

Rwandan women's empowerment through participation as Gacaca judges and its impact on their everyday life

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About the author

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Abstract

Traditional Rwandan culture was centred on patriarchal beliefs and practices that violated women's rights and excluded women from participating actively in the socio-economic and political life of the country. This article analyses whether, in the post-genocide period, Rwandan women have been empowered through their participation as *Gacaca* judges and how this participation has impacted their everyday life. The study draws on a qualitative design. It uses semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions intended to allow participants to fully describe their experience and perspectives. In light of the theory of empowerment, the study illustrates how Rwandan women's participation in *Gacaca* courts resulted in socio-economic and political empowerment, enhancing their capacity to make other types of legal claims, including in relation to land and inheritance. The study thus substantiates the existing literature suggesting that empowerment is a psychological construct reliant on the process of community participation and may benefit from other enablers like an appropriate legal framework that can be reinforced through state power.

Keywords

Rwanda, women empowerment, community participation, Gacaca courts.

1. Introduction

Rwanda faced many ethnocentric socio-political conflicts which culminated in the genocide against Tutsis in 1994. This genocide cost the lives of over a million people (Sharlach 1999: 387), engendered various socio-economic and political instabilities, and destroyed much of the state apparatus. Indeed, during the period right after the genocide, Rwanda was characterised, among other things, by an institutional incapacity to prosecute the alleged perpetrators of the genocide. The high number of detainees and the slow pace of the judicial system with its extremely low capacity suggested that “it would have taken more than a century to complete the prosecution of all cases” (Uvin 2003: 116). As a solution, the Government of Rwanda revived a traditional dispute-resolution mechanism known as *Gacaca* to assist with the prosecution of the alleged genocide perpetrators. The traditional *Gacaca* was therefore transformed into a formal and modern system of criminal prosecution called the “*Gacaca* courts” (Molenaar 2005: 21).

The *Gacaca* courts played a considerable role, not only in the prosecution of detainees, but also in the peace and reconciliation process. On the one hand, it was argued that *Gacaca* courts offered a more suitable form of restorative justice in the Rwandan post-genocide context than the formal justice system (Uvin and Mironko 2003: 219). On the other hand, some scholars judged the same *Gacaca* jurisdictions as “incompetent” to judge such genocide crimes (Waldorf 2006:49), which should rather be the business of only formal justice.

The *Gacaca* courts were grounded on the principle of collective effort, which enabled the adjudication of “nearly two million cases” (National Service of *Gacaca* Courts 2012: 43) during a period of 10 years. This was made possible by mass participation (Morrill 2004: 4) of community judges known as *Inyangamugayo*. One of the very significant aspects of this participation in the process of the *Gacaca* courts was the inclusion of women as both judges and general active participants, which had never happened before. It is worth noting that, in traditional Rwandan society, women suffered a double oppression. They were neither allowed to voice their views in public nor to their families. The only channel they had to convey their questions and opinions on vital societal issues was through male representatives such as their husbands, brothers or sons. Besides, women’s public expression was taken as a taboo and then given an ominous connotation, as expressed by one Rwandan proverb “*Uruvuze umugore ruvuga umuhoro,*” meaning that when a woman speaks in a household, the family is doomed.

In the post-genocide period and particularly during the *Gacaca* trials, women enjoyed a significant twofold revolution. They not only helped maximise the much-needed information about the genocide perpetrators but also and especially participated in their judgement as judges, known as *Inyangamugayo*. The post-genocide Rwandan Government’s decision to make women eligible as *Inyangamugayo* in the *Gacaca* courts has therefore given them the same, if not more, opportunities as men to be fully engaged in the justice and reconciliation process (Purdon 2005: 33), and, particularly to women, the ability to participate directly in the public sphere (De Waal 2006: 209).

This article explores the extent of empowerment which women have gained through their participation in *Gacaca* courts as *Inyangamugayo*. It starts with a brief understanding and discussion of *Gacaca* in the traditional Rwandan setting and its revival in the post-genocide period. A part is devoted to the review of empowerment theories, especially as applied to women. The research data then presents an examination of women’s empowerment through their involvement in *Gacaca*. This empowerment occurred within the psychological, familial, societal, political, and legal domains.

The paper concludes by opening up the question whether the already acquired women's empowerment through their participation in *Gacaca* courts may prompt further initiatives towards full gender equity and equality in Rwanda.

