**The Rwandan Genocide: Identity and Violence**

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During the 1994 Rwandan genocide the interplay of established gender norms and ethnic strife led to heightened sexual violence against women. After the genocide, these same norms were used against women accused of genocide in order to rationalize their participation in the violence; they were labeled monsters and no longer considered women. The female experience of the Rwandan genocide was one of violence, both direct and indirect. In this essay I argue that existing structural violence against women was exacerbated during the genocide and in its aftermath leading to the erasure of female identities and the exclusion of women from family and community life.

An understanding of the established gender norms in Rwanda is necessary to recognize how they were weaponized against women during the genocide and in its protracted aftermath. Rwanda had a highly patriarchal social structure and gender-based divisions of labor began at a young age. Boy were expected to learn how to fight to defend their nation and their family while girls learned traits like obedience, respect, politeness, submission and resignation. In pre-genocide Rwandan society women were often illiterate and poorer than men. They mostly worked on family farms and were involved in the production of food for their family, barring them from participating in economic life.[[1]](#footnote-1) Women were considered completely dependent on men, even their identity as women was intimately connected to their husbands. Womanhood and social status within the community was tied to marriage and childbearing, leading to a valorization of motherhood in Rwandan society and dependence on men to affirm the female identity.[[2]](#footnote-2) This conceptualization of womanhood was also deeply connected with the stigma surrounding rape and sexual violence in Rwanda. Women who had experienced sexual violence were considered ineligible for marriage and could not become mothers legitimately. Additionally, victims of sexual violence were often subject to social exclusion and shaming by the community.[[3]](#footnote-3)

This is not to say that Rwandan women had no power or agency in society. There were women in government positions at the time, such as Prime Minister Agathe Uwilingiyamana (assassinated on the first day of the genocide) and the Minister for Family Welfare and the Advancement of Women, Pauline Nyiramasuhuko (convicted of acts of genocide). Women could also play the role of advisor to their husbands, a role many believe Agathe Kanziga played while her husband, President Juvenal Habyarimana, was still alive. Some regarded her as the power behind the presidential seat. However, women still remained vastly underrepresented in political life. There were few women in the national government and even fewer in local governments, evidenced by the lack of a single female prefect.[[4]](#footnote-4) Furthermore, even in cases when women had power, gender norms still seemed to play huge roles in their lives and self-perceptions. For example, Nyiramasuhuko used her identity as a woman as her defense during her trial at the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda (ICTR), stating that as a woman and a mother she could not have killed anyone.[[5]](#footnote-5) Kanziga has also denied all charges against her and claims that she couldn’t have had any influence on political events because she spent all her time taking care of their garden and livestock to make meals for her eight children.[[6]](#footnote-6) She portrayed herself as the ‘typical’ Rwandan woman: a mother, devoid of power in politics or economics, solely engaged with the production of food for her family.

Eventually, Nyiramasuhuko was convicted for organizing militias to kidnap and rape woman in Butare, a city in southern Rwanda.[[7]](#footnote-7) The strategic use of rape was widespread during the genocide. The only victim survey conducted by the Rwandan government after the genocide put the number of rape victims at 15,700 women. Others have estimated the number to be far higher. A 2009 study estimated that there were a total of 354,440 rape victims during the genocide, and only 60,000 of those victims survived.[[8]](#footnote-8) These rapes can generally be classified into three categories: opportunistic rape, sexual enslavement and genocidal rape. Opportunistic rape is a result of the general chaos of conflict and is generally motivated by individual drives rather than military ones. Sexual enslavement is more involved than genocidal or opportunistic rape due to the added element of confinement and repeated rape, although the drive behind it may be similar to either. Finally, genocidal rape is considered a tool of genocide and is generally ordered by those in positions of power.[[9]](#footnote-9)

