

Research on the Effect of Rwanda Gender Quotas on Political Representation and Optimizing Strategy

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Abstract. This essay examines the effect of Rwanda's gender quotas on political representation, especially in the Rwandan government, and proposes a few optimizing strategies for it to develop. Rwanda is a developing and post-genocide country in Sub-Saharan Africa, in which the average progress in gender equality is low. However, Rwanda outstands and ranks exceptionally high in gender equality, which largely depends on its gender quotas. Therefore, it is valuable to look at this country, which shows great controversy at the regional level. This essay mainly relies on the Literature Research Method, including the use of academic articles, reliable websites, and news reports to conduct the research. It is concluded that the effect on substantive and descriptive women's political representation of the Rwanda gender quota is quite complex and needs improvement. Utilizing party/ legislative gender quotas with rank order or switching the gender quotas to men are two feasible suggestions for Rwandan gender quotas. Through this study, a more critical perspective on gender quotas could be gained. Also, it inspires more thoughts on how gender quotas in post-genocide developing countries could survive and thrive.

1 Introduction

In recent years, there has been a growing global concern over the issue of gender inequality. To 'achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls' was outlined by the United Nations in 2015 to become an essential part of the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) [1]. After its publication, it has been implemented in the development agenda of every Member State. Thus, the problem with gender inequality has transformed into a problem in solutions instead of a problem in cognition. Efforts that contribute to gender equality include reproductive health, economic resources, and political participation. These three indicators are also used in the Gender Inequality Index (GII) created by the UN to evaluate the progress at a state level [2]. Huge variations exist among regions and countries, with Western European countries such as Sweden and Denmark taking the lead and the Middle East and North African countries falling far behind the world average [2]. Focusing solely on the region of Sub-Saharan Africa, which consists of mainly post-colonial developing and underdeveloped countries and ranks below the world average score of GII, an exception is found at the top of Countries with the Highest Gender Equality, presenting a huge contradiction when getting into a group of Western European countries [3]. The exception here is Rwanda, a landlocked country located in Central Africa that relies on agriculture [4]. In 1994, a genocide happened in Rwanda, and between half and one million Rwandans were massacred by the extremist-led government [5]. To avoid genocide happening again due to citizens'

exploitation and marginalization, Rwanda has implemented a decentralization policy since 2000, which planned to improve the government structure and include women and youth [6]. Also, surprisingly, a gender quota of 30 percent of women in elected parliamentary positions was introduced in 2003, which is unprecedented worldwide [7]. According to the GII, women's share of seats in parliament increased from less than 20 percent to over half during the post-genocide period [2]. It clearly shows that the compulsory gender quota in Rwanda has gained more seats for women in the parliament. However, 'counting women' does not necessarily lead to 'making them count' in politics. Based on this assumption, this essay explores whether, in Rwanda, gender quota benefits women's political representation and optimizes strategy. By researching this topic, a more critical and comprehensive view of the effects of gender quota and its linkage with political representation could be provided. Also, the case of Rwanda is controversial because of its poor economy and high gender equality index compared to those of Western European countries. It could deepen the understanding of gender equality and make contributions to the post-colonial feminist theory. Previous pieces of literature related to the research are summarized below. Bauer and Burnet proposed that Rwanda adopted the gender quota in a single authoritarian party context, which seemed unreasonable compared to another democratic state that failed in its gender quota campaign [8]. After that, they also divided the effect of the Rwandan gender quota into two aspects: substantive and symbolic effect [8]. With an emphasis on the

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authoritarian structure of the government like Bauer and Burnet, Burnet argued that more access to elections and government positions might impair the ability of non-governmental feminist organizations and interest groups, but in the long term, increasing political participation of women could even create a consensus of democracy subjectively when operating [8,9]. Tajali, together with Burnet, analyzed the factors that contribute to Rwandan gender quota adoption, mainly paying attention to the post-conflict context and the following demographic, economic changes, etc [9,10]. In summary, most researchers mainly study the formation of the gender quota, using a bunch of comparative case studies to explore the elements of relative factors. Small amounts of their literature offer an in-depth analysis of the effect through a post-genocide and localized perspective. To fill the recent research gap, this essay argues that the implementation of the Rwandan gender quota does not necessarily optimize women's political representation. This essay will first analyze the effect of the Rwandan gender quota from two aspects, substantive representation, and descriptive representation, showing a complex scenario of the reality of the gender quota in Rwanda. Then, some optimization strategies will be given to help maximize women's political participation.

