributed to the ways in which gender roles are socially and culturally constructed in Rwanda. Women and girls are caretakers within the home; they are responsible for childcare and domestic work. On the other hand, husbands are considered as heads of families and they are the sole breadwinners for their families by working outside the home. The labour law has challenged Rwanda's traditional gender roles and norms. Today, women go out to work and get equal pay to men in the same workplace, and some men feel they are unable to control their movements because they cannot monitor them as they used to.

The men interviewed also expressed some worries and uncertainties about women's work outside the home. In fact, they argued that they were no longer in a position to control their wives—their authority over women had been undermined by the gender equality laws and policies. Some men were suspicious about their wives when they were outside their homes working and this implied that they were in the company of other men. This sense of loss of authority, and the view that their wives could now do whatever they wanted, shows how uncertain and insecure some Rwandan men are. The accounts of some men indicate that they cope with this situation by turning to their cultural prerogatives for safety. Three men express their concerns in the following terms:

These days, women are like goats that have broken their chains. When they go out to work, they cheat on us a lot. They even go to bars with men they work with. They do whatever they want. What can you do? Things have changed!<sup>21</sup>

Sometimes, you can even think that she gets money from other men she meets outside. It is possible (...). She goes in the morning and comes back in the evening; you can't know what happens when she leaves home. Equality is destroying some families in our community.<sup>22</sup>

The problem is that even if you try to tell her that she should come home earlier, she says she has the right to socialise with others.<sup>23</sup>

In addition, men also complain that, more often than not, when their wives get more income, they respect their husbands less. Men feel that their respect from their wives has been reduced and that their peers, neighbours, and the community also no longer respect them. Some men, as the following statements show, seem to feel betrayed by the government in its attempt to promote gender equality. Three male respondents had this to say:

19 Woman, 27, V3, March 2013.

20 Woman, 36, V3, March 2013.

21 Man, 57, V4, April 2013.

22 Man, 37, V4, April 2013.

23 Man, 46, V4, April 2013.

In the past, a husband would enter the house and his wife could say, “Karibu mugabo wange” (Welcome, my husband). But today, do you think women can afford to do that anymore? No! They don’t. That culture has gone. A woman used to respect her husband because she knew the next hour she would ask for some money to buy some household items, but now, if she has some money in her pocket, this respect diminishes and you can’t say anything. Everything today is about women. We are now worthless men.<sup>24</sup>

The biggest problem is that when a woman earns more money, not only does she disrespect you, but also you as a husband become socially worthless in the community. Your peers start gossiping that your wife rules you because she has money.<sup>25</sup>

When you find that it is too much and you do not want to be despised by your wife in front of your peers, you avoid talking to her in public. But when you go home, you treat her with threats and intimidations, without beating her anyway because if you dare do so, she can call the local leaders and you can be in trouble.<sup>26</sup>

The ways men articulate their own experiences indicate that there is a conflict between the already existing social/cultural norms and the new gender equality practices. Probably, judging from the accounts of the lived experiences of the men under study, there is a masculinity crisis in rural Rwanda. This is because men appear to be threatened, and the best and perhaps the only way for them to reassert their manhood is to demonstrate it through controlling their wives. As indeed emphasised in the above respondent’s account, and as many men narrated, apparently, some men choose to threaten/intimidate their wives in private as an alternative strategy to demonstrate their traditional power in the household. The strategy can also be interpreted as an attempt by men to prevent women from exercising their right of accessing, using and controlling household income. As a result, the strategy adopted by men does not create a favourable space for successful negotiation to lead to a change in existing unequal power relations between spouses.

As the men’s narratives indicate, their concerns regarding women’s work outside the home and their earning cash portray an image of a rural man who is stuck, insecure and uncertain of his future manhood. The way men articulate their experiences of equality thus indicates their feelings of frustration and their sense that their masculinity is under attack. On the other hand, the women also faced a dilemma. They contemplated whether they should continue enjoying their rights and status which were ushered in by the gender equality legislation, or whether they should stay at home as housewives and obey their husbands to avoid social stigma from the communities they live in. These concerns, thus, constitute a source of friction in their gender relationships.