Genocidal rape was used to humiliate the individual victims and the Tutsi population as a whole, as female nudity and being a victim of sexual violence was highly stigmatized and considered shameful.[[10]](#footnote-10) This use of rape a tactic to humiliate the other can be explained by looking at nationalism through a gendered lens. In patriarchal societies like Rwanda’s nationalism is often gendered masculine and depends on a community of men who believe it is their duty protect the nation. Often masculine traits, such as strength and courage, are associated with nationalism through symbolism.[[11]](#footnote-11) Rwandan men were socialized to buy into this masculine nationalism, being coached from a young age to protect the nation and the family. Gender constructions are relational therefore the gendering of men as nationalist protectors tends to construct women as social and cultural reproducers of the nation. Thus the entire nation can be gendered as female and something to be protected by masculine nationalism.[[12]](#footnote-12) This is clearly visible in Rwandan society as the whole concept of womanhood was intimately connected to legitimate child bearing. Hutu civilians and militiamen bought into these ideas heavily believing that they needed to protect themselves from the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF), expatriate Tutsi rebels, and eventually all Tutsis in Rwanda. This stylized view of the masculine protection of a feminine state naturally leads to the idea that rape is a metaphor for national humiliation.[[13]](#footnote-13) As a result, rape is used to prove the superiority of one group over another; exactly what genocidal rape in Rwanda intended to do. This logic of nationalism shows the weaponization of gender norms against women in times of conflict. Existing gender norms led to the idea that rape symbolizes national humiliation creating added vulnerability for Rwandan women in conflict because of their status as reproducers. Their own womanhood was used against them, making them perfect targets for rape and violence.

However, not all rapes at the time were genocidal, which is clearly a result of weaponized gender norms. The ways that opportunistic rape and sexual enslavement used gender norms against women is more subtle and nuanced. The subordinate position of Rwandan women in society is a form of structural violence: harm or damage that occurs to a person that emerges from an unequal distribution of power or resources rather than an individual actor.[[14]](#footnote-14) Seckinelgin Bigirumwami and Morris explore the phenomenon of how structural violence is exacerbated in times of conflict through the AIDs crisis in Burundi. Gender relations in Burundi are similar to those in Rwanda, women are dependent upon men and socialized to be submissive. During the conflict in Burundi many women lost the protection of men and became vulnerable to rape and sexual violence, which then led to the gendered spread of HIV. Structural violence against women in Burundi is directly related to HIV exposure.[[15]](#footnote-15) Similarly, in Rwanda most women were entirely dependent on their husbands or fathers for financial, social and physical security. This dependency created risks and disadvantages for women, which only become exacerbated under the pressure of the genocide when many men were killed.[[16]](#footnote-16) Not only are women more vulnerable, the exploitation of these vulnerabilities is facilitated by patriarchal norms, such as the socialization of Rwandan women as compliant and submissive.[[17]](#footnote-17) For example, if a Hutu woman was married to a Tutsi man and he was killed during the genocide that women could be taken as a ‘wife,’ which meant sexual enslavement, by another man in the community or *Interahamwe*. These women would also be forced to carry their rapist’s bloody weapons or other paraphernalia, in a twisted reflection of traditional subservience expected from Rwandan wives.[[18]](#footnote-18) If a woman no longer had the protection of a man, she could not defend herself from other men and was forced into submission by her new ‘husbands.’ Thus a woman’s socialization as submissive and dependent worked against her in situations of conflict, exposing her to increased risk of sexual violence and exploitation.

While it is true that the chaos was a necessary factor in precipitating such widespread personal violence against Rwandan women, it is also true that the violence that was already present in their lives was just as important as Seckinelgin Bigirumwami and Morris explain. Even in brutal, spur-of-the-moment murders, the victim’s gender identity was taken into account. Pregnant women were often eviscerated, their status as mothers and women being stripped from them even in death. Hutu women were killed and eviscerated if they were pregnant with a Tutsi child. In situations of sexual enslavement, Hutu men often impregnated Tutsi women to further the Hutu majority, as ethnicity was patrilineal.[[19]](#footnote-19) Again we see that women were more open to personal violence in times of chaos because of existing structural violence. We also see another example of their identities being used against them: pregnant women subject to evisceration and women forced into pregnancy because of their status as cultural reproducers.

