

# Sowing gender policies, cultivating agrarian change, reaping inequality? Intersections of gender and class in the context of marshland transformations in Rwanda

JOHANNA TREIDL

## Abstract

Gender equality has become one of the top priorities throughout the political agenda of Post-Genocide Rwanda. A set of legal reforms, which aim at securing women's land rights, together with the worldwide highest percentage of female parliamentarians have earned the government a lot of respect from the international donor community. At the same time, the state's eager involvement in transforming the countryside into a modern, large-scale production zone, steers in a different direction: Vulnerable groups – among them many single mothers, poor or female headed households – are gradually excluded from this promising path of empowerment.

By focusing on the lived experiences of rural women, this paper illustrates how intersections of class-related risk management, gendered labour tasks, and different livelihood strategies rub up against the Rwandan vision of agrarian change. "Gender equality" thereby remains first and foremost a frequently used buzzword in political discourse.

**Keywords:** Gender equality; Agrarian change; Intersectionality; Political discourse; Rwanda

## Introduction

Over the past three decades, women's land rights and gender equality in the context of rural development in Africa have been recurring topics of debate (Daley, Englert 2010; Doss et al. 2014; Razavi 2003). This was not always the case. Agrarian reforms during colonialism and in the early stages of independence largely ignored gender relations and were male-biased (Bayisenge et al. 2015, p. 75) as were most of the discussions and theories on

---

\* johanna.treidl@reflex.at

agrarian change and global development which followed in the 1960s and 70s (Razavi 2003). Instead of recognizing gender as a key concept to understand phenomena such as the demographic crisis, cases of land rush, the expropriation of peasants or poverty and food (in)security, the grand global theories at that time disregarded female concerns as matters of the local sphere (Freeman 2001) or rejected gender inequalities as a mere side-contradiction.

Women's contribution to the household economy became visible in the late 1970s, when feminist research shed light on the shadowy reproductive sphere. This new insight highlighted the potential of women's active involvement in development and gave rise to the so-called "gender efficiency argument"<sup>1</sup> (Razavi, Miller 1995). While in the early days of feminist research, analysis mostly remained on the level of the household, feminist works in the 1980s increasingly went beyond an understanding of women's labour tasks and responsibilities within the secluded realm of the supposedly "female" domestic sphere<sup>2</sup>. By pointing out, how gender *shapes* as well as how it *is shaped* by diverse global processes, gender was linked to power dynamics on a global scale (Doss et al. 2014, p. 17; Stivens 2005, p. 323).

In anthropology, this new corrective was reflected in several works. Among others, in Guyer's (1988) analysis of how men's shift to commercial cocoa cultivation overturned existing agricultural labour patterns and radically changed the gender relations among the Beti of southern Cameroon, or, particularly relevant to the present article, Carney's (1993) work in the Gambia, which shows how in the course of agrarian intensification of rice production, men redefined marshlands as *maruo* (household) land to gain access to the labour force of Mandinka women and to control their agricultural output.

While looking at this bigger picture of gender in the context of global development, critical voices have called for caution to avoid falling into the trap of generalization and to keep in mind that women are not a homogeneous category. What had emerged from the ground as the Feminists of Colours' critique already in the late 1970s, took another twenty years to take root as a scientific approach labelled "intersectionality"<sup>3</sup> (Yuval-Davis 2006, p. 193). Lutz et al. (2011, p. 8) frame this approach as follows:

[T]he intersectionality approach challenges us to look at the different social positioning of women (and men) and to reflect on the different ways in which

---

1        Though recognizing the strength of this argument within the political debate, Razavi and Miller (1995) critically comment that it limited the claim for gender equity to the positive outcome of a neo liberal cost-benefit analysis.

2        For a critical remark on the "female" domestic sphere see Oyewumi 2002.

3        The literature offers different perspectives on intersectionality, such as the inter-categorical, intracategorical or anticategorical approach (Nash 2008, p. 5).

they participate in the reproduction of these relations. As we do this, intersectionality serves as an instrument that helps us to grasp the complex interplay between disadvantage and privilege (...).

In accordance with their understanding, this paper employs intersectionality as a tool to get a deeper understanding of how current agrarian policies in Rwanda affect different women in different ways. Access to land, labour tasks or involvement in decision-making processes are structured along various axes of gender, class, age, marital status, education, ethnicity, household composition and social status (Doss et al. 2014, pp. 3, 8, 14; Verma 2014, p. 67; Villamor et al. 2014).

Starting by a short resume of my methodological approach and the implications of doing research in a highly politicised environment, the paper will continue with a discussion about Rwanda's recent achievements and constraints in integrating gender equality into land law. Subsequently, the paper will dig into the development agenda of the Rwandan marshlands, which have become pilot areas for agrarian commercialization (Ansoms 2013, p. 6). These sections are followed by the lived experience of rural women against the backdrop of the ongoing marshland transformations.

By adopting a feminist lens and taking into account a range of differences between women, I will demonstrate why, in the Rwandan case, a gender progressive land law on the one hand, and the government's eager ambition to transform the Rwandan marshes into modern assets for large-scale production on the other hand, do not necessarily lead to more equality among women and men at large. Instead, the findings from my research suggest that the government's current approach of marshland modernization curtails the county's efforts in gender mainstreaming. While "gender" has become a frequently used "buzzword" in the Rwandan political discourse<sup>4</sup>, its inflationary use appears to have jeopardized the great importance of the concept.