2. *Gacaca* courts in Rwandan society

In Kinyarwanda, the term *Gacaca* derives from the root-word of *umucaca* (a type of grass eaten by livestock). It refers to a type of grass on which people liked to sit, particularly during dispute-resolution sessions, due to its carpet-like smoothness. This justice-dispensing mechanism came to be known as *Gacaca*.

In the Rwandan traditional socio-judicial framework, *Gacaca* was composed of the family and the village levels. The judges presiding over *Gacaca* were called *Inyangamugayo*, which means "honest person[s]" (Molenaar 2005: 12). This role was assigned only to old men who were family heads, while women were denied participation in the *Gacaca* process (Vandeginste 1999: 16-19). In principle, the *Gacaca* judicial institution was concerned with minor incidents such as fights within households, family disputes, inheritance conflicts, thefts and land disputes. Serious crimes such as murders were taken directly to the royal court, which was the higher judicial structure of the country (Riddell 2005: 46).

The *Gacaca* courts were restored during the post-genocide period by the Government of Rwanda as one among the strategies for the reconstruction of the country in the judiciary area. This hybrid model of retributive-and-restorative justice was born from Rwandan officials' search for a solution to the slow pace of the Western model of retributive justice in prosecuting the alleged perpetrators of the genocide against Tutsis (Uvin 2003: 116). The main aim of the *Gacaca* courts was to accelerate the trials and uncover the truth about the genocide through a system that promoted reconciliation (Uvin 2003: 118). Supporting the government mandate and expectations awaited of the *Gacaca* courts, the East African Community Secretariat (2009: 32) emphasised that they were well-suited to the dispensation of justice in post-conflict societies because, as community-based systems of restorative justice, they encouraged participation, openness and dialogue between perpetrators and victims/survivors of the genocide against Tutsis in an attempt to achieve reconciliation, as opposed to retribution.

Nevertheless, scholars have criticised the revived *Gacaca* courts in terms of their grounded basis, the quality of the *Inyangamugayo*, and the end results. In fact, the restored *Gacaca* courts were qualified as "a state-run legal system" rather than being a community-based endeavour (Thomson and Nagy 2011:13). Moreover, Waldorf (2006:52) pointed out that the new *Gacaca* judges, *Inyangamugayo*, were not "community elders as in the past, but rather elected, comparatively young, and nearly one-third women." With regard to the end results, Ingelaere (2009:517) noted a big gap between "the objective to restore social harmony" among individuals and/or families which was the pursued by the traditional *Gacaca* and "the prosecutorial logic" of the modern *Gacaca* process.

Despite the above criticisms, *Gacaca* had a huge influence on the everyday lives of most Rwandans that warrants close and varied examination. Given this social reality, the current study aimed to consider the involvement of women in the courts and the ways in which their participation as *Inyangamugayo* may have empowered them within the Rwandan post-genocide society.

It is thus worth briefly reviewing how Gacaca courts were implemented in Rwanda from 2002 to 2012. Established by the Organic Law No. 40/2000 of 26 January 2001, *Gacaca* courts were assigned the overall mission to establish the truth about the crime of genocide, to speed up trials, to stop the culture of impunity, to facilitate unity and reconciliation, and to show the capacity of Rwandans in addressing their socio-political challenges. After public awareness campaigns were organised throughout the country in order to raise citizens' awareness, a pilot phase of the *Gacaca* judicial system was conducted from June 2002 to December 2003. The results of this phase brought about the amended Organic Law No. 16/2004 of 19 June 2004, which brought modifications relating to the organisation and jurisdiction of the Gacaca courts, as well as categorisation of genocide perpetrators.

Women's participation in *Gacaca* proceedings was regarded as central to the operation of the courts. Article 14 of the Organic Law No. 16/2004 of 19/6/2004 (Republic of Rwanda, 2004) allowed women to participate in the *Gacaca* courts as not only members of the General Assembly, but also and especially as *Inyangamugayo* judges, at all levels, and it specified the requirements for eligibility summarised in being a "Rwandan of integrity". Molenaar (2005:23) talked of the anti-discrimination nature of the law. Article 34 of the same law enumerates duties and responsibilities to be fulfilled by *Gacaca Inyangamugayo* judges, including the establishment of lists of victims and perpetrators; collection and investigation of evidence and testimonies; judgement of cases; and the hearing of confessions, guilty pleas, repentance and apologies. The effective accomplishment of the responsibilities, as done by women *Inyangamugayo*, as part of the "Seat for the *Gacaca* Court," serves as evidence of the potential for their empowerment in several ways.

