

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

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About the author

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Executive summary

This research explores 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 locally. The empirical material is based on fieldwork conducted in Rwanda in 2014 with 263 respondents in 32 group interviews. The findings reveal that:

- When gender equality laws and policies that challenge power relations are implemented, both men and women experience gender equality dilemmas, worries, and fears that expand and complicate existing power inequalities at the household level.
- Men and women adopt the strategy of silence in the household as one of the means to cope with the newly created gender changes.
- If women's rights continue to be promoted and men's worries, complaints and fears, as identified in this study, are not heard and addressed, gender equality might not have a significant impact on both men's and women's lives in rural households.

Rwanda's evolving gender policy context

The 1994 genocide against the Tutsi caused profound devastation of the country's social, political and economic fabric. In particular, the genocide exacerbated existing gender imbalances and inequalities. In the post-1994 period, different initiatives were undertaken in different domains by the Government of Rwanda in order to rebuild the country. The promotion of gender equality and women's empowerment were considered prerequisites for sustainable peace and development. The 2003 constitution recognised the importance of gender equality and included specific legal provisions to ensure women's equal protection under the law. It has also provided a platform for gender mainstreaming across all sectors.

Today, international reports, studies and surveys often report Rwanda as a success story in introducing gender equality laws and policies that address gender imbalances and offering a firm legal framework for achieving gender equality and women's rights. Other studies, however, suggest that gender equality efforts in Rwanda have not necessarily produced the expected positive outcomes across rural areas, especially in homes. Overall, existing studies effectively show that the new legal reforms, especially those geared towards households, have not adequately changed unequal power relations between men and women.

To date, no study has been conducted on how men and women understand, explain and talk explicitly about the gender equality agenda and its implementation in Rwanda. Very little is known, therefore, about how ordinary women perceive and experience gender reforms in their daily household lives and how they negotiate new gender practices and relationships. This research aims to fill this gap by studying the narratives of women and men about their everyday social practices and processes by which gender equality is or is not being implemented in Rwanda.

Challenges for domestic discussion of gender

The narratives of men and women in rural Rwanda revealed that social norms prevent women from exercising their legal rights. Secondly, when gender laws and policies are implemented, both men and women experience gender equality dilemmas that inhibit the process of fruitful negotiation. The study suggests that these shortcomings give no adequate space for productive negotiation between spouses in household interactions where they can jointly make decisions over household allocation of resources.

Some men explained that they do not engage in negotiation with their wives because negotiating is felt as a loss of their customary respect and self-esteem. The women explained that if they try to engage in discussions with their husbands and challenge their husbands' ideas, the husbands may interpret this be-

haviour as a sign of disrespect, which goes against Rwanda's customary social norms.

More specifically, many men explained that they experience a substantial dilemma when gender laws and policies are implemented and therefore are faced with a host of concerns (feelings of loss of authority, loss of self-respect and a sense of being betrayed by the government). This dilemma concerns two irreconcilable requirements:

- On the one hand, they explain, men have social requirements to fulfil in order to be considered "true men."
- Conversely, gender equality laws and policies give men other requirements to fulfil.

The respondents explained that in order to deal with such concerns and dilemmas, some men often use silence as one of the best options to overcome the long arm of the law. They therefore use silence to ensure that their traditional household authority is unchallenged. Some men stated that this strategic silence protects them from being accused and reported to government authorities because it leaves no trace of evidence that they abuse their wives.

The women, on the other hand, explained that this new male behaviour affects them psychologically and emotionally, and that they cannot report it to the authorities, given the absence of evidence to show they are being emotionally abused. This article suggests that male silence undermines discussions and negotiation in the household because, more often than not, husbands do not speak to their wives.

Thus, for women, silence is meant to help them keep their family intact and safe, whereas for men, it is a new strategy that they are adopting to protect them from legal consequences / disapproval from peers and to resist gender equality practices. In the main, this study argues that the negotiation process that is taking place between husband and wife may not succeed in changing existing unequal power relations embedded in Rwandan society.

Moving from silence to engagement

The study mainly revealed that changing power relations between men and women in Rwanda is a complex process. The process of change is resisted, and negotiations that took place in a context of power imbalance are seen to give rise to frequent family conflicts, trials and tribulations at the household and community level. Gender relations in Rwanda, based on male supremacy, are strongly entrenched in social and cultural norms and influence these challenges. The accounts of the lived experiences further indicate that these norms often act more powerfully than for-

mal laws in everyday life. More specifically, the daily experiences of people I interviewed speak of gender problems that expand, complicate and even create equality dilemmas in rural communities.

Recommendations

The dilemmas highlighted in the narratives of both men's and women's lived experiences, and the strategies they adopt, help to understand that the implementation of the gender equality agenda in rural communities creates a confusing gender landscape characterised by worries, fears and uncertainties. These unintended consequences create a gap between the existence of national gender laws and policies and continued inequality at household level.

- This study suggests that if these gender equality dilemmas are not addressed, the gender equality agenda could worsen the relationships between men and women in rural households. The Government of Rwanda should—before designing and adapting any strategy that aims to challenge and modify the unequal power relations between men and women—***work more closely with ordinary men*** to listen to their concerns in order to achieve long-standing gender equality without harming anyone in the household.
- The planners of gender equality need to ***take men's experiences seriously***; if not, the usual binary of men as perpetrators of violence in the home and women as victims will remain or could even worsen. By focusing on men as perpetrators of gender-related violence, and ignoring men's lives and concerns surrounding gender-related issues, the Government of Rwanda risks overlooking gender-specific inequalities in rural Rwandan households.
- The government, civil society and private sectors involved in gender equality promotion need to ***recognise the lived experiences of individual women in their various categories***. Women are not a homogeneous group and thus face gender-related challenges differently and the latter need to be dealt differently. Listening to the daily experiences of individual women as they articulate their own views can provide knowledge about how gender equality is conceived, lived and interpreted in their own locality. Their different experiences can shed light on strong and weak points of the new gender equality agenda.
- The study reveals ***the demand for public space where traditional perceptions can be discussed, evaluated and modified*** in order to reconcile old and new practices, roles and responsibilities. Otherwise men's narratives indicate that change in the traditional gender norms worsens gender relations and may abet the breakdown of the family.