

# The connections between international politics and gender equality issues

[Politics](#)



## **Gender in World Politics**

### **A Case Study of Gender Development in Rwanda**

#### **Introduction**

Gender is prevalent in all aspects of society but is seldom recognized in the context of international relations. To understand civil war or global recession in regards to gender is difficult for most people. This paper intends to provide a guide on how international relations can be viewed in relation to gender by introducing basic concepts of gender and feminism in the international political realm. This paper's case study delves into Rwanda. Rwanda has rapidly ascended as a leader in equal gender rights over a short time. Our case study aims to understand how Rwandan gender relations have developed to its current state. Moreover, the paper attempts to view the case with a social constructivist lens to comprehend the dynamic change Rwanda has undergone.

## **Gender in World Politics**

International politics is an extremely expansive area of study that incorporates diverse interpretations. Well-known theories like liberalism and realism often dominate the discussion of world politics. Despite a deep history in activism, feminism is an emerging contemporary perspective of world politics. There are a diverse array of feminist international theories; they all view international relations with a focus on gender, trying to understand how gender structures global politics.

## The Gender Lens

Feminist views of world politics extend beyond sex, discussing issues in relation to gender. The feminist definition is distinctively different compared to our everyday understanding of gender. While sex refers to biological traits that distinguish males from females, gender is a fluid concept of identity. Gender is “ a set of socially and culturally constructed characteristics that define...masculinity and femininity” (Baylis, 266). In other words, gender refers to society’s definition of a “ true” woman or man. Current common conception of gender is quite binary: one collection of traits is closely associated to females while another collection of the exact opposite traits is closely associated to males. For example, men are expected to have power, leadership, and rationality. Women, on the other hand, are expected to be weak, dependent, and emotional. The relationship between masculine and feminine traits is mutually exclusive; to be masculine necessitates the absence of feminine traits. Hence, gender is polarized between masculinity and femininity. While this polarization was often thought to be natural, feminists argue that gender is a social construct.

Feminists further argue that gender is not merely a social construct but a social hierarchy, especially in the political realm. Masculine traits are more germane in the political arena. Rationality and strength, for instance, are considered necessary in foreign policy. Consequently, feminine traits are considered less relevant and valuable in the status quo. This patriarchal hierarchy inherently signifies an unequal structure between women and men. If society expects and pushes men to obtain favorable masculine traits while simultaneously coercing women to conform with less prized femininity,

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gender becomes a means of unjust, unequal treatment and distribution. As a result, gender becomes a possible lens for interpreting global inequality, injustice, and conflict. Feminists work to reveal unequal gender structures in order to comprehend and resolve them.

## **Feminist Theories**

Feminists view international politics under the context of gender. Through this lens, unique problems rise to the surface. For example, despite constituting half of the world population, less than six percent of state head leadership are women (Baylis, 267). This even persists in lower rungs of the political ladder; the world percentage of women in parliaments is 15.1% and military personnel rarely include women (Baylis, 267). Beyond the political world, women, on average, are underpaid and have less economic opportunities as well. There is a dearth of women in critical positions of power and an abundance of women in dire straits of poverty and abuse. A wide spectrum of feminist theories has sprouted in attempt to resolve and analyze such problems in their respective unique manners.

Liberal feminism is a school of thought which intends to empower women and provide them equal standing in society. Main issues of focus involve women's subordination like trafficking, rape in war, and income inequalities. Liberal feminists believe that such problems can be resolved via the removal of legal obstacles and promotion of policy. Common agendas liberal feminists support include increased inclusion of women in government offices and legislation to ensure equal pay, all of which aim to achieve women empowerment through political and legal reform. Criticism against

liberal feminism points out difference between gender equality on paper and in practice. Developed countries often have formal legal equality, but many are persistently gender discriminatory. Liberal feminism's blind spot is the fact that gender inequality frequently has deeper social roots than mere bill can solve.

Feminist social constructivism is social constructivism with a focus on gender. It studies the circular influence of gender conceptions and global politics. Social constructivist feminists try to understand how ideas of gender can change global politics and how global politics can alter ideas of gender. Gender norms shape certain social structures. In turn, the development of society under these structures can lead to the emergence of new gender norms. Elizabeth Prügl provides an example of feminist social constructivism, researching the relationship between home-based work and gender-based conceptions of domestic labor (Prügl, 113). Female laborers are frequently underpaid for their home-based work, a phenomenon that Prügl theorizes to be based in the gender idea that women are obligated to do free domestic housework. She substantiates her hypothesis by delineating how the progression of feminist gender theories correlates with improvements of home-based work pay.

