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Women's experiences of gender equality laws in rural Rwanda: the case of Kamonyi District

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This article analyses how women in the rural district of Kamonyi experience gender equality laws and policies in their everyday lives. Traditional Rwandan society had a patriarchal social structure that accepted unequal power relations between men and women. The 2003 new constitution, adopted after the 1994 Tutsi genocide, recognizes the importance of gender equality and includes specific legal provisions to ensure women's equal protection under the law. Drawing on focus group discussions with women in Kamonyi, it emerges that women's experiences are mixed with regard to the new laws: they enjoy the right of access to family assets, inheritance, and work opportunities; yet they also experience a "gender dilemma" of whether to exercise rights enshrined in the constitution even though that may lead to marital difficulties in their households.

Keywords: Rwanda; women's rights; empowerment; gender equality

Since the end of the 1994 genocide 21 years ago, Rwandan society has undergone considerable change regarding the rights of women and their roles in society. The country has been a patriarchal society based on traditional norms of men as the decision makers, the owners of the family assets, the sole breadwinners, and the head of the family.¹ These norms guaranteed Rwandan men a hegemonic position of social dominance and assigned women a social position of subordination.² The 2003 Constitution marked the turning point for the country's move toward gender equality. Rwanda established policies and programs aimed at increasing the role of women in social-economic reconstruction and overturning the country's long history of gender inequality.³

Some gender-sensitive laws were, in fact, enacted even before the new Constitution was passed. Among these are the 1999⁴ law governing Inheritance and Marital Property Rights that establishes gender equality in land inheritance and ownership within formal marriage. However, the new Constitution accelerated the process, resulting in the land policy of 2004 and the Organic Land Law of 2005, both with provisions for gender equality in land rights. Also, a Gender-Based Violence Law (2009) and related policy (2011) give a woman the right to report gender abuses whether these occur in the household or outside the home.⁵ The same instruments defined⁶ gender-based violence and introduced penalties for this.

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However, these gender reform policies do not adequately address women's access to property. The equal share of matrimonial property between spouses is conditional on the formal registration of monogamous marriages. All the gender-sensitive laws and policies correlate with Article 26 of the Rwandan Constitution, which recognizes only a civil monogamous marriage between a man and a woman.⁷ Women in consensual unions and polygamous marriages do not have legal rights to household property.⁸ Although the government has made efforts to encourage couples to register their marriages, some studies show that up to 33% of marriages are still not registered.⁹

Despite these limitations, Rwanda is internationally recognized as a world leader in promoting women's empowerment and gender equality. A study by the Food and Agriculture Organization on land and agriculture reform indicates that Rwanda has successfully reformed its inheritance and land tenure legislation, and provides one of the best legal frameworks for gender-equal land [distribution] in sub-Saharan Africa.¹⁰ The United Nations Development Programme and The United Nations Development Fund for Women continue to argue that Rwanda is an exemplary nation compared to most countries in terms of overall women's empowerment and gender equality.¹¹ A study comparing Rwanda, Uganda, and Tanzania reveals that these countries have a better record than most in the region on gender equality and women's rights; however, Rwanda has integrated gender mainstreaming more systematically. For example, Rwanda has created specific gender units, gender "implemeters" and programs of public education, and gender awareness.¹² United States Agency for International Development (USAID) maintains that Rwanda has made exceptional strides in creating gender institutions conducive to improving the foundations on which strong and positive gender relations can be built.¹³ Powley finds that the country's gender quota policy for parliament and other political institutions has positively affected efforts to institute equality laws; the author states that the high number of women representatives in decision-making positions is key.¹⁴ In addition, Hategeki- mana's study on women's empowerment in the post-1994 period interestingly shows that grouping into economic cooperatives empowers women, their households and the community by generating income.¹⁵ Although these studies show improvements in gender equality and women's rights, other studies indicate that unequal power relations persist between men and women in rural Rwandan communities. For instance, a 2013 survey by the Rwanda Gender Monitoring Office (GMO) on perceptions of gender equality in Rwanda within 12 districts shows that men think gender equality measures devalue them by stripping away the traditional powers of men enshrined in local culture.¹⁶ In addition, a 2012 survey by USAID-Rwanda on gender assessment in Rwanda indicates that although more women now occupy decision-making positions in the government, especially in the National Assembly, at the household level men continue to control the ability of women to make autonomous decisions and participate equally in family decision-making.¹⁷ The GMO findings further show that while Rwanda's new labor laws have transformed women into equal financial partners regarding the ownership of household resources, the same laws have also led to increased workloads for women. Now women must balance new working hours outside the home with routine domestic work that remains unchanged.¹⁸

A 2013 study by the Rwanda Men Resource Center on sexual and gender-based violence across 13 districts adds that although women significantly contribute income to the family through farming and other informal businesses like selling

vegetables and fruits, they possess limited control over how the profits are managed. Major decisions on family resources continue to be made by their husbands, and thus women end up being dependent and subservient.¹⁹ Likewise, a survey by the Rwandan women organization PRO-FEMME TWESE HAMWE on gender-based violence in Rwanda indicates that some rural women suffer psychological and economic deprivation from their husbands.²⁰ A broader study by this researcher on men's experiences of gender equality practices in rural Rwanda also shows that some men have responded to gender changes in society by treating their wives with strategic silence, refusing to speak to them, or to eat food the women prepare. The study suggests that this retaliatory silence can be considered psychological abuse.²¹

Therefore, studies on gender equality in Rwanda present two conflicting images of gender equality – one of progressive gender equality, and the other of a more complex response to gender equality laws and policies. Making better sense of these conflicting images requires more research, on how women in rural communities experience gender equality laws within their daily lives. This will provide better understanding of local interpretations of the national equality agenda and serve as a basis for formulating intervention strategies that are practical and sensitive to cross-pressures from past traditions, and present mandates.

