

The Evolution of Pro-Femmes/Twese Hamwe: Women, Peace, and Political Development in Rwanda, 1992 – Present Day

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Abstract

Rwanda is predominantly known for two reasons: the 1994 genocide that killed almost a million people and for having the highest percentage of women in parliament in the world. This paper historically analyzes women's rights in Rwanda as well as their role in the genocide. This context sets the stage for understanding the evolution of Pro-Femmes/Twese Hamwe (For Women/All Together), or Pro-Femmes for short. Pro-Femmes is a women's rights umbrella organization that was established in Rwanda in 1992. This paper addresses two questions: 1.) How were women able to gain such a strong voice in the political arena? 2.) How has the evolution of Pro-Femmes in Rwanda led to exceptional participation of women in parliament? The paper argues that without Pro-Femmes's influence on the drafting of the 2003 constitution and the system of communication between the legislative, executive and civil society branches, women's rights and representation in parliament would not be as extraordinary as it is today.

Introduction

Rwanda, a small country in East Africa, is known today for two reasons: the 1994 genocide that killed almost a million people, and for having the highest percentage of women in parliament in the world. Rwanda has a history of power struggles, land shortages, and ethnic class divides that was further intensified by colonialism. German and Belgian colonists ruled through the Rwandan monarchy. They gave power and legitimacy to the king and his corresponding ethnic group, creating a wedge in society and a build-up of disdain between the Hutus and the Tutsis. In 1959, Grégoire Kayibanda and his militarized political party, Parmehutu, killed many Tutsis and overthrew the Tutsi monarchy. Kayibanda continued to assert Hutu power as he led Rwanda to independence and, in 1961, he became the first elected president of Rwanda. In 1964, Parmehutu became the only legal political party and Tutsis were not allowed to participate in the political arena.¹ Spats of violence continued for the next 30 years until a civil war erupted in 1990 between the mainly-Tutsi Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) and Hutu militiamen. When the civil war ended in 1993, the violence did not. Hutu elites and Hutu militiamen devised a plan to eradicate all Tutsis and Tutsi-sympathizers. From April to July 1994, these *génocidaires* killed between 500,000 and a million people in Rwanda.² That July, current president of Rwanda and former commander of the RPF's military wing, Paul Kagame took control of Kigali and subsequently ended the genocide.³ Since that time period, the country has begun to rebuild and participate in many reconciliation processes. As Rwanda continues to heal, one amazing transformation is the role of women in society and the governing process.⁴

Prior to the 1990s, women in Rwanda were rarely involved in the government and lacked equal civil rights. But, as a result of the global movement to empower women, women's organizations began to emerge in Rwanda. Established in 1992, Pro-Femmes/Twese Hamwe (For Women/All Together), or Pro-Femmes for short, is an umbrella organization for women's rights groups in Rwanda. Starting with just 13 women's groups, Pro-Femmes now has over 50 women's organizations, as well as several other associations in churches, mosques, schools, and neighborhoods.⁵

Following the genocide, women's groups played a key role in rebuilding Rwandan society, including drafting the country's new constitution. During the transition period, from 1994 to 2003, Rwanda saw a rapid increase in women's organizations. Catherine Newbury and Hannah Baldwin attribute this phenomenon to four different factors: "The dire crisis women faced in the aftermath of the genocide; the historical vigor of women's grassroots organizations and farming cooperatives; monetary and technical support provided by the international community; and the policies of the Rwandan government."⁶ These women's groups, most notably Pro-Femmes, helped increase women's involvement in the government.

¹ Longman, "Rwanda: Achieving Equality?," 134.

² Mamdani, *When Victims Become Killers*, 5.

³ Hunt, "The Rise of Rwanda's Women," 151.

⁴ Due to the lack of a program that can accurately translate Kinyarwanda to English, the sources used in this paper are limited to ones that are written in English and French.

⁵ Pro-Femmes/Twese Hamwe, "List of Associations."

⁶ Newbury and Baldwin, "Confronting the Aftermath of Conflict," 77.

