

## The Effect of Increased Women's Representation in Parliament: The Case of Rwanda

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### ABSTRACT

There is an increasing amount of work on whether a higher level of women's representation in parliament leads to a different style of parliamentary politics. To date, most studies have focused on Western cases, and the results have been mixed. Women add new dimensions to the policy agenda, but there is little evidence that increased women's representation changes policy outputs. The little work that has been conducted outside the Western context confirms the mixed nature of these findings. In sub-Saharan Africa, women have added issues such as HIV/AIDS and property rights to the policy agenda, but there is little evidence to suggest that increased women's representation has altered policy outcomes. In this article, we examine the case of Rwanda, which now has the highest level of women's representation in parliament in the world at 48.75 per cent. Based on face-to-face interviews with women representatives in the Rwandan parliament, we confirm that the Western-based work has validity in a developing world context. In Rwanda, women representatives considered themselves to have a greater concern with grassroots politics, although there was also some divergence of views on the matter; there has been no change in the working hours or calendar of parliament. In terms of the policy agenda, women's issues are now raised more easily and more often than before, and there has been a strong advocacy of 'international feminism' by many deputies. However, increased women's representation has had little effect on policy outputs.

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ON average, women constitute only 17.0 per cent of representatives in parliaments across the world.<sup>1</sup> This unequal gender balance has been the subject of much feminist criticism and the focus of many campaigns for change. Increasing the number of women in parliament is often justified on the basis that it is simply more just to have equal proportions of men and women in a representative body. However, this is not the only basis for the promotion of women in politics. It has been claimed that women have a different approach to or 'style' of politics, that their election to parliament in greater numbers will change the nature of the parliament itself, and that their influence will be seen in changed policy priorities and legislation.

There is now a considerable body of work on women's representation in parliament. This literature has two main characteristics. First, research concentrates on 'explanatory accounts' of women's entry into politics,<sup>2</sup> while 'less work has addressed the issue of what difference women are likely to make' once they enter parliament.<sup>3</sup> This focus on recruiting women to parliament is often linked to a normative feminist agenda, and even some of the work that does focus on the effects women may have can be more prescriptive than descriptive. Consequently, our knowledge about women in parliament is weighted towards the causes of under-representation, with a relative scarcity of knowledge about the consequences of women's parliamentary presence. Secondly, most of the case study material comes from Western countries, and these studies, 'despite their often universal tone', are unlikely to provide a balanced picture of the effects that women have on parliaments in countries outside this area.<sup>4</sup>

This article will try to address both of these weaknesses by focusing, first, on the consequences of increased women's parliamentary representation and, secondly, on a developing country rather than a Western case study. Here, we focus on the parliament of Rwanda, which has now not only the highest proportion of women representatives in the world, but is also the only parliament to possess a functionally even gender split—48.75 per cent of the seats in the Rwandan Chamber of Deputies are held by women. The case of Rwanda offers an unprecedented opportunity to gauge the effects that a large percentage of women may have on a country's parliament. It is also a good example to use for exploring whether the existing findings about the effects of increased women's representation in Western parliaments are relevant in a very different context altogether.

There are three sections to the article. We begin by reviewing the literature about the impact of women's representation on parliament. We follow by justifying the choice of Rwanda as a case study. Finally, we present our findings. We examine the impact of women's representation in three areas: parliamentary culture, the parliamentary agenda and policy outcomes. There is a brief conclusion.

### *The impact of women on parliaments*

There is now a considerable body of work on the impact of increased women's representation in parliaments. The majority of this work has been based on case studies of individual Western countries. For example, Squires and Wickham-Jones have reviewed the studies of the increased female presence in the British House of Commons, and they categorise the effects under the headings of policy style, agenda and outcomes.<sup>5</sup> In terms of policy style, the review suggests that women tend to work more behind the scenes, rather than relying on direct challenges in the debating chamber; they have also been shown to be more loyal to the party line than male Labour MPs (though it has not

been shown whether this is a sign of a distinctive female consensual style of politics, or a result of negative pressure on the women to conform). By contrast, women MPs had little success in changing the 'adversarial' culture of the parliament, or in other areas such as altering work hours or introducing childcare facilities. As regards the policy agenda, it is suggested that women were likely to raise issues of equality, education, women's relatively poor economic position, childcare, violence against women and integration of gender into the issues of employment and pay. However, in terms of policy outcomes, the few initiatives that were considered successes for the women (such as the development of the National Childcare Strategy) were in areas that dovetailed with existing government policy. The evidence from the UK shows mixed results of greater women's representation in parliament with few distinct women's-oriented policy-related outcomes.