### **Juggling with truths – methodological peculiarities of doing research in Rwanda**

Usually the family has to share, because a family consists of a husband and a wife. We all take part in the sharing of the things, cause our cooperative consists of men and women. So each one brings up an idea. No idea is let down just because it's from a woman or a man", the cooperative president replied to my question about how gender issues were considered in their work.

---

<sup>4</sup> Similarly, yet on a more general scale, Adjamagbo and Calvès (2012, p. 9) have criticised the co-optation of gender and empowerment in the international and development context.

“Do you agree?”, I asked, looking at the vice president and only women present at this meeting, “Is that also your impression that everyone is working equally in the cooperative and at home?”

After my assistant had translated the question, there was silence.

Finally, another cooperative member confirmed: “Yes, this is how we believe and do it” (Meeting with a Cooperative 2015-04-03).

This episode from an introductory meeting with a marshland cooperative is representative for many situations I encountered during field work. While straightforward questions about gender usually provoked answers which stressed the sameness between women and men or reaffirmed that there are no differences, the lived realities I observed often did not match with these accounts. In the Rwandan context, this kind of discrepancy has been reported by several authors among other challenges of doing in-depth research in a highly sensitized and politically controlled country (Ingelaere 2010, de Lame 2005, Schräpel 2015, Thomson 2010, Thomson et al. 2012). Not only the state apparatus, but even ordinary Rwandans are well-trained, not to say “disciplined”, in rehearsing the official government discourse of success. There is a term in Kinyarwanda called *ubwenge* which captures this kind of performance:

Ubwenge is both an overall principle structuring behaviour and display, and also a specific way of communicating. In the traditional organization of Rwandan society, speech acts did not correspond to reality alone, and what one said did not necessarily correspond with what one thought (Ingelaere 2010, p. 54).

I regularly experienced the subtle tactics of *ubwenge*. In the silence of a missing answer as in the situation noted above, in the gaps of what people said, in their sudden change of topic, in the vagueness of how certain terms were used or in the catchy phrases they had learned in respective trainings: “Gender equality is not about women, it is about women *and* men!” An inquiry on gender relations therefore demands a subtler approach, one that preferably avoids terms such as gender or equality because they are linked to the national discourse and evoke reports which downplay persistent gender inequalities.

The findings of this article are based on the insights from long-term field work over a period of 12 months between 2014 and 2016. The longer I stayed, the better I came to understand the “hidden transcripts” (Scott 1990) and the more people finally opened up. Thomson (2010, p. 25) highlights the importance of personal engagement and of building a relationship upon trust in order to get sincere answers. Staying in a rural site of Kigali Province, being incorporated in the community, and becoming a witness

of local every day life definitely helped to distinguish the narrated, political discourses from farmers' experiences on the ground. Nevertheless, I was often eyed with suspicion and lied to or rather not told the whole truth.

I collected data during meetings and group discussions with four marshland cooperatives. One was a large cooperative with more than 300 members working on an area of about 60ha. The three other cooperatives were much smaller, working on two to three ha and counted around 20 members. This data was triangulated with informal conversations and unstructured interviews with local farmers and cooperative members, as well as with formal interviews with government officials from different levels and a network analysis in one of the smaller cooperatives. Three research assistants alternately accompanied me to interviews and on my strolls down and up the hills. They translated for me, took notes and transcribed recorded interviews. In many cases my informants would accept audio recording, but once the topic touched upon more sensitive issues, I had better experiences with off-record accounts. These were noted down in verbatim records and anonymized, to protect my informants. For the cases in this paper I am using pseudonyms. Quotes from verbatim records are referred to as "Protocol".

### **Rwanda's commitment to gender equality – achievements and constraints of the new land legislation**

The formalization of property rights has often been regarded as an opportunity to liberate women from patriarchal structures and to secure their land rights. More recent studies, however, show that formal land titles have not necessarily led to more independence, especially not for women. Frequently they have deprived women from any claims, since the titles with absolute land rights<sup>5</sup> were usually issued on the name of the male head of the household (Doss et al. 2014; Nyamu-Musembi 2008, p. 32; Stivens 2005, p. 330; Verma 2014, pp. 4, 12).

While the feminist literature is still undecided regarding the issue of formal versus customary laws, Rwanda seems to be a promising example of how the formalization of land rights can be combined with a gender sensitive approach. Praised as a "first legal step" (Daley et al. 2010, p. 132) in securing women's land rights in Rwanda, the 1999 Law on Succession (GoR 1999) was introduced only five years after the genocide. The prominence of gender equality in this law, often also referred to as "inheritance law", was mostly attributed to the high percentage of female headed households

---

5 Doss et al. (2014, p. 9) distinguish between the rights to: access, withdraw, manage, exclude others from the land or alienate the land.

after 1994, and the need to put women in a secure position concerning land titles (Daley et al. 2010, p. 131; Newbury and Baldwin 2000, p. 1; Pottier 2006, p. 519). The law ensures equal rights between women and men with regard to property upon civil marriage and the right of recognized children, regardless of their sex, to receive an equal share from the parent's patrimony (GoR 1999, articles 43, p. 50). Gender equality is also explicitly stated in the Organic Land Law (GoR 2005, article 4) which regulates the ownership, possession and equal rights over land between legally married spouses. These, together with a set of other laws and policies aiming at gender equality<sup>6</sup>, as well as the country's worldwide highest percentage of female parliamentarians, have earned the Rwandan government a lot of international recognition.