From 1994 to 2003, women's representation in Parliament (by appointment) reached 25.7 percent.⁷ In May 2003, a new gender-sensitive constitution was adopted which included gender quotas and other provisions geared toward equality. Following the parliamentary election cycle in October 2003, women achieved nearly 50 percent representation.⁸ In the most recent election held in 2013, women won 64 percent of the seats—the highest percentage in the world.⁹ How were women able to gain such a strong voice in the political arena? How has the evolution of Pro-Femmes in Rwanda led to exceptional participation of women in parliament? The exploration of Pro-Femmes and its associated organizations provides insight into how women helped with the peacemaking process following the 1994 genocide and were able to create a new constitution and bolster women's involvement in the legislature.

Background History of Rwanda: Race, Ethnicity, and Gender Equality Struggles

The 1994 Rwandan genocide did not occur out of thin air, but was rather due to a long history of ethnic class divides, land scarcity, and patrimonialism. Although colonizers institutionalized the terms “Hutu,” “Tutsi,” and “Twa,” these identities had been established in the Rwandan region before the Europeans had arrived. According to Ugandan academic Mahmood Mamdani, the origins and migration of the terms “Hutu” and “Tutsi” are not cultural, but rather political identities.¹⁰ Secondly, “The predecessors of today's Hutu and Tutsi indeed created a single cultural community, the community of Kinyarwanda speakers, through centuries of cohabitation, intermarriage, and cultural exchange.”¹¹ Prior to colonialism, the terms Hutu, Tutsi, and Twa were flexible and could change depending on marriage, occupation, or accumulation of wealth (usually the number of cows). Mamdani's final conclusion is that, “Hutu and Tutsi emerged as state-enforced political identities. The context of that development is the emergence of the state of Rwanda.”¹² It should be noted that the term “state” does not refer to what is now known as Rwanda, but rather the kingdoms and leaders that existed in that region prior to the colonial creation.

Germany and Belgium each colonized Rwanda in 1897 and 1916 respectively.¹³ During this time period, these imperialists delineated local, ethnic divides as social classes and ethnic tribalism, and interpreted them based on John Hanning Speke's “Hamitic hypothesis,” that “everything of value ever found in Africa was brought there by these Hamites [caucasian European migrants], a people inherently superior to the native populations.”¹⁴ Missionaries, Belgians, Germans, English, and other colonists were “convinced that wherever in Africa there was evidence of organized state life, there the

⁷ Powley, “Women Hold Up Half the Parliament,” 154.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ United Nations Rwanda, “Women secure 64 percent of seats.”

¹⁰ Mamdani, *When Victims Become Killers*, 74.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Sanders, “The Hamitic Hypothesis,” 532.

¹⁴ Ibid.

ruling groups must have come from elsewhere.”¹⁵ In Rwanda, the Tutsi were interpreted by Europeans as being the superior race to the Hutu majority and Twa minority. This distinction between “elite Tutsis” and “commoner Hutus” invoked tensions among community members. These new, concrete identities solidified by Belgian-issued ID cards helped facilitate multiple incidences of ethnic violence leading up to the 1994 genocide.

Power in post-independence Rwanda was held by an elite ruling class, who benefitted from patrimonialism and weak civil society institutions. According to Longman, “In both Eastern Europe and Africa, civil societies emerged during periods of economic and political decline to challenge the totalizing projects of the party-states.”¹⁶ In Rwanda, those who were considered elite fought to maintain their power by presiding over civil society groups. In the 1980s, President Habyarimana’s regime “sought to bring all women’s groups, youth groups, and economic organizations under its management.”¹⁷ But, even though these groups were closely aligned with the state and controlled by the ruling class, these different organizations “ultimately allowed a degree of autonomous space to emerge and contributed in important ways to Rwanda’s democracy movement.”¹⁸