The situation in Scandinavia is similar. In her recent historical overview of the climbing proportions of women in the Swedish parliament, Sainsbury concluded that the presence of greater numbers of women was decisive in two respects.<sup>6</sup> First, the women deputies reformulated traditional 'women's issues' as a broader issue of gender equality, which helped to make them major considerations for parties. Secondly, they converted the demand for women's representation into a demand for a more complete democracy. Sainsbury's findings imply that a greater presence for women moved the debate from one about women to one about gender. In her review of Nordic parliaments, Drude Dahlerup revealed that changes in the political culture did occur as a consequence of increased female presence. However, that phenomenon, she concluded, was the 'one point' on which it seemed 'relevant to talk about a kind of "automatic" change when the minority grows large'.<sup>7</sup> More recently, Wängnerud's empirical investigations of the attitudes and behaviour of MPs in the Nordic parliaments revealed that most women considered the increased representation of women to have changed their party's position; the particular areas mentioned were family policy, gender equality and social policy.<sup>8</sup> Wängnerud also tested the idea that the gender of representatives is important in determining the political agenda of the Riksdag. She found that women representatives were more likely to represent 'women's interests', and consequently argues that increased female representation results in greater parliamentary attention for gender equality, family policy and social policy.

This article focuses on the impact of increased women's representation in one sub-Saharan country—Rwanda. In this region, there is now a considerable literature on gender and development and, in particular, on the reasons why women's parliamentary representation has been traditionally low and how it might be increased.<sup>9</sup> By contrast, as Bauer and Britton note, little scholarly attention has been paid to the work of women in African parliaments once they have been elected.<sup>10</sup>

What is more, even on this latter topic, the evidence from the limited number of existing studies is decidedly mixed. In some cases, the increased representation of women has had 'a visible impact on the institution of parliament'.<sup>11</sup> For example, women parliamentarians have changed parliamentary hours and calendars, created institutions that drive feminist change, and introduced gender into debates and legislation, among other things.<sup>12</sup> Equally important for the purposes of this article, African women MPs have caused changes in ways that have not been seen in Western contexts. Bauer and Britton claim that African women deputies 'have an agenda that is demonstrably broader than the legislative platforms of their counterparts in the North'.<sup>13</sup> They point out that land rights, poverty alleviation, HIV/AIDS, sexual freedom and violence against women are all issues that are different and generally more pressing for women in Africa than in the West. More specifically, in South Africa, the parliamentary calendar was matched with the school calendar and earlier ending times for debates were introduced.<sup>14</sup> Indeed, the most impressive feminist legislative record is also in South Africa, where significant changes or additions to law in the areas of abortion, employment equality and others have been made. For example, Meintjes details how alliances between activists outside parliament and women deputies was crucial in passing the 1998 Domestic Violence Bill.<sup>15</sup>

At the same time, though, the evidence from other case studies is more mixed. In Namibia, women 'have played a pivotal role in crafting and passing many ... new laws'.<sup>16</sup> However, in contrast to South Africa, women deputies have 'not managed to make their national legislatures more women- or parent-friendly'.<sup>17</sup> Moreover, while women have engendered the legislative process in Namibia, the successful implementation of reforms has been problematic.<sup>18</sup> In Mozambique, women's increased representation has not yet translated into significant 'women-centred or feminist policy initiatives'.<sup>19</sup> Here, women deputies acknowledged that women in civil society were more influential in the passage of the 2003 Family Act than were women in parliament.<sup>20</sup> In Uganda, expectations raised by the increased representation of women in parliament have not been met.<sup>21</sup> In particular, it proved impossible to insert a clause into the 1998 Land Bill to ensure that women had equal rights with men over joint property, including the homestead.<sup>22</sup> One reason for the weaker-than-anticipated impact of women deputies in African countries is the system of reserving parliamentary seats for women. The quota system is usually controlled by political parties, and this often means that women feel they must be loyal to the party line, even at the expense of promoting gender-centred legislative reforms. This reason was cited as being particularly important in the case of both Mozambique<sup>23</sup> and Uganda,<sup>24</sup> both of which have systems where one party is dominant.

There is very little literature on the impact of greater women's representation in the Rwandan Chamber of Deputies, but what there is provides contrasting pictures of the impact of increased women's representation. In her work, Elizabeth Powley points to the early legislative achievements of women deputies, including the revoking of laws that prohibited women from inheriting land.<sup>25</sup> Additionally, in a recent article, Powley and Pearson demonstrate the impact of women deputies on the drafting of the 2006 bill to combat gender-based violence.<sup>26</sup> By contrast, while Longman does indicate that women deputies have been influential in passing reforms of benefit to women, including revisions to laws relating to inheritance, discrimination and rape, he questions whether they have really achieved much in the authoritarian political environment of the country.<sup>27</sup> In contrast to Powley,<sup>28</sup> who stresses that deputies from different parties have worked together on gender issues, Longman argues that in a system dominated by the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF), the 'lack of political freedom limits the ability of women to influence policy'.<sup>29</sup> The contrasting viewpoints of the existing literature on Rwanda leaves plenty of opportunity for further work on the impact of increased women's parliamentary representation in the country.

