HOW RWANDA HAS ACHIEVED THEIR LEVEL OF ECONOMIC GENDER EQUALITY
AND WHAT OTHER SUB-SAHARAN NATIONS CAN LEARN FROM THEIR EFFORTS

Annika Ziegler

University of Redlands
Abstract

This research paper analyzes how Rwanda so rapidly mitigated economic gender inequality and what similar countries can do to see that same progression. Prior to the 1994 genocide, Rwandan women were subordinate to men which was showcased through incredibly disproportionate levels of representation in particular occupations and laws that a required male approval to do partake in certain activities. When the genocide left men greatly outnumbered by women, women in the country stepped up and rebuilt their tragically broken nation and made the advancement of women’s rights a key priority. Through the implementation of many consequential policies, the economic state of women greatly improved. The sequential initiatives carried out by the Rwanda government have put it among the world’s top leaders in economic gender equality and exemplify how other sub-Saharan countries can too lessen their economic gender disparities.

Keywords: Rwanda, economic equality, women, gender-quota
In 1994 the small sub-Saharan country of Rwanda was ripped apart by a horrific wave of gruesome genocide in which over 800,000 people were killed in just one hundred days. Members of the Hutu ethnic majority banded together to carry out an extensive mass slaughter of the Tutsi minority while the UN and the U.S. did little to mitigate the undertakings. Various types of weaponry were used to advance the tragedy and one significant one was sexual violence. Up to 500,000 women were raped throughout the process, resulting in the birth of over 20,000 babies. “Rape was the rule, and its absence the exception” said UN special rapporteur Rene Dengi-Segui in his 1996 Rwandan genocide report (Dengi-Segui). The propaganda and encouragement of sexual violence was more pervasive during the Rwandan genocide than any other conflict in history, a facet of the disaster that is often overlooked. Tens of thousands of Rwandan women were left pregnant and riddled with HIV, and were often rejected by society as the social stigma of rape and rape-induced pregnancies was widespread throughout the country. It is even suggested that women may be “regarded as the main victims of the massacres, since they were raped and massacred and subject to other brutalities” (Dengi-Segui). The immense mistreatment and torture of women was central to the genocide, but the women of Rwanda were not down for long. Just 23 years later, Rwanda stands as a world leader for economic gender equality, a position that is notably and vastly different from their post-genocide state as well as the current state of many of their sub-Saharan neighbors. A country that just over two decades ago was destroyed by mass murdering men is now known as the “number one country for women in power” (Thompson). Rwanda has demonstrated that even amid the worst possible conditions, economic gender equality can be provoked through the implementation of law and policy, thus other sub-Saharan nations should replicate the country’s initiatives so that they too can realize economic gender progression.
Although many are unaware of it, Rwanda is one of the best countries in the world in terms of economic gender equality. When most people think of nations that lead the world in economic gender equality, the Nordic countries come to mind. Conversely, when most people think of Rwanda, the 1994 genocide comes to mind. For the most part, Rwanda is not associated with economic gender equality or regarded as the progressively accomplished country it is. This perception needs to change as Rwanda deserves recognition not only for its high status in the world of economic gender equality, but for the incredibly small amount of time it took to achieve that status and the harsh conditions from which it was derived and is currently being fostered.

The World Economic Forum’s 2017 Global Gender Gap Report has ranked Rwanda fourth in the global gender gap index, beating Sweden (World Economic Forum). Out of 144 countries, Rwanda is third in the category of political empowerment and seventh in economic participation and opportunity. And Rwanda’s improvements have not been slowing; in 2014, the nation ranked 118th in the category of health and survival, yet just four years later, it is tied for first thanks to the passage of significant health-care legislation. Rwanda was the first country in the world to have a majority of females in the legislator and now has the highest percentage in the world at 64%. This incredible and rapid achievement cannot remain overlooked, and the identification and subsequent implementation of the policies Rwanda used to achieve this success are key to minimizing economic gender inequality in sub-Saharan Africa.