3. Women's empowerment

Empowerment consists of giving individuals power and capacity so as to enable them to make decisions with the aim of effecting positive changes (Naz and Rehman 2011: 57). Although this term is differently conceived and defined in various contexts, it is often connected with progressive, representative, and inclusive development policies and programmes. Mackenzie (2009: 199) argues that the aim of empowerment is to shape a new development outlook: one that is focused on local interests, is associated with human concerns, and is representative of community needs. In addition, empowerment involves the raising of the powerless. This is supported by Rezazadeh (2011: 263), who emphasised that empowerment should be understood as an approach that enables the previously "disadvantaged and the marginalised to gain power to change the quality of their lives."

In the context of the current research, empowerment is strongly linked to efforts aimed at women's emancipation. For a long time, women experienced marginalisation within patriarchal societies, including the Rwandan one. Therefore, women's empowerment results in achieving gender equality, which should be translated into equal opportunities for men and women in all spheres of society. Women's participation in the *Gacaca* courts finds here its justification as one way of enabling their empowerment. It challenges the patriarchal basis of knowledge and validates women's experience, which becomes visible through practical socio-cultural and politico-economic transformations.

Empowerment strategies used at international, national, and local levels are different from one region of the world to another. They are always shaped by the complexity and multi-dimensionality of women's needs and

the socio-cultural context of the region of the world in which they live. The example of the East African women, as highlighted by Obbo (1980: 1-14), exposes their quest for economic independence, the determination to achieve economic autonomy, and the manifestation of the desire to enter into more equal relationships with men in other domains of societal life.

As for Rwanda, unprecedented efforts towards women's empowerment in all spheres of societal life have been made during the aftermath of the 1994 genocide against Tutsis. According to Olney (2011: 104), the genocide which caused women to become the majority of the Rwandan population has also foisted new roles upon them. The newly acquired roles have thus enabled women to engage in more community activities, and this has the potential to lead to their greater individual and collective empowerment.

Women's mobilisation and gender empowerment have been identified among key objectives of the Government of Rwanda, and this has been implemented through a variety of initiatives such as those oriented to economic development, women's rights, education, and more participation in decision-making institutions. Practically speaking, Baines (2005: 220-228) enumerates a number of women's networks, such as Pro-Femmes Twese Hamwe, a united platform for the promotion of women's common interests, which has empowered grassroots women and has promoted their involvement in national development; Duterimbere (involved in the promotion of women's roles in economic development); Haguruka (concerned with the advancement of women's legal rights); AvegaAgahozo (an organisation of widows and genocide survivors); and Club Mama Sportive, which facilitates educational support and provides literacy classes to women and girls.

The determining factor in the improvement of women's representation in political, economic, and social institutions has been the government's high level of commitment to women's inclusion and the expansion of their rights. In this regard, women have been allowed to participate in the justice system and the reconciliation process in the post-genocide period, something that, as discussed, had not been possible in traditional Rwandan society. Reggy (2009: 55) notes that Rwanda is one of the most remarkable examples of women's involvement in post-conflict contexts. More closely, Tiemessen (2004) draws attention to the inclusion of women as victims/witnesses and judges in the processes of the Gacaca courts at all levels, and the crucial role women played in the attainment of the reconciliation and justice objectives of the *Gacaca* courts. The same observation on women's roles in *Gacaca* courts is echoed by Hansen (2005), who highlighted women's engagement in the process of *Gacaca* courts as principal witnesses of genocide-related atrocities and actors of post-genocide reconciliation. However, these studies do not explore the relationship between Rwandan women's community participation experience and their individual empowerment, which is the concern of the present study.