To sum up, there is a considerable body of work on women and parliaments. When we examine the literature that deals with the effect of increased women's representation in parliament, the findings from the Western-based studies are mixed. We discover that women have been found to work differently to men, being more inclined to focus on grassroots activity. Moreover, women have added new dimensions to the policy agenda, raising issues of equality, violence against women and others. However, there is little evidence that increased women's representation has changed policy outputs. What little work that has been conducted in the sub-Saharan Africa context seems to corroborate these findings. In particular, women have added new issues to the policy agenda, specifically HIV/AIDS, property rights and so on. However, we have little evidence so far to suggest that increased women's representation has altered policy outcomes to any significant degree. In the rest of this article, we focus on the example of Rwanda. To what extent are the findings of the existing studies consistent with the recent Rwandan experience?

### *Why Rwanda?*

Rwanda is probably best known for the genocide that took place between April and July 1994, when ethnic Hutu militias and government forces murdered approximately 800,000 Tutsi Rwandans. The genocide was halted in early July when largely Tutsi forces from the RPF took the capital, Kigali.<sup>30</sup> In November 1994, parliamentary politics were started virtually for the first time when the parliament of the transitional government (called the Government of National Unity) met. The transitional period of recovery from the genocide ended with

the elections of 2003. The 2003 elections saw the RPF win 33 of 53 seats, and in coalition with several smaller parties, they actually control 40 seats. The smaller parties have little influence over policy, and the two non-coalition parties cooperate with rather than criticise the RPF.<sup>31</sup> The elections were criticised by both NORDEM and the European Union observation missions as falling short of normal standards of 'free and fair'.<sup>32</sup> Freedom House does not class Rwanda as an electoral democracy and continues to rank Rwanda as 'Not Free'.<sup>33</sup> Longman describes the state as 'highly authoritarian'.<sup>34</sup> This context suggests that the Rwandan experience may be incommensurable with the findings from the established liberal parliamentary democracies in the West, where most of the research on the effect of women's representation in parliament has originated. However, we argue that Rwanda is a useful case to examine and that conclusions can reliably be drawn.

There are two reasons why Rwanda is a useful case. First, although women were victims of murder, rape, sexual torture and assault during the genocide, it was men and boys who were the primary targets for extermination.<sup>35</sup> As a result, immediately after the genocide, the population of Rwanda was estimated to be approximately 70 per cent female; now, some 14 years later, over 56 per cent of the adult population is female.<sup>36</sup> In addition, as is often the case during violent conflicts, many women took on new traditionally 'male' roles in the economy and politics during the period of war and genocide. However, contrary to what the standard model of the post-conflict literature predicts,<sup>37</sup> women did not relinquish these roles after the conflict ended. Of particular relevance to us here is the fact that women's interest in politics did not wane but grew in the post-conflict period. Today, there are a great many very active women's groups in Rwanda, and they form 'probably the most vibrant sector of Rwandan civil society'.<sup>38</sup> In other words, even though Rwanda may be an authoritarian society, it is one in which women have a considerable and active presence.<sup>39</sup> Secondly, women's representation in the Rwandan parliament has increased rapidly. The first parliament in 1994 contained 70 seats with eight (or 11.4 per cent) held by women.<sup>40</sup> In January 1997, women's representation in the Chamber of Deputies rose to 17.1 per cent; in November 2000, it rose again to 25.7 per cent. In 2003, the new Constitution included a quota policy assuring women 'at least 30 per cent of posts in decision-making organs' (Art. 9 (4) Rwandan Constitution 2003). Under this system, two seats per province and two seats for Kigali city are reserved for women (a total of 24 seats). These women are elected by a joint committee of the members of the relevant local authority and the members of the executive committee of women's organisations at the relevant level (Art. 76 (2) Rwandan Constitution 2003).<sup>41</sup> Following the 2003 election, 39 of 80 deputies were women, or 48.75 per cent of the Chamber.<sup>42</sup> In short, Rwanda

now has the highest percentage of women's representation in parliament in the world and, moreover, the increase has been rapid. All in all, given the activism of Rwandan women's groups and the high level of women's representation in the Chamber of Deputies, Rwanda provides an excellent case for examining the effect of women's parliamentary representation.