Sub-Saharan Africa does not have the best track record with regards to female economic opportunity. Although many sub-Saharan nations are making progress in the area, most still lag far behind Rwanda and the rest of the developed world with progress in economic gender equality. Though every country can take a page from the country on reducing their economic gap between men and women, underdeveloped and developing sub-Saharan nations whose cultures
and history mirror those of Rwanda’s are in a particularly convenient position to do so. While experts all around the world point to the Nordic countries as prime examples of economic gender equality and encourage identical policy initiatives, it can be difficult for poor sub-Saharan nations to try and imitate the actions of such countries whose GDPs and overall economies are so different from theirs. Rwanda’s economic state, however, is quite similar to that of the average sub-Saharan African country. The World Economic Forum ranks Rwanda in the lowest income group in the world, with a per-capita gross national income of $1,005 dollars or less. On the other hand, Iceland, Norway, Finland, and Sweden – the rest of the nations in the top five of the Global Gender Gap Index list- are all categorized as the highest income countries, with GNIs of $12,236 or higher (World Economic Forum). Poor sub-Saharan nations cannot be expected to copy strategies used by countries with far more wealth and resources than them, which is why they must look to Rwanda for guidance. Gender inequality costs sub-Saharan Africa an estimated $95 billion dollars a year, a figure that could be greatly reduce if they follow in the footsteps of Rwanda (United Nations Development Programme).

In order to analyze Rwanda’s great triumph of economic gender equality, it is first important to understand the role of women in the country before its transformation. Prior to the 1994 genocide, Rwandan women retained little power over their lives, their labor, and their country. According to Nichole Hogg’s Red Cross report on women in Rwanda before the genocide, “many Rwandan international organizations have detailed women’s subordination to men in this society, in which the Rwandan woman is a symbol of ‘fertility and weakness,’ while the man is a symbol of strength and protection, who ‘makes all the major decisions.’” While boys were taught to defend the household and the nation, girls were taught to help their mother with household chores as “a gender-based division of labor was instilled at an early age” (Hogg).
There were laws prohibiting women from being commercially active without explicit permission from their husband and it was also illegal for women to engage in paid employment or conclude a contract without her husband’s consent (Vanhees). Even though Rwandan women conducted 70% of all agricultural work, they were not allowed to own land and their husbands had full control over all of its resources. In addition to disparities in labor rights, education was disproportionately dominated by men. In the 1980s, females made up 45% of the children in primary school, 14% of the people in secondary school, and seven percent of college students (Hunt, Swanee, & Heaton).

One of the biggest contrasts from the pre-genocide era to now is women’s representation in politics. The amount of women in leadership roles was staggeringly low in these times: In 1990, only 1% of leaders at the sector level were women, in 1992, only 17% of parliament seats were held by women, and in 1994, only three women held what is considered a ‘key political position’ (Hunt, Swanee, & Heaton). Needless to say, Rwanda was not characterized as a country where women were granted freedom, choice, or equality- it was a country that looked a lot like many sub-Saharan nations do today. It was not until after the 1994 genocide that things began to change.

A legitimate evaluation of Rwanda’s rise to its current state of economic gender equality cannot be conducted without acknowledging the unfortunate reality of what prompted the transformation: the mass murdering of hundreds of thousands of Rwandan men. The genocide resulted in a disproportionate amount of male deaths, leaving the population to be 70% female by the time the disaster ended (Couch). With men making up such a small proportion of the country, the obstacles of male dominance and control were now significantly less prevalent; men were no longer in a position in which they could restrict or limit the advancement of women as they were
greatly outnumbered. In response to these suddenly skewed demographics and apparent power vacuum, women stepped up and rebuilt their devastated and broken nation. With help from the Rwandan Patriotic Front, women whose husbands had been slaughtered, whose families had been torn apart, and who had been impregnated by their rapists united against the backdrop of an unthinkably tragic and broken country to transform and recreate Rwanda. There are three vital things that Rwanda has done to get to where it is today and that sub-Saharan nations must do in order to achieve economic gender equality: create governmental bodies devoted to advancing women’s rights, ensure that women have adequate representation in the legislature, and give women the means to be self-sufficient.