Despite the overall positive presentation of Rwanda's commitment to gender equality in the media and in the public discourse, feminist researchers have also expressed concerns with regard to the new legislations. Their criticism concerns the exclusion of all kind of not legally registered marriages (e.g. polygamous relationships or couples married by customary law) as well as "illegitimate" children from such unions (Daley et al. 2010, p. 138; Englert and Daley 2008, p. 164; Pottier 2006, p. 519). Unclear formulations and ambiguities in the law text have caused confusion and result in the application of both, customary and formal regulations, at the same time (Ansoms, Holvoet 2008, p. 142, 149; Pottier 2006, p. 528). Even if women are well-informed and claim their rights, the family council tends to fob them off with smaller parcels, or land of a lower quality (Daley et al. 2010, p. 138; Pottier 2006, p. 520). In other cases, women intentionally decide against exercising their rights to avoid family conflicts and to avoid endangering their social network (Burnet 2011, p. 322). Social pressure from the family-in-law has led widows to give up (parts of) their rightful land (Ansoms, Holvoet 2008, pp. 144; Daley et al. 2010, pp. 134, 140). Furthermore, the new land law prohibits splitting land into parcels of below one ha. This regulation affects 80% of the Rwandan households (NISR 2008, p. 36) and limits women's chance of getting a share. In such situations, once more the family council decides under whose name the land will be registered (Protocol with Notary for Land Registration, 17-06-2015). This particularly affects women from poor households who do not inherit anything and consequently are disadvantaged on the matrimonial market (Daley et al. 2010, p. 139).

All these shortcomings have given rise to the idea that gender equality serves only as a label in the Rwandan political discourse, to demonstrate the county's efforts in "democratization" (Hogg 2009, p. 42) and to stay

---

<sup>6</sup> For example, the recently published family law (GoR 2016) or the national gender policy (GoR and MIGEPROF 2010)

accountable for the donor community (Ansoms, Rostagno 2012, p. 429; Burnet 2011, p. 311; Debusscher, Ansoms 2013, p. 1124; Holvoet, Inberg 2015, p. 162).

Despite the above mentioned blind spots, the new land legislations have definitely raised awareness about gender issues among the Rwandan population. Especially women from urban areas and the rural elite have profited from such laws or gender quotas (Burnet 2011, p. 321; Daley et al. 2010, p. 139). What is left out in all these critical assessments is the fact that the new regulations do not apply to the marshlands, which account for about 10% of the country's territory (REMA 2011, p. 36).

### **Agrarian transformation in the Rwandan Marshlands**

The situation in the Rwandan marshes is different. In contrast to the hillsides, where a process of land registration and distribution of private land titles for long-term leasing (up to 99 years) was launched (Pottier 2006), the already mentioned Organic Land Law (GoR 2005, article 29) marks marshlands as state-property.

Already in the 1970s, against the backdrop of growing land pressure, the government started to recognize the marshlands as potential alternative areas for agricultural production (Cambrezy 1981). Yet despite some bigger development projects, marshlands continued to be generally regarded as public lands and access was less regulated than it is today. Usually the marshlands were administrated by local authorities and allotted to individual farmers and peasant families according to their physical capacity or personal connections (Jefremovas 2002, p. 75; Ansoms, Murison 2012, p. 375). Today, marshland plots are no longer given to individuals. Instead, farmers need to group into marshland associations or cooperatives to obtain usufruct<sup>7</sup>. The difference between the privately-owned hillside plots and the collectively used, state-owned marshlands is crucial: Whereas the latter turned into hot spots of agrarian change, similar projects on the hillsides mostly failed.

Over the past decade, the development of vast areas of seemingly vacant<sup>8</sup> marshlands has become a central part of the Rwandan agrarian vision (GoR and MINAGRI 2004, p. 18). A lot of government and donor money has been spent on the reclamation of marshlands, the installation of sophisti-

---

7 Exceptions are made for influential personalities with connections to the government, or to the military and for private investors (Field Notes, 2015 and 2016). See also the cases in Ansoms, Cioffo et al. (2014).

8 Ansoms, Wagemakers et al. (2014, p. 245) point out that the Rwandan marshlands are often falsely declared as "un(der)used", a narrative which is common in the context of large-scale land deals (Verma 2014, p. 54).

cated drainage and irrigation infrastructure and good roads for better accessibility and on the implementation of marshland cooperatives (GoR and MINAGRI 2004, p. 67). All these measures primarily intend to move away from small-scale, subsistence-focussed<sup>9</sup> agriculture to modern, large-scale production for national and international markets<sup>10</sup>.

Precisely this process of agrarian modernization in the Rwandan marshes comes along with a row of gender-specific effects. The next section studies these effects and the way they intersect with other social divisions, mainly class. “Class”, as employed in this paper, comprises economic aspects such as financial capacity and wealth as much as social aspects like status, networks or household composition (labour capacity), which is a similar take as the one of the Rwandan *ubudehe*-system<sup>11</sup>.

### **Empirical perspectives on gender and class in the modernization process**

The collective use of marshlands in the form of cooperatives is, according to the Government of Rwanda (GoR 2006, p. 1), “a potential vehicle through which the members (...) improve social well-being with special emphasis on gender equality, housing, education, health care and community development”.

Everytime we make a committee (...), I make sure that there are some women in that committee, so that if there is a training, they cannot be left behind. (...) You know, they are the heart of the family. They are the ones who work hard to develop their family. In our country, we used to say: ‘A family is a woman’ (Interview with Community Developer at RSSP, 15-02-2016).

This statement by an official in charge of community development for a state-led development program nicely summarizes the government’s vision of female empowerment through marshland cooperatives. First, women are

---

9 For a critical remark on the understanding of subsistence farming as opposed to commercial farming see Little, Horowitz 1987 or Peters 2006, p. 6.