The longstanding, patrimonial system of governance in Rwanda dates back prior to colonialism. With elite status fluctuating between Hutus and Tutsis, hostile power relations became deep seeded and caused many ethnic skirmishes to occur prior to the genocide. Following independence, a new constitution was created by PARMEHUTU activists which promised that “all the citizens are, by right, equal before the law, without distinction of race, origin, sex or religion.”¹⁹ However, ethnic tensions remained and caused cycles of violence. In 1963, 20,000 Tutsis were killed in Rwanda by Hutus as a retaliation to an attack on Hutus by Tutsi rebels based in Burundi.²⁰ In 1964, the first elected president of Rwanda, Grégoire Kayibanda, in a concerted effort to maintain the Hutu Power ideology, declared PARMEHUTU as the only legal political party and Tutsis were not allowed to participate in the political arena.²¹ Conversely, in 1973, a moderate Hutu named Juvénal Habyarimana led a successful coup to overthrow President Kayibanda, committing to a policy of “reconciliation” between Hutu and Tutsi.²² Some 50,000 Hutu refugees fled to Rwanda from Burundi in 1988 following ethnic violence there.²³ As more instances occurred in Rwanda and neighboring countries, Tutsis who had become refugees and were living in Uganda, Burundi, Tanzania, and Zaire, formed a rebel group called the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF), led by Paul Kagame.²⁴ In 1990, an ongoing conflict in Uganda escalated and the RPF, which had harnessed enough power, left war-torn Uganda to reclaim citizenship in Rwanda. In 1990, a civil war broke out between President Habyarimana’s government and the RPF that lasted for three years.²⁵ Mamdani states, “The civil war signified a citizenship crisis on both the Ugandan and the

¹⁵ Mamdani, *When Victims Become Killers*, 80.

¹⁶ Longman, *Christianity and Genocide in Rwanda*, 24.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 25.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ Reyntjens, *Pouvoir et Droit au Rwanda*, 338.

²⁰ “Rwanda profile- Timeline,” January 1, 2016.

²¹ Longman, “Rwanda: Achieving Equality?” 134.

²² Mamdani, *When Victims Become Killers*, 140-142.

²³ “Rwanda profile- Timeline,” January 1, 2016.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ *Ibid.*

Rwandan sides of the border.”²⁶ The war lasted three years until August 1993, when the Arusha Accords were signed, ending the civil war.

Nevertheless, peace and power sharing did not last long and tensions between the Tutsi RPF and Hutu Power ideologists soon escalated. The 1994 genocide was engineered by an elite group of Hutus and Hutu militiamen; the same group of Hutus who had sought to end the civil war by eradicating all Tutsis and Hutu-sympathizers. They continued their extermination plan by collecting machetes, guns, and ammunition and creating maps that marked where Tutsis resided.²⁷ On April 6, 1994, Rwandan president Juvénal Habyarimana and Burundian president Cyprien Ntaryamira were landing in Kigali, from a summit in Dar es Salaam, when their airplane was shot down and both presidents and members of their entourage perished. This incident sparked mass chaos and is remembered as the start of the genocide.²⁸

The Genocide

From April to July 1994, in just 100 days, around 800,000 people in Rwanda were slaughtered, women were raped, and places usually seen as safe havens, such as churches and schools, became sites of mass executions. Throughout the genocide Hutus were required to follow the “Hutu Ten Commandments.”²⁹ One of the commandments forbade Hutus from having relations with Tutsis “whether in sex, business, or state affairs.”³⁰ Many Hutus were required to set up roadblocks and check people’s ethnic identity cards. Any Tutsi trying to pass through or Hutu who was found harboring a Tutsi was killed. Hutu priests encouraged Tutsis to seek refuge in their churches, where they would entrap them and invite Hutu *génocidaires* to conduct mass killings.³¹ Fear was one of the main driving factors of the genocide. All Hutus, including women and children, had to participate or risk being killed themselves.³²

Gender and Genocide

Contrary to early theories regarding gender and war—where men are the warriors and women are powerless victims—both men and women were perpetrators of violence during the Rwandan genocide. Women hacked open other women with machetes, cheered on the men as they massacred people, and even stole the jewelry, clothes, and money of those whom they had just killed.³³ Most female killers were Hutus, looking to eradicate Tutsi women who were regarded as “sexual elite” and considered “deviants.”³⁴ Tutsi women in Rwandan society were attacked because they were viewed as the property of men and because of their ability to continue producing children of Tutsi ethnicity. In order to humiliate their victims, Hutus dehumanized women and reduced them to property of

²⁶ Mamdani, *When Victims Become Killers*, 36.