The first measure Rwanda took was pivotal to the success of the other two: the creation of governmental bodies whose purpose is to mitigate gender inequality. In 1996 the Rwandan Women Parliamentary Forum was formed as a mechanism for integrating women in parliament (East African Community). The creation of this forum opened up new doors for women, and gave them the means and resources to lobby for legislative action for women’s rights. There had never been anything like this before in the Rwandan government. Even though there had been a few female legislators in the past, they had never before united with the goal of promoting and furthering women’s rights initiatives. The establishment of this group induced all of the following endeavors that improved the lives of Rwandan women throughout the nation.

It is hard to imagine Rwanda seeing the progress toward economic equality if the Women Parliamentary Forum had never been created. The forum has since devised several other branches of government that aim to facilitate gender equalizing practices like the Ministry of Gender and Family Protection, the Gender Monitoring Office, and the National Women’s Counsel. Having committees like these dispersed throughout the government is central to
attaining economic gender equality. The presence of official groups that seek to advance women’s rights within the nation’s government helps to ensure that women’s issues do not go overlooked and are prioritized in law making. It is because the formation of the Women Parliamentary Forum and other similar counsels that the next step was possible.

The second undertaking that was instrumental in attaining Rwanda’s level of economic gender equality was guaranteeing that women had sufficient representation in legislative bodies in order to ensure that policies were constructed with an eye towards gender equality. The most cited reason for Rwanda’s remarkable success in promoting economic gender equality is their gender quota system. In 2003 a constitutional referendum allowed for the development and implementation of a new constitution to repeal and replace the previous one. This constitution looks drastically different from the old one. One of the most notable new components of the 2003 constitution is its encompassing of gender quotas for women at all levels of government. Article Nine mandates that all representative bodies at every level of government must be at least 30% female (Abbot). Prior to 1994, women had never made up more than 18% of the parliament, so this new requirement represented a drastic change for women in politics. This provision not only makes it easier for a woman to attain a seat in the Chamber of Deputies, but it ensures that at least 24 of them will. Another action that helped make women more present in government was the implementation of gender-responsive budgeting. Led by the Ministry of Gender and Family Protection, this initiative seeks to integrate gender equality into the country’s developmental agenda (Ministry of Gender and Family). Gender-responsive budgeting takes into account the different impacts that certain budgeting practices have on women and strives to construct budgets that consider gender in its composition. And in 2011, it became law that all ministries have to produce gender budget statements. This initiative makes it so women have a
place in the economic development of the country, a crucial element of economic gender
equality. These two practices, gender quotas and gender-responsive budgeting, are crucial to
fostering economic gender equality in Rwanda. Guaranteeing a voice for women in government
as well as a place for them in economic growth are arguably the two most important things that a
country can do to advance women’s rights and economic gender equality. Women cannot
progress unless they have the necessary tools and resources to bring their problems to light and
take action to fix them, something that can only be accomplished if women are in leadership
positions. It is only when women have ample representation in government that the third step can
occur.

Creating conditions in which women can be independent is an essential aspect of
economic gender equality and was central to Rwanda’s success. Prior to the country’s
transformation, Rwandan women could not attain the same level of success as men because they
were reliant and dependent on them for stability. As discussed before, Rwandan women had
limited rights before the genocide. They needed their husband’s permission to do the most basic
things, and in some cases, were barred from doing certain activities altogether. Because of this
restrictive system, women could not be economically stable without men. Rwanda passed a
number of instrumental laws that diminished this survival requirement and allowed for women to
succeed on their own. The first legislative action that opened the door for women was an
amendment of a commerce law in 1998 that gave women the right to open a bank account on
their own (Vanhees). Giving women control over their finances is an incredibly important step in
limiting their dependence on men. Independence cannot be secured without a woman’s ability to
dictate her own money. The Succession Law of 1999, which proclaimed that men and women
have equal rights to own and inherit property, was the next significant piece of legislation that
expanded women’s freedom. One of the largest drivers of the economic gender gap in Rwanda was the fact that women were not allowed to own land. Even though women cultivated the vast majority of it, men were the ones who held authority over it. Granting women the right to own and inherit land gave them a means self-sufficiency and a way to be economically independent. Another thing that fostered women’s dependence on men in Rwanda was their virtual inability to retain a career for themselves, as women were expected to partake in household production rather than market labor and could not engage in paid employment or sign a contract without her husband’s consent. The country dismantled this trend by passing the Labor Law in 2009. The law mandates equal pay for equal work, prohibits discrimination based on sex, marital status, or family responsibilities, and proscribes workplace harassment. It also provides protection to pregnant women and working mothers, and guarantees paid maternity leave. With the previous barriers to employment gone, more Rwandan women are able to get a career and provide for themselves and their family without the support of a husband. Another important step that the Rwandan government took to lessen women’s reliance on men was promote education. Many older women in Rwanda are illiterate because they did not receive a proper (if any) education. In order to deter this tendency, a law passed in 2003 guarantees fee-free primary education (Hunt, Swanee, & Heaton). High education cost was a large reason for the disproportionate amount of girl-to-boy schooling. Families did not want to spend money educating their daughter with such low returns to investment. With that obstacle removed, however, parents are less inclined to keep their daughters out of school. And in 2009, the Rwandan government mandated basic education for all children, an act that prompted those not nudged by the fee-free law.

