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When "Bright Futures" Fade: Paradoxes of Women's Empowerment in Rwanda

> Learning from our history to build a bright future.
> —Official slogan of the eighteenth commemoration of the 1994 genocide against the Tutsi[1]

> Rwanda is a country full of paradoxes, difficult for outsiders to comprehend and to apprehend.
> —Filip Reyntjens (2011, 1)

In the twenty years since the Rwandan genocide claimed the lives of more than five hundred thousand people, Rwanda's leadership has endeavored to fundamentally transform the country. Central to this plan is the goal of transforming Rwanda into a middle-income country by the year 2020, with a per capita income of $900 (compared with $583 per capita in 2011) and a life expectancy of fifty-five years (forty-eight years in 2011) (Republic of Rwanda 2000).[2] Linking the country's tragic past with the notion of a new future filled with hope, prosperity, and progress for all Rwandans has been a central theme in the Government of Rwanda's development strategy. The government's "Vision 2020" economic development plan boldly states, "Rwandans will be a people, sharing the same vision for the future and

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[1] This slogan appeared on billboards throughout Rwanda in 2012. See, for example, http://www.huye.gov.rw/index.php?id=2261&tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=429&cHash=d9b79f4414930b81f9c892e592575957.

[2] See also the World Bank's 2011 World Development Indicators for Rwanda, downloadable via http://data.worldbank.org/country/rwanda.

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ready to contribute to social cohesion, equity and equality of opportunity" (Republic of Rwanda 2000).

There is much to be hopeful about in Rwanda: in the past decade, the country has experienced remarkable economic growth, rising standards of living, and progressive social reforms focused on ethnic and gender equality.[3] Women have been at the center of this impressive progress. Under the leadership of President Paul Kagame, women comprise a greater percentage of parliament than in any other country in the world. Moreover, Rwanda passed landmark legislation officially affording women rights equal to those of men and implemented "gender-sensitive" reforms, creating a series of government institutions that protect women's rights and promote economic development.[4] This progress is particularly remarkable given that as recently as the 1980s, Rwandan women held no subnational political offices, lacked the legal right to inherit property or open bank accounts, and were prohibited from joining profit-making organizations (Newbury and Baldwin 2000; Uwineza and Pearson 2009). Today, girls outnumber boys in primary school, the government practices affirmative action in its employment policies, and female parliamentarians serve as respected role models for a new generation of young women. Myriad international development agencies, nongovernmetal organizations (NGOs), and foreign governments have assisted in Rwanda's remarkable recovery. The success of these government- and NGO-sponsored campaigns to promote women has established Rwanda as a "donor darling" at the forefront of the global movement for gender equality, leading to a sense of optimism among young girls, government officials, and the international development community about the "bright future" of Rwanda's women (Frye 2012).[5]

Yet do the daily lives of most Rwandan women reflect the purported progress? If not, what has prevented these empowerment efforts from taking hold? This article draws on interviews that I conducted with 152 women at all levels of Rwandan society to investigate the social processes that intervene in state-led empowerment efforts. In doing so, I aim to give voice to the individual women who are the supposed beneficiaries of these empowerment projects. While the political class of elite women has seen

[3] These reforms include provisions in the 2003 Constitution, the 1999 Inheritance and Succession Law, the Organic Land Law of 2005, the 2009 Law on Gender-Based Violence, and more.

[4] These include a Gender Monitoring Office, the Ministry of Gender and Women's Promotion, a National Women's Council, a National Structure for the Follow-up of the Beijing Conference, a Forum of Rwandan Women Parliamentarians, and more.

[5] Throughout this article I draw on fieldwork I conducted in Rwanda between 2009 and 2013.

rapid wealth accumulation and the extension of myriad rights, "ordinary" Rwandan women's stories illustrate a depressing paradox: despite the world's highest percentage of women in parliament, some of the strongest state-led efforts to promote women, and an entire government apparatus designed with gender equality in mind, profound impediments to women's equality are deeply entrenched and appear unlikely to dissipate any time soon.

Recent qualitative work has challenged many of the impressive development indicators that the Government of Rwanda has presented to the international donor community.[6] This article continues in this mold, employing qualitative methods and a bottom-up perspective to illustrate three paradoxes of development efforts that have emerged within different social institutions—including the family, the education system, and the labor market. Each of these paradoxes serves as an example of how efforts to promote women have failed to fundamentally transform ordinary women's lives. In the first, patriarchal processes conflate adulthood with marriage, denying unwed women the same rights as their married counterparts and thus reinforcing women's dependence on men. In the second, well-intentioned education policies promoting girls have unintended effects, which ultimately create new forms of oppression for women. Finally, the ambitious development enterprise led by the government is only made possible through the repression of some of its citizens, which essentially entrenches their poverty even more deeply. Combined, these three paradoxes suggest that the very efforts intended to remedy women's subordination have indirectly reinforced it in particular ways. This article joins a tradition of feminist scholarship that cautions against an easy reading of efforts to promote social change.

Women's empowerment in development

Since the 1990s, multinational agencies, NGOs, and policy makers have made the advancement of women a core objective of development initiatives. For instance, in 2000 the United Nations adopted eight Millennium Development Goals, the third of which is to "promote gender equality and empower women."[7] These and similar goals from the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), the Beijing Declaration, the European Convention, and Security Council Resolution 1325 have formalized states' commitment to empowering women

[6] See Ansoms (2011), Ingelaere (2011), Reyntjens (2011), Straus and Waldorf (2011), Sommers (2012), and Debusscher and Ansoms (2013).