4. Methodology

This research is qualitative and explorative. The choice was based on the belief that it would enable the researcher to gather first-hand information directly from participants by "watching ... [them] in their own territory and interacting with them in their own language, on their own terms" (Kirk and Miller 1986: 9). This provided the researcher with an in-depth understanding, enabling her to establish the extent of *Inyangamugayo* women's empowerment as a result of their participation in the post-genocide Gacaca courts. The choice of the qualitative method was motivated by the fact that the study involves an exploration of feelings

and emotions, as well as the personal lives of the Rwandan women as the participants of this study. Semi-structured interviews were used for data collection, with a focus on “understanding informants’ perspectives on their lives, experiences, or situations as expressed in their own words” (Taylor and Bogdan 1998: 88). Open-ended questions were preferred, for their ability to create the possibility of alternative views and hence access more valid information. Indeed, they enabled participants to fully describe their experience of participating in the Gacaca courts as judges, as well as the impact of this experience on their lives. These types of questions helped the researcher to create an atmosphere in which respondents felt comfortable while talking openly about themselves. Creating an environment of trust was essential, since a number of Rwandan women had been through traumatic experiences, which made them feel ashamed or cautious about sharing their experiences.

All the interviews were conducted in Kinyarwanda, the national language. Individual interviews were preferred, to enable the researcher to elicit maximum private information from the participants. As such, the interview guide was adapted from one interview to another. The research area was the Mukura Sector, located in the Huye District in the Southern Province of Rwanda, and the Kimihurura Sector in the Gasabo District, in the City of Kigali. These two sites were selected for a number of reasons, including the fact that one is located in a rural area, the other in an urban area, which would enable the researcher to compare the results. Another reason is that the researcher was familiar with the two areas. As such, one advantage of this insider position was that the researcher possessed “major insight into the communities that cannot be achieved by outsiders on their own” (Rabe 2003: 156).

Three categories of participants were interviewed. The first category comprised 12 women who had participated in the Gacaca courts as *Inyangamugayo*. Eight of these women were unmarried, and the remaining four were married. The rationale for these subcategories was to allow the researcher to compare the extent to which their level of empowerment varies. The second category was constituted of four husbands of the married women. The last category was made up of four key informants (two representatives of the National Women’s Council and two Executive Secretaries of Sectors). Interviewing these key informants allowed the researcher to gain background information on participants.

A purposive sampling technique was used to select participants, based on the above categories. The data was analysed by means of a three-step qualitative text reduction technique, which involves transcription, sentence summary, and reduction of information into key concepts or themes. Finally, the thematic analysis method was used to interpret the data, where the researcher was able to construct thematic groups of information to be analysed (Babbie and Mouton 2001: 493).

5. Women’s individual and collective empowerment through participation in Gacaca courts as *Inyangamugayo* judges

The study sets out to analyse whether Rwandan women have been empowered through their participation in the *Gacaca* courts as *Inyangamugayo* and the impact of this involvement on their own and their communities’ day-to-day lives. The research drew on the existing literature suggesting that empowerment could be enabled through community participation. Thus, the main argument has been that *Gacaca* offered a unique example of individual empowerment that was reinforced and then extended to wider community empowerment. The empirical data highlights an existing relationship between women’s participation in the *Gacaca* courts and changes that were brought about as result of this community participation experience.

The study findings below indicate that women who participated in Gacaca courts as Inyangamugayo saw this opportunity as the starting point of their empowerment in the post-genocide period. The emerging themes include (1) psychological empowerment involving a sense of self-worth, self-confidence, respect, and dignity in the community, (2) familial empowerment, (3) societal empowerment with the acquisition of the status of change agent and leader, as well as (4) political and legal empowerment. In the light of this reality, Gacaca courts can be considered as an empowering process through which women were given “opportunities to control their own destiny and influence the decisions that affect their lives” (Zimmerman 1995: 583). This experience continues to help women in their everyday lives, even after the closure of the Gacaca courts in 2012.

Rwandan women’s experience of participating in the Gacaca courts as Inyangamugayo had a significant psychological impact on their self-perception and inner being. Simply put, women who acted as Inyangamugayo in the Gacaca courts have restored their sense of self-worth and dignity. Their participation helped them to find their voice, to ensure their social visibility and to ascertain their group affirmation to the point of feeling capable and useful to their community. Indeed, many of the participants reiterated that their participation in Gacaca courts boosted their self-confidence, self-esteem and a feeling of power that they had never experienced before. A respondent (Anita) reflects on her experience:

“I am proud of myself, because I had never been so useful in my life. Gacaca changed everything in me. When I came back from the forests of Congo where I was taken hostage by the Interahamwe (i.e., militia who committed the genocide), I could not talk because I was dead inside. When I was elected as an Inyangamugayo, I found myself making decisions and judging perpetrators. After that, I became a new person, and, with the experience of the Gacaca courts, I can take on other responsibilities without fear.”