10 The assumption that large-scale production is principally more profitable than small-scale farming, which is commonly linked to the debate of subsistence based vs. market-oriented agriculture, has been challenged by several authors (Ali, Deininger 2015; Ansons 2013; Bernstein 2006).

11 *Ubudehe* is a social classification system. It was introduced as part of the Participatory Poverty Assessment and distinguishes between: *abatindi nyakujya* (the most vulnerable), *abatindi* (the vulnerable), *abakene* (the poor) *abakene bifashije* (the non-poor), *abakungu* (the wealthy), and *abakire* (the rich) (Mupenzi 2010). Recently, the system has been reorganized by the government into four categories which caused a lot of confusion and discontent.

encouraged to join and actively participate in the cooperatives. Further, the quote indicates how this will lead to empowerment because women are “not left behind” and finally, it points to the necessity of including women in the country’s development agenda since “they are the heart of the family” and their empowerment will automatically be for the benefit of the entire family. This corresponds to the classical gender efficiency argument as it was discussed in the beginning of this paper.

Findings from my research partly confirm these bright prospects. Uwineza, a woman in her forties accounts:

Because of the bad life, I went to the marshland and I started to cultivate vegetables and bought a goat. I would take good care of it and it would bring good profit, and I would cultivate in the marshland again and I bought sorghum and beans. And like that I would come to the level of buying a cow (...) and my children started drinking milk, and stopped suffering from kwashiorkor. (...) It was due to the good cow and the Government of Unity that helped me. Because someone who did such activities of men’s work, they would say that I was like a “mantype”, a kind of abomination. But because of the Government of Unity that was encouraging women to do good work, I wouldn’t concentrate on that believe (Interview with Uwineza, 28-06-2015).

Uwineza had caught my attention in one of the first cooperative meetings because she spoke out when the members felt betrayed by a foreign investor who had been brought by the government. Together with her husband and five children Uwineza was living in a small, but neat house with electricity, cement floor, painted walls and glass windows. Two of her adult sons had bikes for taking fresh vegetables to the Kigali markets. I came to know Uwineza as an ever active and hard-working woman who was always well-informed about the current state of the cooperative. Even though her engagement in diverse activities outside the “female domestic sphere” was a recurring issue of family conflicts, she had managed to buy some land and possessed three cows. Her children were old enough to support her activities which allowed her to launch new projects and to put some money aside (Protocols with Uwineza 06-07-2015, 16-01-2016).

A different situation was shown by Mutuyimana, a widow with two small kids who was working five plots in the same cooperative. I met her at a moment when the cooperative had experienced a discouraging joint venture with the aforementioned foreign investor. In expectation of a lot of profit, Mutuyimana had invested some money into a solar electricity kit, but, in the end, she could not pay the instalments and had to return the kit. She now was struggling to make ends meet: “We are now in poverty. Even getting something to eat is hard for us. Before we never had such kind of problems but now, I cannot even afford transport to the hospital when I am

sick” (Protocol with Mutuyimana, 25-02-2016). Her place was one of the better places, but it looked shabby and several windows were broken. When I asked her about the cooperative, Mutuyimana complained:

They [the authorities] should allow us to cultivate a crop of our individual choice, cause we all do not have the same capacity (...). For example, we cannot all have the capacity to crop French beans, as the seeds are expensive. (...) If they could only allow us to crop the normal beans, because they do not take a lot of time and care and yet you can get money out of it. One sack of fresh, normal beans costs 8000frw, which is far more than French beans which require more pesticides, care and time (Protocol with Mutuyimana, 25-02-2016).

Time and cost were the main issues addressed in Mutuyimana’s request. Her perspective challenges the government’s approach which pursues the idea that cooperatives should concentrate on the cultivation of one crop in large-scale manner and follow a harmonized cultivation plan. This idea corresponds with the government’s introduction of the Crop Intensification Program (CIP), which allocates specific priority crops to certain regions while other crops are forbidden. Since marshlands are state property, the cooperatives are liable to these new regulations.

Many farmers experience these crop restrictions and the high level of “supervision”, not to say control, by the authorities as a loss of autonomy (Cioffo et al. 2016, p. 287; Huggins 2017, p. 134). Marshland cultivation now requires the use of state-propagated improved seeds and chemical fertilizers. Furthermore, farmers need to adapt to a unified mono-cropping regime which disregards the heterogeneous backgrounds and needs of the cooperative members, as the case of Mutuyimana indicates. The juxtaposition of Mutuyimana’s and Uwineza’s situation clearly demonstrates how gender role patterns intersect with different household compositions and economic capacities: Whereas Uwineza freely disposed of her time and had sufficient money for buying seeds, pesticides and to hire additional labour to comply with the cooperative’s new setup, Mutuyimana would have preferred to opt for less labour- and cost-intensive crops. Crops that would be adjusted to her personal capacity. Crops that would earn her some money but that would also feed her family if necessary.

Traditionally, the Rwandan marshlands were used by smallholder families for the cultivation of food crops during the dry season (Meschy 1989, p. 136). These so called *ingandurarugo* were mainly (not exclusively) produced for home consumption and helped families to compensate food shortages. The Gender Coordinator at MINAGRI (18-06-2015) explains:

*Ingandurarugo* means ‘food crops’ (...) as opposed to these cash crops. (...)

[T]hey are those crops that women see, that are really for the feeding of the household. Those include some beans, maize, potatoes, sweet potatoes and all that, and women are actually involved in such farming activities.