The experiences of men in rural Kamonyi also resonate with findings from the Democratic Republic of the Congo (Lwambo, 2013), where men believed that their wives slept with their superiors and co-workers when they went to work outside their homes. This also resonated with the findings from Tanzania where some men feel dishonoured and sense a loss of reputation in society if they cannot control wives who go out to work (Silberschmidt, 2005). The men’s narratives therefore mirror other studies on masculinity which show that men feel stressed and displaced in their family if they cannot control their wives who work outside their homes (Freedman and Jacobson, 2012; Porter, 2013).

The men’s concerns, as of now, are likely to prevent a process of constructive discussion and fruitful negotiation between spouses about the use of household property, earnings and plans for family advancement. But in the future, this could perhaps change if women’s rights continue to be promoted and if men’s worries and fears, identified in this study, are heard and addressed.

### ***Reporting domestic Abuse to authorities***

Generally, in Rwanda, if abuse of any kind takes place, the victim is expected to report to local mediators in the first instance. If the conflict cannot be resolved through reconciliation, the victim is expected to report the

24 Man, 55, V4, April 2013.

25 Man, 39, V3, March 2013.

26 Man, 26, V3, March 2013.

matter to local leaders. In case this second instance also fails to solve the problem, the unsatisfied party can report the matter to the police post in the local area.

Specifically, as far as this study is concerned, the Rwandan gender-based violence law grants women the right to report abuse, whether these occur in or outside the home. It also provides legal sanctions against the perpetrators (Article 13). All the interviewed women hailed and appreciated the practicability of gender laws that give them such rights. However, this was not the case for men. The way women articulated their experiences indicated that they were aware of the existence of the law that punishes gender-related abuse. They demonstrated that they were also knowledgeable about the legal institutions to resort to (community leaders or the police) in case of any abuse or breach of law. Two women explain this as follows:

It is good that we have laws that protect us. If my husband beats me, I can go to community leaders or can call the police. In the past you couldn't. It was normal for a woman to be beaten. Even if he sells a piece of land without telling me, I can alert the community leaders.<sup>27</sup>

It is not only that, but even in bed, he cannot come and force me to have sex. If I don't want it or I am tired, he cannot force me as it used to be before. Laws are there; if he forces me it is also violence. I can report the case to the leaders.<sup>28</sup>

In spite of such women's awareness and appreciation of gender-related laws on domestic abuse, many problems still arise when it comes to reporting such abuse. As some of the women interviewed indicated, if a woman reports her husband for any kind of abuse (physical violence, sexual abuse, a unilateral decision like selling household property, etc.), she faces several problems. Not only is her husband punished (mostly jailed), but also the woman becomes the only household breadwinner. In most cases, she is also threatened by her husband's family members, and threatened with warnings of rejection by the community, which accuses her of having exposed family issues, which, culturally, should be kept secret. In addition, if a woman decides to bail her husband out of prison or is obliged to do so in order to secure good relations with the husband's family and the community, she can do this after paying bail fees. Consequently, she experiences the problematic choice of either reporting the abuse, or accepting to live with abuse. Three female respondents recount their experiences as follows:

The problem is that even if you call the police or community leaders and he is jailed or held for some days at the police station, it is the woman who suffers more. At that time when he is in jail, the entire household requirements and domestic duties fall solely upon you. And if you want to get him out of the police station you will need to pay bail fees. The police officer in charge will tell you that the police station is not the hotel.<sup>29</sup>

It is not easy! When you report your husband, you are addressed by the people [community] as *igishigabo* [a woman who misbehaves] and you start to feel ashamed in public. In case this happens, you avoid passing where many people are gathered in the community because they start pointing fingers and talking to each other saying 'Look at the woman who jailed her husband!' You become a hot topic of discussion and a laughing stock in the community. To avoid such problems, there are times when we do not even report them!<sup>30</sup>