²⁷ “Rwanda profile- Timeline,” January 1, 2016.

²⁸ Investigations and debates have questioned who was responsible for the plane crash. There are many rumors asserting Paul Kagame and the RPF planned the attack. But, there are also theories claiming Hutu militiamen shot down the plane because they thought President Habyarimana was too sympathetic towards Tutsis.

²⁹ Mamdani, *When Victims Become Killers*, 190.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 190.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 226-227.

³² *Ibid.*, 191.

³³ Summerfield, “Rwanda: When Women Become Killers,” 1817.

³⁴ Blizzard, “Women’s Roles in the 1994 Genocide,” 34.

men and of their ethnic group.³⁵ This led to sexual violence against Tutsi women. Many Tutsi women were raped while HIV/AIDS ran rampant and rape survivors were stigmatized and socially ostracized. Research shows that “women were not immune to the genocidal ideology, and women in leadership roles, such as teachers and radio announcers, played an important part in disseminating the propaganda among the population.”³⁶ Women with a voice in society took advantage of their power and shrugged sisterhood aside for Hutu loyalty.

Female *génocidaires* killed not just for gendered reasons, but ethnic ones as well. Some Tutsi women who were married to Hutu men felt loyalty to the Hutu ethnic group rather than their own.³⁷ Many Hutu women felt compelled to conduct killings in fear of being labelled a Tutsi-sympathizer. *Radio Télévision Libre des Mille Collines* (RTLNC), also known as “hate radio,” broadcasted anti-Tutsi messages and encouraged Hutu uprisings and killings.³⁸ Mamdani references one broadcast that “cautioned its listeners to do a thorough cleanup: this time—as opposed to the last time, 1961-63—even the children should not be spared.”³⁹ In July, RPF soldiers invaded Kigali and had taken over most of Rwanda. By the end of the genocide, almost 800,000 people died and millions more had fled the country.⁴⁰ Not only did the overall population decrease, but women now made up 70 percent of the country.⁴¹

The Desire for Women’s Groups

From around 1985, President Habyarimana, his ruling party, policy makers, and the international community sought to encourage the creation of women’s groups and economic development organizations.⁴² Pro-Femmes/Twese Hamwe, started in 1992 as Rwanda’s umbrella organization for promoting women’s empowerment and gender equality. Since then, Pro-Femmes has contributed to the economic, social, and political development of women in Rwanda. In part, due to Pro-Femmes, in the years following the genocide, women have gained the right to have shared property ownership with their spouses, access to affordable family planning services, and the ability to pursue wage employment in Rwanda.⁴³ The following section will detail gendered issues in Rwanda prior to 1992, the transformation of perceived women’s roles in the country, the coordination between state and civil society women’s organizations, the creation of the Pro-Femmes Twese/Hamwe umbrella organization, and Pro-Femmes’s facilitation of peace and reconciliation processes following the genocide.

³⁵ Ibid., 23.

³⁶ Hogg, “Women’s participation in the Rwandan genocide,” 86.

³⁷ Sharlach, “Gender and Genocide in Rwanda,” 392.

³⁸ Mamdani, *When Victims Become Killers*, 212.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ “Rwanda profile- Timeline,” January 1, 2016.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Longman, *Christianity and Genocide in Rwanda*, 25.

⁴³ Berry, “When ‘Bright Futures’ Fade,” 10-11.