Gender equality and women's empowerment

Gender equality has attained a level of increased importance within the global political agenda. Some see it as a cornerstone for development²² and fundamental condition for the full enjoyment of human rights by women and men. What is required is equality under the law, equality of opportunity, and equality of voice.²³ Promoting gender equality is also depicted as an essential component of an effective economic and human development strategy and a core requirement for social justice and good governance.²⁴ However, Levit and Verchick²⁵ point out that in reality, power and privilege in most societies still belong to men and men are in a position of dominance over women. Equality cannot be achieved if this prevailing situation is not addressed.

To redress women's inequality, Kabeer argues that empowerment should be at the center of a process by which “those who have been denied power gain the ability to make strategic life choices in a context where this ability was previously denied.”²⁶ Empowerment is a process that challenges patriarchal beliefs and transforms unequal political, economic, and social structures.²⁷ Put differently, empowerment is understood by feminists as facilitating gains in power that enable women to have agency. Empowerment is not just the “possession of power” rather the “ability to exercise power” in the household and at all levels of society.²⁸ It is a process that leads people to perceive themselves as able and entitled to make decisions.²⁹ Batliwala anticipates that if women are empowered by having the same rights and opportunities as men, they will be able to overcome their inequalities by challenging the existing power relations and gaining greater control over the resources.³⁰ Empowerment thus becomes a process of transformation and change.³¹ If women are empowered, they gain the power to make changes in their gender relations by being able to voice their needs. Hence, power is defined as a creative ability that proceeds from the assumption that individuals have to make a change in their lives and influence other people's behaviors and attitudes, rather than control over other people.³²

In Rwanda, however, researchers inform us about the experience of empowerment programs and policies of women in groups (associations and cooperatives), and about

women's contribution to governance in post-genocide reconstruction.³³ No one has yet researched how women in rural communities, especially those who are legally married and are not in cooperatives, experience empowerment programs, policies, and laws. We know that unequal power gender relations continue to be a challenge, particularly in the households. We do not know, however, how rural women themselves talk about it and live with it in their daily lives. To better understand what is happening on the ground, this study gives voice to the people concerned³⁴ about the experiences of rural women regarding gender equality in the home.

The daily experiences of ordinary women can provide valuable information about unanticipated bottlenecks in the implementation of gender equality laws and their practices. This does not mean that rural women have better knowledge of the situation in Rwanda or that they all have the same experiences. Rather, their different experiences can shed light on strong and weak points of the new gender policies.³⁵ The purpose of this paper is to explore and analyze the daily experiences of women from a country that is becoming known as a role model in promoting women's rights and equality. It focuses on rural women and addresses one main question: how do women living in rural areas of Rwanda experience the new gender equality emphasis in daily household life?

Methodology

This study was conducted from January to May 2013 among women in four villages of Kamonyi District. In a government survey, Kamonyi District was ranked as the best performing rural district on four dimensions of development – justice, social welfare, good governance, and economic development³⁶ – and it emerged as the best district in incorporating gender equality-related activities in its plans. In this study, I chose to work in the district the Government of Rwanda identifies as the best district in the country in terms of incorporating gender equality-related activities in its plans, for two reasons. If Rwanda is internationally recognized as a world leader in promoting gender equality and women's empowerment, I am interested in listening to women in this district that the government considers its role model, to see if the lived experience of gender changes corresponds to the image. Second, being judged the best district on gender equality reasonably suggests that women in other districts of the country might experience less equality than in Kamonyi. Therefore, a case study of Kamonyi should provide a model of the “best case scenario” for the country.

A single-case study methodology facilitated the exploration of an issue that has been neglected in the current literature, and lends itself to a deep study of ordinary women's experiences of gender equality policies and laws, which can be used by relevant stakeholders to improve equality policies. As such, it is not intended to be representative since the information from this case study was not generalized. Testimonies from women in this district make it possible, however, to formulate propositions regarding women's experiences in rural areas of the country where some gender problems are likely to be more acute.³⁷

Kamonyi District has a population of 330,000, 52% of which is female and under 40 years of age.³⁸ Four villages were selected as sites of interviews with women, and within each village, the interviews were organized around two focus groups, one with young married women aged 25–45, and the second with older married women 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. A total of 16 discussion groups of 124 women participated in the study, all of whom were legally married, owing to the fact that current laws provide ownership rights only to legally married women living in monogamous marriages.³⁹ There were six to nine women in each group (see the appendix).

