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Women in the Rwandan Parliament: Exploring  
Descriptive and Substantive Representation

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## **Abstract**

Rwanda's national legislature has the highest percentage of female members worldwide. This dissertation explores whether this achievement constitutes genuine descriptive and substantive representation of women. Using a qualitative case study methodology, it argues that neither form of representation is fully realized. There are considerable ethnic and geographic differences between female representatives and the female populace. Further, while they have positively influenced parliamentary debate and leadership, female legislators have initiated few policy advances on women's issues. This paper also argues that the Rwandan Patriotic Front's authoritarian grip on power is a crucial limiting factor to enhancing women's representation. This research disputes a causal relationship between the number of women in parliament and expansion of women-friendly legislation and emphasizes the importance of institutional and political context.

## **List of Abbreviations**

CMT	Critical Mass Theory
CSO	Civil society organization
FWP	Forum of Rwandan Female parliamentarians
GBV	Gender-based violence
MIGEPROF	Ministry of Gender and Family Promotion
MP	Member of Parliament
RPF	Rwandan Patriotic Front

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## **1 Introduction**

**“Rwanda provides a compelling model for the rest of the world. After the 1994 genocide, civic engagement grew organically, driven by newly emboldened women.”**

- Swanee Hunt, former United States Ambassador to Austria; Founder, Women and Public Policy Program, Harvard University’s Kennedy School of Government (Pierre, 2018, para.6)

**“President Kagame is not only the President of Rwanda but also the global leader for gender.”**

- Nkosazana Dlamini Zuma, former African Union Commission Chairperson (Rwanda High Commission, 2016, para.7)

**"How Rwanda beats the United States and France in gender equality"**

- Headline of a World Economic Forum article promoting Rwanda’s high rank on the Global Gender Gap Index (Thomson, 2017)

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Over the last several decades, we have seen tremendous gains in women’s political representation in governments around the world, particularly in national legislatures (Rai, 2008). It is often considered “self-evident progress” when a legislative body increases its proportion of diverse representatives (Phillips, 2017, para.3). However, research shows that the mere fraction of female<sup>1</sup> parliamentarians says little about how they are able to legislate, given the multitude of systemic challenges faced after taking office, nor does it reflect the political environment that shapes the legislative agenda and processes (Wängnerud, 2009).

Since the 1994 genocide, observers around the world have celebrated Rwanda for advancing economic growth and gender equality, among other development successes, which has positioned Rwanda as a continental leader (Bauer & Burnet, 2013). Today, Rwanda has the

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<sup>1</sup> I acknowledge the important distinction between sex and gender, however, in this dissertation, I use them interchangeably.

highest percentage of women in parliament<sup>2</sup> worldwide, with a lower house that is 61% female (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2019b). Many prominent figures have lauded increases in women's representation as "the dawn of a new, more 'peaceful,' and 'equitable' age in Rwandan politics" (Burnet, 2008, p.362). Conversely, others have warned of growing authoritarian behaviors exhibited by President Kagame and the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) and chronicled the submission of the legislature to the will of the executive (Longman, 2006; Reyntjens, 2015).

Given these conflicting notions of Rwanda's achievements, it is important to question whether the country's position as a "compelling model" is warranted. Using a qualitative case study approach, this dissertation explores the status of both descriptive and substantive representation of women in the Rwandan parliament. Specifically, it seeks to understand whether the large number of female representatives actually reflects the heterogeneity of Rwandan women and what legislative advances these parliamentarians have made to promote women's interests and gender equality. Further, it considers the RPF's role in shaping these conditions, which speaks to the importance of institutional and political factors for realizing the potential of women's political representation. I argue that the Rwandan case does not embody genuine descriptive or substantive representation, largely due to the RPF's tight grip on power, election meddling, and stifling of dissent. While this research is unique to the Rwandan case, it offers significant insights and implications for movements to bring more women into government around the world.

The second chapter reviews existing literature on women's parliamentary representation, providing a critical analysis of global progress, three concepts that comprise this dissertation's theoretical foundation, evidence regarding substantive representation worldwide, and trends identified in the African context. Subsequently, I outline my methodological approach. The fourth section provides background on Rwanda, before evaluating descriptive representation along ethnic and geographic divides. It then delves into women's leadership equity, advocacy, and policy impact to understand substantive representation. This chapter also applies evidence regarding the RPF's activities to help explain the discoveries made about descriptive and

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<sup>2</sup> "Legislature" and "parliament" are used interchangeably to refer to Rwanda's national bi-cameral parliament, and "legislators," "parliamentarians," "representatives," and "members of parliament (MPs)" are all used to refer to its members.

substantive representation and speculates about what motivates the party's commitment to gender equality. Finally, I conclude by contextualizing my findings and arguing that mischaracterization of the Rwandan case is detrimental for global advocacy.