Rape, genocidal or not, had clear effects on the identity of its survivors. The act of rape stripped women of their womanhood and excluded them from the community. Womanhood is inextricably tied to marriage and motherhood, while the stigma around rape makes women unworthy of marriage. Thus they are unable to become mothers in the traditional sense and are blocked from becoming women.[[20]](#footnote-20) Many women are stuck in a kind of limbo. They are not girls because of the sexual violence they have experienced, some even have children as a result of rape, but regardless they are never able to legitimately transition into womanhood in the eyes of Rwandan society.[[21]](#footnote-21)

In addition to the 354,440 rape victims, the genocide left around 800,000 people dead and the new RPF-led government sought justice. The ICTR was established, but that was not enough. Due to the sheer number of perpetrators, the RPF designed the *gacaca* court system, which allowed genocidaires to be tried locally.[[22]](#footnote-22) Much to the surprise of many communities, women were put on trial and convicted of genocide. Women participated in the genocide to various degrees, from simply robbing dead Tutsis to taking an active part in the slaughter. The three most common acts of genocide by women were looting Tutsi property, revealing Tutsi hiding places and supporting the *Interahamwe* by feeding or housing them.[[23]](#footnote-23)

Often women accused of genocide acted out of fear. Sometimes women were threatened directly while others participated because they feared what might happen to them if they didn’t participate.[[24]](#footnote-24) There were also cases where women were both perpetrators and protectors; they ‘bartered’ with Tutsi lives. For example, one woman took an old Tutsi woman to be killed by the *Interahamwe* in order to save the lives of two younger Tutsi girls she was hiding in her home.[[25]](#footnote-25) This is not to say that women were unaffected by Hutu-extremist sentiments. Many women were inspired my Hutu militarism and believed that Tutsis needed to die. But causes for participation were extremely varied and often cannot fall into categories of fear or ethnic animosity. Gender roles came into play often, sometimes women simply did what men told them to do because that is what was expected of them. Women also went to extreme lengths to defend their families. For example a Hutu woman offered herself up as a sex slave to the *Interahamwe* in order to protect her family. She was denounced because she was seen with her new ‘husband.’[[26]](#footnote-26) Despite the various causes for their participation in the genocide many women faced the same fate as their peers who experienced sexual violence during the genocide: the weaponization of gender norms against them and the erasure of their identities. They were labeled as monsters; no longer considered women by their communities and abandoned by their families.

By participating in any violence female genocidaires are thought to have acted so far outside of their gender norms and roles that they are deemed ‘non-women.’ Instead people see them as ‘monsters,’ or claim they never were women and always acted like men.[[27]](#footnote-27) Being convicted of genocide also led to abandonment by their families and communities. While male genocidaires are visited by their wives and children or receive gifts from other relatives while they are in prison, most women are disavowed by their families and receive no support from the outside world.[[28]](#footnote-28) Because they are women, they are treated with less compassion by the community for their participation in the genocide. This often makes the women feel disconnected from their identities. They are unable to engage in typical feminine activities, such as taking care of children, making food for the family and taking care of the home because they are in prison and they have been disowned by the family they would have cared for.[[29]](#footnote-29) Their greatest connection to womanhood is severed and they become monsters in the eyes of society.

However, there are differences in treatment based on socioeconomic status. Generally, women who worked in government or were political elites during the genocide do not experience such a clear disconnect from their womanhood. They are usually not abandoned by their families and are able to remain in contact with the core aspects of their femininity. Additionally it seems that their disconnect from former political parties or careers is much more salient for them than any rupture in their womanhood. [[30]](#footnote-30) Still, women of high status are seen as monsters and non-women by the general populous and they know it. They often rely on gender roles to defend themselves against their accusations, just like Nyiramasuhuko did. The most common claims are that they didn’t have any real power and were unable to stop the violence perpetrated by the men around them.[[31]](#footnote-31) Their identities as women in Rwanda are being challenged by accusations of violence, so they defend themselves by attempting to reclaim their femininity. While these women didn’t experience a total severance from their identities, gender roles were still used against them and they were still deemed ‘non-women.’ It seems, however, that they had more agency to fight against this de-gendering because they were able to maintain connections with their families, thus maintain claim to their womanhood.