[7] United Nations, Resolution adopted by the General Assembly: United Nations Millennium Declaration (A/RES/55/2). http://www.un.org/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=A/RES/55/2.

as part of broader development efforts. At the core of these various initiatives is the goal of extending rights to women—including, among others, the right to education, to work outside the home, and to have protection from domestic violence. Integrating this human-rights-based framework into development efforts merged the previously distinct fields of development and human rights (Uvin 2004; Alston and Robinson 2005). Today, states like Rwanda see the rights-based empowerment of women as essential to economic development plans and thus have integrated gender-sensitive policy instruments, such as gender quotas, into their national legal codes.

This development framework largely rests on the premise of participation or "entryism," that is, the notion that getting more women into paid employment, parliament, or school will represent progress toward women's empowerment and thereby development in general (Razavi and Miller 1995). The Millennium Development Goals—the most prominent framework used by policy makers—even define women's empowerment by the progress made toward equalizing the number of men and women in education, wage employment, and national parliaments. But scholars caution against assuming that such programs and policies will have a real and profound effect on the lives of ordinary women and highlight the problematic effects that initiatives to promote gender equality may have.[8] Two key critiques of these efforts are made repeatedly in the feminist literature.

First, legal rights alone are insufficient to fundamentally transform gendered power systems, as they do not eliminate the dominant gender regime, its mechanisms of production, or even male dominance—even if they soften some of its effects (Brown 2000). Drawing from Karl Marx, this perspective finds that rights can amount to pure rhetoric, as they do not alter the relations of production or other underlying structural forces and can even come at a cost (Baynes 2000; Somers and Roberts 2008; Choo 2013). Studies within the sociology of gender further elaborate this idea by discussing how the granting of new rights to women on the basis of their gender marks the category of "woman" as distinct (Lorber 1994). This further reinforces the idea that brings about the subordination of women in the first place—that men and women are fundamentally different. This means that during empowerment efforts, the rights women are granted in one social arena do not necessarily translate into women's increased power across all spheres.[9] For instance, while increasing women's enrollment in school is a requisite element of women's empowerment, the education system can play a critical role in the legitimation and reproduc-

[8] See Brown (2000), Rai (2003), Walby (2003), Moser (2005), Rai and Waylen (2008), and Campbell and Teghtsoonian (2010).

[9] See Mason (1986), Malhotra and Mather (1997), Mayoux (2001), and Kabeer (2005).

tion of social inequality as schools reinforce the gendered power relationships present in broader society (Bourdieu and Passeron 1990; Kabeer 2005). Therefore, these efforts integrate women into the very system that produced their subordination in the first place and do little to dismantle the original structural or cultural reasons that boys initially outnumbered girls in school.

Women's power therefore cannot be defined by access to resources or rights; instead, it is a question of control over these things (Mason 1986; Malhotra and Mather 1997). Yet the rights-based development framework is predominantly concerned with securing women's *access*. Women might, as a purely legal matter, have access to voting, school, medical care, a workplace free from sexual harassment, and so on, but they can only fully access these rights if they are granted permission to do so by husbands, fathers, community members, and others, or if they possess the necessary tools or resources to do so on their own. This can lead to a "paralyzing binary of rights and tradition" (Hunter 2010, 6), in which deeply entrenched social structures pose challenges for women's full control over resources (Mason 1986; Merry 1988; Mayoux 2001).

In Rwanda, progressive laws guarantee women the right to own property, dissolve their marriages, access protection against domestic violence, and even obtain an abortion if certain (stringent) requirements are met. Yet underlying obstacles regularly prevent women from actually activating—or controlling—these rights. These obstacles range from the patriarchal structure of society to the authoritarian nature of the state. This article thus illustrates how even with impressive top-down measures designed to promote women, the divide between formal legal access to resources and control over these resources means that women in countries like Rwanda face persistent barriers to their "empowerment."

The feminist and postcolonial feminist literature makes a second key critique of rights-based empowerment efforts: rights differentially empower groups within an inegalitarian social order (Brown 2000, 232). Rights-based efforts often presuppose the internal homogeneity of "women" as a category of analysis, without recognizing the complex and intersecting class, racial, and colonial dynamics that create further divisions within the group (Mohanty 1988; Crenshaw 1991; Hassim 2006). While oppression is pervasive across all of these divisions, the construction of women as a single entity assumes that the powerlessness and subjugation of all classes of women is rooted in the same structures. This creates a simplistic understanding of women as oppressed, which fails to see that some women are situated at the intersection of several oppressions at once.[10] As Chandra

[10] See hooks (1989), Crenshaw (1991), McCall (2005), and Choo (2013).

Talpade Mohanty notes, "such simplistic formulations are both historically reductive; they are also ineffectual in designing strategies to combat oppressions. All they do is reinforce binary divisions between men and women" (Mohanty 1988, 73).

When rights are established, those with social resources at the highest ends of the social order will almost always be able to take greater advantage than those at lower levels. Elite women from dominant ethnic or racial groups benefit the most from the extension of these rights, while poor women or women from marginalized ethnic or racial groups may find themselves in fundamentally unchanged—or worse—positions. In Rwanda, policies designed to equalize the percentage of women and men in government have been directed at "women" as a category, ignoring the deep class, ethnic, linguistic, and regional divides that have been important since before the colonial era (Newbury 1988; Prunier 1995). Today, this has resulted in the disproportionate promotion of women who are Anglophone Tutsis who grew up in Uganda. While Rwanda has received international acclaim for its promotion of women, few observers have acknowledged that the beneficiaries of these programs do not represent the spectrum of classes, ethnicities, and education levels in Rwanda today—nor do observers acknowledge how the granting of certain rights may be deepening various forms of inequality.