A week ago (...), I called the community leader because my husband had sold the land without telling me and when he came back at night drunk, I asked him why he did so and where the money was. Then, he started intimidating me. I became angry and asked him loudly and he slapped me; he broke my arm, don't you see? I have been at the hospital. The head of the village came and took him; he is now at the police station. My mother-in-law came two days later. She started intimidating me, saying that I should go and release her son. I didn't do that. My neighbour came to my house this morning and told me that what I did was not proper and that

27 Woman, 58, V1, January 2013.

28 Woman, 45, V1, January 2013.

29 Woman, 26, V2, February 2013.

30 Woman, 26, V2, February 2013.

I should go and ask the police to release my husband and then they can negotiate with him. I know that if I go to police to tell them to release him, I will have to pay bail fees of 5,000 RWF [10 EUR]. But do I have it? And those who are yelling at me cannot even give me a coin. I will need to work to get the money if I want him bailed out. It is not easy!<sup>31</sup>

The act of reporting husbands for their abuse can exacerbate unequal power relations. Consequently, as the narratives indicate, some women choose to remain silent. However, other women interviewed insisted that instead of keeping quiet, they prefer to fight with their husbands, despite the dangers that this can bring to them. The following testimonies amply demonstrate the determination of the women concerned:

Oh! You people want to make me laugh! I cannot allow him to sell our land without my consent, unless he kills me first and sells it after.<sup>32</sup>

Things have changed! All the property in the household belongs to both of us. We must decide together, otherwise it can lead to a fight.<sup>33</sup>

However, as reported by many women, a woman who tries to impose her rights against the will of her husband, or who refuses to allow her husband to use the household assets as he wishes, or who reports her husband to authorities, often faces social disapproval. Some female respondents reported that the women's actions could also be a source of endless domestic conflicts and abuse in the home, especially in young couples.

As far as men's experiences are concerned, the right to report domestic abuse is identified as a root cause of many problems. Rural Rwandan men seem to have lost their value, self-respect and integrity as men in their households. In addition, the men interviewed complained of losing their socio-cultural esteem, notably among their peers and community. Thus, the respondents' testimonies indicate that men believe that the current gender equality legislation has made them losers on all fronts: their prerogatives (such as men's unilateral decisions, wife-beating practices, sole land rights, etc.) have been undermined. Men are thus now concerned, and angry that they will be severely punished when those "prerogatives" are reported as abuse.

Consequently, men are faced with a dilemma. If they do not comply with societal norms that give them power over women, the community, peers and neighbours will treat them with scorn. If they comply with social norms, they can be punished by the law. Therefore, in the face of this dilemma, as explained above, they either choose to remain silent in the household or they turn to drugs and alcohol and perhaps abandon their households. Four men shared their experiences in the following explanations:

Look! Even when you try to reprimand your wife, she can say that you have abused her. It is sorrowful the way we live now. I don't talk and she doesn't talk because if we both talk, in most cases we end up fighting. You know why? Because she doesn't want to give up, since she knows that the laws are there to protect her in whatever circumstances and that I can be punished.<sup>34</sup>

If you dare make a decision over assets without her consent, she calls the community leaders or the police and you are punished or jailed. So, do you think a man has value anymore? We are regarded as worthless in our home, not even in the community, who do you think we are? Life is becoming difficult for men!<sup>35</sup>

When we start arguing, I just leave her and go away because if I stay there, I may get angry and can beat her. I come back in the evening after taking my two bottles of *Kiyoda* [a traditional

31 Woman, 46, V2, February 2013.

32 Woman, 30, V2, February 2013.

33 Woman, 41, V2, February 2013.

34 Man, 29, V3, March 2013.

35 Man, 25, V3, March 2013.

beer in Kamonyi] and go directly to bed. What can you do? Things have changed!<sup>36</sup>

