

Post-genocide gender roles in Rwanda

A qualitative study of women's perceptions and experiences of gender roles within the Rwandan reconciliation process¹

Introduction and background

This year marks the 20-year anniversary of the 1994 Rwandan genocide, which saw over 800.000 Tutsis and so called "Tutsi sympathisers" killed in 100 days. The genocide sent shock waves throughout the world, and much attention has since been directed towards the small, central African country and its long path towards justice, reconciliation and national healing.

As the country prepares for a month of national remembrance in April, the reconciliation process carries on, with the primary aim of unifying the people of Rwanda beyond ethnic identities. The Rwandan government, led by Paul Kagame, who in 1994 fronted the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) in its surge to effectively end the genocide and rid the county of the *genocidaires*, has sought to facilitate reconciliation on both a political level, e.g. through the establishment of the National Unit and Reconciliation Commission (NURC), and on an individual and inter-personal level, where memory, truth, confession and, ultimately, forgiveness, has been at the centre (Ndangiza et al. 2008). Thus, post-genocide Rwanda constitutes a renewed national vision, through the continuous promotion of ideals relating to citizenship, good governance and economic, social and cultural development. Simply put, as the country turned to justice and reconciliation, the government saw the opportunity to "[...] create Rwanda anew" (Gready 2010: 639).

Coincidentally, as Rwanda rebuilds, the government has made significant strides towards achieving gender equality, and currently has a National Parliament made up of 64% women (2013), thus surpassing any other country (al Jazeera Online, 2013). Gender equality and gender equity has been placed at the centre of the reconstruction of Rwanda, as seen in the renewed Constitution of 2003, where the preamble puts emphasis on the notion of gender equality along

¹ Proposed title

with reconciliation, and in the government development program from 2000, Vision 20/20, where gender equality was specified as a cross-cutting theme for all future government policies, in order to ensure a prosperous future for Rwanda (Rwandan Constitution of 2003; Vision 20/20 of 2000). Rwanda has subsequently been hailed as the home of a gender revolution, where women have not only bridged the gap from the household domain to political and judicial participation, but have also been bestowed many progressive rights, such as the right to own land and property (Boseley 2010). In 2007, Kagame received the African Gender Award on accounts of involving women in the national reconstruction process (Burnet 369: 2008).

Theoretical framework

The thesis will draw on prior research regarding gender, and more specifically gender roles, in post-conflict societies and reconciliation processes. In the case of Rwanda, Herdon et al. argues that the government chose to emphasize women as a way to carry out sweeping transformations in the reconstruction of the country. By linking notions of gender equality to nationalism, and hence a renewed country vision for Rwanda, it was possible to reconstruct traditional gender roles and promote women's empowerment (Herndon et al. 2013). Thus, the post-conflict setting forced women to re-evaluate traditional gender roles within society. In the immediate reconstruction of Rwanda women were made to "[...] think of themselves differently and in many cases develop skills they would not otherwise have acquired" (Powley 2005: 158).

Moreover, as women's organizations dominated the reconciliation scene during post-genocide Rwanda, women were seen, both by the government and civil society, as powerful symbols for healing and reconciliation (Herdon et al. 2013: 75). Helms argues that women often get caught in a paradox in post-conflict reconciliation, as they are charged with achieving reconciliation based on perceived inherent qualities, such as peacebuilding, while at the same time risk being placed under affirmative gender essentialisms, where women are regarded as a solely homogenous group (2003: 15-17). This may create a setting where women struggle to transcend the roles assigned to them. Herdon et al. writes that "[...] war-torn countries imagine women and mothers as more likely to seek peace" (Herdon et al 2013: 80). Taking this into account, it is interesting to contrast this to the theory of intersectionality, seeking to depict identities (including those of women) as inherently different and complex. Gopaldas argues "[...] every person in society is positioned at the intersection of multiple social identity structures and is thus subject to multiple social advantages and disadvantages" (2013: 91). Thus, intersectionality, and the multifaceted roles, experiences, and identities of women and men will be a departure point for this thesis. De Los

Reyes et al. (2005) will additionally be used to explore issues such as class, gender, power and ethnicity.

Aim and research question

The primary aim of the thesis is to gain a better insight into women's perceptions and experiences of gender roles within the reconciliation process in Rwanda. By exploring gender roles, it will be made possible to approach the gendered dimensions of reconciliation within post-conflict countries. This thesis will take its root in feminist research, with the primary aim of giving voice to the women of Rwanda, and shedding light on their understanding of gender in reconciliation. The guiding research question will thus be as follows:

How do women perceive and experience gender roles within the Rwandan reconciliation process?