Drawing on these two principles developed in feminist scholarship—that rights-based empowerment efforts fail to fundamentally dismantle social structures that produce gender inequality, and that they can actually amplify the social inequality they are implemented to address—this article seeks to illustrate how these rights-based empowerment efforts have unfolded in Rwanda. "Paradox" serves as a useful heuristic in this effort. As noted above, feminist and Marxist scholars employ the concept of paradox in relation to liberalism, the promotion of women, human rights, or other emancipatory formations that, to borrow Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's words, are "that which we cannot not want" (1993, 44; see also Brown 2000, 230). Paradox captures the irresolvable limitations of these emancipatory processes. For example, as in the discussion above, the more highly specified rights are for women, the more likely they are to further distinguish women on the basis of their gender and thereby further women's subordination (Scott 1996, 3–4; Brown 2000, 231). In other words, rights that attempt to alleviate suffering lock people into the identity defined by their subordination.

In this article, I use "paradox" as a device for illuminating the complicated and often contradictory nature of women's empowerment efforts in Rwanda. Ultimately, while Rwanda has made important strides in many areas in the last twenty years, these efforts have failed to eradicate the social

structures that perpetuate women's subordination. Moreover, women's empowerment efforts have been differentially successful: wealthy, Anglophone, Ugandan-raised, predominantly Tutsi women have benefited tremendously from the policies implemented by the government and NGOs, but these reforms have yet to trickle down to most women. As a result, the gulf between the elite and the masses in Rwanda is widening. A rights-based orientation to empowerment can thus come at a cost (Choo 2013).

Background on Rwanda

Rwanda is a small landlocked country in the Great Lakes region of East Africa. It has been the subject of much study and attention since the 1994 genocide and concurrent civil war, in which as many as one million Rwandans were killed in total (Prunier 1995; Straus 2006). During the violence, an estimated 250,000 women were raped, at least 100,000 children were orphaned, and the entire social fabric of Rwandan society was obliterated (Prunier 1995; Nowrojee 1996). The Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF), a mostly Tutsi rebel army from Uganda, ended the genocide about one hundred days after it started and quickly consolidated control of the country.[11] Led by current President Paul Kagame, the RPF has ruled Rwanda since 1994. While the government is nominally multiparty, in practice the RPF functions as the single dominant state party. Today the regime tightly controls the press, violently suppresses critics, and controls a powerful army that is deeply integrated into the political structure of the state. Freedom House (2012) ranks Rwanda as "Not Free," and numerous scholars have documented the government's repression of civil society, opposition politicians, and human rights activists (Longman 2011; Reyntjens 2011; Straus and Waldorf 2011). Moreover, the RPF's long-term members dominate private enterprise and politics and have rapidly accumulated wealth and power (Booth and Golooba-Mutebi 2012). The gulf between this politico-military elite and the peasant masses is widening; today Rwanda ranks in the top 15 percent of unequal countries in the world with a Gini coefficient of 0.51, up from 0.289 in the mid-1980s (Ansoms 2008, 5).

Despite its authoritarian tendencies, the RPF has a long history of female leadership in its ranks and modeled its early structure on that of Ugandan President Yoweri Museveni's National Resistance Movement (Longman 2006). Once the RPF secured control of Rwanda, its leadership encouraged the incorporation of women into politics at a rapid pace (Powley 2003; Burnet

[11] Throughout the article I use RPF to refer to both the political and military wing of the movement.

2008). The political will of the RPF and President Kagame are frequently cited as the primary cause of women's remarkable political successes: today women comprise 64 percent of Parliament, nearly half of the Supreme Court, are nine of nineteen Ministers, and 40 percent of local leadership at all levels of governance. Of course, the motivations for this political will are not necessarily benign—some have suggested that the high level of women in politics in Rwanda is designed to obscure the overwhelming dominance of Anglophone Tutsis from Uganda in government (Pottier 2002; Reyntjens 2004; Longman 2006). The Government of Rwanda's promotion of women may also partly be a strategy to attract foreign investment and accolades. Certainly the regime's desire to promote women is secondary to its objectives of promoting economic development and maintaining political control (Debusscher and Ansoms 2013). Setting this debate aside, regardless of the government's motivations, its efforts have resulted in the world's highest level of women in parliament and a rapid installment of myriad laws and policies promoting women's rights.

The setting

With about 1 million residents, Kigali is the only major city in Rwanda. Like many other capital cities in the developing world, it has neighborhoods with stylish restaurants, world-class hotels, and modern houses in manicured compounds. Unlike many other cities in the developing world, however, the vast expanses of slums or tenement houses are nowhere to be found. Government cleanup projects have pushed most poor housing outside of the city, paved major roads, and installed efficient streetlights and road signs. Orderly and professional police checkpoints on weekend nights ensure that residents are not drinking and driving. Groups of women sweep the streets every morning, leaving them pristine and litter-free. Even plastic bags are outlawed, further reducing clutter in the urban landscape. Construction on new high-rise buildings is constantly ongoing, and modern malls with wireless Internet and gourmet coffee shops are frequented by wealthy locals and expatriates alike. The city is orderly, clean, and (in areas) visibly prosperous.

The apparent absence of slums and extreme poverty is surprising in a country ranked the 167th poorest in the world.[12] The city's orderly exterior masks deeper underlying tensions, and armed security officers who are sta-

[12] The ranking of 167th in the world is based on gross domestic product per capita adjusted for purchasing power parity. See the World Bank's 2012 World Development Indicators for Rwanda, downloadable via http://data.worldbank.org/country/rwanda.

tioned at regular intervals around the city reflect a feeling of unease that lingers just underneath the exterior. Young men hang out on street corners or in front of shops, seemingly socializing but really just waiting—they have no work to do. In several Kigali neighborhoods, women line the sidewalks every night, as soon as darkness allows for their anonymity. They hope for customers but are terrified of the police. As this description suggests, Rwanda is Janus-faced: impressive economic progress and political stability belie undercurrents of oppression, poverty, and authoritarian control.