Historical Analysis of Women's Rights and Pro-Femmes

Gendered Issues in Rwanda

Rwanda, like many other African countries, did not adopt a stringent patriarchal society until the arrival of European colonizers. Prior to this colonialism, women were not considered inferior to men, but rather an integral part of the community.⁴⁴ Consequently, gendered relations in pre-genocide Rwanda were inherently complex. There was implicit discrimination in the ascribed female societal role and governmental policies that limited women's rights. During colonialism, women were not allowed to hold or inherit property, a woman's role was one that was subservient to man's, and males were wealthier than their illiterate, female counterparts because they had been able to receive an education.⁴⁵ It should be noted that there were exceptions to these depicted gendered roles, but they were not the norm. Women were further marginalized by restrictive policies, such as The Family Code of 1992. This code deemed that a husband was the head of the household.⁴⁶ A woman needed the consent of her spouse to open a bank account or engage in commerce, and "if a Rwandan woman married a foreign man, she (and her children) lost Rwandan citizenship."⁴⁷ Prior to the genocide, women not only lacked legislative rights, but women were not present in government as well. Jennie Burnet provides the years and percentage of seats women held in Rwanda's parliament including: 6.3 percent in 1982, 15.7 percent in 1988, and 11.4 percent in 1994.⁴⁸ In 1993, the first female Prime Minister was appointed from the opposition party, but she was immediately killed at the start of the genocide.

Women's Movements

Women's groups have been integral in challenging Rwanda's oppressive patriarchy and the use of misogynistic rhetoric. Beginning in the late 1970s, the United Nations helped facilitate a global movement aimed at women's rights and empowerment. In 1985, the Third United Nations Conference on Women convened in Nairobi in an effort to encourage women to fight for equality, development, and peace.⁴⁹ As a result of this conference, grassroots organizations were inspired and compelled to make positive change in their respected countries.

Rwanda's government is made up of three branches: the executive (President, Prime Minister, Ministers, Ministers of State), the legislative (Chamber of Deputies and the Senate), and the judicial (the Supreme Court). Meanwhile, women's organizations have formed their own three-branched system to coordinate their goals and efforts: civil society (Pro-Femmes), the executive branch (Ministry of Gender and Family Promotion), and the legislative branch (Forum of Women Parliamentarians).⁵⁰ It can be argued that the collaboration between Pro-Femmes and the two state branches have both helped and harmed the legitimacy of civil society's achievements. With the help of the legislative and

⁴⁴ For more on this topic read Chanock, "Neither Customary nor Legal: African Customary Law," 72-88.

⁴⁵ Hogg, "Women's participation in the Rwandan genocide," 72; Wallace, Haerper, and Abbott, "Women in Rwandan Politics and Society," 112.

⁴⁶ Sharlach, "Gender and Genocide in Rwanda," 391.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Burnet, "Gender Balance in Post-Genocide Rwanda," 370.

⁴⁹ 5th Women's World Conference, "1985 World Conference on Women."

⁵⁰ Powley, "Women Hold Up Half the Parliament," 157-158.

executive branches, Pro-Femmes has been able to voice the concerns of women and lobby for women's rights policies, but Pro-Femmes's close connection to the government prevents it from speaking out against authoritarian tendencies.

Women's Movements and the Executive Branch

In 1992, as pressure from women's organizations grew and their messages of women's empowerment became more persistent, President Habyarimana's government created a new Cabinet position: the Ministry in Charge of Family and Women Promotion (MIFAPROFE). MIFAPROFE's "primary mandate was to promote economic development to improve the status of women and children."⁵¹ Over time, the ministry's title and purpose has evolved and expanded in an effort to address concerns within Rwanda's society. In the years following the genocide, MIFAPROFE's commitment grew to include the management of post-conflict rehabilitation issues (Ministry of Gender, Family and Social Affairs, 1997); mainstreaming women's empowerment within different institutions, particularly governmental ones (Ministry of Gender and Women Promotion, 1999); and under the Prime Minister's Office, a mission of gender equality, family promotion, and child protection (Ministry of Gender and Family Promotion, 2005).⁵² Today, women hold twelve Cabinet positions, including Minister of Foreign Affairs and Cooperation, Minister of Health, and Minister of Cabinet Affairs.

