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Women parliamentarians and post-conflict reconstruction

In the aftermath of the 1994 genocide, the Rwandan population was 70 per cent female. Women assumed roles as heads of household, community leaders and financial providers, meeting the needs of their devastated families and communities. The extraordinary contributions of women to the post-conflict reconstruction of the country have become an important part of public discourse in Rwanda. Women's heroic efforts are recognised and lauded at the highest levels of government, by average Rwandans, on the radio and even in public art.¹

Before its civil war in the early 1990s and the 1994 genocide, Rwandan women never held more than 18 per cent of seats in the country's parliament.² During the nine-year period of post-genocide transitional government, from 1994–2003, women's representation in the parliament reached 25.7 per cent. A new gender-sensitive constitution was adopted, including specific mechanisms to increase women's political participation, among them a constitutional guarantee, a quota system, and innovative electoral structures. The Rwandan Government made women's inclusion in parliament a hallmark of its program for post-genocide recovery and reconstruction.

The quota system provides for 30 per cent of seats in the parliament to be occupied by women. In the lower house (the Chamber of Deputies), there are eighty members in total, each serving five-year terms. Fifty-three of these members are directly elected to represent political parties in a proportional representation system. The additional seats are contested in the following manner: twenty-four members are elected by women from each province and the capital city of Kigali, two are elected by the National Youth Council, and one is elected by the Federation of the Associations of the Disabled. The twenty-four seats that are reserved for women are contested in women-only elections; that is, only women can stand for election and only women can vote. In addition to the twenty-four seats set aside in the Chamber of Deputies, the 2003 elections saw an additional fifteen women elected in openly contested seats for a total of thirty-nine out of eighty, or 48.8 per cent of seats—the world's highest rate of women in parliament.³ The 2008 elections saw Rwanda set a new record, with 55 per cent of parliamentarians being women—the first country in the world to see women outnumbering men in political posts.⁴

The Rwandan experience demonstrates how organising can strengthen women's capabilities in advocacy and lobbying skills. In 1996, women in Rwanda's parliament formed a cross-party caucus, the Forum of Women Parliamentarians (FFRP), which included all female members of Parliament—from both the upper and lower houses, those who represented political parties and those who were elected on the "women's ballot".⁵ They work together across party lines on issues of common importance to women, focusing on advocating on behalf of Rwandan women and on building the capacity of its members. In recent years, the FFRP has become increasingly focused on legislative responsibilities and constituent service: it reviews existing laws and introduces amendments to change discriminatory statutes, examines proposed laws with an eye toward gender sensitivity and conducts meetings and training with women's groups to sensitise and advise the population on legal issues. One of the hallmarks of the FFRP's work has been its use of consultative processes—both internally and externally—with constituents, and other women's organisations. The *Collectifs Pro-Femmes Twese Hamwe* (forty-one different associations), the *Rwandan Women Leaders Caucus*, the *National Council of Women*, and the *Ministry of Gender and Women Promotion*, for example, have been active partners of the FFRP.

1 Elizabeth Powley, "Rwanda: The Impact of Women Legislators on Policy Outcomes Affecting Children and Families" (Background Paper prepared for *The State of the World's Children 2007*, December 2006), 4.

2 Inter-Parliamentary Union, *Women in Parliaments 1945-1995: A World Statistical Survey*, (Geneva: IPU, 1995).

3 Inter-Parliamentary Union, "Women in National Parliaments," IPU, <http://www.ipu.org/wmn-e/classif.htm>, (accessed March 9, 2009).

4 BBC News, "Women to Rule Rwanda Parliament," *BBC News Front Page*, September 17, 2008, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/80/2/hi/africa/7620816.stm> (accessed March 9, 2009)

5 Elizabeth Powley, "Rwanda: The Impact of Women Legislators", 6.

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Some of the achievements of the FFRP and its partners are:

- A bill on gender-based violence, adopted by the Rwandan Parliament on August 3, 2006. The *Law on Prevention, Protection and Punishment of Any Gender-based Violence* defines gender-based violence and addresses crimes committed during the genocide as well as the current situation. It identifies various types of gender-based violence perpetrated against women, children and men and it specifically highlights polygamy as a cause of violence. Moreover, for the first time under Rwandan law, the law provides a legal definition of the rape of an adult woman and proscribes punishment.⁶
- The 1999 *Law on Matrimonial Regimes, Liberalities, and Successions*. This law established, for the first time, women's rights to inherit land. Women parliamentarians worked in close concert with the Women's Ministry and women's civil society organisations.
- The 2001 *Law on Rights and Protection of the Child Against Violence*. This law defines a child as anyone under the age of eighteen, and lays out both the rights and responsibilities of children. It criminalises murder, rape, the use of children for "dehumanising acts", exploitation, neglect and abandonment, and forced or premature (before the age of twenty-one) marriage.

These three landmark pieces of law were made possible by the commitment of women parliamentarians in shaping them, on the basis of extensive research in the country and in consultation with grassroots women about the type of security threats they and their children face. The process of developing the *Law on Prevention, Protection and Punishment of Any Gender-based Violence* demonstrates the FFRP's participatory approach:

- With support from the United Nations Development Programme, in 2005 the FFRP hired two local consultants to engage civil society organisations and experts on issues of gender-based violence. A questionnaire about gender-based violence was distributed. The consultants' report served as the starting point for a national conference on gender-based violence.
- In October 2005, during this two-day conference, participants discussed and debated issues of gender-based violence in Rwanda and developed a set of recommendations that would provide the framework for the new law. Panel discussions with experts and lawmakers were broadcast to all provinces over television and radio.
- After the national conference, members of parliament returned to their home districts to discuss gender-based violence with their constituents, explaining the policy-making process and soliciting opinions. Of 106 parliamentarians, seventy-six participated in this process, approximately half of them men. Parliamentarians also coordinated with the National Women's Council to convene large groups of women for women-only discussions.
- By December 2005, the consultants turned over their strategic policy document to the FFRP. The FFRP then formed a consultative committee composed of both men and women, including female parliamentarians, representatives from the Ministry of Justice, the national police, civil society, and the legal community.
- In August 2006, the FFRP presented the bill for approval to the Parliament.⁷

Beyond the parliament, the Rwandan Government took steps to address gender in post-conflict reconstruction, creating a ministry dedicated to women's empowerment and developing a national gender policy. This paved the way for gender to be identified as one of three cross-cutting priorities in the poverty reduction strategy review process.

⁶ Elizabeth Pearson, *Demonstrating Legislative Leadership: the Introduction of Rwanda's Gender-Based Violence Bill* (Washington D.C.: Hunt Alternatives Fund, 2008).

⁷ Ibid, 21–22.

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The Rwandan Government also sponsored extensive research into different aspects of gender-based disadvantages. The findings were fed into discussions with every ministry and government department about the barriers to gender equality and how they may be overcome. As a result, the Ministry of Agriculture is committed to increasing the number of women reached by its extension programmes; the Ministry of Education is striving to increase the retention of girls in schools; provincial governmental structures are committed to promoting the representation of women in local decision-making processes; and gender budgeting exercises are used to train civil servants to translate policy decisions into concrete actions through resource allocation.⁸

⁸ UNIFEM, *Report of the Learning-Oriented Assessment of Gender Mainstreaming and Women's Empowerment Strategies in Rwanda*, September 2–12, 2002 (Kigali: UNIFEM, 2002), originally cited by Sanam Naraghi Anderlini and Judith El-Bushra, "Post-conflict Reconstruction," in *Inclusive Security, Sustainable Peace: A Toolkit for Advocacy and Action*, (London: International Alert, 2003), 130.