By thinking in strictly binary terms, the weaponization of identity against the identity holder becomes much easier. Eunjung Kim details this process in regards to disability imagery implemented by non-Western countries. Generally, Western countries are seen as ‘heavens’ for disabled people while non-Western countries are characterized as ‘hells.’[[32]](#footnote-32) Creating this binary opens a window of opportunity for that identity to be weaponized at the expense of the identity holder. In this case, non-Western countries use positive disability imagery to make themselves look good; invalidating the experiences of the people who are represented by that imagery.[[33]](#footnote-33) Something very similar has happened to Rwandan women. Rwandan society has created a very strict gender binary: men as protectors and women as homemakers. This binary allowed for the weaponization of gender identity against women; invalidating their experiences and ultimately stripping them of their womanhood altogether. Rape victims during the genocide were stripped of their ability to legitimately become wives and mothers, while female genocidaires were abandoned by the communities and families, thus their connections to womanhood were severed. The existence of structural violence against women seems to be fueled by this binary.

It is necessary to recognize Rwandan women’s experiences outside of the gender binary in order restore some sense of womanhood to their identities. Especially when it comes to women convicted of genocide. These women engaged in genocidal violence, while being subject to structural violence. They are perpetrators, but they are also victims. If we analyze the experiences of Rwandan women through queer theory, rejecting traditional binaries and recognizing the multiple subjectivities of women, the dynamics of their lives become much more clear to the observer. By rejecting the binary of Rwandan social roles we immediately return agency to Rwandan women. For victims of rape during the genocide who are now looking for ways to reconnect with their femininity; we don’t look at them as operating outside the boundaries of womanhood but as security subjects grappling with past-violence affecting their current lived experiences. Instead of looking at female genocidaires as women who have stepped so far outside of their social role that they should be considered less than human, we look at them as a non-normative subject interacting with violent conflict.[[34]](#footnote-34) Through rejection of the binary the recognition of multiple subjectivities becomes possible. This requires looking past their construction in the collective Rwandan psyche as householders and defining them as complex people with a multiplicity of identities that all interact with conflict differently.[[35]](#footnote-35) They are not just perpetrators or victims; they can be both and most certainly are both. Their ethnicity also defines them, but just because someone is Hutu doesn’t mean they are not a victim of genocide and vice versa. As we have seen with those of high status convicted of acts of genocide, social and political status are also important valences in women’s lives and can determine how they are perceived by the community.

It does seem that Rwanda is working toward eliminating structural violence caused by the gender binary through education. The genocide uniquely highlighted the how Rwandan women experienced gender and how structural vulnerabilities were exacerbated to extremes during conflict. Gender norms were used against women to entirely erase their connection to their own sense of womanhood and their identities within their community. The weaponization of identity in times of conflict and even in its aftermath is clear, especially when it is subject to extreme binaries like those we see in Rwanda. The Rwandan government and Rwandan society have recognized the detriments of established gender roles to some extent and have been working against them in recent years. National government has seen a significant uptick in female representation. Additionally, in a school outside of Kigali boys are taught how to prevent sexual violence against women, as well as how to prevent financial and emotional abuse. Meanwhile the girls are taught economics and reproductive health.[[36]](#footnote-36) Rwandan society is trying to construct a new paradigm: giving women new agency in society while holding men responsible. A 17-year-old in the program, Robert Rwibutso said: “There are girls that are prevented from coming to school, and it's my responsibility to advise the parents that their daughter has equal rights to her brother. If her brother is studying, she has to study as well.”

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