Data and methodology

The analysis in this article is based primarily on interviews I conducted with 152 women in Rwanda during six months of fieldwork at various intervals between 2009 and 2013. I also draw on participant observation with a small women's cooperative over the same period of time, as well on observations from two prior summers spent in Rwanda in 2007 and 2008. I selected interviewees using a stratified purposive sampling design, which aimed to interview respondents from three categories: (1) high-level government officials and executives in government-linked NGOs ("elite" women); (2) members of less formal community organizations; and (3) poor urban and rural women ("ordinary" women). In order to capture variation in income, urbanization, and levels of violence during the genocide, respondents were selected from three focus regions: Kigali City, Musanze District in Northern Province, and Bugasera District in Eastern Province. In this article, I group all respondents in categories 2 or 3 together, for a total of 112 individual or small group interviews with nonelites. These interviews comprise the bulk of the data for this article.

All respondents were interviewed once individually or in a small group at a mutually agreed upon location and were given the option of conducting their interview in one of the three official languages of Rwanda: Kinyarwanda, English, or French. Most chose Kinyarwanda, and while I speak elementary Kinyarwanda, most interviews were conducted with the help of a Rwandan translator. Themes covered in the interviews included daily activities, hopes for the future, resources for social support, and postgenocide shifts in their daily lives. Interviews ranged from thirty minutes to upward of three hours and were almost always audio-recorded. Interviews conducted in small groups were usually several hours in length, which allowed me to ask participants individualized questions. Upon their completion, I transcribed the majority of the interviews and coded them for patterns in Dedoose, a qualitative coding software. The interview excerpts selected for this article represent themes that consistently appeared in multiple interviews. To preserve the anonymity of my interview subjects, I assigned pseudonyms

from a list of common Rwandan names. To triangulate my interview data with independent sources, I also draw extensively from published studies, government documents, and NGO reports.

Findings

Has national-level progress toward empowering women in Rwanda manifested in an actual improvement in the lives of ordinary women? Just as Rwanda itself encompasses paradoxical tensions between development and poverty, stability and oppression, ordinary women's daily reality is in tension with the rights and achievements women have won at the national political level. Parliamentarians and other elite women I interviewed expressed that "everybody nowadays is in a great environment and people have really reconciled."[13] Many stated that they "believe that the future will be bright."[14] These political elites acknowledged that women still face poverty and other challenges but on the whole expressed their confidence that tremendous progress has been made since 1994.

Yet in interviews with nonelite women, patterns of hopelessness, the inevitability of poverty, and frustrations about the gap between expectations and reality surfaced. Young women who had already finished school were almost all struggling to find secure employment and expressed fear that their poverty would follow their children through their lives. They confessed that growing up they imagined being business women, ministers, doctors, or government employees. But now they are informal vendors, farmers, sex workers, or unemployed. While some were still hopeful that their situation could change "if God wills it" (an oft-repeated phrase in my interviews), others acknowledged that it is often difficult to maintain hope.

Why have the extensive efforts to empower women failed to fundamentally transform ordinary women's lives? The sections that follow illustrate three paradoxes of women's empowerment in Rwanda, which capture the underlying barriers to state-led empowerment efforts. These paradoxes provide examples of the ways in which efforts to remedy women's subordination may indirectly end up reinforcing it.

Marriage and adulthood in Rwanda

In the years since 1994, Rwandan women have won the right to share property ownership with their spouse, access free or low-cost family planning

[13] Member of Parliament, February 7, 2013, Kigali.

[14] Member of Parliament, February 14, 2013, Kigali.

services, and seek wage employment in Rwanda's burgeoning economy. Yet while these rights have been granted, my data reveal patterns of how deeply entrenched social expectations require women to be married before they are able to take advantage of these rights.

In Rwanda today, family relations have much in common with a traditional patriarchal model of household arrangements. Descent passes through paternal lineage, and household authority and control of finances are generally vested in the male household head. Traditionally, all property and cash are owned and controlled by men; women depend on their husbands, brothers, or sons for access to land (Vansina 2004). As a product of this model of household gender relations, girls do not earn the right to be seen as adult women until they are formally married. An unmarried *umukobwa* (girl) must act like a "timid virgin" and has none of the rights that come with adulthood, like independence or control over her fertility. A girl—regardless of age—only has the social identity of her brothers or father and is denied full participation in society as an adult until she becomes an *umugore*, a wife (Jefremovas 2002). At that time she enters her husband's household and joins his family.

This step—formal marriage—is a prerequisite for adulthood and, as a result, for accessing many rights and resources in Rwanda. For example, several of my young, relatively well-educated respondents described how in job interviews, the first thing they are asked is, "are you married?"[15] According to Nadaje, a twenty-one-year-old college student, "You can't get a good job in Rwanda unless you are married." She described how "all of the responsible positions—like ED, CEO, you know the big positions" required a female applicant to be married to be competitive for the job.[16]

References to marriage and birth control were also common among my respondents. For example, Rwanda's national health care program, Mutuelles de santé, grants women access to low-cost or free family planning services. In theory, any woman who has paid into the Mutuelles system can visit a pharmacy and request contraceptives. In practice, however, the value placed on women's honor and virginity prevents many women from doing so unless they are married. This prevention happens both directly and indirectly: women are occasionally denied contraceptives by reactionary pharmacists, but more often they let their fear of being judged by pharmacists or others in their communities prevent them from even attempting to access contraceptives. Fiona, a twenty-three-year-old college student, described how she had recently visited a pharmacy in Kigali to request information

[15] Sharon, 2012, age 21, Kigali.
[16] Nadaje, 2012, age 21, Kigali.

about the birth control pill. The pharmacist curtly told her to lower her voice, and whispered, "You don't need that; you are still a young girl! You are going to spoil your future. . . . These birth control pills will be bad for your health!"[17]

Other unwed respondents in their twenties were more hesitant about visiting a pharmacy to request some form of birth control even though they were sexually active, simply stating, "birth control is for women, not girls."[18] Many were afraid of being labeled prostitutes.[19] Rosina, an educated twenty-two-year-old, expected the pharmacist to think, "I know this girl isn't married, why is she taking this birth control medication?"[20] Yvette, a twenty-year-old university student, explained that "there is a shame and some stigma" associated with asking for birth control. She continued, "The way people will consider you in your community; maybe they will think you are a prostitute. Maybe they will think you have sex every day."[21] Thus while the Government of Rwanda's impressive Mutuelles program grants women the right to access family planning resources, deeply held beliefs about the relationship between marriage and sex prevent many young women from controlling their rights.