Other prominent feminist theories include feminist critical theory, feminist poststructuralism, and post-colonial feminism, Feminist critical theory, based on Gramscian Marxism, focuses on the relationship between " ideational and material manifestation of gendered identities" (Baylis, 267). It attempts to understand the current manifestation of gender and what factors

accumulated to form it. Feminist post-structuralism concentrates on the link between knowledge and power. Men are stereotypically viewed as thinkers and have dominated the academic field. Post-structuralists question the objectivity of knowledge and attempt to re-imagine it in consideration to masculine and feminine characteristics. Post-colonial feminism believes global structures are Western-dominant. Post-colonial feminists emphasize the need to reconstruct feminism and the gender perspective in the cultural context of non-Western Third World countries.

## **Security and Gender**

The fundamental concept of war originates, in part, from the idea of protection; war is often waged to defend security, interests, and influence. Often protectors are thought to be male soldiers while women are almost always the subject of protection. This masculine narrative is widely used to motivate and justify war. However, the macho script of war casts a shadow on the contribution and sacrifice of women. Women labor forces keep warring states' economies functional. Women frequently fight as active soldiers, especially in ethnic and civil wars, only to be forgotten. Women also are extremely victimized in war, subject to rape and prostitution. The plight of women in war questions the protection myth; the supposedly “protected” bystanders make large contributions to the war effort and/or extensively suffer from war. Despite recent times of peace, the masculine image of war has not waned and remains to be the dominant narrative.

Feminists redefine security, a long male-dominated masculine field, to incorporate all forms of violence. This broad interpretation encompasses

physical, economic, and even ecological violence. The feminist approach of security is a bottom-up approach. Individual security is prioritized instead of state security. The catalyst of this approach was the concern that preoccupation of national security and interests could jeopardize individual security. Historically, many states have exhibited expensive aggressive military behaviors justified by the masculine security narrative at the cost of individual welfare and safety. For instance, USA, post-9/11, invaded Iraq, with no evidence that implicated Iran for 9/11, on masculine emotions of scarred pride and the pressure to uphold an image of strength. Feminists strive to reach peaceful solutions that foremost protect individual security even at the cost of being considered “feminine”.

## **Gender in the Global Economy**

Patriarchal gender structure is prominent in the global economy. The gendered division of labor is silent dogma of most economic markets. In modern Western and Eastern culture, domestic labor has been closely, nearly exclusively, associated with women. Gender roles expect men to be “breadwinners” and women to be “housewives”. This economic dimension of femininity has limited women outside of the domestic sphere as well. Gender has pushed women into careers that require caring, cleaning, and other ‘motherly’ skills. Nurses are disproportionately women, while there is a lack of women doctors; Elementary education teachers are disproportionately women, while there is a lack of women professors. These occupations are often poorly paid positions as well.

In addition to limitation of employment opportunities, gender imposes an unequal pay. Even though, women perform well in occupations like light industry, women rarely receive full credit. Feminine expectations such as skills in sewing and crafts lead employers to take female work success for granted, limiting possibility for pay proportionate to performance. Moreover, the possibility to get married or pregnant is an inherent source of job instability for women. The expectation to perform household labor can also be considered to be a form of unfair wages as well. Some feminists argue that household labor is a unjust form of free labor, another socially imposed form of improper wages upon women.

## **Case Study of Rwanda**

Case of Rwanda provides a perfect real-world example of how higher levels of gender equality can bring out positive political, economic and social effect. This essay would specifically focus on three questions: first, how has gender inequality been resolved?; second, how has resolved gender inequality improved social conditions in Rwanda; and lastly, how much equal is gender in Rwanda?

## **Historical Background**

In order to examine How has gender inequality has been realized in Rwanda, it is essential to acknowledge the historical background of Rwanda alongside. Rwanda is comprised of two key ethnic counterparts: the majority Hutu who lays its origin at Chad and the minority Tutsi who are deemed to have come from Ethiopia. The interethnic conflict between the Hutu and the Tutsi was persistent within Rwandan region due to class conflict. Although the Tutsis



numerically outnumbered the Hutus, Tutsis were wealthier and had much higher social status. The class difference originates from the time when Rwandan independence from Belgium was achieved in 1964. First election was conducted in which the Hutu won, but the King appointed a Tutsi man for the prime minister. Such initiative brought about a great upheaval and hostile atmosphere was generated where many rebellions erupted, of which were frequently radicalized. In 1972, a group of Hutu policemen with the leader named Juvenal Habyarimana plotted a rebellion, murdering all the Tutsis and Hutus who refused to join them in the lakeside towns of Rumonge and Nyanza-Lac (Johnson, 2018). It seemed the Hutu successfully drove out the Tutsi force from Rwanda and the leader, Juvenal Habyarimana, appointed himself as the president of Rwanda.