Evidence from the above passage shows that the respondent’s participation as a Gacaca court judge not only gave her a sense of power, but also restored her sense of being alive that she had lost when she was abducted and abused by the Interahamwe.

The involvement in the *Gacaca* courts also brought a sense of vindication and/or justice for some of the participants. This was testified by Aurore, who confided:

“I feel comforted inwardly because I had the opportunity to prove what I am capable of, and I feel respected: I contributed in judging perpetrators of the genocide against Tutsis. No one shut me up based on the fact that I am a woman. Now, I can take decisions without looking for a man to help me. Previously, I had to ask advice from a male member of my family to make sure that I was doing the right thing, but now I believe in myself. I can take any decision without consulting anybody. I have found out the capacity that was hiding in me, that of doing the right thing without any help.”

This appears to be relevant in terms of female subjection and social status, where the participant indicated that she experienced notable changes in relation to her personhood and social consideration.

Another noticeable outcome of the *Gacaca* courts for women's empowerment is the fact that perpetrators of the genocide, especially rapists, were punished for their crimes. This is a major shift from the past, whereby a number of rapists could walk away unpunished. Most of the participants saw this punishment as an affirmation of their own self-worth, which encouraged women *Inyangamugayo* to overcome shame and act proactively so as to ensure that raped women got justice. In sum, they were proud of their contribution to peace and justice.

Further, women's participation in the *Gacaca* courts has earned them respect by their society during and after the court sessions. Betty narrates:

“As I was the secretary of the panel, at the beginning of a *Gacaca* court session, I had to take my notebook and properly record proceedings as they happened. At the time of panel deliberation in private, I had to read what I wrote, and my colleagues always approved it. The event that followed the verdict was the most interesting and made me feel powerful forever. Before verdicts were communicated, everyone remained quiet and paid attention to the person who was reading out the court decisions, and that person was me. Me, *nyakatsi!*¹ I now have respect that I had never had in my life before. The audience had to stand up in silence and listen to me. Accused persons were actually convicted on my orders. Once I uttered the order, such persons were immediately arrested by local defence forces in public.”

As displayed in the above statement, the respondent was very committed and felt powerful and respected, thanks to her active role in the *Gacaca* courts. Interestingly, she considered herself as *nyakatsi* (pitiful), which illustrates her low self-esteem prior to her experience and participation in the *Gacaca* courts. Currently, she feels that she has become a valuable being, visible and respected:

“I am now like a celebrity; I am not *nyakatsi* anymore, and I am a valuable person. People are still identifying me by my role in *Gacaca*, and they often refer to me as “the one who was *Inyangamugayo*.” *Inyangamugayo* has now become my other name.”

The above individual feeling of power and recognition by the community, thanks to the *Gacaca* courts, is corroborated by another testimony from Wivine, who reveals:

“Now I feel on top of the world. The dignity that I have acquired from the *Gacaca* court is very important to me for the rest of my life. Had it not been the experience of *Gacaca*, I wouldn't have discovered who I am. And again with *Gacaca*, my understanding of many things has changed. Everything has improved. I feel powerful, and I don't feel shy anymore. In the past, I could not speak in public, but I did it during *Gacaca*. I am no longer afraid to say what I think anymore. I feel confident. I am also now quite optimistic; in the past I was pessimistic.”

A common fact revealed by almost all the participants is the difference between the pre- and post-*Gacaca* periods. Frida perceives it as an open door which had been previously shut. This becomes evident when she contends that participating in *Gacaca* courts enabled her to believe that she can achieve all the goals that she sets for herself:

¹*Nyakatsi* derives from the word *akatsi*, which means a small grass. *Nyakatsi* in this context, and by inference, refers to someone perceived to be in a pitiful condition.

Before, I was shy, but now I don't incarnate that reserved character anymore. I feel open. It is like there was a door which was closed in me and now it is open, and I realise that behind that door there is life; there is power that I need to take advantage of for the realisation of my dreams. In everything, I have to try to do something; I can't let it go away. They always said women are weak, and we agreed that we always need men to help us to achieve results in everything. That weakness has gone away and I feel powerful because I started with a big responsibility, serving the country. Why can't I help myself, a friend or my family?