There is another element to this story: it is becoming increasingly difficult to get married in Rwanda. This is partly because there is a substantial demographic imbalance in Rwanda today, largely because of the disproportionate death, displacement, and imprisonment of men during and after the genocide and subsequent wars in neighboring Congo. While women comprise 54 percent of the population as a whole, among Rwandans between the ages of twenty and thirty-five there are one hundred women for every eighty-five men (Republic of Rwanda 2011). This means that as many as 15 percent of young women may remain unwed or enter into illegal polygamous marriages.[22] Moreover, rampant poverty and cumbersome government regulations pose an additional barrier to marriage. Male youth in rural parts of the country are expected to construct a house for their bride-to-be prior to marriage, but 18 percent of male youth live in extreme poverty—meaning they do not have enough money to eat, much less purchase government-sanctioned home-building materials (Republic of Rwanda 2011; Sommers 2012).

[17] Fiona, 2012, age 23, Kigali.

[18] Women's cooperative, 2012, Musanze.

[19] Chantal, 2012, age 19; Aline, 2012, age 19; Angelique, 2013, age 20; Alice, 2013, age 23, Kigali and Musanze.

[20] Rosina, 2013, age 22, Kigali.

[21] Yvette, 2012, age 20, Butare.

[22] Of course a percentage of women many not want to marry or are not heterosexual.

As a result of these barriers to marriage, poor and middle-income Rwandans who do find a partner frequently enter into informal or common-law marriages (Pottier 2006). Up to 60 percent of Rwandan women enter into these informal partnerships at some point in their lives (Powley 2006, 13). Among women between ages twenty-five and twenty-nine, while 48.5 percent are formally married, 22.6 percent are currently in an informal union (Republic of Rwanda 2010). For some, the lack of a legal marriage can have significant consequences. Beatrice, age 28, described how she bore two children to the same man, who consistently refused to legally marry her. When it came time for her to give birth to their second child, her common-law husband abandoned her at the hospital. She described how "that means that you are just a prostitute, because that is how you are taken in Rwanda, because the prostitutes are the ones who just get pregnant by anyone they see in the road."[23]

The legal rights that have been established since 1994 do not protect women like Beatrice; only legal wives have rights to their husbands' property in the event of a divorce or their spouse's death. Such marriages not only cost money but also are more difficult to dissolve, as divorces are rare and difficult to obtain (Polavarpu 2011). The patriarchal structures that associate marriage with adulthood continue to serve as mechanisms for the subjugation and control of women across the world (Epstein 2007), and Rwanda is no exception. What is unique about the Rwandan case is the abundance of women-promoting policies that have been implemented at the national level; if we were to see progress toward women's empowerment anywhere in the world, we would expect it here. Yet few efforts have been made to shift the entrenched social structures within the family. Instead of being able to access the new rights based on their gender alone, women are finding that they must be married (to a man) in order to have full control over these rights. Thus, these well-intentioned policies aiming to grant women power have paradoxically reinforced women's dependence on men.

The expectations gap and unintended consequences

A second process that limits the ability of rights-based empowerment efforts to transform ordinary women's lives is the unintended consequences of such policies, which can ultimately create new forms of oppression for women. Many policies have unintended effects. For instance, the 1999 Inheritance Law granted girl and boy children equal rights to their family's

[23] Beatrice, 2013, age 28, Eastern Province.

land.[24] However, dividing land among all children has resulted in increased land fragmentation, as land is portioned into smaller and smaller parcels for each child. This has resulted in a loss of land productivity, an increase in erosive cropping patterns, and new sources of discord within families (Polavarapu 2011, 133; see also Burnet 2008). There is also some anecdotal evidence that this law has also created a disincentive for men to formally marry their spouses, as informal marriages—as mentioned above—are not beholden to the law if they dissolve.

The growing frustration that has emerged when Rwandans have been unable to achieve their educational expectations is another important example of the unintended effects of state policies. The implementation of free primary school for all as part of the Vision 2020 plan has served to equalize the percentage of girls and boys in lower education, and led to elevated expectations about future educational attainment. Educational expectations are particularly heightened for girls, who have new opportunities to pursue education and now grow up being told by NGOs and state officials that education is the key to "the good life." In theory, all Rwandan children can attend all six years of primary school at no cost to their parents.

Yet the reality is that school is not completely free; fees are still required for uniforms, school supplies, PTA contributions, coaching, and weekend or evening classes (Williams, Abbott, and Mupenzi 2014). Upper secondary school (the final three years) is still privately run, requiring students to either pay for classes or earn a scholarship awarded on the basis of the national exams. As a result, many poor families cannot afford to send their children to school. Only an extremely small percentage of Rwandans—usually from the highest economic quintile—are able to complete their primary and secondary education. Among the wealthiest 20 percent of the population, 15.5 percent of young people have postprimary or higher education; among the poorest 60 percent, this number is less than 1 percent. And by the time of graduation from secondary school, the sex divide within this group of the educationally privileged is stark: in 2010, only 1,865 girls were selected to attend public universities, compared to 4,801 boys (Republic of Rwanda 2011).