Hence, the government's vision to transform marshlands into large-scale production zones for cash crops not only excludes poor farmers, it also interferes with the gender specific cropping patterns in Rwandan agriculture. Although Villamor (2014, p. 131) unmasks the identification of "male" cash crops versus "female" food crops as a gender stereotype, she argues that this "classical" pattern often relates to different risk capacities.

Risk preferences significantly differ based on gender, with growing evidence that women are individually more risk-averse and less prone to competition than men. (...) Particularly when resources are limited or lacking, gender differences in risk aversion become relevant for decision making.

Also in Rwanda, the perception that food crops are women's crops whereas men do cash crops is too simple to be called a general pattern. Uwineza, for example, was very much inclined to crop vegetables for sale, as were most men of the smaller cooperatives. Less entrepreneurial women, in turn, would often praise beans or sweet potatoes (Group Discussions 12-05-2015, 24-05-2015). However, since sweet potatoes were not listed among the CIP priority crops for this region (Protocol with the District Agronomist 28-04-2015), the cooperatives were "encouraged", not to say pressured, to grow other food in the marshlands. In search for a shady place to sit down and talk to the members of a sugar cane cooperative, I was led into the middle of their plantation and suddenly found myself next to several plots of sweet potatoes hidden in the sugar cane (Field Notes, 29-04-2015).

Another reason for some women's preference for food crops, which they can harvest just in time for meal-preparation, is related to power dynamics within the household:

At home the man has to take the responsibility of the money that enters. For example, if you have the idea of cultivating some tomatoes, sometimes a man immediately comes and gets all the harvest out of your hands and sells it. Even if you have sold them, you have to give the money to him to keep it, unless maybe you understand each other well and he lets you to go and participate in saving groups (Group discussion with female cooperative members, 03-06-2015).

This quote from a group discussion with female cooperative members explains why women in "traditionally" organized male headed households are reluctant to invest a lot of work in cash crops. Household background

and a family's understanding of gender equality therefore are crucial for a women's chance of empowerment through cooperatives. This also accounts for the experience of another woman in her sixties. She and her husband were both cooperative members but he exercised strict control over all her activities and income. She complained about her situation in comparison to the other women in the cooperative (mostly widows) who were able to engage in small businesses and put some money aside (Field Diary, 26-01-2016). Unfortunately, further attempts to meet and discuss her situation failed because her husband had become suspicious.

This story, as well as the situation in the sugar cane field or the case of Mutuyimana reveal that the government's promoted "modern" cash crops are not embraced by all female cooperative members. In some cases, women's lack of bargaining power within the household intersects with gender specific crop preferences. In other cases, risk aversion and the lack of financial means hinder women to engage in cash crop production.

Financial constraints not only restrict the members' capacity to comply with the cooperatives' inflexible cropping schemes, they also play an important role in entering a cooperative in the first place. This is demonstrated by the following conversation with two women who were collecting animal grass in the marshland. When I asked them why they were not members of the cooperative, Kabahire explained:

Kabahire: To become a member you have to pay a membership fee, and we do not have the money to pay that fee.

JT: How much is that?

Kabahire: It is 7.000 RWF.

JT: Can you join the cooperative if you get the 7.000 RWF?

Kabahire: Yes. Everyone would like to have that opportunity of working with the cooperative here in the marshland (Protocol with Kabahire, 02-02-2016).

The fee of 7.000 RWF<sup>12</sup> to enter this cooperative is relatively modest as compared to the three smaller cooperatives who were charging between 50.000 and 100.000 RWF and in one case even up to 200.000 RWF<sup>13</sup> (Meeting with Cooperatives, 15-03-2015 and 01-05-2015). Such high fees represent a barrier for farmers with low financial capacity. Dawson et al. (2016, p. 212) conclude from their investigation into the Rwandan Green Revolution, that wealthier farmers were more likely to be in a cooperative than poor or landless people – a fact that was confirmed to me by the pres-

12 In comparison, the salary for a full day of agricultural labour in this area is about 800 to 1.000 RWF.

13 200.000 RWF corresponds to the price of a young cow. Cows are very valuable in this region. Such high fees were justified by the cooperative's achievements such as having built a cooperative office.

ident of the big cooperative (Protocol, 15-04-2015). I later found out that many of the members of this cooperative were living in Kigali and hiring locals to till their plots (Protocol with cooperative sub-chief 20-05-2015). This was also the case for Kabahire and her husband who made their living as wage workers on other people's farms. A small plot in front of their place allowed them to cultivate some basic food crops, but these were not sufficient for themselves and their six children. Kabahire's reply to my question why she and the other woman were not using the money they earned to register for the cooperative thus comes without surprise: "We had a lot of needs in our homes and we decided to buy small livestock first" (Protocol with Kabahire 02-02-2016).

Kabahire's decision to spend her little earnings on urgent household needs corresponds to the aforementioned image of a woman being "the heart of the family". Uwineza's account also confirms the idea that women are directing their efforts towards the well-being of their families before thinking of themselves. This perception and the underlying assumption that women's income benefits the family more directly, whereas men like to take a "detour" passing by the *kabaret*<sup>14</sup>, was explained to me as an important reason why the government tries to get women involved in cooperatives (Interview with Benjamin Muligande from RSSP, 19-02-2016).