Women's Movements and the Legislative Branch

In 1996, a caucus was created to unite women's ideas and promote gender equality policies. Bringing together all the female legislators, the Forum of Rwandan Women Parliamentarians (FFRP) focuses on capacity building for female parliamentarians and the advocacy of gender inclusion laws.⁵³ FFRP works together with Pro-Femmes and the executive branch to create laws that speak to the female constituency's need. The FFRP is an important element in the push for women's voices in the legislature and gender equality in Rwanda. Today women hold 64 percent of the seats in the lower house and 38 percent in the upper house.⁵⁴

Pro-Femmes/Twese Hamwe and Civil Society

In the 1980s and 1990s, a multitude of women's organizations were formed to enhance women's economic power, abolish the Family Code of 1992, and improve health and education services for women. In 1992, with a desire to coordinate their initiatives and with encouragement from international donors, 13 women's organizations came together to form the umbrella organization Pro-Femmes/Twese Hamwe. However, the genocide devastated these organizations; their physical infrastructure had been destroyed and many members and leaders were killed or fled into exile.⁵⁵ In the aftermath of the genocide, groups of women formed together under Pro-Femmes to rebuild existing women's organizations. They also expanded their activities to address the physical and psychological

⁵¹ Burnet, "Gender Balance in Governance in Post Genocide Rwanda," 372-373.

⁵² Republic of Rwanda Ministry of Gender and Family Protection, "Historical Background of the Ministry."

⁵³ Gomez and Koppell, "Advancing Women's Caucuses in Legislatures."

⁵⁴ United Nations Rwanda, "Women secure 64 percent of seats."

⁵⁵ Newbury and Baldwin, "Confronting the Aftermath of Conflict," 97.

hardships faced by women following the genocide, including fighting economic depredation, the rebuilding of homes, taking care of relatives and orphans, and aiding victims of rape. Rwandan women re-organized Pro-Femmes into multi-ethnic but non-partisan groups and reconstituted the platform of the organization.⁵⁶ However, there was a lot of mistrust among the women, generated from years of ethnic division. Eventually, the organizations came together under an agenda that focused on “issues important to all women.”⁵⁷ Drafted in 1994, the Campaign for Peace was created by Pro-Femmes, “as a means of addressing Rwanda’s post-genocide social and economic problems. This program...proposed ways of involving women in efforts to promote overall reconstruction and reduce social tensions.”⁵⁸ Pro-Femmes continues to improve women’s roles in society and has established a mission aimed at peace, health, social justice, education, and capacity building. The mission of Pro-Femmes is “To contribute to the improvement of the socio-economic status of women, promoting the culture of peace for sustainable development through coordination and capacity building of member associations.”⁵⁹ Pro-Femmes’s mission helps women in Rwanda, but also appeases the democratic agenda of the international community.

Funding

Rwanda is known as a “donor darling” by international aid organizations.⁶⁰ This nickname can be attributed to the strategic and resourceful nature of the RPF regime’s fiscal aid allocation.⁶¹ One of the biggest reasons Rwanda receives money is due to the government’s promotion of females in government—often an indicator of democratic freedom. Women’s civil society organizations have also benefited from external monetary contributions. In 1999, over \$3 million dollars was given by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) to be distributed to local women’s associations.⁶² Even though a majority of funding in the late 1990s came from international donors, Rwanda’s women’s movements did not allow these international organizations to dictate their agenda.⁶³ Rwandan women’s groups resisted the influence of international donors, even if it meant they would lose out on opportunities to receive aid. Pro-Femmes is not an exception; dating up until 2012, all Pro-Femmes projects have been funded entirely by external donors.⁶⁴ Additionally, some Pro-Femmes individual member associations receive their own funding. However, Pro-Femmes has maintained their mission statement and objectives to advocate for the women of Rwanda.

⁵⁶ Powley, “Women Hold Up Half the Parliament,” 157.

⁵⁷ Burnet, “Gender Balance in Post-Genocide Rwanda,” 374.

⁵⁸ Newbury and Baldwin, “Confronting the Aftermath of Conflict,” 98.

⁵⁹ Pro-Femmes/Twese Hamwe, “Our Mission.”

⁶⁰ Beswick, “Aid and Security in Post-genocide Rwanda,” 4.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Burnet, “Gender Balance in Post-Genocide Rwanda,” 374.