The impacts and resulting changes from these three initiatives are verification that they are the foundation of Rwanda’s economic gender equality. The legislative action that the
Rwandan government took is the reason for the country’s equalizing accomplishments. To begin with, the increased female presence in government has had lasting impacts on women throughout the country. The gender quotas implemented in 2003 had a profound effect on women’s representation in parliament. The quota system gave women the confidence to run for seats not specifically reserved for them, and by 2013, females made up the 64% of the House of Deputies, despite only being garneted 30% of the seats (Thompson). This rise in woman leadership has had a significant impact on the female citizens of Rwanda as well. Research found that women are much more likely to communicate with locally elected officials as well as speak out during public meetings and public forums- something that was unheard of before (Burnet). The high number of women in parliament has also led to the passage of laws that have greatly improved women’s health in the country. Maternal mortality rates have plummeted and there has been an increased use of contraceptives among women (Abbott). The legislation that increased women’s freedom and independence have also contributed greatly to Rwanda’s gender equalizing success. Divorce rates and sexual violence reports both increased. Though this may sound bad, it shows that women are much more comfortable leaving an abusive relationship or a bad marriage, which displays women’s decreasing reliability on men. Additionally, female labor participation rates have gone up in the country, and the number of women cultivating fields has significantly dropped (East African Community). Educational strides have also been made. It is reported that women now finish high school at slightly higher rates than men, and the number of women attending college is steadily increasing. As one Rwandan put it, “girls attend school in large numbers in Rwanda today, not like in the past when they were kept at home to cook, clean, take care of younger children, and work in the fields” (Hunt, Swanee, & Heaton). While all of these accomplishments are advantageous, however, Rwanda still has progress to make.
While Rwanda can provide glowing economic gender equality statistics, the country still lacks when it comes to social gender equality. Those who object to the notion that Rwanda is leading the world in gender equality point to the fact that there are still pretty rigid gender norms within the household, especially in rural areas. And this may be due to the fact that unlike the U.S. in the 1960s, there was no women’s movement or social upheaval; the country skipped right to pro-women legislation, omitting the fight and struggle that instigated social change in the America. Gregory Warner, NPR’s former East Africa correspondent, found that female politicians in Rwanda do not consider themselves feminists, and still went home and were expected to cook, clean, and behave as a stereotypical “good wife.” He believes that “because of the way that gender equality came so rapidly to Rwanda, from the outside in, with no psychological buildup or women's lib movement, it was harder for these politicians to talk about equality without appearing disloyal, not just to their spouses but to their country” (Warner). Because of this, many women are still subordinate to men within the household. But even though Rwanda has some improvements to make, the country is in an advantageous position to make them. While shifting the long-embedded social norms of a nation is in no way easy, Rwanda has a leg up on making it happen as women already have a loud and strong voice in the government.

Although Rwanda has progress to make, sub-Saharan nations can still learn from their great successes in economic gender equality. With all of the odds stacked against it, the Rwandan women managed to rebuild their country from scratch, and just 23 years later, now have progressive and record breaking economic gender equality. While it is not easy to institute change with such a limited amount of wealth, Rwanda has shown that it is possible, and sub-Saharan nations should follow in their footsteps.
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