Confronting the government's efforts with my data from the ground indeed confirms that all the four marshland cooperatives contained a fairly balanced number of female and male members (9:10, 6:11, 9:7, 143:180). However, considering the fact that the agricultural sector is constituted by women in the first place (86% in 2010) (MINAGRI 2010, p. 4) female participation in cooperatives is comparatively low. As for the small cooperatives, most women were widows, often genocide widows<sup>15</sup>, who are under particular attention of the government (Interview with Benjamin Muligande from RSSP, 19-02-2016, Meeting with a cooperative 03-04-2015). Some had replaced their husbands or sons in the cooperatives (Group Discussion with Women, 14-05-2015) and in several other cases the women knew the president in person or were distantly related (Data from Network Analysis, January and February 2016). The latter substantiates other author's observation that personal connections and access to information (e.g. about constitutive meetings) are important prerequisites for becoming a cooperative member (Ansoms, Cioffo et al. 2014; Verhofstadt, Maertens 2015).

Interestingly enough, none of the cooperative presidents failed to prompt-

---

14 "Kabaret" derives from the French word "cabaret" and is commonly used in Kinyarwanda for bar.

15 The term "genocide widows" usually refers exclusively to Tutsi women who have lost their Tutsi husbands during genocide. It does, officially, not refer to Hutu women whose Tutsi men were likewise killed (Burnet 2012, p. 130).

ly inform me about the precise number of women in their cooperatives, not even the president of the one big cooperative, whereas questions with regard to the members' socio-economic background or sector of origin<sup>16</sup> were not definitively answered (Protocol with Cooperative President 15-04-2015). This indicates once more the prominence of gender in the national political discourse and demonstrates that the cooperative leadership is well aware of this fact.

With respect to the cooperative committee, which is supposed to fulfil a 30% quota of women (Interview with Director General of MINAGRI, 02-05-2015), most committee members were male as were the presidents in all cases. Even though the four cooperatives I investigated are not sufficient to draw tangible conclusions, this impression was confirmed in an interview with the Director General at MINAGRI (02-05-2015):

[T]he problem is, if you want to form a cooperative, in the decision-making organs the women are not majority. (...) But we encourage them to put also women in the decision-making organs.

His statement acknowledges the problem of women being under-represented in the cooperative committees. Yet, his solution to simply "put" women into the relevant positions, once more, indicates a simplistic top down approach which neglects the structural causes of this disparity. A closer look at the female committee members of the investigated cooperatives revealed that one of them was young, educated and not yet married, four were in their forties or fifties, had grown up children and were at least not among the poorest segments of the population. The one thing all these women had in common was that they enjoyed a certain degree of freedom: They had no small children who needed a lot of care and they could delegate household work.

Women's reproductive and care duties turn out to be a restriction for some women to get actively involved in cooperatives or even hold a leadership position. This points to another loophole in the government's gender equality discourse: Throughout my research, gender equality was generally explained to me as a woman's opportunity and ability or even duty to do the same work as men. This general assumption was mostly followed by a clarification that this process will also need men's understanding, but it was rarely addressed as an opportunity for men to engage in household and care activities. Consequently, women's work load at home remains largely unchanged. During a group discussion with female cooperative members (03-06-2015) one woman complained:

---

<sup>16</sup> Sector is the third-lowest out of six administrative levels in Rwanda. Topographically it often corresponds to a group of hills.

That women also get part of their share from their families, yeah, that's the good thing men like about equality. But then, telling a man: "Go and fetch water, I'm going to cook!" (...) or: "Today I'm going to have a walk, so you stay at home and do the cooking and take care of the place!" That's impossible! And also that he brings the money and you share it because of equality cannot work. Only when you say: "I'm going to my family and get my share", there he can understand. But otherwise, if it's just for your own good, then no, that never works.

Against this backdrop, unpaid committee work appears as an additional burden rather than empowerment. A similar conclusion was drawn by Burnet about rural women's increased involvement in local government structures (Burnet 2011, p. 327).

## **Conclusion**

In this paper I have shown how the government's ambition of transforming the Rwandan marshlands into modern cash crop production zones for state "supervised" cooperatives, undermines the country's efforts in terms of gender equality: Women with limited financial income are structurally excluded from the fertile lowlands either because they fail to meet the cooperative entry fees or because they cannot cover the regular production costs for the CIP promoted crops. While better-off women were able to participate in cooperatives and have profited from the government's investments, women who continue to carry the main burden of reproductive and care work in their families struggle to coordinate their household duties with labour-intensive cropping schemes. Moreover, women with restricted personal and financial freedoms in patriarchal family structures hardly benefit from the new profit-oriented cooperative setup. Such structures may account for the pertinent under-representation of women in marshland cooperatives, and even more so in the cooperatives' decision-making organs.

The failure of the government's efforts in this respect is related to a simplistic understanding of gender equality primarily in terms of quotas. This neglects the complex interplay between gender and other social attributes such as class, age, marital status, household composition, education or ethnicity. An inclusive and intersectional policy approach is needed to reveal the differences between women and to ensure that gender equality goes beyond being "mainly rhetorical" as Peters (2013, p. 543) would say. I further advocate for more and sensitive long-term research in Rwanda with active engagement in the diverse and sometimes inconsistent practices of everyday life. In the long run, this will reveal the gaps between official discourse and the lived realities on the ground and lead to a better understanding of the dynamics at play.