⁶³ Ibid., 375.

⁶⁴ *Pro-Femmes Voice and Choice of Rwandan Women*.

Women and the Peacemaking Process

The members of Pro-Femmes and women in general have helped Rwanda move forward after the genocide. The Civil Society Index reported, “Women’s groups have been particularly active in supporting the Gacaca justice initiatives; lobbying for assistance and justice for widows, orphans, and other vulnerable groups in Rwandan society; and providing credit for women’s associations engaged in economic activities.”⁶⁵ Besides taking on new societal and economic roles, women also helped in the truth and reconciliation process following the genocide. The Gacaca courts is a community-based legal system that was implemented to help manage the large number of genocide cases. Pro-Femmes helped increase women’s roles in the Gacaca system and spread awareness about the effectiveness and importance of the courts to local communities.⁶⁶ Because of Pro-Femmes’s advocacy, women became judges, female survivors were encouraged to speak about the violence perpetrated against them, and women were acknowledged as witnesses to the atrocities. Since 1999, Pro-Femmes has helped reintegrate thousands of survivors, returning prisoners, and former soldiers into Rwandan society through different peace programs.⁶⁷ Women have also been involved in “various trainings on peacekeeping, conflict management, mediation, and reconciliation.”⁶⁸

Pro-Femmes has also helped rape victims, who are viewed as outcasts. The victims are now able to receive mental and physical health treatment without stigmatization. Based on the number of pregnancies caused by rape and the probability of conceiving a child, the UN’s Special Rapporteur estimated between 250,000 and 500,000 rapes occurred during the genocide.⁶⁹ In the years following the genocide, rape victims were ostracized and their attackers were not held responsible. HIV and AIDS became prevalent and women were afraid to seek treatment for fear of being marginalized and labelled a “rape victim.”⁷⁰ Sharlach states, “A uniquely Rwandan component of rape as genocide was the deliberate transmission of HIV.”⁷¹ In 2003, in order to help rape victims, Rwandan women’s associations called for international organizations to help mitigate the spread of HIV and AIDS.⁷² The Association of Genocide Widows, a current member of Pro-Femmes, has created “psychological and medical services,” as well as sponsored solidarity programs for genocide victims.⁷³ Pro-Femmes’s social justice programs have forged a path towards reconciliation, peace, and women’s empowerment. Scholars Anderson and Swiss studied the “relationship between post-conflict transition, peace processes, and quota adoption” to “examine the role played by peace accords and, more specifically, accords with a focus on women’s rights in leading countries to adopt electoral quotas for women.”⁷⁴ Their findings show that peace processes that include women accelerate the adoption of electoral gender

⁶⁵ Civil Society Index Rwanda Report, “The State of Civil Society in Rwanda,” 17.

⁶⁶ Blizzard, “Women’s Roles in the 1994 Genocide,” 69-70.

⁶⁷ *Pro-Femmes Voice and Choice of Rwandan Women*, 7.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

⁶⁹ Nowrojee, *Shattered Lives*, 24.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

⁷¹ Sharlach, “Rape as Genocide,” 117.

⁷² Cohen, D’Adesky, and Anastos, “Women in Rwanda: another world is possible,” 613.

⁷³ Blizzard, “Women’s Roles in the 1994 Genocide,” 30.

⁷⁴ Anderson and Swiss, “Peace Accords and Adoption of Electoral Quotas,” 34.

quotas.⁷⁵ Pro-Femmes was a key player in generating and encouraging grassroots women's ideas and in the implementation of gender quotas in Rwanda's new constitution.

2003 Creation of Rwandan Constitution

During the transitional period following the genocide, Pro-Femmes and other women's organizations successfully lobbied to change the 1992 Family Code and encouraged gender quotas in the new constitution. Scholar Tandoh-Offin reported, "Pro-Femmes and its member organizations organized campaigns, public lectures, and seminars to educate and also mobilize support among the women in Rwanda who constitute about 70 percent of the post-war population."⁷⁶ In 1999, the Inheritance Law was passed which "gave women full legal rights to enter into contracts, seek paid employment, own property in their own names and separately from their husbands, and open bank accounts without the authorization of their husbands or fathers."⁷⁷ After the Inheritance Law passed, women continued petitioning for more gender equality legislation.