Both groups consisted of women involved in agricultural work, small-scale trading of goods in the open market, and casual work on construction and water irrigation sites (all of which work activities are also undertaken by men in Kamonyi District). To a greater extent than individual interviews or questionnaires, I found group interactions provided space for discussions and exchanges that exposed a variety of views and experiences in relation to a particular issue.⁴⁰ The women talked freely when telling their stories; and there was an impression that those stories had been shared previously among themselves, because the discussion was lively with everyone commenting as if already aware of the situation. It was not a case of just telling stories one after another. A woman would say: “To add to what my colleague said,” or “I don’t know if you understand what my colleague said but the situation is like this (...).” The debate allowed me to analyze the similarities and differences, and to get a clear understanding of how women are experiencing the gender equality situation both in their homes and in their communities.

However, I am aware of Spivak’s argument that people from outside the subaltern community cannot “hear” what people from a different community or class are trying to say.⁴¹ Before commencing the study, I spent 30 days conducting a pilot study with women in Kamonyi. I participated in community activities such as “Umu-ganda,”⁴² where we constructed water corridors and two toilets for widows. After the community service, we had a meeting where residents shared information on what was going on in the area. Later, the village leader introduced me officially to community members, saying: “I also wanted to welcome Kagaba. She will be with us for five months doing *ubushakashatsi k’uburinganire* (research on gender equality) in our communities.”

Two weeks later I attended “Ubusabane”⁴³ where I ate and drank as part of the community. Both occasions presented opportunities for access, selection, and interaction with the participants. I became an outsider and insider to Kamonyi. Using a few open-ended questions to elicit participants’ stories, I found that most of the women also wanted to talk about personal family problems, as many perceived me as “a smart person” from “Kaminuza” (the University of Rwanda); indeed, at times I was mistakenly seen as someone who might find solutions to individual complaints, or at least someone who could give informed advice. I interpret this confiding behavior as a sign of trust by the villagers; however, it could also have created some expectations on their part that I could not fully meet.

Women narrate gender equality in rural Rwanda

Two main themes emerge from the focus group discussions about gender equality experiences: (1) women earn autonomy through gender equality laws and (2) women face challenges when exercising aspects of the gender equality laws.

Women earn autonomy through gender equality laws

In their narratives, women repeatedly brought up the issue of Rwanda’s “equality law” and how it affects their lives in a positive way:

In the past, a man was a king, whatever he said was bound to happen, and as a woman you could not say otherwise.⁴⁴

Today with the equality laws, a man cannot, for example, sell the plot of land without my approval. I will need to sign because today a man has fifty percent and I have fifty percent of what we own. In the past all the assets in the house used to belong to men.⁴⁵

Women frequently compared two periods in time, with the past referring to the period before the gender equality law. The very term “gender equality” did not exist widely before the new constitution. Today, government institutions and civil society organizations offer gender awareness programs that many women have taken. In addition, residents have learned about gender equality through community meetings and media campaigns. As the women note, in the past, a man would make all the decisions about the use of land, but the 2005 Organic Law Determining the Use and the Management of Land ensures that legally married women now have equal ownership rights with men to the family’s land.

Access to land

Access to land is crucial for the vast majority of Rwandans in a country that is overwhelmingly agrarian. About 71.7% of working adults depend on agriculture as their main form of livelihood.⁴⁶ Up to 2005, the land rights that were accorded to women in the post-genocide constitution – such as inheritance or property sharing in the case of divorce – were regulated by their relationship with men.⁴⁷ The woman quoted below says that she and other women had been living a life of subservience by having to accept what a man wanted for the household. Now, as women explain, they are legally accorded the right to influence household land decisions. In such a case, there has to be negotiation between a woman and her husband, as she will need to sign for any land sale to occur. This allows the woman to be part of the household land decisions, a new opportunity for her:

Things have changed completely, in my time as a woman you couldn’t say anything at home regarding family assets because the husband would tell you, “Remember you brought nothing when we got married, you only came with your clothes, what could you add?”

God bless President Kagame Paul, he gave us women value.⁴⁸

Oh! A woman is considered. I now have inheritance right, whenever I want, I can go back and ask my parents to give me my share, so when you have it, your husband will not despise you as before.⁴⁹

These women point out that recognition in the household is now linked to what a woman brings to the marriage financially. Men previously believed that the woman contributed nothing after the marriage had taken place, leaving the woman to feel she had no value in her husband’s eyes. However, now, she explains, she has rights under the law to own any inheritance from her parents, and that gives her value in the household and family equality with her brothers. Moreover, the new law provides women with resources that enable some autonomy from the family and husband.

The right to work and earn an income

It is not good when a man sees you always asking for money; he despises you.

A husband sees you as someone who does not have value in the house.⁵⁰

For men instead of being despised, sometimes I preferred to do without some things I needed.⁵¹

Until recently, there was a clear sexual division of labor in Rwanda. Women were expected to do “women’s work” and this was limited to domestic and agricultural labor. Men had their own income-generating spheres of work, usually outside the home. With today’s new gender-sensitive laws, women have more choices:

Before equality came, a woman was supposed to do agriculture labor, collect water, do the cooking, cleaning and any another household work. The outside and paid work was supposed to be done by men. That is how I grew up.⁵²

Today, things have changed, a man goes up to work on the construction site and you go as well. He gets paid and you get paid. Now it is good.⁵³

In one group discussion, a woman who was doing casual work on a water irrigation site said that things were changing in her home because of the income she earns; she contributes to the family welfare, and she gains a bit of independence in the sense that she can buy some minor things for the home without begging her husband for money. The women maintain that they are no longer limited only to what Rwandan culture has traditionally considered women’s work. In Kamonyi, the majority of the work for them is on road construction, water irrigation, and other areas of manual labor. These work opportunities, the women say, enable them to make purchases for the home that take into consideration the needs of women and children:

In the past I could wait until my husband gives the money for shopping, today I can also buy some stuff on my own without waiting for him [...].⁵⁴

Do you know [...] there are things men do not buy even if they have the money.