While participants expressed similar overarching feelings, each woman's experience was unique. Each had a specific story to tell about how she felt about her involvement in the *Gacaca* courts. For the Rwandan women in this study, their participation in the *Gacaca* courts had major psychological effects on their self-image and inner self. They avowed to have recovered their voice in the patriarchal society. This individual psychological empowerment gained through the participation in the *Gacaca* courts as *Inyangamugayo* has had implications for their everyday life in their families and society at large. This level of women's empowerment may be actually linked to a number of formal institutional processes and strategies developed by women themselves. They comprise the creation of cooperatives and other women's associations, which have championed women's active participation in the process of socio-economic development, as well as the implementation of the principle of gender equality.

The new status that Rwandan women gained as a result of their participation as *Inyangamugayo* in *Gacaca* courts was also evident in their households. Wivine stressed positive changes that happened in her home because of her participation in *Gacaca* courts because she had to spend much more time fulfilling the responsibilities of a judge:

“Following my involvement in *Gacaca*, my husband respected me because he knew that I could operate on another social level. When I was elected to be *Inyangamugayo*, I was worried about my baby, but he [my husband] took care of her until the end of *Gacaca*. It was the first time I saw him taking care of the baby.”

In the traditional sharing of home responsibilities, caring for children, especially babies, was much more the obligation of wives than husbands. However, when women got involved in *Gacaca* courts as judges, some husbands had to play more roles at home, including assisting their wives in childcare. This is explained by the fact that women had to leave their homes in the morning and only return late in the evening because of the long day and intensive work assigned to them as one of the judges.

Frida provided an interesting account of how she was able to peacefully contradict a decision made by her husband. For her, this was unheard of before she began participating in the *Gacaca* courts as an *Inyangamugayo* judge:

“Some time ago, my husband unilaterally decided to give a part of our land to his friend for temporary use. When I learnt about it, I asked him, but he ignored me. I then invited members of both our families to a meeting. When they arrived, I told them how my husband had given the land, and explained that he hadn't the right to do that without my consent as a legally married wife with equal rights to our property. This made him appear uncomfortable in front of the relatives and he apologised for his mistake and the land was returned. Those who knew me before commented that *Gacaca* had made me sharp, and it is true. Before my involvement in *Gacaca*, I could not talk in front of people. I was shy.”

This example emphasises that the woman respondent's participation in *Gacaca* courts not only helped her overcome her shyness, but also equipped her with the necessary knowledge of property rights. She was enabled to feel sufficiently empowered with legal knowledge to make other types of legal claims related to the protection of the family property. This woman's ability to make use of the changes in inheritance and property law is an illustrative example of the change in intimate family relationships and the newly acquired women's empowerment in the family.

The women's newly acquired status of *Inyangamugayo* was not only positively recognised by their family members but it also constituted a part of the family pride at large. Epa affirmed that she had been more respected in her home, and her children were proud of her, to the extent of reporting to their friends about their mother's important role in *Gacaca*:

“In my family, they respect me. They are proud of me. My children were telling their friends that I am *Inyangamugayo* because this name is very powerful, even after the official closure of *Gacaca* courts.”

The above instance illustrates how Rwandan women who participated in the *Gacaca* courts as judges continued to enjoy respect from their families and relatives as a result of the power gained during the *Gacaca* jurisdictions. This is regarded as a positive implication of their participation for their household life and improved consideration within the wider community.

It is worth noting different perceptions of the levels of women's empowerment and some constraints still prevailing in the newly acquired empowerment. Married women interviewed admitted that they only became co-heads of their households alongside their husbands. In other words, husbands can no longer make important decisions alone without the consent of their wives. This means that married women have attained a certain degree of equality with their husbands. As for unmarried women and widows, they indicated that their participation in the *Gacaca* courts conferred to them much more confidence to continue to assume their role as heads of households. Thus, whereas married women have attained shared decision-making power in the household, unmarried women and widows have gained self-assurance in their position as heads of households.

Although women can challenge their husbands' decisions in relation to family matters, men's perception that women's prior consent is of less value still leaves women uncomfortable and limits their empowerment. Moreover, some participants in the current study reiterated that married women still consider their husbands as heads of the families. Unmarried women and widows, as de facto heads of their families, are free from that kind of challenge, but sometimes, they are not fully confident in their decision-making. This noticeable gap was highlighted by the participants in the study, and suggested the need for more effort from all the stakeholders in order to fully achieve women's empowerment at the family level.