Pro-Femmes, with its connection to the executive and legislative branch, became instrumental in the implementation of gender quotas in the constitution. Tandoh-Offin maintains that, "The Rwandan women's movements were very effective in organizing consultations among the various NGOs [non-governmental organizations] and women at the grassroots level to generate ideas, concerns, suggestions and perspectives especially as they relate to women's livelihoods."⁷⁸ Once this information was collected, Pro-Femmes relayed the opinions to members of the Constitutional Commission. With the help of women's rights activist Judith Kanakuze, who had been appointed to the Constitutional Commission, the gender quota and other inclusive policies were drafted into the 2003 constitution.⁷⁹

The RPF government should also be commended for its role in drafting a gender inclusive constitution. The RPF, predominantly made up of exiles from Uganda, drafted Rwanda's constitution after Uganda's.⁸⁰ In particular, the RPF was influenced by Ugandan President Yoweri Museveni's policy to have reserved seats for women in parliament, and his appointment of women to the Cabinet and Supreme Court.⁸¹ In Rwanda, the Chamber of Deputies (parliament) consists of 80 seats. Fifty-three of the seats are directly elected by proportional representation and the remaining 27 are elected by specific councils with 24 specifically set aside for women.⁸² The 24 women are elected by electoral colleges in each of the provinces—six women from Eastern, Southern and Western, four from Northern and two from Kigali.⁸³ With a proportional representation system, individual candidates can run for office or political parties create a list of candidates, and the number of

⁷⁵ Ibid., 57.

⁷⁶ Tandoh-Offin, "Quota Laws," 14.

⁷⁷ Burnet, "Gender Balance in Post-Genocide Rwanda," 376.

⁷⁸ Tandoh-Offin, "Quota Laws," 13-14.

⁷⁹ Burnet, "Gender Balance in Post-Genocide Rwanda," 378.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Ibid., 367.

⁸² Comparative Constitutions Project, "Rwanda Constitution of 2003."

⁸³ Ibid.

candidates are chosen from the list based on the percentage of votes the party receives. After the 2003 election, women who had occupied the reserved seats ran for the directly-elected positions, “Freeing up the women-only seats.”⁸⁴ Since then, the percentage of women in parliament has increased every election cycle.⁸⁵

Conclusion

In the years following the genocide, Rwanda transformed its society and government to become more inclusive of women and their rights. One of the biggest improvements has been the increase in the number of women in parliament. Today, women hold 64 percent of the seats in the Chamber of Deputies. Pro-Femmes/Twese Hamwe, a women’s rights umbrella organization, has been instrumental in lobbying for gender equality legislation. Pro-Femmes has campaigned for gender quotas and voiced the opinions of women at the grassroots level of society by gathering information and sharing it with policy makers. There are concerns about Pro-Femmes being closely tied to the government and questions of if the integrity of the group has been compromised. However, as is evident in the passing of many gender inclusive laws, the system of communication and interconnectedness between the legislative, executive and civil society branches has helped advance women’s rights.

Scholar Patrick Tandoh-Offin states, “Without the conscientious efforts of the Pro-Femmes and its many other women’s civil society organizations, the quota law in Rwanda probably would not be in existence.”⁸⁶ In the years after the genocide, women would have been less empowered without Pro-Femmes. The unity amongst Rwandan women, created by the umbrella organization, solidified a common goal for gender inclusiveness and eased animosity following the genocide. Pro-Femmes fought for increased representation in parliament, including advocating for gender quotas in the 2003 constitution. Today women continue holding more seats in the legislature, in part due to the motivation and voice of Pro-Femmes.

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⁸⁴ Hunt, “The Rise of Rwanda’s Women,” 155.

⁸⁵ The World Bank, “Proportion of seats held by women.”

⁸⁶ Tandoh-Offin, “Quota Laws,” 14.

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