Hah! Imagine me calling the community leaders and telling them ‘Please, my wife beat me up’ or she did this and that. This is unbelievable (...) No, even if she does that, I can’t report her because even the community leader would laugh at me, and the whole community would find a topic to talk about. There are men who are beaten by their wives but they don’t talk. Oh! They are there. We have them here.<sup>37</sup>

The men’s narratives seem to suggest that married couples can face serious problems related to the implementation of the gender equality agenda. In some rural households, communication and negotiation between couples is characterised by disagreement and fights. Some men appear to consider this a kind of unbearable disrespect and betrayal from their wives. And because they do not want to face social disapproval and get punished, some live in their homes as if they are not there. To avoid quarrels that would cause friction between them and their wives and to avoid being undervalued by their peers, many men reported that keeping silent is the best way to cope with the situation. This is because whatever takes place in the home will not be exposed to outsiders, leading the husband to maintain his public image as a respectable man. Alternatively, both husband and wife can become silent, rarely talking to each other, sometimes for a long time.

In traditional Rwanda, domestic abuse or violence was considered a private matter. Women simply kept quiet about it. They were not permitted to report it and they resorted to keeping silent. If a husband beat up his wife, for example, this was not seen as an offence. It was often seen by society as a way of men disciplining their wives (Uwineza and Pearson, 2009). In addition, women often used to avoid reporting such incidents and remained silent about abuse for fear that they would be divorced and therefore abandon their children in the process. This fear was due to the Rwandan tradition that all children in any given marriage automatically would be taken care of by the father upon separation (Uwineza and Pearson, 2009). Hence, the women opted to remain silent and to tolerate all forms of mistreatment as long as they were able to bring up their children (Adekunle, 2007). Furthermore, given that in the past, household property was registered only in the husband’s name, the latter enjoyed full rights to do as he wished without asking or informing his wife. With the new gender equality legislation in place, men have become restricted in their actions *vis-à-vis* property ownership. Now, the respondents explained, because men are reported if they abuse their wives, or if they use the household property without their wives’ consent, they face problems and live under fear of being subjected to punishment by authorities.

An analysis of the women’s narratives shows that even though women now know their constitutional rights to report anybody who abuses them, most of the time, they prefer not to do so. Some still continue to remain silent. This experience resonates with a study conducted by Narayan (2000) in Jamaica where women do not dare report their husbands’ abuse, fearing that the latter can abandon them.

Likewise, men also adopt strategies to avoid problems associated with their wives’ reports on domestic abuse. These strategies, as discussed above, include male silence, turning to drugs and alcohol, and abandoning their households. Apart from the Rwandan strategy of male silence, other strategies resonate with the experiences of men in other countries. In Gabon, Cameroon and Uganda, men reported that if they had problems with their wives, they would turn to drinking in order to forget their problems. In Tanzania, DRC, Vietnam, and Latvia, men experiencing similar problems turn to drugs and alcohol, beat their wives and suffer from depression, although some simply walk away, abandoning their homes, which are then taken care of by their wives. In the same study, extreme cases of suicidal depression were reported (Narayan, 2000; Silberschmidt, 2005; Lwambo, 2013).

## Conclusion

36 Man, 42, V4, April 2013.

37 Man, 47, V4, April 2013.



The accounts of the lived experiences of Rwanda's rural men and women reveal that the implementation of gender laws and policies has created a confusing rural gender landscape characterised by worries, fears and dilemmas. These dilemmas are manifest in three areas: (1) joint decision-making over domestic property, (2) women's earnings and work outside the home, and (3) reporting domestic abuse to authorities. This has led to a complicated clash of values: a clash between tradition and the rule of law, a clash between government and culture, and a clash between husband and wife. In short, these clashes are influenced by the new gender equality laws and policies, which have, arguably, created an environment of friction between men and women. It should be noted that the implementation of gender equality policies is not only hampered by the perpetuation of societal norms but is also compounded by the worries and fears of husbands whose authority, as heads of families, seems to be undermined by the legal punishments from the government machinery.