The participants indicated that, for most women, their participation in the *Gacaca* courts as *Inyangamugayo* constituted their first opportunity to exercise an important action of community participation and service. Firstly, the function of judges gave them a chance to show their community what they were capable of, and especially, it allowed them to render services to their community. Secondly, the women *Inyangamugayo* were appreciated by their community members in return for the good and valuable services rendered. This was a significant step towards their greater involvement as women in the public sphere, as reported in the following statement from Cathy:

“Women’s participation in *Gacaca* courts as *Inyangamugayo* was fundamental to the success of the *Gacaca* courts. This increased their awareness in terms of their ability to contribute to public activities. Other testimonies from respondents emphasised the community service rendered by women during *Gacaca* trials, which showed that they are able, and thereafter can be entrusted with other community-related responsibilities.”

Another respondent named Ano stated:

“Before participation of women in *Gacaca* courts, during elections of village and cell leaders, community members could not see women as people who are able to serve them. After women’s participation and experience in *Gacaca* courts, the community realised that women could accomplish hard tasks. This can be seen in many cells and villages where women have been elected as heads of cells or villages. The community now trusts them because of what they accomplished in *Gacaca* courts.”

To this, Robi added that:

“Some of the women who acted as judges assumed administrative and leadership positions, such as presidents or secretaries of the seat of *Gacaca* courts. These women become opinion leaders after the closure of the *Gacaca* courts. They were empowered, and also the members of the community trust them because of such a big role played in the *Gacaca* courts. When we need people to be elected for any voluntary position for community services, like members of the sector or cell councils, they accept to be elected and to participate in local decision-making organs.”

In addition to being elected leaders of grassroots institutions (villages and cells) most of the *ex-Inyangamugayo* were put forward for top leadership positions in community forums, such as the parent’s forum (*Umugoroba w’ababyeyi*), where men and women of the same village sit together, once a week, and attend to different family-related matters, including fighting malnutrition, good cohabitation in households, and settlement of familial disputes. This community consideration vis-à-vis the women constitutes part of their empowerment in the local society.

Increased trust is further evidence of women’s empowerment through their participation in *Gacaca* courts as *Inyangamugayo*. To this, Anita testified about herself:

“When people saw how I managed to discharge my first responsibility as *Inyangamugayo*, they later elected me as *Umwunzi* (community mediator). I did not doubt my ability to take on this role because I knew that I am already known for my successes in the *Gacaca* courts.”

According to the Law No. 37/2016 of 08/09/2016 determining the organisation, jurisdiction, competence and functioning of an *Abunzi* Committee, *Abunzi* (community mediator) Committees have the responsibility for conciliating parties involved in disputes under cell and sector level jurisdiction. Committee members work on a voluntary and non-remunerative basis. In addition, the function is exercised by people of integrity and trust in the community. This institution is somehow similar to the *Gacaca* court, and thus women’s experience in the former institution motivated their fellow citizens to trust them.

Anita's story is mirrored by that of her colleague Epa, who revealed that her participation in the *Gacaca* courts as a judge earned her the trust of her community: "The community members always want to give me responsibilities because they know that I can do things in the right way."

When asked about her appreciation of the work accomplished by women *Inyangamugayo* during the *Gacaca* courts and their contribution to community well-being after the closure, a respondent who is also the local representative of the National Women Council, Ano, characterised the women *Inyangamugayo* as "agents of change" in the past and the present. She stated that:

"Women who participated in *Gacaca* courts changed and have a key opportunity to change the community's attitude towards gender inequality. Such women have become "change agents"; when we need to do anything, we start with them because we know that they are already available and able to intervene in any activity. In their homes, they are responsible and their partners respect them. In public, they are the first to ask questions and make comments while others are still shy."

The testimony is clearly supportive of the idea that becoming a "change agent" requires preparation, training, and experience. In this regard, *Gacaca* courts shaped the women judges' influence on their local community. This is justified by the women's new knowledge of the laws and leadership skills gained through their participation in the *Gacaca* courts, which clearly enhanced their empowerment within the society.

Throughout the above data, women's empowerment broke new ground, both psychologically and on the family front, and was meant to extend to the larger society. Participants in this study indicated that their participation in the *Gacaca* courts gave them a chance to show their community what they were capable of. Their appreciation and trust from other community members enabled them to not only overcome fear and timidity but also to make a step forward towards their greater involvement in the public sphere and increased participation in community activities of various domains.