Do you think a man will remember that there is no salt at home?⁵⁵

Eh! No. In most cases men go to bars, it is not certain that he can remember to buy sugar for my kids and me.⁵⁶

As respondents narrate, the income women earn makes it possible for them to get some of the things they did not have previously, not because they did not want them, but because they were not able to get them on their own. Apparently, the earnings from casual manual work provide some areas of financial autonomy, reduce personal stress, and give women a bit of confidence and self-esteem in not having to wait for a husband to provide all of the household needs. These testimonies support Sunny’s study on women’s paid work that show that participation in daily paid work helps a woman, not only to contribute to the family’s survival, but also to enjoy obtaining items that their husbands did not provide.⁵⁷ Further, women described how bringing financial value to the home empowers them to start enterprises with other women.

Before you could not give a husband a suggestion. But today you can.

When you have some money you can tell your friend let’s do a, b, c because you know she can also bring her share and build something together. That is the same with men.⁵⁸

What she is saying is true. If you do not have something to present to him, showing that you are able to contribute, you cannot present your ideas, he cannot even listen to you.

It is not all men who are like that but the majority are.⁵⁹

Other studies also show that women's self-esteem and capacity to generate independent income adds to their empowerment.⁶⁰ Yet while women say that earning money brings certain benefits, it does not bring significant changes in status, as their income is insufficient to provide for all of their needs, and it does not always ease relations with husbands.

Beating a woman and sexual abuse

In addition to improvements in women's autonomy, the women talked about the abuse they have experienced in their homes and how it is decreasing.

In the past before equality came, a man beating his wife was like a law. No one would question that, it was culturally accepted. On the contrary, other people in the community would consider a man who did not beat his wife as not a true man.⁶¹

Today it is not accepted anymore, any male domestic brutality is followed by repressive intervention.⁶²

It is talked about on the radio, written on public buses, everywhere it says, any abuses done to you or your neighbor do not keep it to yourself, tell your nearest local leader or call the Rwandan police phone number.⁶³

As women point out, before gender equality became a national policy, a "true Rwandan man" would assert his value and power by beating his wife. Violence against women was not seen as unjust in Rwanda, but as a respected aspect of social normality.

Beating a wife was like a law. When I grew up I saw my father beating my mother, my grandfather beating my grandmother, I knew that it was a way of life, a wife should not make mistakes and if she does, she will be punished by the husband.⁶⁴

Beating women was seen as one way of correcting women's mistakes and asserting dominance in the house. As several men put this when I interviewed them separately from the women:

Sometimes you would even beat her, not for a mistake, but because it had been a while since beating her last.⁶⁵

Or maybe because your friend told you in a bar that he beat his wife last night, you felt like you should do it.⁶⁶

Beating a wife was like a sign showing her that you are a man in the house.⁶⁷

No one will question that; instead, if you do not correct her, your friends will think that your wife has given you *inzaratsi*.⁶⁸

As men highlight, it was traditionally understood that a wife could be beaten at any time. A proper masculine man should beat his wife since it was an acceptable expression of his cultural gender rights. However, despite cultural acceptance, the 2009 law on the prevention and punishment of gender-based violence stipulates that any act of abuse, whether inside or outside the household, should be reported.⁶⁹ This admonition has been widely disseminated through public communication campaigns. Everyone in the community has the responsibility to speak out, not just the abused person, by reporting either to local leaders or the police. For women's lives, this represents a big change as one woman remarked:

Equality brought many good things, not only what you see from the outside but even inside things are changing. (She smiled). Even in bed we have equality [...] before a man would come and tell you turn yourself (*hindukira*), wanting it or not you will accept to have sex with him, but today all is done by agreement. If a husband requests sex you have the right to consent or not and he can't force you, bearing in mind that any forced sex attempt may put him in trouble with the police or local leaders.⁷⁰

Before, a woman could not speak out about the abuse she suffered in the house, while today she is encouraged to speak; not only as the victim but as an informant on what is happening in a neighbor's household. As this woman highlights in her testimony above, women feel they have more control over their sexuality now. Previously, a man expected to have sex at any time, whether or not a woman wanted it, due to the social expectation that a true Rwandan man can control his woman in all aspects of life. As a woman, she had no control over her own body. Sexual relations were directed by the needs of men, not love or the sexual desires of women. Again, these explanations support deeply entrenched beliefs that men somehow need more sex and have a right to sex with their partners whenever they want.⁷¹

Therefore, it is clear from these women's experiences that there have been many positive changes as a result of legislation that supports gender equality, particularly as it relates to women's access to assets, inheritance, work opportunities, and household sexual relations. Women say they appreciate the gender-sensitive policy and laws in place, especially those that enable them to gain rights and opportunities denied them for so long owing to cultural norms and values. However, as the next section shows, the new laws also set up new challenges for women and men and new elements of confusion.