The approval rate for the Hutu government was dropping sharply at the time due to the serious economic instability in Rwanda. The Tutsi refugees in Uganda, with the support of moderate Hutu, constituted the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) in order to overthrow the government of Juvenal Habyarimana and regain their control in Rwanda. Juvenal Habyarimana accused Tutsis inside Rwanda to be conspiratorial RPF collaborators. Societal turmoil continued, and eventually both sides declared a truce in 1993.

However, even then the interethnic conflict seemed to persist. Then in 1994, Habyarimana's plane was bombed, and the conflict reached to its peak. The presidential guards instantaneously executed a campaign of retaliation.

Leaders of political oppositions were killed. Most of them were the Tutsis, but even moderate Hutus were included. The United Nations tried to intervene in the fueled strife, but its attempt was unsuccessful. Between April and June of

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1994, the massacre led to more than 800, 000 casualties. This incident came to be known as Rwandan Genocide of 1994. Through the incident, significant number of men were sacrificed which further provided a scope for the women empowerment in the post-war society in Rwanda.

### **How has gender inequality been resolved?**

The aftermath of the Rwandan Genocide led to holistic change in Rwanda's gender makeup. Since most of the casualties were men, the post-genocide Rwandan population consisted of 70% women. There was a significant shortage of workforce in the nation, including, but not limited to, corporate and political realm. The post-war government then set its aim at alleviating the gender-based discrimination. The subsequent president, Paul Kagame, executed several means to aid the government's new aim. He passed the constitutional reform that provided 30% female quota within the parliament and even other quotas for leadership roles outside the parliamentary and political area.

As a consequence of such efforts by the government, females could become increasingly influential in political area. Rwanda has witnessed a symbolic growth of female population within the parliament as well as society.

Increased women empowerment had several positive impacts on the society. First, the child mortality rate has been lowered. Second, girls now could get better education than before. Social resources have been now fully exploited as women in the labor market were more fully employed. Also, resources have been exploited more completely as women were then better educated, which led to improved productivity. Last, better social condition has been

provided to women that they became less discriminated. These consequence altogether have shifted Rwanda towards more gender-equal society.

## **How equal is gender in Rwanda?**

In order to examine the degree of the gender equality in Rwanda, the gender makeup within the parliament should be taken into account as politics traditionally has been deemed as the area in which women are not allowed. Already female-dominated parliament is becoming more female-dominated as the number of women within the parliament keeps growing. In 2003, women occupied 48% of the seats, which kept increasing to 66% in 2013. This percentage of 66% shows the stark contrast to those of other more developed countries such as 19% in the US and the world average of 22%. Furthermore, in 2008, Rwanda became the first country to have a female majority in the parliament. Thus, it can be concluded that all these overwhelming statistics showing high female proportion in the parliament in Rwanda demonstrate that the gender equality has increased to a great extent in Rwanda in comparison to other countries.

## **Theoretical Analysis**

Rwanda is an intriguing case for feminist social constructivists. In the feminist social constructivist lens, societies are formed through the circular causal relationship between gender and global politics. Pre-genocide and post-genocide Rwanda are two extremely different countries. Consequently, under constructivist logic, there has been some form of change occurring in the cycle of gender and politics. The constructivist cycle, foremost, involves existing established social norms creating defining social structures. These

social structures influence the agency of the members of society. In turn, actors impact and change society based upon knowledge and experience of these preconceived structures. If this change is substantial, it creates a social situation in which new norms emerge and cascade. Rwanda exhibits this cycle. Pre-genocide Rwanda gender structure, particularly in security, formulated a situation in which new modern-day gender norms were needed and accepted.