However, as indicated by other studies earlier conducted on the topic of empowerment, the achievement of women's agency engages with not just the gender-based sources of women's oppression, but also the transformation of relationships and mind sets (Datta and Kornberg (2002). In the context of Rwanda, this aspect is still facing some constraints and challenges, linked particularly to the socio-cultural perceptions of power relations within the family and society at large. Definitely, the participants in the current study suggested that individual empowerment gained by Rwandan women has sporadically interacted with the traditional family power relations, and it is still subject to social constraints inflicted on women. The need was therefore expressed to keep raising awareness of the power relations and the eradication of the still-existing barriers that may sustain inequalities between men and women.

Legal and political empowerment is another aspect revealed by the respondents as emerging from women's participation in *Gacaca* courts as *Inyangamugayo*. In fact, the experience of the *Gacaca* courts encouraged Rwandan women to fight for their rights. Rwandan traditional culture dictated that women remain silent if they are victims of violence, and they were often abused and had few real opportunities of seeking redress. The *Gacaca* Law was among the post-genocide laws which prompted women to change attitudes and to benefit from the protection granted by the law.

Women participants in the study confirmed that their involvement as *Gacaca* court judges enabled them to know the laws first, and then to use the law as a source of protection. The following is a personal testimony from Mary, who asserted:

“I feel motivated. If another social or political project that requires my involvement comes up, I will be the first to participate, because of the way people listened to me, valued my role of *Inyangamugayo* and did not reject me on the ground of being a woman. Because of *Gacaca*, I now know a number of laws that protect me, especially the succession inheritance law. For example, I inherited my parents’ house. They did not prevent me because I am a girl, and it is because I participated in *Gacaca*. I was able to explain the position of the law in this matter.”

This statement attests to women’s greater awareness about their entitlements – family inheritance in the above case. Education as to the law and their own rights was thus one of the merits that women *Inyangamugayo* benefited from, having been involved in these *Gacaca* courts.

Besides the legal empowerment, it was also reflected in some women’s enthusiasm to assist others who may be in situations of being denied their rights. This ambition was articulated by Fany:

“I am like a professional now. I think they should take us to other countries where they need help so that we can help them because we now know how things must be done. I feel like other leaders, I feel confident of whatever I can do because I know that I will end up with success. I judged many cases in my position. The mere fact that people stood up in silence when we arrived to begin a session filled me with power and self-worth.”

It is evident that women’s empowerment gained through their participation in the *Gacaca* courts as judges had positive implications on their own lives, family, community, and wider society. During the interviews held, women who participated in the *Gacaca* courts as judges emphasised that the experience they gained as individuals encouraged them to speak up for themselves and for others. This change of attitude is evocative of legal empowerment for the women, who were enabled to demonstrate their capacity to not only exercise their rights but to also take action against infringements of others’ rights.

6. Conclusion

The present study laid out how, in the aftermath of the genocide against Tutsi that took place in 1994, women’s empowerment was identified as a key objective of the Government of Rwanda. It was implemented through a variety of initiatives, among which women’s participation in the *Gacaca* courts was a central one. This study indicated that the experience of the *Gacaca* courts provided women *Inyangamugayo* with opportunities to start contributing to their own personal empowerment and to play active roles in their community.

The study illustrated how Rwandan women’s participation in the *Gacaca* courts as *Inyangamugayo* contributed to the eradication of a number of barriers earlier erected against their empowerment on all fronts of society. The *Gacaca* experience positively impacted on women’s self-esteem, decision-making power, dignity, esteem and consideration by the community, knowledge of the law and enthusiasm for rights protection.

This study has contributed to the existing literature, suggesting that empowerment is primarily an individual construct to show rather than it also has positive manifestations and outcomes at the levels of the family, group, community, and society at large. This empowerment is reliant on the notion of community participation and can benefit from other forms of enablers like an appropriate legal framework that can be reinforced through state power.

However, it is worth noting the need to pay attention to a perceptible challenge relating to the remaining traditional family power relations. The latter can still hold back the expected progress in women's empowerment, especially because of a series of constraints which still prevent women from achieving complete empowerment in private and public spheres particularly because of the dictates of culture and customs.

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