2 Method

This essay mainly utilizes the literature research method, namely secondary materials, to complete the study. Omitting the steps to collect first-hand information, this essay makes use of reports, academic articles, official websites, and other reliable sources to investigate the impact of gender quotas on women's political representation and the optimization of political strategies in Rwanda. In the background part, to highlight the uniqueness and value of this case study country, the essay extracts controversial data to picture a pioneer in gender equality in the region of Sub-Sahara Africa, which, in common perception, lags behind the global progress of pursuing gender equality. Then, to reach the main conclusion of this research, the author only narrows the scope to several articles that focus on 'Rwanda', 'gender quotas', and 'political representation and strategy', which enables the academic articles to be the most relevant to this study's topic. Also, based on these keywords, up-to-date studies and studies supported by quantitative analyses and qualitative case studies are prioritized. After selecting the literature, data, and key information are collected and categorized into different aspects, which in this essay only focuses on the effects of gender quotas in changing women's political participation. Limitations and strengths are evaluated, and findings are interpreted based on the literature. In the discussion part, while fully recognizing the defects of Rwandan gender quotas, the essay draws on excellent experiences from countries alike and suggests either improving the gender quotas or adding other methods to improve political participation. The findings are presented coherently and cohesively, and they aim to provide a comprehensive analysis of the relationship

between gender quotas, women's political representation, and political strategies in Rwanda. Based on the existing typical scholarship, this essay offers a better understanding of the Rwandan gender quota policy and encourages further research and policy initiatives in this area.

3 Result

3.1 The complexity of substantive representation

With more women members in parliament (MPs), there will be more possibilities for the formulation of pro-female policies. According to Bauer and Burnet, after the 2003 gender quotas, the Forum of Rwandan Women Parliamentarians (FWP) further legislated the criminalization of prostitution for clients, HIV screening and treatment, and further education on child sexual abuse [8]. Here, by implementing these policies and legislations, Rwanda showed its faith in preventing sexual abuse at all ages and helping women fully recognize their body autonomy and the importance of sexual health. The FWP also became the first to pass anti-gender-based violence legislation (GBV) in the world [8]. Surprisingly, Rwanda deems domestic violence, including marital rape, illegal in the GBV legislation, and the legalization of abortion is also under their consideration [8]. To highlight its position as a world pioneer in this area, it should be noted that over 20 countries still allow perpetrators to marry the victims to hedge from the trial, and only a few countries recognize the right to abortion [11]. Through this comparison, it could be concluded that in Rwanda, more women MPs contribute to a more female-friendly political atmosphere in which they are well-protected.

However, the most common problem that occurred in feminism, especially in post-colonial or, in this situation, post-genocide feminism, is 'who can represent whom'. A three-layered conflict exists in Rwandan gender quotas. Firstly, women MPs might represent men in two possible scenarios: in the electoral process, due to the traditional disparity in literacy level and the ability to network between men and women, women are either manipulated or left behind by men [12]. In the highly authoritarian bureaucratic system, women MPs, although successfully elected, are still under the pressure of their male boss or colleagues [9]. In both case scenarios, though women are involved in the electoral or political process, their ability to take part in politics is largely hindered by the overarching patriarchal structure. Notably, due to the current authoritarian structure of the government, this male-dominated situation is hard to change in a short time because of the deep-rooted hierarchy. Burnet then illustrates another misrepresentation where the women MPs represent the 'outside' society [9]. It is found that women MPs would care more about their gains and promotions, and under the pressure of the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF), which governs the state together with the government, their 'female-friendly' policies are sometimes moderated

as simply a means to be in line with the RPF to avoid further dispute. In this case, even if they are women, after being elected, their incentives demand inspection and evaluation. Also, the authority of the RPF, which puts ethnicity and integrity at the core, would somehow ignore or delay gender issues. Women MPs usually compromise when conflict arises in case of being forced to resign. A more prominent issue is the antagonism between elite women and rural women in Rwanda. Elite women are usually highly educated; however, it is not guaranteed that they are better at lobbying for a women-friendly law or more experienced in negotiating with RPF or other departments [12]. Here, a controversy between their educational level and their ability arose, questioning whether they were qualified to represent the whole group of women in Rwanda. More specifically, taking the land tenure and land use issue in Rwanda as an example, elite women, whose lifestyle and interests bear few similarities with those of rural women, failed to recognize that land property is significant for rural women who are mostly subsistent farmers [8]. Therefore, the seemingly common Land law they proposed for all Rwandans disproportionately affected rural women as men mediated their rights. Lack of experience and empathy for rural women has led to a split between Rwanda's elite women and rural women, making the latter doubtful about the inclusiveness of the government's law and policy. With more women involved through gender quotas, although there will be visible progress in pro-female policy making, there are still representation problems among women MPs; they could represent men, their self-interest, class interest, and the RPF instead of the whole Rwanda women group.

3.2 The complexity of descriptive representation

Unlike substantive representation, descriptive representation not only focuses on the identity of women MPs but also, more broadly, on a large group of women who play active roles in politics [13]. After the adoption of gender quotas, more and more women earned a voice in politics, which cannot be ignored as it had happened in traditional gender settings [8]. Moreover, it has been leveraged to benefit women and girls in several other aspects, such as education, the economy, and their daily lives. Gender quotas in Rwanda help change stereotypes of women from being wives, caregivers, and subordinates to more politically and economically active actors, which are gender-neutral and powerful roles in society. Less discrimination and more respect towards women would be developed under the function of gender quotas.