Challenges faced by women when exercising gender equality laws

Household violence

Despite the many positive changes under new laws grounded in the right to gender equality, challenges related to domestic violence still remain. One woman explained:

When my husband attacked me, I called the police and he was jailed. My in-laws started intimidating me by repeatedly telling me that I would pay a very high price. Did he kill you? Said my mother in-law. To save your skin you better make sure that he is free. In the same way, my husband sent threatening messages [saying] that either I make sure that he is released or I sign my death warrant. Even my neighbors told me to act as per my family in-law's request. I had to pay a fine of 5000 francs [\$10] to get him released. I was confused, what I did, I then sold the goat we used to own and got him released.⁷²

This narrative indicates that even if a woman has a given right, exercising that right sometimes places her in fear of her life. By trying to protect herself, this woman faced anger from the entire family and community. She also had to take a scarce household resource and sell it in order to get her husband out of the police station. Her testimony indicates that communities at large are not yet willing to accept the idea that beating a woman is a bad thing; but instead they think the wife reporting the husband is wrong. The social and cultural expectation remains that this woman should be beaten if she makes mistakes.

When the husband is back at home from the police station, the police will not be by your side.⁷³

It is not only that even when at the table eating or between you in bed, the local leaders will not be there either, so it is better to keep quiet.⁷⁴

When you keep quiet you avoid many problems. Laws are good but are also bad.⁷⁵

As these women note, a woman can indeed report her spouse for committing violence, thereby leading to police intervention, but that intervention will not necessarily prevent violent reprisal by the spouse. If she reports the husband, she risks being ostracized by family and neighbors. Also, the entire household burden will fall on her while the husband is jailed. This woman and some other women participants in the study choose silence as a form of protection. The work of Naila Kabeer on *Voice, Agency and the Sounds of Silence*⁷⁶ argues that silence contradicts the spirit of gender equality, as it allows for domestic violence to continue as a cultural tradition. When women do not raise their voices to protest injustice and inequality, silence becomes a disempowering strategy.

When your husband beats you ... you can show evidence, but when he comes and spends a week without saying anything at home, without eating at home, it creates more thoughts and stress in your head.⁷⁷

To add on what my neighbor says, you cannot even raise an issue with the local leaders or the police; they will think you are lying because that kind of abuse leaves no evidence.⁷⁸ Life is not easy.⁷⁹

It appears that men in Kamonyi District – which, again, is seen as the most progressive district for gender equality – are finding alternative ways to live the same old lives in a changing society. Now that the law punishes violence against women, men are challenged about the loss of their power over women. One way to regain their power without physical harm is to use emotional and mental strategies, knowing that authorities will not intervene. One woman explains:

Do you think men are stupid? If you report him two to three times, he leaves you, and goes out cheating with other women without husbands, most of the time they go to widows, and when he wants he comes back, you cannot ask him where he has been. You just keep quiet.⁸⁰

For this woman, reporting violence comes with too many consequences. Hence, choosing a plan of action to counter the situation of being abused presents a difficult puzzle and a seemingly unresolvable gender dilemma.

Men's responses to women engaging in paid work

As described, many women state that the income they now earn is not enough to render them independent of men. Two narrators explain:

Even though we have been telling you that we do casual work, we get almost nothing compared to what we need to buy at home.⁸¹

For example when I get home in the evening I have to do all the work I was supposed to do if I stayed home [...] but instead of begging I prefer to go to work and get little.⁸²

As these women point out, their work does not give them enough income to meet their needs. While they feel it is better than nothing, the work also overwhelms them. They work outside the home for cash and when they get home they have to do the household

chores, such as fetching water, collecting firewood, looking after children, and preparing food for the family, all of which increases their workload considerably. The women participants in this study say they would prefer to have long-term jobs, but would not leave casual work to stay home and do household work again. They want to be autonomous.

Yet, the new roles can mean that they are more vulnerable to hidden forms of inequality in the household, and must juggle the responsibilities of work and home – the old double burden that often follows new rights for women.

The husband would work for money and bring the food home. Today it is like this is no longer his job. He always tells me that I also work and therefore I should buy what I need for the home.⁸³

There are men who are complicated, when they see their wives getting jobs instead of putting hands together for the family, they immediately decide to let you use what you earn and they do not give theirs.⁸⁴

It is not all men. There are also other men who have good hearts who bring what they have and pull together and plan what to buy at home. It all depends on how you live together and the character of your husband.⁸⁵

Some men see their wives getting money as a way of releasing them from family responsibilities, and others see the extra household income as making it possible for the family to move forward. Narayan Deepa offers valuable insights into the complex situation now facing Rwandan women. Narayan argues that changing women's roles should be accompanied with changing men's internalized norms about women and their behavior toward women. Otherwise the local customs and traditions will continue to dictate the roles women and men are expected to play within the household.⁸⁶ In the previous section, we saw that the earnings women get can allow them to negotiate with their husband, but the woman whose husband is becoming less responsible will not be able to craft such negotiations.

Respect, submission, and love

Many women say that they are confused as to whether they should respect, obey, and still love their husbands even when he makes no effort to provide for the family.