In order to assess the effects that women representatives have had on the Rwandan parliament, face-to-face interviews were considered the most useful method. The women selected for the interviews were those who were in parliament both prior to the 2003 elections—entering at various points between 1994 and 2001—and who were also elected to parliament after 2003. These people have experience of the functioning of the parliament both before and after the attainment of the 48.75 per cent mark and are in an ideal position to assess what effects (if any) the increased numbers have had on the parliament. Interviews were conducted with nine of the 12 women deputies who were in parliament both prior to and following the 2003 elections.<sup>43</sup> The interviews were conducted in English and French in the Chamber of Deputies in Kigali between 26 June and 5 July 2006. Of the nine interviewees, six belonged to the RPF, two were elected in fulfilment of the quota, and one was a member of the Democratic Socialist Party. The dominance of RPF members in this group roughly corresponds to the size of the RPF majority in parliament as a whole. This case selection allows us to appreciate better whether the increase in the proportion of women deputies made a difference. It also allows us to gain some insight into whether there are differences between quota and non-quota deputies, as well as between RPF and non-RPF deputies. The interview method is vulnerable to possible inaccurate 'self-reporting'.<sup>44</sup> As a result, the interviews are complemented by a review of laws passed by the parliament carried out with particular attention paid to any changes that emerged post-2003. The purpose of this review is to get a picture of how the greater presence of women may have influenced the output of parliament or public policy, as well as act as a check of the stated priorities of the deputies in the interviews against the policies that were actually approved.

### *Women and Parliament in Rwanda*

In this section, we examine the impact of increased women's representation in the Rwandan parliament from 2003 to 2006. We report findings in three areas. First, we examine women's effect on the culture of parliament. This is the area where we would expect to see most change on the basis of the studies that have been carried out in a Western context up to now. Secondly, we examine the impact on the policy agenda. Again, here we would expect there to have been a change following the large increase in representation in 2003. In addition, the evidence from recent African studies suggests that women in the Rwandan



parliament are likely to emphasise specific African issues such as HIV/AIDS, gender aspects of property rights and so forth. Thirdly, we examine the impact on public policy outputs. Studies to date have suggested that this is the area where women have had little impact. What is the situation in the Rwandan case?

THE CULTURE OF PARLIAMENT. In terms of parliamentary culture, several very striking changes were revealed by the research. First, the Rwandan female deputies do not seem to have been relegated to traditional 'women's areas' as extensively as some work has revealed in other cases.<sup>45</sup> Although the Minister for Gender and Family Promotion is a woman, there is also a female Minister for Education, Science, Technology and Research and a female Minister in the Office of the President. Among the junior ministers, women are also well represented in non-traditional areas such as Economic Planning and Cooperation. Women are also well spaced across the various parliamentary Committees (see Table 1). Women occupy 60 per cent of the vice-presidential positions and 27 per cent of the presidential positions on the standing committees. One of the two deputy speakers of parliament is a woman.

Secondly, major changes seem to have occurred in the 'social climate' of parliament. The interviewed representatives reported a positive overall change in parliamentary culture, giving evidence that with the greater number of women they felt more comfortable, more confident and more 'at home'. One deputy talked about 'the small issues

#### 1. Women's representation on standing committees of the Rwandan parliament

Committee	Number of women MPs	Total number of MPs	Proportion of women MPs
Foreign Affairs and Cooperation <sup>†</sup>	5	7	71.43
Petitions <sup>†</sup>	4	7	57.14
Science, Culture, and Youth <sup>†</sup>	4	7	57.14
Political Affairs* <sup>†</sup>	4	7	57.14
Gender and the Promotion of the Family*	4	6	50.00
Agriculture, Livestock Development, and the Environment <sup>†</sup>	3	6	50.00
State Budget and Property*	3	6	50.00
National Unity, Human Rights and the Struggle against Genocide <sup>†</sup>	3	7	42.86
Economy and Trade	3	7	42.86
National Security and Integrity	3	8	37.5
Social Affairs	2	6	33.33

\*indicate that the president of the Committee is a woman MP.

<sup>†</sup>indicate that the vice-president of the Committee is a woman MP. (committee membership data available at <http://www.rwandaparliament.gov.rw> accessed 22/08/2006)



that affect you ... when you work with men they set the pace and you follow'. The same deputy feels like she can now 'dress like a woman' and says that 'you feel at home. At first, you felt you were an intruder. The feeling has gone'.<sup>46</sup> The increased confidence of the women deputies was very frequently mentioned, as was the observation that larger group numbers bring greater individual confidence.<sup>47</sup> The deputies also reported that the increased confidence within the group of women had wider effects on the working environment of parliament as a whole. One felt that 'confidence leads to acceptance'.<sup>48</sup> Now 'the women participate, even more than the men'.<sup>49</sup> One deputy said that 'people smile' and are more able to 'be themselves' now, and that the atmosphere in the parliament is 'nicer'.<sup>50</sup>

One theme that emerged as important in all the interviews was the issue of female solidarity. Several interviewees spontaneously and openly declared that they put the promotion of women ahead of party politics.<sup>51</sup> It was repeated in several of the interviews that the women were a team and acted as a unified lobby on gender issues. However, this solidarity seems to have been present since well before the 2003 influx of women. The interviewees reported that, before 2003, women Deputies made up a very close and dedicated group: the women were 'a solid team, very focussed'.<sup>52</sup> They lobbied strongly on gender issues despite their small numbers, with considerable success.

