

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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Disclaimer

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Executive Summary

- Traditional Rwandan culture was essentially centred on beliefs, rituals, and taboos that violated women's rights. For centuries, patriarchy has privileged males over females in all sectors of life. Women had been excluded from participating in the socio-political and economic life of Rwanda. Their direct, active participation in societal life was limited to their assigned roles in the homestead. This effective domestication and subservience of women and girls translated, among others, in their exclusion from the traditional *gacaca*. However, in the post-genocide period, this situation has changed significantly; women have been included in the processes of gacaca courts as *Inyangamugayo*.
- Rwandan women's participation in *gacaca* courts has been the major means of their empowerment in both private and public spheres. Rwandan women have been empowered psychologically, socially (in their families and communities), legally (knowledge of law and acquisition of property right), and politically (access to decision-making position) through their participation in the post-genocide *gacaca* courts as *Inyangamugayo*. This has enabled them to make some positive changes in their everyday lives.
- Though significant efforts have been made, gender stereotypes remain a challenge to an increased, sustainable empowerment of Rwandan women. The government of Rwanda and private actors should establish mass education programmes aimed at promoting gender equality.
- Men should be involved in the awareness raising campaigns for women's Empowerment in order to promote positive masculinity. This will help to address some of the stereotypes which hinder the process of the promotion of gender equality and women's Empowerment in Rwanda.

Introduction

Like many other African societies, the traditional Rwandan culture was centred on patriarchal beliefs and practices that excluded women from participating actively in the socio-economic and political life of the country. Women's public expression was taken as a taboo, and the only channel used by women to convey their questions and opinions on vital societal issues was through male representatives such as their husbands, brothers, or sons.

During the post-genocide period, women's mobilisation and gender empowerment have been identified as one of the 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.

One important opportunity given to women was the government's decision to make them eligible to hold the position of *Inyangamugayo* in the *Gacaca* courts. This allowed them to be fully engaged in the justice and reconciliation processes, which were among the top priorities of the country, considering the history of genocide against Tutsi. The *Gacaca* courts were reintroduced by the Government of Rwanda as one among a number of strategies for the reconstruction of the country's justice sector.

The inclusion of women as both judges and general active participants in the *Gacaca* courts was taken as part of the government's approach to women's empowerment. The research outlined in this policy brief examines the extent to which that women's participation has impacted their everyday life.

Research Methodology

This research is qualitative and explorative. Semi-structured interviews and open-ended questions were used for data collection. All the interviews were conducted in Kinyarwanda, the national language. 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. 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 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). A purposive sampling technique was used to select participants, based on the above categories. The thematic analysis method was used to analyse and interpret the data.

Research Findings

The research findings indicated 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 main areas of empowerment were psychological empowerment, involving a sense of self-worth, self-confidence, respect and dignity in the community; familial empowerment through the recognition of their role and capacity by family members, especially husbands; societal empowerment with the acquisition of a status of "change agent: and leader; and political and legal empowerment, seen in women's increased awareness of their rights.

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. The appreciation and trust shown by other community members enabled them to not only overcome fear and timidity but also to take a step forward towards their greater involvement in the public sphere and increased participation in community activities in various domains.

It was shown that 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 the 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.

However, even though good progress was made in the area of women's empowerment, the need was expressed by the participants to keep raising awareness of the power relations and the eradication of the still existing barriers that may sustain inequalities between men and women.

Recommendations

Based on the research findings, the following recommendations are made to different actors for the on-going empowerment of women:

- Women themselves should take initiatives to raise their own awareness of how to maximise the chances and opportunities offered to them by the Government of Rwanda. This is particularly relevant, as some of them still consider their empowerment as a gift instead of as a right.
- Women's networks and forums play an important role in the enhancement of women's empowerment. Their existing efforts have constituted a good basis for women to build on, but some of them are still lagging behind. Thus, much more energy is needed to keep the women's movements dynamic and effective.
- Awareness raising campaigns which aim to change men's negative attitudes towards women's rights and capacities are still needed. Gender equity and equality will be more successful if men play their role to support women in that process.
- The general Rwandan social fabric, which has been influenced, if not directed, by the patriarchal mind-set for a long time, has to adjust to substantial social change. It is very important to involve all parts of society in an inclusive framework in order to ensure that women may enjoy greater participation in the general social life of society.
- The Government of Rwanda is the main role player in the endeavours aimed at full women's empowerment. As policy maker and watchdog of policy implementation and evaluation, the government should sustain what was started and ensure the continuation of current endeavours towards full women's empowerment.
- The National Unity and Reconciliation Commission (NURC), based on their achievements and expertise in Gacaca courts, should always involve women in reconciliation-oriented programmes.