Do not make me laugh! The fact that he contributes nothing to the family, he has already lost his consideration as head of the family.⁸⁷

How can I treat him with respect while he does not make effort to ensure the family welfare?

If he gives me peace it is fine, but in most cases to ensure I do not dare ask or question his neglect, he traumatizes the whole family as a mechanism for ensuring that no one will ask and no one will say anything about his irresponsibility.⁸⁸

And sometimes he even leaves the family. If it was you, could you really respect that man?⁸⁹

If men are becoming less involved in family matters and are not willing to contribute to family well-being, this contradicts the Rwandan tradition of a man as the head and family breadwinner.⁹⁰ With men not meeting their traditional responsibilities, women lose interest in fulfilling their cultural expectation to respect and obey their husbands. It seems as if many women are in a moment of confusion between respecting their husband, thereby keeping the old cultural assumptions, or rejecting those norms. This is perhaps due to the change in the norms of masculinity and femininity, which have occurred through the enactment of the government's laws and policies on gender equality. For the time being, women have also become breadwinners – a task which had been

exclusively assigned to men. But many women are not sure whether they should follow the old path or the new one that is putting them in a difficult situation.

The ways that the women represent the repercussions of changing gender norms resonate with testimonies in other contexts. Studies done in Cameroon, Tanzania, and Jamaica on the roots of gender inequalities show that when men's authority is challenged they experience stress and react with threats and violence to control women.⁹¹ It does not stop there: the man may even decide to leave the home, as the narrator above explains. Arguably, there are some Rwandan women who can face an undesirable choice: wait for her husband to provide everything for the home and family, or earn her own income, lose the man and bear the entire family burden.

Making sense of women's narratives: concluding thoughts

It is clear from the testimonies that gender equality laws have had led to positive outcomes for Rwandan women. However, additional efforts are still needed to address many of the unintended consequences. As Naila Kabeer has explained, changes in one social dimension can lead to changes in others either negatively or positively. The policy changes may improve women's lives by providing new "resources" for immediate needs that never existed, but it can also provide more inequalities and confusion.⁹² The women's narratives in Kamonyi indicate that gender equality policies and laws have created gendered dynamics in which men feel disempowered at the same time that women feel empowered. This, in turn, is leading to critical tensions in the household. Women face two irreconcilable choices: exercising their rights or accepting to live as if the rights had not been given to them.

Women exercising the gender equality rights

According to some women who participated in the study, gender equality rights affect them in two different ways. On the one hand, they now enjoy the rights and, on the other hand, they are suffering from consequences arising from exercising their rights. Equality laws give women potential financial gain, and enhance their bargaining power, as well as security and autonomy within the household. In addition, she has the right to work outside her home and get paid in cash. The earnings she gets help her to contribute to the family's survival and allow her to make suggestions to her husband.⁹³ It is obvious that, according to these women's testimonies, women's choices have increased.

At the same time, the narratives tell us that a woman in Kamonyi faces a number of unexpected consequences while exercising her given rights. For instance, if a woman reports an abusive husband to the authorities or to the police, she is looked down upon by the whole community. She is branded a bad woman. This experience resonates with other women's testimonies, in, for example, South Africa, where women who spoke out regarding their violent situation were ostracized by their own family members and community.⁹⁴ In Zimbabwe, women who spoke against management policies at work as well as against their husbands often faced disapproval at many levels.⁹⁵ In addition, when the husband is jailed for beating his wife, in order to get him released from the police station, the woman will need to do double the work. She will need to work to get the money to pay the police station to release him, and she will need to work to be able to meet her children's needs at home. As a consequence, she acquires a social burden that she did not expect to have. Furthermore,

while the man is in jail, he does not earn money for the family. The woman becomes the sole breadwinner for the entire family. This extra burden forces her to work even harder.

Government policies seem to anticipate that if women are empowered by having the same rights and opportunities as men, they will make changes in their households by challenging dominant power relations. Rural women's narratives from one of the most "successful" districts in Rwanda indicate that the reality is rather more complex. Far from transforming women's lives, the situation creates conflicts, ambiguities, social, and economic hardships for a woman in the household. The adoption of good laws and policies do not necessarily bring the predicted results. One reason for such unpredicted negative results is that women can only attain the benefits of given rights if the cultural interpretation of those legitimate rights has been secured.⁹⁶ If not, women may be prevented from exercising those rights and may suffer considerable social disapproval.

The law does not guarantee gender equality in the private sphere because culture, social norms, and perceptions also have the power to influence *de facto*.⁹⁷ Then, the question is how to make sense of these intertwined powers. Clearly, rural women's testimonies indicate that this issue needs more attention. Women's ability to exercise legitimate rights depends not only on good laws and policies but also on various social and cultural factors.⁹⁸

Women may prefer not to exercise gender equality rights

Rural women's testimonies show that some women refuse to exercise their given rights and prefer to avoid social disapproval and extra burdens or unintended consequences by remaining silent. Conditions in the household then can remain the same as they were before the equality laws were passed; or they can be even worse as husbands try to circumvent the law. This was also found to be the case in Bangladesh, where women's silence was seen as a self-protecting strategy in the face of social and economic choices.⁹⁹ The women narratives in this study suggest that being silent could be a good strategy because the situation they face after reporting abuse by husbands causes some women overwhelming problems.