When students are forced to drop out of school because of financial considerations, they become disillusioned, as they are often unable to find nonagricultural jobs—indeed in Rwanda, "failure at the cusp of advancing carries a heavy social cost" (Sommers 2012, 106). This is creating a growing

[24] Law no. 22/99 of 12/11/1999, "Law to Supplement Book One of the Civil Code and to Institute Part Five Regarding Matrimonial Regimes, Liberalities and Successions." *Official Gazette of the Republic of Rwanda* 33, no. 22.

population of unemployed, frustrated youth (Sommers 2012). In addition, this gap between educational expectations and reality is facilitating another form of subjugation for women—the increased prevalence of transactional sex, as young Rwandan women are raised with high educational aspirations, but when they realize the hidden costs of school they are unable to afford it. Instead of dropping out, many of these young girls adopt "sugar daddies," older men who willingly pay for their school fees or other costs in exchange for sex (Restless Development/Bell and Payne Consulting 2011; Williams, Binagwaho, and Betancourt 2012).

While official figures on the rate of transactional sex are unavailable, a 2006 behavioral surveillance survey found that 12.1 percent of Rwandan girls had had their first sexual encounter with a man at least ten years their senior (*IRIN News* 2009). Transactional sex is defined as a nonmarital sexual relationship that involves the exchange of gifts or cash, and it often happens across generations (Luke 2003). It differs from traditional conceptions of prostitution in that the relationships are often long-standing and may involve a broader set of obligations that are not linked to a predetermined payment (Hunter 2002). My data confirm studies by Timothy Williams, Agnes Binagwaho, and Theresa Betancourt (2012) and by Mollie Gerver (2013), who found that girls in Rwanda use transactional sex to secure supplies that they need to continue their education.

For example, the girls accepted at secondary school are excited about the opportunity to continue in school. But once they arrive, they discover many hidden costs: accommodation and food are expensive, CDs and other materials are required for classes, and exams cost money (Williams, Abbott, and Mupenzi 2014). While these costs affect boys and girls alike, girls face the additional burden of social expectations to look the part of a "modern girl"—hair plaiting or styling is expected, soap and lotion are commodities that symbolize beauty or wealth, and cell phones and other electronics are seen as a must. Fashion is extremely important; Western-style dress is associated with modernity and progress, while traditional African fabrics are associated with life in the village. Without funds to afford these items, many girls are left out of desirable social groups or are seen as "village girls" who do not have access to "the good life."[25] For girls without the financial ability to afford these items, older men—sometimes teachers, family friends ("uncles"), or fathers of friends—are often the only way to obtain these things.

Peace, a twenty-three-year-old unemployed secondary school graduate, described her motivation for taking a sugar daddy while in secondary school:

[25] Field notes, July 2012.

"When you don't have a job, you can't provide yourself with everything you need—clothes, lotion, hair styling . . . the thing is that we will go for anything because it is the only way to get money. It is the only option we have."[26] Note that Peace's "needs" do not include subsistence essentials like food or shelter. Instead, she lists items needed for social advancement: she uses transactional sex for consumption rather than subsistence (Hunter 2002). Among my interview respondents, having a sugar daddy is not embarrassing or shameful; instead, it is a status symbol that can inspire envy among friends. My data thus support research from other sub-Saharan contexts, which sees women's participation in transactional sex as an extension of their ability to make claims and seek social mobility (Hunter 2002; Swidler and Watkins 2007; see Luke 2003 for a review). For Alice, age twenty-two, her decision to accept a sugar daddy was grounded in practical considerations about her future. She acknowledged, "I slept with him because there is something I needed from him. It is not because I loved him."[27] The eight women in my study who admitted to accepting sugar daddies are not desperately poor; instead, they have aspirations of social mobility and financial independence that motivated their decision. As such, the extension of education to all Rwandans has had differential effects by social class and gender, as poor and middle-class students—and girls in particular—face new forms of oppression while seeking to achieve their educational goals.

The impacts of these cross-generational relationships and the lack of access to birth control discussed above are wide ranging and reveal the human cost of these barriers to women's empowerment. HIV is a continuing problem, and women have a 68 percent higher rate of infection than men (Rwanda Biomedical Center 2014).[28] While Rwanda has been heralded for decreasing the birth rate from 5.8 births per women in 2000 to 4.6 births in 2010, today 47 percent of all pregnancies in Rwanda are still unintended (Basinga et. al. 2012). Once a girl gets pregnant, she "becomes surrounded by a pool of problems."[29] An unmarried young mother in Rwanda is shamed in her community and has few career or relationship options (Restless Development/Bell and Payne Consulting 2011; Debusscher and Ansoms 2013). Interviewees mentioned these girls losing *agaciro*—or value—when they become pregnant out of wedlock. If girls are in school,

[26] Peace, 2013, age 23, Kigali.

[27] Alice, 2013, age 22, Kigali.

[28] The HIV/AIDS rate is low by comparison to other Sub-Saharan Africa countries at 3.7 percent for women versus 2.2 percent for men (Rwanda Biomedical Center 2014).