Learning from the respondents' accounts, we can conclude that the strategies adopted by men to solve the above problem—drugs and alcohol abuse, abandoning the household, and, particularly, silence—tend to negatively affect women's enjoyment of their newfound rights stipulated in the new "gender equality" agenda. Particularly, the strategy of silence adopted by husbands seems to carry some implications with regard to women's rights. Firstly, it undermines the attempt by women to exercise equal power provided by the new legislation; it also creates unpleasant behaviour that women were not culturally confronted with before. Thus, silence in this case can be seen as a hindrance to effective implementation of the gender equality law, intended to produce substantial change to women's lives.

Traditionally, silence was—and still is—a strategy used by women to keep their families safe and intact. In Rwandan culture, silence as a strategy for solving family conflicts was never used by men in their households. This is because men's power in the household was never challenged by their wives, especially in public, as is the case today. Husbands had absolute power over other household members and were respected in the community (Uwineza and Pearson, 2009). Today, with the new gender equality practices in place, a number of men are faced with dilemmas emanating from the clash between new and old practices. Hence, men tend to adopt silence as a strategic response to avoid something that could publicly challenge their supremacy.

Generally, Rwandan men attach considerable respect to societal norms, which award them a high status. These conditions include: exercise of power and authority in the household, unilateral decision-making by the husband, and household protection. Conversely, gender equality laws and policies pose a new set of conditions and criteria for men to fulfil. These include negotiation with women regarding any household transactions and refraining from disciplining their wives (or "correcting them," as it used to be called). Failure on the part of men to comply with these two requirements is either punished by peers and society or by government authorities. On the other hand, to avoid punishment in case their wives report them to authorities for abusing their rights, many men in this study identified both silence and privacy as the best options. However, it should be noted that the strategy of silence often calls for hidden resistance to gender equality practices.

On the other hand, according to the narratives of women's lived experiences, silence hurts them in many aspects of life (physically, psychologically, and emotionally). Nowadays, this type of silence used by men is known as *ihohoretwa rya bucece*, translated in English as "covert abuse." Some men told me that when they adopt silence in their homes, they are safe and secure because even the women cannot report them to authorities because there is lack of proof of abuse. One male respondent said this in his own words: If I do not beat her, how can she report me? Even my friends will not notice that she despises me. If I don't speak with her for some time or do not eat the food she has prepared, she is prompted to change her behaviour/reaction.<sup>38</sup>

Thus, as this respondent's account indicates, and, as recounted by many other men in this study, silence is often preferred because it cannot be reported to authorities, as it leaves no traces of evidence. Instead, silence—as used in this article—absolves men from punishments administered by the tripartite system: peers, community and government authorities. Reading from the men and women's narratives, it seems like the current reaction to gender equality practices in rural Rwanda can be associated with Rwanda's tremendous rapid changes in gender relations in the country occasioned by the 1994 genocide and the new gender laws and policies. The 1994 genocide in Rwanda abruptly changed gender roles and responsibilities in many respects.

Following the absence of many more men than women,<sup>39</sup> women were obliged to take on men's roles, which was not the case before. On the other hand, the new laws on gender equality introduced after 1994 also ushered in new gender practices such as compelling men to take joint decisions with their spouses over household assets, and compelling husbands not to physically abuse their wives. The laws also encouraged wives to report cases of domestic abuse to authorities. These two factors disrupted routine social life, prompting people to abruptly adapt to and cope with the newly created situation.

This could partly explain why, in this study, the accounts of the lived experiences of men and women show that they develop strategies to cope with the new changes in gender relations. In fact, gender relations were fixed in men's favour before the genocide. Once those relations were mandated for change, the strategy of anxious silence, which women had used, emerged as an overall strategy for both men and women, as each group contemplated the implications of the genocide and the gender changes that resulted from it.