Nevertheless, some changes have come *since* the 2003 elections and the introduction of the quota. The women are highly aware of their new numerical strength. There is now a suggestion that many of the debates around women's representation in parliament have become redundant, since, as one deputy succinctly put it, 'you're there'.<sup>53</sup> Another deputy pointed out that now 'if we are absent, there's no quorum, that's for sure'.<sup>54</sup> Many of the women said that the role of the Forum for Rwandan Women Parliamentarians (FWRP)<sup>55</sup> had become more important in coordinating the activities of the larger group of women. Some also mentioned that the bigger group of women was also a more diverse group, but solidarity even within this broader spectrum of women was felt to be strong;<sup>56</sup> a minority of the women interviewed said that they felt the larger group had brought greater solidarity.<sup>57</sup>

Although, with the introduction of reserved seats, most of the women now in parliament have been elected in fulfilment of the quota, no significant differences between the quota deputies and the directly elected deputies emerged among the interviewees. Women's solidarity again seemed to cover both groups of deputies. One deputy interviewed did express the feeling that the larger post-2003 group was of mixed quality and less efficient overall than the smaller earlier group;<sup>58</sup> however, she noted too that several of the men elected in 2003 were new to parliament and lacked experience as well. Both the two quota deputies interviewed agreed to the general report on the improved

atmosphere in parliament and the importance of female solidarity, as well as on other issues.

One specific area of change was the relationship between the men and women parliamentarians. The relationship between the two was generally reported to have improved since the 2003 elections. Although some of the deputies acknowledged that before 2003, many of the men were gender-sensitive and were jointly responsible for attaining the figure of 48.8 per cent, the general report was that the men's and women's working relationship was 'not smooth'.<sup>59</sup> Since 2003, though, the women (both quota- and party-elected) feel a sense of détente between the two. Many of the women echoed the feeling that 'men understand better now',<sup>60</sup> and that there is more ease of understanding between the male and female deputies.<sup>61</sup> One of the women asserted that there were 'not a lot of distinctions' between the men and women deputies in the current parliament.<sup>62</sup> Specifically, the nature of collaboration between the men and women in the parliament has changed. Instead of the furious lobbying that the women used to undertake, men now understand their arguments and are more 'gender sensitive'—and anyway 'they have to pay attention' since the women now compose such a large, and largely unified, group.<sup>63</sup> One woman interviewed said that she felt that men and women had now become 'true partners' in their parliamentary work.<sup>64</sup> In short, the women seemed to feel that since 2003, the men and women deputies 'have a very good relationship'.<sup>65</sup>

However, the interviews with the deputies failed to show changes in some other aspects of parliament's political culture. Unlike the South African case, the functioning of parliament—the hours worked, the calendar, the way meetings were arranged and conducted and formal decision-making processes—had not changed in any way, according to the interviewees. When asked about this aspect of the parliament, one MP said 'it [parliament] works in the way it always works. It is done regardless of men and women. It operates and it's normal'.<sup>66</sup> The idea of changing this 'normal' functioning to a manner more favourable to women did not emerge in any of the interviews, even as an aspiration. There was also no mention of getting childcare facilities at the parliament.<sup>67</sup> This was despite the fact that several of the respondents referred to the greater domestic responsibilities of women;<sup>68</sup> this issue did not seem to be viewed by the women as related or interconnected with their work in parliament. The extra responsibility of caring for their children at home was often dismissed as a problem for 'women in general' or 'women everywhere', and not as something deserving of particular attention in their own workplace, the parliament. An interview with one of the quota deputies seemed to reveal that what compromise existed between home and work life happened within the home rather than at the parliament. This deputy said that you have to 'talk to your husband, you lobby him', and educate the family that

parliamentary work would take up a large proportion of time. This woman had been one of a group to travel to Sweden to discuss the question of women in parliament and was shocked to learn of the high numbers of Swedish women deputies who divorced after entering parliament. She asserted that, in contrast, '[Rwandan women deputies have] got the skills to manage our children and our families'.<sup>69</sup>

Contrary to what might have been expected, given that the Rwandan women deputies seem to form such a unified group in regard to gender issues, some of the more experienced parliamentarians reported that since 2003, they spent *less* time working on gender issues. They attributed this to the fact that as they have taken on new roles in parliament, they have less time to work as intensely on gender issues, and that with so many women, their individual efforts are no longer so crucial. One explained: 'I'm not any less interested in women's issues, but now I feel like there are others to do it'.<sup>70</sup> This may be a sign that some women are moving to become 'parliamentarians' rather than constituency workers. Both of the quota deputies were among those who mentioned that the larger number of women has freed their resources to pursue goals other than ones directly related to women's issues. There were several other instances where the feeling that there were now so many women, that it was possible for some of them to move out to other areas, was expressed.<sup>71</sup>

