

“It is Difficult to Live with What We Know”. Gender-based Violence in Rwanda

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This contribution is part of an on-going research in Rwanda on gender based violence during and after the genocide. Both the perpetrators and the survivors of genocide are traumatized in this society which is still grappling with the devastating effects of a horrific genocide, characterized by systematic rape of hundreds of thousands of women beside the mass murder of a million people during the genocide. It is estimated that over 250,000 women were raped and many were infected with HIV and AIDS and also gave birth to children of rape many of these are now vulnerable living “under the shadow of genocide”.

The paradox of the post genocide Rwanda is that on the one hand, to address gender inequality, the government has developed an elaborate gender policy which has resulted in the highest number of women parliamentarians in the world (56%). Also nearly 50% of senior positions in government agencies and local administration are held by women, thus bringing them to the mainstream of decision-making in the political arena. On the other hand, gender based-violence is on the increase. Why is this in a society where women are apparently playing a substantial role in the decision making processes? Why has the political will and action not dismantled the patriarchal structures and norms which shape the notions of masculinity and gender relations? In other words, why is there such a wide discrepancy between the implementation of the government gender policy and the reality of gender relations in the communities at the grassroots level? Or is it that Rwanda’s peculiar post genocide situation, which is fraught with enormous challenges of rebuilding a crashed social fabric, engenders sexual violence in a deeply wounded society? This contribution therefore focuses on these questions in an effort to explore the connection between the social impact of genocide, particularly the widespread trauma and sexual violence in Rwanda.