However, descriptive representation of gender quotas sometimes leads to unpredictable side effects or even deviates from the concept of gender. Firstly, the method of gender quotas is criticized as non-democratic for it is based on set demographic proportions rather than merit [14]. Women, either with or without the help of gender quotas, would be doubted as unqualified and labeled as 'quota women'. This side effect reverses the initiative of gender quotas but further deeply taints women's abilities

and shapes them as the only incompetent group that relies on gender quotas to be elected. In Rwanda, if this criticism exists, women might face considerably more misunderstanding because of the opaque authoritarian system and the generally less-educated population. Another problem that might uniquely belong to Rwanda is the intersection of gender and ethnicity. Tracing back to the reason for Rwandan gender quotas, it is found that the tool aimed at integration after the 1994 genocide, which is the major ethnic against the minor ethnic: Hutu against Tutsi. Guariso et al. discovered through interviews of life stories from Rwandans that although absolute numbers and percentage of women representatives have increased over the years, the perceived political representations of men have increased and caught up with that of women after the adoption of gender quotas, which is contradicting to the quantitative effect [15]. However, when they are categorized by both gender and ethnic: Hutu men, Hutu women, Tutsi men, and Tutsi women, then the perceived political representation indicates a difference, showing a clear edge of Tutsi Rwandans compared to Hutus [15]. When discussing perceived or descriptive representation, it may not be immediately evident or suitable to link gender quotas directly to gender effects. Instead, gender quotas are better interpreted as a technique that improves the integrity of different ethnicities. A farfetched connection to gender might cause future ignorance of gender equality in political participation. In general, despite the positive effect of removing the stereotypes, gender quotas might place women in a disadvantageous stance or might have few ties with gender equality in the context of Rwanda.

4 Discussion

Due to the complexity of substantive and descriptive representation, two potential optimization strategies are suggested below to improve political participation in Rwanda.

Firstly, change the reserved seat quota to a party/legislative quota with rank orders. It is suggested that although the reserved seat quota could have a strong numerical increase of women representatives in a short time, in the long run, if the quota is canceled, the political system will receive little improvement. Bjarnegård and Zetterberg further illustrate that in reserved seat quota, women are not competing directly against men, so the patriarchal party election system will not be changed, but in a party/ legislative quota scenario, the election process will be affected as there are women involved [16]. Also, with a ranking system, the opaque election system among parties needs transparent criteria and processes, which witness a huge and long-term change compared to the traditional process. In Rwanda, this shift is more than applicable. Due to the still patriarchal and authoritarian structure, a long-term and thorough change is what Rwandan women expected. To integrate gender equality into the party, the party/legislative quota with rank order is better than simply a direct reserved seat. For example, when

elections with gender quotas are adopted in the RPF, then women cadres, whether they are elected or not, have gone through the election process together with men, therefore adding to the possibility for the previously all-male or male-dominated election process to change, e.g., having more gender-neutral criteria or avoid a glass ceiling of all men voting to occur. Then, although in the short term, there will not be a significant increase in women's political participation, there will be a healthier and women-inclusive system in the long run, which is certainly more valuable.

Secondly, apply gender quotas on men instead of women. This creative form of gender quota has a few unique and ground-breaking advantages. According to Murray, gender quotas for men prevent viewing women as the 'others' and as the group that needs restrictions [17]. Furthermore, it successfully addresses the root cause of 'quota women', that is, filtering women through gender quotas. Instead, they add regulations on men to filter them. By shifting the attention from underrepresentation to overrepresentation, the pool of male candidates will be more highly qualified, and there will also be less nepotism or corruption, as they face fierce competition and are under scrutiny. This approach is also suitable for the Rwandan government. According to the complexity of substantive and descriptive representation, women MPs are doubted and criticized, and although some cases might be true, it is found that male MPs receive less or even no attention. There is no condemnation against men, but wrong behaviors do exist among them. By shifting the gender quota to men, the burden of proving oneself as qualified also shifts to men, which is the optimal scenario under the patriarchal society. Also, men could recognize the disproportionate problem in political participation themselves and thus have a better understanding of the importance and urgency of reaching gender equality in political participation.

5 Conclusion

To conclude, this essay argues that Rwandan gender quotas, although having a visible numerical impact on women's political participation, are not effective in optimizing women's political participation as well as gender equality. Although more women are included in the government, the substantive problem is still fierce in Rwanda. Women MPs have a risk of representing men, their own interests, an upper-class interest, or the interests of the RPF rather than representing the whole Rwandan women's group. In descriptive aspects, though gender quotas are praised for moving away from the stereotypes of women, they might be used as a fatal weapon to doubt women's competencies and might be under the suspicion of forging a tie with gender that does not exist. Then, in the discussion part, two strategies are proposed to optimize the gender quotas in Rwanda: change the reserved seat quota to a party/ legislative quota with rank orders and apply gender quotas on men instead of women. This essay tends to fill the gap of a lack of research on the effect of Rwanda's gender quotas

through a post-genocide and localized perspective instead of simply a narration of its history. By focusing on this topic, this essay offers a critical perspective on the evaluation of gender quotas. More specifically, further research on gender quotas in post-genocide, developing, and third-world countries could be done. The limitations of this essay are the use of secondary data and a lack of fieldwork to prove the findings and the feasibility of the suggestions. Future studies could then use surveys or interviews to gain primary data to achieve a more accurate result.

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