Possibly related to this feeling is the divergence of views on the question of women and 'grassroots' politics. Although previous work has suggested that women parliamentarians are more likely to engage in grassroots politics, two opposing views emerged in the Rwandan case. The first view held that women deputies are more inclined and, with their increased numbers, have more resources to pursue grassroots politics since 2003. One woman explained that as the background of many of the women deputies is in civil society, they 'know the problems of the grassroots'.<sup>72</sup> Another stated that their increased numbers allowed women to take more time off from parliament to visit their constituents.<sup>73</sup> Community work including the support of women's groups and provision of post-genocide counselling was mentioned as the focus of grassroots work.<sup>74</sup> On the other hand, the second view, expressed by several deputies, asserted that the women have in fact less time to spend on grassroots contact as, with the increase in their numbers, they have also advanced in parliament and attained more demanding positions.<sup>75</sup> One deputy stated that she tried to support the development of the grassroots through supporting laws that would encourage it, but that for herself, she said, 'my priority is the mission of parliament, the grand parliamentary mission'. She also stated that 'it's rare that we leave the parliament'.<sup>76</sup> Other women also made this point that women now have more 'parliamentary' work to do, although they were less clear about the choice between being available for grassroots work and being dedicated to law-making. The divergence seems to

come from the fact that most of the women advocate for women's equality, but that not all of them are willing to dedicate time and resources to working for this on the local level. This would suggest that a grassroots inclination may have less to do with gender and more to do with position or level in parliament.

**POLITICAL AGENDA.** Gender issues feature extremely prominently on the political agenda of the women deputies interviewed. The deputies emphasised the importance of female solidarity in the parliament and the pursuit of positive improvements for women over both party politics and other policy desiderata, with again no difference showing up in the reserved seat deputy interviews. Beyond their own individual agendas, the interviews revealed that the women considered gender to have been quite definitively established as an issue on the parliamentary agenda—as one deputy put it '[t]he principle now exists'.<sup>77</sup> Further, two deputies suggested that the priorities of the female MPs have begun to tilt the agenda of the parliament as a whole towards greater gender-sensitivity, and that male deputies have now begun to consider women's issues as part of their remit.<sup>78</sup>

Women's economic advancement,<sup>79</sup> female solidarity within the parliament<sup>80</sup> and, especially, international female solidarity<sup>81</sup> emerged as the female deputies' current priorities. In terms of economic advancement, deputies advocated providing support to women entrepreneurs<sup>82</sup> and consciousness-raising and education for girls and women.<sup>83</sup> As regards female deputy solidarity, some mentioned that they try to have women replaced by other women so as not to suffer a drop in group numbers,<sup>84</sup> and the provision of training, including seminars, retreats, study trips, and even English lessons have been pushed for by women deputies for other women deputies. On this point, it is interesting to note that, although all of the language used conscientiously refers to 'gender', the women seemed to consider gender to still refer overwhelmingly to women. One stated it openly: 'we say gender but we mean women'<sup>85</sup>. The kind of shift that Sainsbury described in the case of Sweden, from an agenda focused on 'women' to one focused on 'gender', does not seem to have come about in Rwanda. An interesting finding concerns the existence of an international gender agenda. In many of the interviews, the women voiced an interest in helping to replicate the achievement of the Rwandan parliament in other countries of the world: one deputy said that it was one of her priorities to see similar changes 'across the world',<sup>86</sup> and another expressed the view that only a global women's lobby could truly change women's situation for the better.<sup>87</sup> It is true that international organisations have 'profoundly influenced' feminist movements in Africa, Rwanda included, but a similar outward international focus was not observed in other African countries.<sup>88</sup>

Two women also mentioned that they try to integrate gender into their other priority areas which may not initially seem to have much to do with women's issues. The President of the Standing Committee on the Budget and State Patrimony emphasised her efforts to 'engender' the budget,<sup>89</sup> while another deputy stated that she integrates gender into her work on agricultural development and land issues.<sup>90</sup>

Although most answers reflect the feeling that getting women's issues heard now is easier than before, there is no suggestion that women's issues are a *new* (post-2003) part of the parliament's agenda. The political role of women in the RPF from an early date was mentioned as a significant factor by deputies from that party as well as from both of the quota-elected deputies and the Social Democrat deputy,<sup>91</sup> and some asserted that this had put gender issues on the parliamentary agenda at an early date.<sup>92</sup> The presence of the women does not seem to have caused the introduction of gender on to the list of priorities, although it does seem to have eased the discussion of such issues in parliament. When asked about their early experiences in parliament, most said that they had found it difficult to make a place for gender issues; an example mentioned by several respondents was the campaign to have rape and sexual torture crimes moved from Category Three of the post-genocide prosecution guidelines (in the same category as property damage) to Category One (in the same category as murder). One deputy called it 'a tug of war',<sup>93</sup> another 'a battle'.<sup>94</sup> In contrast to this in the current parliament, 'the work has been easy because women have been many'.<sup>95</sup> Two of the deputies mentioned that the large number of women assured by the quota system is a kind of guarantee on women's rights and participation in parliament.<sup>96</sup>