Gender in Rwanda prior to the Rwandan genocide was extremely patriarchal. Gender roles were strongly enforced and masculine traits were highly valued. Rwandan women were rarely allowed to work, confined to their homes and domestic responsibilities. Only a small minority of women held positions in public office as well (Hogg, 94). Many Rwandan norms and proverbs reflect the subordinate role of pre-genocide Rwandan women. Rwandan women were forbidden from wearing trousers, exhibiting a culture that greatly discourages female involvement in the workforce. Rwandan proverbs such as “in a home where a woman speaks, there is discord” and “a woman’s only wealth is a man” show deep-rooted patriarchy in Rwandan culture (Hogg, 69). The treatment of women during the Rwandan genocide is the ultimate testament to the imbalanced gender structure of the time. Hutu extremists strategically formed groups of AIDS patients and instructed them to rape Tutsi women, an attempt of genocidal rape (Drumbl, 3). However, Hutu soldiers, including these genocidal rape squads, raped not only Tutsi women but also many Hutu women who had no relations to Tutsis (Fielding, 11). Soldiers subscribed to the protection myth choosing to rape the women

they enlisted to “protect” shows how women were considered to be little more than objects prior to and during the genocide.

Gender conception in pre-genocide Rwanda objectified, oppressed, and legitimized abuse of women. This patriarchal idea of gender influenced the development of the Rwandan genocide. Due to the view that men were able-bodied, intelligent, and possible future threats, most Tutsi men were immediately slaughtered. Hutu leaders mandated soldiers to kill Tutsi men on the spot. The patriarchal conception of gender and security also pushed Hutu men into battlefields; consequently, most Hutu casualties were men as well. On the contrary, killing women were not a priority as they were viewed to be weaker and more docile, meaning they were not immediate threats that had to be eliminated. Provided, this did not exempt women from death or suffering. Rather, the subordinate role of women in Rwandan gender structure led women to become subjects of rape and be killed under the whim of male soldiers. This difference simply resulted in more women survivors compared to men. As a consequence, Rwanda's population became predominantly female after the genocide. The previously male-dominated workforce and political arena faced a sudden shortage in human capital. Past gender conceptions had led to an unexpected development of politics.

Rwanda was in a dire situation: there was a lack of human capital to combat the daunting task of reconstruction. Rwandan women were also in a strait as well. Homes had been devastated, there was no family breadwinner, and political leadership had largely died, leaving communities without direction. From this mutual need of both individual women and state, Rwandans were

forced to abandon their original gender norms and recreate their notion of gender. Women started to work in their local economies to feed their family (Journeyman Pictures). Traditionally male occupations like butchering were replaced by women. Women started to actively participate in politics, organizing political organizations to initiate projects to rebuild their communities. As aforementioned, constitutional reforms to include women and legislation to better ensure women's rights demonstrated state support for these new emerging norms, helping redefine gender structures.

Post-genocide Rwanda forced women to behave outside their original gender roles. It also forced society to accept these changes. Derived from necessity, the political landscape of Rwanda had to incorporate change. Previously expected to be domestic and submissive, Rwandan women now have become extremely active in all walks of life. Post-genocide development in Rwanda led to the downfall of original notions patriarchal Rwandan gender and created new feminist gender norms. Traits such as leadership, power, and decision-making are no longer exclusively male. Present-day Rwanda shows that these new gender norms are being internalized by society. The election of 59 women into a 90-seat parliament shows that many Rwandans are accepting the notion of female leadership. Child mortality rates have also dropped as less families abandoned baby girls, now recognizing the potential of girls as well. Women are no longer subordinates but near equal members of Rwandan society.

Through a feminist social constructivist analysis of Rwanda, Rwanda has dynamically changed in the past three decades. The relationship between

gender and developments in Rwandan politics have created a unique national gender paradigm. The original patriarchal structure was a cause for the disproportionate death of men. The aftermath of the genocide has pushed both government and women to break the original gender structure and accept a novel female-dominant gender arrangement. Conceptions of gender have created particular historical developments that have, in turn, recreated gender in Rwanda.

## **Conclusion**

Gender is a social construct, but its current structure is patriarchal. Masculine traits such as strength and leadership are dominant central themes in world politics. Accordingly, spheres of life from security to economy are largely favorable towards men. Feminist theories attempt to understand and resolve this inequality. Rwanda's development in relation to gender has been uncommon, recently becoming the sole nation to have elected a female-majority Parliament. Current gender structure in Rwanda is, in fact, due to the consequences of the Rwandan genocide. The social constructivist view provides deeper insight on how gender affected and was effected by Rwanda's political developments.