[29] Angelique, 2013, age 20, Kigali.

they almost always drop out. Serafine, a nineteen-year-old single mother, described how her sugar daddy got her pregnant while she was in secondary school, forcing her to drop out. "I found out that that man had other women," she said. "There was no other way out; I couldn't go to school and take care of the baby."[30]

While most unwed mothers carry their pregnancies to term and endure the social stigmatization that results, an estimated sixty thousand women obtain induced abortions every year (Basinga et al. 2012). Having an abortion—an exceedingly risky and illegal choice—is seen as the only way to retain one's value after an unwanted pregnancy, especially among girls with some education and access to resources (Restless Development/Bell and Payne Consulting 2011). Abortion is a crime subject to years in prison in Rwanda; however, at the national level, fourteen abortions still occur for every one hundred live births. Approximately 40 percent of those who induce abortions develop complications that require medical treatment; "bleeding out" is extremely common. Yet since abortion is almost always illegal, by showing up at a hospital one risks arrest and imprisonment. Thus, at least 30 percent of the women who need medical attention after an abortion do not get it, and many of them die (Basinga et al. 2012). Many of the young women who attempt abortions do so because they are still in school and fear what their pregnancy means for their ability to achieve their imagined educational goals. Young, educated women I interviewed suggested that abortion is common among their classmates, especially if they get pregnant by their sugar daddies who may be willing to pay for the procedure.

A fatalism about getting pregnant, being abandoned, becoming a prostitute, and contacting HIV was depressingly common among the young, unmarried girls I interviewed for this project. The logic of pro-women development efforts depends on the idea that rights to universal health care or free primary education will help mitigate gender inequality. Yet as this discussion has attempted to show, sometimes these policies have unintended effects. Such effects have consequences themselves, as girls engage in transactional sex to keep their educational dreams alive and sometimes become pregnant or sick from these relationships. Ultimately, while rights-based policies provide women in Rwanda with access to resources like free primary education, they often do little to secure women's control over them. As such, efforts to remedy women's subjugation end up creating new forms of oppression for some women, paradoxically undermining the goals of these programs in the first place.

[30] Serafine, 2013, age 19, Kigali.

"New Rwanda" and the authoritarian state

The third process impeding the realization of women's empowerment in Rwanda is the intrusion of the authoritarian state into the private lives of its citizens through benign and draconian regulatory measures that seek to organize and control all areas of Rwandan life. The Government of Rwanda is currently attempting a radical modernization of the entire social structure, as articulated in its Vision 2020 plan. At the core of this transition is the goal of reengineering the rural agricultural sector, eliminating subsistence farming by professionalizing farming techniques and restructuring land holdings (Pottier 2006; Ansoms 2009). In order to achieve these ambitious plans, the Government of Rwanda only sanctions certain forms of labor, and cleanliness and security are highly prized as part of a plan to make Rwanda "the Singapore of East Africa." Authorities impose fines on the population for a lengthy list of violations, which range from failing to wear shoes, use mosquito nets, or bathe regularly, to selling homemade goods like cheese or running informal businesses (Ingelaere 2011, 74). Strict regulations prohibit informal work considered dirty and at odds with the image of a modern Rwanda, wreaking particular havoc on the lives of poor urban women who are seeking informal self-employment. While these laws hurt both poor men and women, they are particularly detrimental to women because low-skill industries dominated by women (e.g., hawking vegetables and clothing, informal domestic work cleaning or doing laundry, sex work) are disproportionately illegal compared to low-skill industries dominated by men (e.g., selling phone credit, construction, brick making, driving moto taxis). In short, the development enterprise led by the Rwandan state is made possible through the repression of vulnerable women's labor and bodies, which ultimately entrenches their poverty even more deeply.

The primary economic challenge facing young women in Rwanda today is the lack of jobs outside of the agricultural sector. For youth who were raised believing in their "bright future" and who completed some education, the expectation of good jobs is pervasive—and yet the majority of Rwandans still engage in subsistence farming as their primary livelihood. Within this sector, the sex divide is stark: 82 percent of women work in the agricultural sector compared to 61 percent of men. Today skilled service occupations employ 4 percent of women, compared to 7 percent of men (Republic of Rwanda 2011). The English-speaking elite in Kigali holds the majority of these nonagriculture jobs (Marijnen and van der Lijn 2012). The shortage of wage jobs results in a high number of women engaged in prohibited work, including as hawkers or sex workers. These precarious forms

of employment subject women to the brutal regulatory practices of the authoritarian state.

After finishing school, tens of thousands of youth migrate to urban areas in the hopes of finding decent paid work in Rwanda's burgeoning economy (Republic of Rwanda 2011). They are quickly dismayed to learn that good jobs are hard to find and usually require personal connections. After searching in vain for jobs, some youth with limited education and skills end up settling for informal work as hawkers. Street hawkers—who sell clothes, vegetables, or fruit—are predominantly women.[31] Like other informal vendors across the world, these workers start small businesses selling fruits, clothes, or vegetables that they can cheaply purchase from rural areas and wholesale markets. They then sell these items on the streets from baskets or from informal stalls located just outside of the formal markets.

The Government of Rwanda has prohibited this type of work, labeling it a threat to security. Yet thousands of women (and some men) still make their living selling these basic items on the side of the street. With the new restrictions, vendors must collectivize to form a cooperative if they are to have any hope of legally continuing this practice. But the costs associated with joining these cooperatives are extremely high, as they require weekly dues and collateral. Further, only cooperatives that sell certain types of items in specified locations are approved. Therefore, for most urban hawkers, the only option is to live day to day, selling the small quantities of fruit or vegetables they are able to purchase with small loans from income saving cooperatives.

The restrictions on hawking are strictly enforced. I interviewed fifteen women currently or formerly employed illegally as vendors. Each reported being arrested between three and fifteen times (the average was about eight). Each arrest sends their lives into chaos, as they are put in jail for days, weeks, and sometimes months at a time. Solange, a twenty-four-year-old fruit vendor and genocide survivor, explained: "I'm a single mother, and I have one child. So if they arrest me, you can't imagine what happens to my kid. He is all alone. And sometimes you have to spend two weeks in jail if you can't pay. And they cut your hair, you sleep on the floor. It is really horrible. When you come back after two weeks, you don't have anything. You have no money. So you have to borrow money from your friends to restart your business."[32] As Solange notes, the children of single

[31] Field notes 2009, 2013.