PUBLIC POLICY. Several laws of great significance to women have been passed in Rwanda; crucially, however, only one major piece of legislation related to gender has emerged since the 2003 elections. The achievement of Category One status for rape or sexual torture in the post-genocide prosecution guidelines (1996), a law extending the rights of pregnant and breast-feeding mothers in the workplace (1997), a law on the protection of children from violence (2001), the inheritance act (2003) and the extraordinary gender-sensitive Rwandan Constitution itself (2003), all date from before the elections in 2003. At the time of the interviews, there was a major piece of legislation on gender-based violence progressing through parliament (it was passed to committee on 6 August 2006), which will be discussed further below. In the interviews, however, it was pre-2003 laws to which the deputies referred when they were asked about the successes of the women in parliament. These laws were passed at a time when the numbers of women in the Rwandan parliament were much smaller than today, and

they were all in fact initiated by the executive and approved by the parliament. Given the commitment of the RPF to women's promotion<sup>97</sup> and the origin of these pieces of legislation, it is likely that (although supported by the women deputies) they were not introduced, or even passed, as a result of the women's high representation.

The 'Law on the Prevention, Protection and Punishment of Any Gender-Based Violence' is, however, a notable policy achievement; it is one of only a few pieces of legislation that have originated in parliament rather than in the executive. The women deputies and the FWRP were instrumental in formulating the law and getting it passed and, importantly, they did so in collaboration with men deputies right from the outset of the legislative process,<sup>98</sup> confirming the idea that there is now more solidarity between men and women deputies after 2003. Among other things, the law makes polygamy illegal and provides a legal definition of rape of an adult woman. It also sets out punishments for offenders.<sup>99</sup> According to UNIFEM observers, the parliamentary debate on the law grew heated over the issues of polygamy and the inclusion of marital rape as a gender-based violence crime.<sup>100</sup> The head of the FWRP, however, challenged the Chamber to safeguard Rwanda's reputation as a committed promoter of women's rights and to pass the bill.

### *Conclusions*

What is the significance of these findings for research on women in parliament? The findings support many, if not all, of the work of Western case studies, and in this sense confirm that the Western-based work has validity in developing world contexts. In itself, this is important, suggesting that the experience of women's representation is universal rather than context-specific. They also confirm some of the findings of studies conducted on other African countries.

In terms of parliamentary culture, the findings echo those of the established studies based on the Western experience. For example, we found that the women considered themselves to have a greater concern with grassroots politics. This supports similar findings by Norris in the case of Britain.<sup>101</sup> Also, consistent with Dahlerup's work on Scandinavian parliaments, it appears that the only change that 'automatically' accompanies an increase in female representatives is a change in parliament's 'social climate'. In short, 'numbers do count'<sup>102</sup> in that they guarantee the continued presence and normalisation (in that male MPs also consider them issues worthy of parliament's consideration) of women's issues on the agenda. But in contrast to the case in South Africa, a change in the working-hours or calendar of parliament was absent in the Rwandan example, and there has been no change in the lack of childcare facilities in parliament. Why this is the

case is certainly an issue worthy of further research. The interviews reveal that the deputies do consider balancing domestic and public responsibilities to be a difficulty, but apparently this has simply not led to any suggestions for policy change.

Also striking in the political culture findings is the strength of solidarity expressed by the deputies. Women's solidarity in the parliament was mentioned by each one of the deputies, often quite prominently. The consistency of support for solidarity across the majority RPF deputies, the quota deputies and the PSD deputy is marked. With the increase in the numbers of deputies, the role of the FWRP in maintaining this solidarity seems to have grown, as many of the interviewees noted its increased importance in coordinating the larger group of women.

In terms of the policy agenda, gender issues seem to have been established as part of the agenda prior to the increase in numbers; indeed, they appear to have been present to a large degree right from the beginning of parliamentary politics in Rwanda in 1994. That said, after 2003, the interviews reveal that women's issues have certainly been raised more easily and more often. An important related point about the political agenda that was highlighted by the interviews was that a gender agenda is now perceived to be 'guaranteed' by the presence of more women. There was one finding from the research that had not been reported on in previous studies and which may be attributable to Rwanda's unique gender proportions. The strong advocacy of 'international feminism' by many of the deputies, their insistence that the Rwandan situation of gender equity should be campaigned for and replicated in other parliaments, seems new. This may be related to the high proportion of women—a plausible explanation would be that since the proportions of women deputies in Rwanda cannot be justified in rising very much higher on the grounds of equal representation, the next step is to look outside the country to increase representation—however, it is not possible to confirm that a near-equal proportion causes a shift to a more global outlook on gender equity in such a simple way.