Highlighting Rwanda's rapid development within gender equality and gender equity, and examining lessons learned from the Rwandan genocide, is essential for broadening the understanding of post-conflict societies. In addition, a MFS in Rwanda may be of high value for the Swedish development community, as the country is undergoing economic and social development. The study will be part of my Master's Degree in International Development and Management at Lund University (LUMID) and I will be based in Kigali, Rwanda.

Research units

The Rwandan reconciliation process is exceedingly broad, and encompasses many different levels of activity. For the purpose of this study, I will solely focus on civil society organizations on a community and individual level. I have therefore selected two organizations that work with rebuilding lives and communities in the aftermath of the genocide, but in very different ways; namely the Institute of Research and Dialogue for Peace (IRDP) and the Rwanda Women Network (RWN). These will serve as research units.

The IRDP has the sole aim of facilitating dialogue and open communication, to provide healing for the communities of Rwanda. The IRDP is a partner of SIDA, and has been described as a unique approach to offering people "[...] the possibility to meet and reconcile" (SIDA Online, 2014). The second NGO selected, the RWN, provides multidimensional care for female victims of genocide, with the overall objective of peace and reconciliation in post-conflict Rwanda. The RWN works with promoting the health of women and children, facilitating economic empowerment, enabling advocacy and education, and ultimately, ensuring peace and reconciliation (RWN Online, 2014).

The main reason for selecting these organizations is their contrasting methodologies and target groups, but being united under a common *raison d'être* – facilitating reconciliation for individuals. Therefore, I believe that these will constitute exciting units of analysis.²

Methodology

As the research will explore women's perceptions and experiences, it will be solely qualitative in nature, with the aim of providing rich and in-depth accounts of how women view reconciliation. Moreover, qualitative methods are more compatible with feminist research, as the research allows for a deeper understanding of underlying structures in society with gender roles at the centre (Bryman 2012: 410-411).

As the thesis aims to explore women's perceptions and experiences, it will first and foremost gain its data through semi-structured interviews with female respondents. The interview subjects will be either personnel or beneficiaries of the organizations participating in my research, and will be of different ages and backgrounds. Thus, the interviews will not be a random sample as such, but a purposive one.

In order to limit the scope of the data collection, I will conduct 10-15 interviews, ranging from 1-2 hours. The questions posed will touch upon perceived differences in men and women's roles in, and contribution to, the reconciliation process. Moreover, I wish to explore attitudes, attributes and limitations to men and women's participation, and also touch upon female and male influence on the reconciliation process.

The primary appeal of semi-structured interviews is its flexible nature, offering the researcher the ability to match the interview to the respondent, while still following a set interview guide (Scyheyvens and Storey 2003: 471). My primary reasoning for carrying out interviews is to gain insight into how the respondents view the world, and hopefully gain a better insight into women's view of the Rwandan reconciliation process. As noted earlier, feminist research is highly reconcilable with qualitative methods, in particular unstructured or semi-structured interviews (Ibid: 491).

The interviews will then be analysed through a discourse analysis, with the aim of highlighting hidden assumptions and underlying structures within society, in relation to the creation of gender

² It should be noted that, while I have approached these organizations with a request to conduct research at their respective organizations, I have as of yet not received a definitive answer. However, I remain hopeful of a positive outcome. If these organizations, contrary to expectation, should decline, I will contact other organizations working with reconciliation in Rwanda.

roles. Phillips et al. stress the importance of social constructivism to look beyond language, and to view language in its relationship to the creation and recreation of the structure of society (2003). This method of analysis will thus be employed, when examining the gathered data.

Limitations and delimitations

There are potential drawbacks to my research plan, which need to be addressed and mitigated. First and foremost, the genocide and subsequent reconciliation process remains a very sensitive topic in Rwanda. Alas, this might contribute to limitations to my data collection. In order to approach this topic, I will seek to act with sensitivity and tact, and strive to create a relaxed and open atmosphere during my research. Still, how gender roles manifest themselves in a post-conflict setting is a very important issue to explore, and can provide a deeper understanding of how genocide affects society. I have engaged in constant dialogue with my contact person in Rwanda, and remain confident that this topic is possible with the correct guidance.

Furthermore, language is an issue I need to consider, as in most field based research in developing countries. The indigenous language of Rwanda is Kinyarwanda, which is spoken by the clear majority of its population. French and English, along with Kinyarwanda, are the official languages of Rwanda, but the country has since the 1994 genocide taken significant strides towards the international community of English speaking countries, thus rejecting Francophone (McGreal 2008). As I have grown up bilingual in both English and Swedish, I feel confident in my capabilities in conducting research in English, but I have also taken to learning French. However, I understand my limitations in learning Kinyarwanda, and therefore plan on employing the services of translators and interpreters throughout my research. With a MFS grant, this should be within the realm of possibility.

Keywords:

Rwanda; reconstruction; reconciliation; post-genocide; post-conflict; gender; gender roles; discourse; intersectionality

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