In conformity with existing theories, the accounts of the lived gender equality experiences of both men and women in rural Rwanda support the literature on masculinity studies which explain that when men see their power relations challenged, they often experience psychosocial stress and frustration. This is often because they feel unable to cope with the standards imposed by the communities in which they live. That is why many rural men often turn to alcohol, violence and home abandonment as immediate solutions (Porter, 2013; Sweetman, 2013; Silberschmidt, 2005; Freedman and Jacobson, 2012; Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005). But at the same time, the accounts of lived experiences of women also indicate that the latter are stressed by and are living with the dilemma of not knowing what they should do, hence, sticking to the strategy of silence as a woman's cultural solution to keep their family together. Likewise, the accounts of lived experiences of men and women in rural Rwanda support the literature on gender and development approach which suggests that social norms, values and cultural practices embedded in society can be a hindrance to women's rights and gender equality (Agarwal, 1994; Jackson, 2003; Goetz, 1997).

However, the accounts of the lived experiences of men and women in rural Rwanda reveal something new, which appears to have been less considered by existing gender and development literature (Cornwall, 1997: 8). The implementation of gender laws and policies leaves men with *concerns* such as a feeling of loss of authority, self-respect, manhood, and a sense of being betrayed by the government. To deal with such concerns, men adopt "silence" as a strategy to survive the consequences of the implementation of the gender equality agenda. This strategy protects them from being accused of violating gender laws because it leaves no trace of evidence as regards the accused. However, the strategy has a negative effect on both men and women in terms of societal, psychological and emotional considerations. The final result is that the strategy of "silence" as a cultural bargaining chip and as a resistance strategy to change gender traditional practices affects the outcome of the negotiation process. Therefore, the accounts of lived experiences of men and women in rural Rwanda suggest that men's concerns and survival strategies need more consideration in order to achieve longstanding gender equality without harming anyone in the household.

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39 According to National Gender Statistics Report (2013: 11) 33.6% of Rwanda's households were headed by women because many men were injured and unable to carry out their family responsibilities. Others had been killed, were in prison, or had fled the country (Uwineza and Pearson, 2009). Women were subjected to sexual assault and torture, including rape, during the genocide, the latter often leading to HIV infection (Debusscher and Ansoms, 2013: 1115). An estimated 500,000 women were raped during the three months of the genocide and many lost their husbands, children and relatives (Arnold, 2009: 7).

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## Appendix

List of focus group discussions referred to in this paper

- Number: Age
- V: Village 1-4

Woman, 38, V1:	January 2013
Man, 49, V4:	April 2013
Woman, 28, V3:	March 2013
Woman, 36, V4:	April 2013
Woman, 62, V3:	March 2013
Man, 56, V3:	March 2013
Man, 47, V1:	January 2013
Woman, 32, V1:	January 2013
Woman, 28, V1:	January 2013
Woman, 59, V2:	February 2013
Woman, 47, V2:	February 2013
Man, 47, V3:	March 2013
Woman, 29, V2:	February 2013
Man, 52, V3:	March 2013
Woman, 30, V1:	January 2013
Woman, 44, V1:	January 2013
Woman, 27, V3:	March 2013
Woman, 36, V3:	March 2013
Man, 57, V4:	April 2013
Man, 37, V4:	April 2013
Man, 46, V4:	April 2013
Man, 55, V4:	April 2013
Man, 39, V3:	March 2013
Man, 26, V3:	March 2013
Woman, 58, V1:	January 2013
Woman, 45, V1:	January 2013
Woman, 26, V2:	February 2013
Woman, 26, V2:	February 2013
Woman, 46, V2:	February 2013
Woman, 30, V2:	February 2013
Woman, 41, V2:	February 2013
Man, 29, V3:	March 2013
Man, 25, V3:	March 2013
Man, 42, V4:	April 2013
Man, 47, V4:	April 2013