## References

- Adjamagbo, A., Calvès, A.E., (2012), L'émancipation féminine sous contrainte, *Autrepart*, 61, 2, pp. 3-21.
- Ali, D.A., Deininger, K., (2015), Is There a Farm Size–Productivity Relationship in African Agriculture? Evidence from Rwanda, *Land Economics*, 91, 2, pp. 317-343.
- Ansoms, A., (2013), Large-Scale Land Deals and Local Livelihoods in Rwanda: The Bitter Fruit of a New Agrarian Model, *African Studies Review*, 56, 3, pp. 1-23.
- Ansoms, A., Cioffo, G., Huggins, C. and Murison, J., (2014), The Reorganisation of Rural Space in Rwanda: Habitat Concentration, Land Consolidation, and Collective Marshland Cultivation, in Ansoms, A., Hilhorst, T., eds., *Losing Your Land: Dispossession in the Great Lakes*, Woodbridge, James Currey, pp. 163-185.
- Ansoms, A., Holvoet, N., (2008), Women & Land Arrangements in Rwanda. A Gender-Based Analysis of Access to Natural Resources, in Englert, B., Daley, E., eds., *Women's Land Rights & Privatization in Eastern Africa*, Woodbridge, James Currey, pp. 138-157.
- Ansoms, A., Murison, J., (2012), De la prospérité à 'Saoudi' à la noyade au 'Darfour', in Reyntjens, F., Vandeginste, S. and Verpoorten, M., eds., *L'Afrique des Grands Lacs: Annuaire 2011-2012*, Paris, Harmattan, pp. 375–396.
- Ansoms, A., Rostagno, D., (2012), Rwanda's Vision 2020 Halfway Through: What the Eye Does Not See, *Review of African Political Economy*, 39, 133, pp. 427-450.
- Ansoms, A., Wagemakers, I., Madison Walker, M. and Murison, J., (2014), Land Contestation at the Micro Scale: Struggles for Space in the African Marshes, *World Development*, 54, 2, pp. 243-252.
- Bayisenge, J., Höjer, S. and Espling, M., (2015), Women's Land Rights in the Context of the Land Tenure Reform in Rwanda – The Experiences of Policy Implementers, *Journal of Eastern African Studies*, 9, 1, pp. 74-90.
- Bernstein, H., (2006), Is There an Agrarian Question in the 21st Century?, *Canadian Journal of Development Studies*, 27, 4, pp. 449-460.
- Burnet, J.E., (2011), Women Have Found Respect: Gender Quotas, Symbolic Representation, and Female Empowerment in Rwanda, *Politics & Gender*, 7, 3, pp. 303-334.
- Cambrezy, L., (1981), Conquête des Marais au Rwanda et dynamique de population, *Études rurales*, 83, pp. 45-68.
- Carney, J., (1993), Converting the Wetlands, Engendering the Environment: The Intersection of Gender with Agrarian Change in the Gambia, *Economic Geography*, 69, 4, pp. 329-348.
- Cioffo, G.D., Ansoms, A. and Murison, J., (2016), Modernising Agricul-

- ture Through a 'New' Green Revolution: The Limits of the Crop Intensification Programme in Rwanda, *Review of African Political Economy*, 43, 148, pp. 277-293.
- Daley, E., Dore-Weeks, R. and Umuhoza, C., (2010), Ahead of the Game: Land Tenure Reform in Rwanda and the Process of Securing Women's Land Rights, *Journal of Eastern African Studies*, 4, 1, pp. 131-152.
- Daley, E., Englert, B., (2010), Securing land rights for women, *Journal of Eastern African Studies*, 4, 1, pp. 91-113.
- Dawson, N., Martin, A. and Sikor, T., (2016), Green Revolution in Sub-Saharan Africa: Implications of Imposed Innovation for the Wellbeing of Rural Smallholders, *World Development*, 78, 2, pp. 204-218.
- Debusscher, P., Ansoms, A., (2013), Gender Equality Policies in Rwanda: Public Relations or Real Transformations?, *Development and Change*, 44, 5, pp. 1111-1134.
- Doss, C., Summerfield, G. and Tsikata, D., (2014), Land, Gender, and Food Security, *Feminist Economics*, 20, 1, pp. 1-23.
- Englert, B., Daley, E., (2008), Afterword - Securing women's land rights, in Englert, B. and Daley, E., eds., *Women's Land Rights & Privatization in Eastern Africa*, Woodbridge, James Currey, pp. 158-175.
- Freeman, C., (2001), Is Local: Global as Feminine: Masculine? Rethinking the Gender of Globalization, *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 26, 4, pp. 1007-1037.
- GoR., (1999), *Law N° 22/99 OF 12/11/1999 Law to Supplement Book I of the Civil Code and to Institute Part Five Regarding Matrimonial Regimes, Liberalities and Successions.*
- (2005), *Law N° 08/2005 of 14/07/2005 Organic Law Determining the Use and Management of Land in Rwanda.*
- (2006), National Policy on Promotion of Cooperatives. [Online] Available at: <http://www.rca.gov.rw/spip.php?article15> (Last access: September 10, 2014).
- (2016), *Law N°32/2016 of 28/08/2016 Law Governing Persons and Family.*
- GoR, MIGEPROF., (2010), *National Gender Policy.*
- GoR, MINAGRI., (2004), *Strategic Plan for Agricultural Transformation Rwanda – Phase I (PSTA I).*
- Guyer, J.I. et al., (1988), The Multiplication of Labor: Historical Methods in the Study of Gender and Agricultural Change in Modern Africa [and Comments and Reply], *Current Anthropology*, 29, 2, pp. 247-272.
- Hogg, C.L., (2009), Women's Political Representation in Post-Conflict Rwanda: A Politics of Inclusion or Exclusion?, *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 11, 3, pp. 34-55.
- Holvoet, N., Inberg, L., (2015), Gender Mainstreaming in Sector Budget Support: The Case of the European Commission's Sector Support to