In the area of policy, a significant impact from the greater numbers of women is not to be seen. This again agrees with the evidence from previous studies that indicate that policy output is the area most resistant to gender effects. To indicate this lack of influence is not to say that Rwandan government policy is unfriendly to women, but quite the opposite. However, many of the most significant laws (from the point of view of the position of women) were passed before the large increase in women's parliamentary representation occurred (Category One status for rape, the inheritance law and indeed the Constitution); the gender-based violence law is an exception in this regard. The commitment of the dominant party, the RPF, to gender equity and the promotion of women seems a good explanation for both the early



presence of women's issues on the parliamentary agenda and the legislation friendly to women.

This final point particularly leads to the conclusion that an increase in the number of women in parliament may be uninfluential in comparison with a government commitment to develop legislation that promotes women's rights. On the other hand, the changes that have occurred in the political culture of the Rwandan parliament and the working relationship between its male and female deputies would have been difficult to impose by fiat. All told, the evidence from the interviews suggests that they were the result of a long process of normalisation arising from the increased numbers of women in parliament.

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- 40 Quoted from an interview with Deputy Anastase Mukandora, 26 June 2006. The archived figures of the IPU are only available from 1997.
- 41 T. Longman, *op. cit.*, p. 141.
- 42 The 30 per cent quota applies to both the Senate and the Chamber of Deputies, although candidates for the Senate are not directly elected, and the Senate possesses less power than the lower house. Articles 8, 76(2), 54, and 82 also safeguard the political participation of women.
- 43 Only 11 women were continuously in parliament. One of the MPs currently in parliament had replaced a member who stepped down due to a political scandal in early 2006. This deputy had been in parliament between 2001 and 2003, but had not, initially, been elected again in 2003.
- 44 S. Childs, *op. cit.*, p. 9.
- 45 See, for example, K. Ross, *op. cit.*, pp. 189–201.
- 46 Interview with Deputy Juliana Kantengwa, 30 June 2006.
- 47 For example, interview with Deputy Bernadette Kanzayire, 30 June 2006.
- 48 Kantengwa interview.
- 49 Interview with Deputy Anastase Mukandora, 26 June 2006.
- 50 Interview with Deputy Henriette Mukabaranga, 30 June 2006.
- 51 For example, Mukandora interview, Deputy Berthe Mukamusoni interview, 26 June 2006, and Deputy Esperance Mwiza interview, 28 June 2006.
- 52 Kantengwa interview.
- 53 Mukamusoni interview.
- 54 Kantengwa interview.
- 55 A parliamentary body founded in 1996 intended to bring women MPs from all parties together.
- 56 For example, Constance Mukayuhi Rwaka interview, 3 July 2006, and Mukabaranga interview.

- 57 Deputy Jacqueline Muhongayire interview, 4 July 2006, and Mukamusoni interview.
- 58 Kantengwa interview; also Mwiza.
- 59 Interview with Deputy Connie Bwiza, 28 June 2006.
- 60 Mwiza interview.
- 61 For example, Mukandora interview.
- 62 Mukamusoni interview.
- 63 Mukayuhi Rwaka interview.
- 64 Mukamusoni interview.
- 65 Mukayuhi Rwaka interview.
- 66 Bwiza interview.
- 67 It must be taken into account that space is at a premium in the parliament building (it was very heavily damaged during the fighting around Kigali, and large parts of it are still being repaired); the women's apparent lack of interest in the issue is important.
- 68 For example, Mukabaranga and Mukayuhi Rwaka interviews.
- 69 Mukabaranga interview.
- 70 Kantengwa interview.
- 71 For example, Mukabaranga interview.
- 72 Mukayuhi Rwaka interview.
- 73 Mukamusoni interview.
- 74 Mukamusoni, and Bwiza interviews.
- 75 Kanzayire interview.
- 76 Kanzayire interview.
- 77 Kantengwa interview.
- 78 Bwiza and Kantengwa interviews.
- 79 Mukandora interview.
- 80 Mukamusoni interview.
- 81 Mukayuhi Rwaka and Muhongayire interviews.
- 82 Mukandora interview.
- 83 Mukayuhi Rwaka, Mukabaranga interviews.
- 84 Mukabaranga, Mukandora, Muhongayire, Mukayuhi Rwaka interviews.
- 85 Kantengwa interview.
- 86 Mukayuhi Rwaka interview.
- 87 Muhongayire interview.
- 88 G. Bauer and H. Britton, *op. cit.*, p. 17.
- 89 Mukayuhi Rwaka interview
- 90 Kantengwa interview.
- 91 Mukamusoni, Mukabaranga, Mukandora and Muhongayire interviews.
- 92 Bwiza and Mukandora interviews.
- 93 Bwiza interview.
- 94 Kantengwa interview.
- 95 Bwiza interview.
- 96 Kantengwa and Muhongayire interviews; also Kanzayire.
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- 100 UNIFEM Press Release 'Gender-based violence bill passes in Rwandan Parliament', 2006, available at <http://www.reliefweb.int/rw/rwb.nsf/db900SID/EGUA-6SFRSH?OpenDocument>, accessed 22 April 2007.
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