There are several theoretical explanations for women's silence as a strategy. Some argue that silence can be a "survival" and "security" strategy while dealing with a difficult situation of terror and rape in war and post-conflict zones or in cases where speaking out can aggravate the problem.¹⁰⁰ Others believe that silence is a "disempowered failure" as it shows a failure to protest injustice given that the costs of protesting are high.¹⁰¹ However, the picture the women paint of rural women in Kamonyi shows them stuck or lost between the old and the new: they do not know what stand to take. Some women have found that the laws are good and protective, but acting as the law dictates puts them in trouble with their husbands. Some women in this study branded the new laws as "love killers."

Nevertheless, the contradictions and dilemmas expressed in their stories attest to the challenge of knowing whether and how the new constitution is empowering women. This study does not examine whether the new constitution, public policies, and laws are empowering women or not. It does nevertheless reflect the experiences of "gender equality" in one district of rural Rwanda as a contradictory and confusing process of change that creates gender dilemmas. Although Rwanda has created a conducive legal environment for gender equality and women's rights, narratives from

women living in Kamonyi district communicate a different image: in families, exercising these rights can lead to women suffering unintended consequences that originate from various social and cultural norms operating at cross-purposes.

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Notes

1. Uwineza and Pearson, "Sustaining Women's Gains in Rwanda," 8.
2. Adekunle, *Culture and Customs of Rwanda*, 45.
3. For instance, Articles 9, 10, 11, 16, 25, 28, 37 and 40 of the 2003 Constitution have clear provisions on equal rights of both males and females in Rwanda. It reinforced the principle of gender equality and provided quotas of at least 30% for women in decision-making organs.
4. The Law No 22/1999 of 12 November 1999 to supplement Book one of the Civil Code and to institute Part Five regarding Matrimonial Regimes, Liberalities and Successions. The law mandates that all children, irrespective of sex, have a right to inherit property, over which they then assume full ownership – is now legally stipulated as a parental duty in Articles 42 and 43 of the Succession Law.
5. Republic of Rwanda, *Constitution of the Republic of Rwanda*; Republic of Rwanda, *National Gender-Based Violence Policy*.
6. Gender-based violence in Rwanda is defined as

Any act that results in bodily, psychological, sexual and economic harm to somebody just because they are female or male. Such an act results in the deprivation of freedom and negative consequences. This violence may be exercised within or outside the household.

The term "just because they are female or male" should be interpreted to mean any harm based on the gender of the victim.

7. Republic of Rwanda, *Constitution of the Republic of Rwanda*, Article 26.
8. Daley, Dore-Weeks, and Umuhoza, "Ahead of the Game," 144.
9. Bayisenge, *Changing Gender Relations?*, 22; Rwanda Gender Monitoring Office, *Gender Best Practices*, 33; Cooper, *Challenges and Opportunities*, 5.
10. Food and Agriculture Organization, *State of Food and Agriculture*.
11. UNDP, "UNDP – Rwanda"; Nambi, "UNFEM Director in the Country."
12. McAuslan, "Personal Reflections," 125.
13. USAID, "Gender Assessment in Rwanda," 10.
14. Powley, "Women's Contributions to Governance."
15. Hategekimana, *Women's Empowerment*, 264.
16. Rwanda Gender Monitoring Office, *Perceptions Towards Gender Equality*, 13.
17. USAID, "Gender Assessment in Rwanda," 13–14.
18. See note 16 above.
19. RWAMREC, "Sexual and Gender Based Violence," 83.
20. PRO-FEMME TWESE HAMWE, "Situational Awareness," 53.
21. Kagaba, "Threatened Masculinities," 18.
22. UNFPA, "Gender Equality."
23. World Bank, "Engendering Development."
24. Squires, *New Politics*, 1.
25. Levit and Verchick, *Feminist Legal Theory*, 13.
26. Kabeer, "Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment," 13.
27. Parpart, "Rethinking Gender and Empowerment," 355.
28. Parpart, "Rethinking Em(power)ment," 10–11.
29. Rowlands, "A Word of the Times."