[32] Solange, 2013, age 24, Kigali.

mothers are abandoned to friends or neighbors; once arrested, women are not given a chance to notify their children that they will not be coming home. In jail, women's heads are shaved, they are fed one cup of corn each day, and they are occasionally subjected to abuse by police. Their inventory is confiscated or destroyed upon arrest, which is perhaps most devastating for their future financial stability. Alliette, a thirty-year-old vegetable vendor, expressed her frustration at these regulations. She described how the Rwandan government emphasizes *kwihangira imirimo*—or the idea that you should try to start to your own business and be self-reliant: "They keep saying this [about *kwihangira imirimo*] and trying to raise awareness on it. But that is what we did—we tried to think of our own projects by carrying those baskets and selling our goods. You know? So that we don't have to expect to be employed by anyone else. But look at what they are doing to us! We are employing ourselves, we are doing our own businesses, but they won't let us. So there is no hope."[33]

The state-sponsored abuse of these women limits the ability of poor, uneducated women to participate in legitimate paid employment. But for many, the constant threat of arrest and the poor profit margins from vending simply do not make for a sustainable career. As a result, many of these women turn to sex work, which is comparably illegal but can result in higher wages and does not carry the same risk of having one's inventory destroyed by the authorities. Poor urban female youth in Rwanda are at an extremely high risk of becoming sex workers, in part because of the difficulty finding wage jobs outside of the agricultural sector (Binagwaho et al. 2010; Sommers 2012). In Marc Sommers' study—a small sample, but the only study specifically on youth in Rwanda to date—sex work was the most common occupation for urban female youth (n = 93) (2012, 177). I interviewed eight women currently or formerly employed as sex workers in Kigali. These women described how they are subjected to even more police abuse than street vendors and are reportedly taken to a special jail where "you don't have human rights . . . they beat you, they cut your hair, they treat you as a human being without value."[34] Devote, a thirty-six-year-old sex worker, described how she initially planned to be a gardener but found that there was not enough work to survive:

> I came to Kigali in 1997; I was married to a soldier. I am an orphan; my parents were killed in Burundi. In 1996 my husband went to Congo to fight, but he died there. So I came to Kigali to claim the benefits that I was eligible for, to help with the children. Now that I

[33] Alliette, 2013, age 30, Kigali.
[34] Devote, 2013, age 36, Kigali.

> was a widow and an orphan, I just decided to remain in Kigali. The fact that I had studied something to do with agriculture, I thought I would get jobs in people's gardens. So I decided to stay. I wanted to get jobs gardening, but sometimes I would get the jobs, and sometimes I wouldn't. Since I have kids, soon life got a bit harder. So I started going on "the walk"—going out, to where you found me.[35]

Once young women turn to sex work, most feel trapped and suffer from the constant fear of abuse by police or customers. The likelihood of contracting HIV/AIDS is also extremely high; a recent study found that 71 percent of sex workers in Kigali were HIV-positive (Binagwaho et al. 2010).

As the Government of Rwanda attempts to radically transform the country into the "new Rwanda," an inherent contraction has arisen between the government's goal of a clean, orderly, and prosperous society, and the realities of the labor market. For many young, poor Rwandan women, good jobs are impossible to find; they thus turn to informal work in order to make enough money to cover basic necessities like food, school fees, and rent. As these forms of work are considered dirty and at odds with the image of the new Rwanda, the state intervenes in brutal ways that add an additional layer of struggle for those attempting to ascend the economic ladder. The paradox is that in aiming to improve people's lives by promoting development and encouraging women to participate in wage employment, the Government of Rwanda restricts women's bodies and labor in ways that further perpetuate their subjugation and entrench their poverty.

Discussion and conclusion

Despite the government's implementation of many women-promoting policies and programs, this article reveals that efforts to empower women are complicated and constrained by three paradoxes that unfold within the institutions of the family, the education system, and the labor market: women's newly won rights can actually reinforce their dependence on men; unintended consequences of rights create new forms of oppression; and while trying to improve peoples' lives through modernization, the Government of Rwanda restricts women's labor and further entrenches their poverty. These three paradoxes suggest that despite some of the world's strongest efforts to promote women, meaningful progress has thus far failed to occur in ordinary Rwandan women's lives.

[35] Devote, 2013, age 36, Kigali. Note: "the walk" is a euphemism for sex work.

These findings should cause us to pause and reconsider the risks of employing national-level statistics—such as the percentage of women in parliament, or the ratio of girls to boys in education—as meaningful indicators of women's status in society. As feminist scholars have argued, rights-based development programs do not dismantle the underlying social structures that produce women's subordination. Moreover, by treating women as a homogenous group to be "empowered," these policies ignore the differential effects they will have across classes, races, and other categories of difference. Critically interrogating the underlying gendered structures that produce women's subordination will be essential if these development efforts are to make lasting improvements in women's lives. Moreover, foreign donors must demand that different ethnic, regional, and linguistic power hierarchies be considered when designing and implementing programs that aim to promote "women" as a whole.

To be sure, Rwanda has made tremendous progress in many areas since the violence, and collectively women are in many ways in a better position than they were two decades ago. Yet beneath the façade of gender equality and development in general, discontent is slowing growing (Sommers 2012; Thomson 2013). In a country where the expectations of a better future have been set so high, especially when juxtaposed with the country's past, escalating discontent raises the specter of social instability in Rwanda, which could undermine the stability of the Kagame regime and may even lead to a renewed risk of violence in the future. This article thus echoes the calls of other Rwandan scholars to look for signs of instability and dissatisfaction under the veneer of progress more generally. Without some hope in a "brighter future," this malaise is likely to grow.

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