- Rwanda's Agriculture Sector, *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 16, 2, pp. 155-169.
- Huggins, C., (2017), *Agricultural Reform in Rwanda: Authoritarianism, Markets and Zones of Governance*, London, Zed Books.
- Ingelaere, B., (2010), Do We Understand Life after Genocide? Center and Periphery in the Construction of Knowledge in Postgenocide Rwanda, *African Studies Review*, 53, 1, pp. 41-59.
- Jefremovas, V., (2002), *Brickyards to Graveyards: From Production to Genocide in Rwanda*, Albany, State University of New York Press.
- de Lame, D., (2005), *A Hill among a Thousand: Transformations and Ruptures in Rural Rwanda*, Madison, University of Wisconsin Press.
- Little, P., Horowitz, M., (1987), Subsistence Crops Are Cash Crops: Some Comments with Reference to Eastern Africa, *Human Organization*, 46, 3, pp. 254-258.
- Lutz, H., Herrera Vivar, M.T. and Supik, L., eds., (2011), *Framing Intersectionality: Debates on a Multi-Faceted Concept in Gender Studies*, Farnham and Burlington, VT, Ashgate.
- Meschy, L., (1989), La colline et le marais. La gestion des bassins versants au Burundi et au Rwanda, *Études rurales*, 115, 1, pp. 129-151.
- MINAGRI, (2010), *Agriculture Gender Strategy*.
- Mupenzi, A., (2010), *Interventions against Poverty in Rwanda: A Case Study of Ubudehe in Gatsibo District, Eastern Province, Rwanda*, Kampala, Thesis at Makerere University. Available at: [https://news.mak.ac.ug/documents/Makfiles/theses/Mupenzi\\_Alfred.ps](https://news.mak.ac.ug/documents/Makfiles/theses/Mupenzi_Alfred.ps) (last access: February 8, 2017).
- Nash, J.C., (2008), Re-Thinking Intersectionality, *Feminist Review*, 89, 1, pp. 1-15.
- Newbury, C., Baldwin, H., (2000), *Aftermath: Women's Organizations in Postconflict Rwanda*, Working Paper No. 304, Center for Development Information and Evaluation, U.S. Agency for International Development, Washington.
- NISR., (2008), National Agriculture Survey. [Online] Available at: <http://www.statistics.gov.rw/survey-period/national-agriculture-survey-september-2008> (last access: October 26, 2015).
- Nyamu-Musembi, C., (2008), Breathing Life into Dead Theories about Property Rights in Rural Africa - Lessons from Kenya, in Englert, B., Daley, E., eds., *Women's Land Rights & Privatization in Eastern Africa*, Woodbridge, James Currey, pp. 18-39.
- Oyewumi, O., (2002), Conceptualizing Gender: The Eurocentric Foundations of Feminist Concepts and the Challenge of African Epistemologies, *Jenda: A Journal of Culture and African Women Studies*, 2, 1, pp. 1-9.
- Peters, P.E., (2006), Rural income and poverty in a time of radical change in Malawi, *Journal of Development Studies*, 42, 2, pp. 322-345.

- (2013), Land Appropriation, Surplus People and a Battle over Visions of Agrarian Futures in Africa, *Journal of Peasant Studies*, 40, 3, pp. 537-562.
- Pottier, J., (2006), Land Reform for Peace? Rwanda's 2005 Land Law in Context, *Journal of Agrarian Change*, 6, 4, pp. 509-537.
- Razavi, S., (2003), Introduction: Agrarian Change, Gender and Land Rights, *Journal of Agrarian Change*, 3, 1-2, pp. 2-32.
- Razavi, S., Miller, C., (1995), *From WID to GAD: Conceptual Shifts in the Women and Development Discourse*, Vol. 1, United Nations Research Institute for Social Development Geneva.
- REMA., (2011), *Rwanda's Changing Environment - Implications for Climate Change Resilience*, Malta, Progress Press co Ltd.
- Schräpel, N., (2015), Getting the papers right - Some reflections on the politics of research permits in Rwanda, in Engel, U., Gebauer, C. and Hüncke, A., eds., *Notes from Within and Without: Research Permits between Requirements and 'Realities'*, Leipzig, Halle, Working Papers Series Nr. 16, pp. 31-34.
- Scott, J.C., (1990), *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts*, New Haven, Yale University Press.
- Stivens, M., (2005), Gender, in Carrier, J.G., ed., *A Handbook of Economic Anthropology*, Cheltenham, UK and Northampton, MA, Edward Elgar, pp. 323-338.
- Thomson, S., (2010), Getting Close to Rwandans since the Genocide: Studying Everyday Life in Highly Politicized Research Settings, *African Studies Review*, 53, 3, pp. 19-34.
- Thomson, S., Ansoms, A., Murison, J., (2012), *Emotional and Ethical Challenges for Field Research in Africa: The Story Behind the Findings*, Houndsmills, Basingstoke and Hampshire, Palgrave.
- Verhofstadt, E., Maertens, M., (2015), Can Agricultural Cooperatives Reduce Poverty? Heterogeneous Impact of Cooperative Membership on Farmers' Welfare in Rwanda, *Applied Economic Perspectives and Policy*, 37, 1, pp. 86-106.
- Verma, R., (2014), Land Grabs, Power, and Gender in East and Southern Africa: So, What's New?, *Feminist Economics*, 20, 1, pp. 52-75.
- Villamor, G.B., van Noordwijk, M., Djanibekov, U., Chiong-Javier, M.E. and Catacutan, D., (2014), Gender Differences in Land-Use Decisions: Shaping Multifunctional Landscapes?, *Current Opinion in Environmental Sustainability*, 6, 1, pp. 128-133.
- Yuval-Davis, N., (2006), Intersectionality and Feminist Politics, *European Journal of Women's Studies*, 13, 3, pp. 193-209.