30. Batliwala, "Meaning of Women's Empowerment," 129.
31. Kabeer, "Resources, Agency, Achievements," 437.
32. Allen, "Power of the Feminist Theory," 21.
33. Hategekimana, *Women's Empowerment*; Cherry and Hategekimana, "Ending Gender-Based Violence"; Powley, "Women's Contributions to Governance."
34. Nordstrom, *Different Kind of War Story*, 7.
35. Brooks, *Feminist Standpoint Epistemology*.
36. Rwanda Districts Performance Evaluation Report 2011–2012.
37. This research is part of a larger project on experiences of gender equality in Rwanda that entails interviews with rural men and women and also government gender agencies known as gender machineries. The objective is to understand how a variety of people in the rural areas in Rwanda experience current gender equality policies and laws.
38. National Institute of Statistics of Rwanda, EICV3 District Profile – Kamonyi.
39. Under the Rwandan Constitution art.26 only civil monogamous marriage between a man and a woman is recognized.
40. Padgett, *Qualitative Methods*.
41. Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak."
42. In Rwanda, there is a mandatory community service day from 8:00 am to 11:00 am, on the last Saturday of each month called Umuganda meaning community service. The day is designed to be a day of contribution and building the country by citizens themselves. The day is intended to build community involvement and strengthen cohesion between persons of different background and levels. It is a day where people in the community express their needs and voice opinions on various issues (Rwanda Governance Board).
43. Ubusabane is a great event where residents share foods and drinks with their leaders during or after discussing issues affecting the particular area. It is largely viewed as a rallying point for unity and togetherness (Rwanda Governance Board).
44. Woman, 54, V2.
45. Woman, 34, V1.
46. National Institute of Statistics of Rwanda, *Integrated Household Living Conditions Survey*, 22.
47. Daley, Dore-Weeks, and Umuhoza, "Ahead of Game," 137.
48. Woman, 62, V4.
49. Woman, 54, V3.
50. Woman, 39, V2.
51. Woman, 30, V2.
52. Woman, 56, V1.
53. Woman, 47, V1.
54. Woman, 38, V2.
55. Woman, 27, V2.
56. Woman, 32, V2.
57. Sunny, *Women Paid Work*.
58. Woman, 51, V4.
59. Woman, 49, V4.
60. Stromquist, "Education as a Means for Empowering Women," 23.
61. Woman, 48, V3.
62. Woman, 46, V3.
63. Woman, 50, V3.
64. Woman, 57, V1.
65. Man, 61, V4.
66. Man, 57, V4.
67. Man, 55, V4.
68. Inzaratsi consisted, in Rwanda, of some products made by herbal medicine that wives used to give their husbands in beer or food, or put a little quantity in the conjugal bed so that the husband may always think only of his wife and may never react badly against her. Man, 48, V4.
69. Republic of Rwanda, *National Gender-Based Violence Policy*.
70. Woman, 43, V1.

71. Rwanda Gender Monitoring Office, *Gender Best Practices*; Rwanda Gender Monitoring Office, *Perceptions Towards Gender Equality*.
72. Woman, 31, V2.
73. Woman, 27, V2.
74. Woman, 32, V2.
75. Woman, 29, V2.
76. Kabeer, *Voice, Agency and the Sounds of Silence*, 17–18.
77. Woman, 40, V1.
78. Woman, 47, V1.
79. Woman, 37, V1.
80. Woman, 28, V3.
81. Woman, 26, V1.
82. Woman, 33, V1.
83. Woman, 44, V4.
84. Woman, 39, V4.
85. Woman, 48, V4.
86. Narayan, *Voices*, 205.
87. Woman, 31, V3.
88. Woman, 29, V3.
89. Woman 26, V3.
90. Uwineza and Pearson, *Sustaining Women's Gains*, 10.
91. Narayan, *Voices*, 176.
92. Kabeer, "Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment," 15.
93. Powley, "Women's Contributions to Governance."
94. Win, "Open Letter," 76.
95. Sylvester, *Producing Women*.
96. Jackson, "Gender Analysis of Land," 475.
97. Agarwal, "Bargaining and Gender Relations," Narayan, *Voices*, 108.
98. Agarwal, "Bargaining and Gender Relations."
99. Narayan, *Voices*, 179.
100. Parpart, *Choosing Silence*, 4; Hansen, "Little Mermaid's," 287.
101. Kabeer, *Voice, Agency and the Sounds of Silence*, 18.

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Appendix

List of group discussions referred to in this paper.

- Number: Age
- V: Village 1–4

| | |
|----------------|---------------|
| Woman, 54, V2: | January 2013 |
| Woman, 34, V1: | January 2013 |
| Woman, 62, V2: | January 2013 |
| Woman, 56, V1: | January 2013 |
| Woman, 47, V1: | January 2013 |
| Woman, 38, V2: | January 2013 |
| Woman, 57, V1: | January 2013 |
| Woman, 43, V1: | January 2013 |
| Woman, 37, V1: | January 2013 |
| Woman, 26, V1: | January 2013 |
| Woman, 33, V1: | January 2013 |
| Woman, 39, V2: | February 2013 |
| Woman, 30, V2: | February 2013 |
| Woman, 27, V2: | February 2013 |
| Woman, 32, V2: | February 2013 |
| Woman, 31, V2: | February 2013 |
| Woman, 27, V2: | February 2013 |
| Woman, 32, V2: | February 2013 |
| Woman, 29, V2: | February 2013 |
| Woman, 40, V1: | February 2013 |
| Woman, 47, V1: | February 2013 |
| Woman, 28, V3: | March 2013 |
| Woman, 31, V3: | March 2013 |
| Woman, 29, V3: | March 2013 |
| Woman, 26, V3: | March 2013 |

| | |
|----------------|------------|
| Woman, 54, V3: | April 2013 |
| Woman, 48, V3: | April 2013 |
| Woman, 41, V3: | April 2013 |
| Woman, 37, V3: | April 2013 |
| Woman, 51, V4: | May 2013 |
| Woman, 42, V4: | May 2013 |
| Man, 61, V4: | May 2013 |
| Man, 57, V4: | May 2013 |
| Man, 55, V4: | May 2013 |
| Man, 48, V4: | May 2013 |
| Woman, 44, V4: | May 2013 |
| Woman, 39, V4: | May 2013 |
| Woman, 50, V4: | May 2013 |