## 2 Literature review

### 2.1 Women's Parliamentary Representation

Today, the world average of women in national parliaments is 24% (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2019a), which has steadily risen for the last two decades (The World Bank, 2019). Childs & Lovenduski (2013) split the case for increasing the number of female representatives into three categories: the *justice argument*, based on fairness and equity; the *pragmatic argument*, which centers on political benefits like garnering more female votes for the party; and the *difference argument*, which purports that women legislate differently than men and tackle issues overlooked by male decision-makers. This dissertation focuses on unpacking the latter. There are also arguments that increasing women's representation will deepen democracy (Phillips, 1998), which is reflected herein as well.

Over one hundred countries have adopted gender quotas in political parties or legislatures to achieve these ends (Krook, 2009; Rai, 2008). Quotas take different forms, including reserved seats or spots on candidate lists; some are legally mandated, while others are adopted voluntarily by parties (Dahlerup, 2009). Based on the Scandinavian experience, where women slowly gained 20-30% of parliamentary seats over 60-70 years, it was assumed that a base of representation in parliament and parties was a pre-condition for the success of gender quotas (Dahlerup & Freidenvall, 2005). However, Dahlerup and Freidenvall (2005) argue that countries like Argentina, Costa Rica, Rwanda, and South Africa have recently proven that women can quickly achieve dramatic gains in representation – even in a single election – through quotas without significant prior representation, which they call the *fast track*.

But reaching higher numbers of women in parliaments is only part of the story. Academics have sought to understand what happens once more women assume office. A risk of the fast track is that female MPs can become *tokens*, effectively powerless (Dahlerup & Freidenvall, 2005). While quotas may help more women get elected, they do not tackle societal inequalities that impede women's political representation, including disproportionate responsibilities for unpaid care work (Dahlerup & Freidenvall, 2005). They do not automatically alter legislative norms and procedures designed around men's experiences (Krook, 2016). Female parliamentarians often face resistance from male counterparts, who might question their

qualifications, reinforce gendered stereotypes, or organize committee assignments to blockade them (Goetz, 1998; Krook, 2016).

## **2.2 Theoretical Foundation**

### **2.2.1 *The Concept of Representation***

The theory that underpins most contemporary scholarship on women in politics is Pitkin's (1967) *The Concept of Representation*, in which she envisages four dimensions of political representation: *formalistic*, *descriptive*, *symbolic*, and *substantive*. Formalistic representation considers the institutional means through which representatives are granted authority and held accountable. Descriptive representation encompasses the degree to which people are reflected in their representatives based on shared characteristics, whether attitudes, experiences, or identities. In practice, it is invoked to discuss the number of women or other minorities in legislatures. Symbolic representation refers to the *feeling* of being represented: whether people perceive their representatives 'stand for' them. It is commonly used to frame research about how attitudes and behaviors are affected by representation. Finally, substantive representation emphasizes representatives' actions on behalf of those represented, often used to examine policy responsiveness (Dovi, 2015; Kurebwa, 2014; Pitkin, 1967). Pitkin elevates substantive representation above the others, emphasizing how representatives act over who they are (Dovi, 2015; Pitkin, 1967). Nevertheless, she conceives of the four dimensions as a cohesive whole, but many scholars citing Pitkin's work treat them as separate concepts (Coffé, 2012; Kurebwa, 2014).

Pitkin's theory was not specific to gender, but has been applied to issues of gender and politics since the 1990s (Childs & Lovenduski, 2013). Since her writing, scholars have considered various components of substantive representation, including policy priorities, voting records, bill-drafting and sponsorship, and debate participation, among others (Celis, Childs, Kantola, & Krook, 2008). Some argue that representatives regularly advocating for women's concerns and adding women's viewpoints into decision-making constitutes substantive representation, while others emphasize the need for a diversity of concerns represented or alignment between representatives and their constituents (Childs & Lovenduski, 2013).

### ***2.2.2 The Politics of Presence***

Phillips' (1998) seminal work, *The Politics of Presence*, distinguishes between the “‘who’ and ‘what’ is to be represented,” known as the *politics of presence* and the *politics of ideas* respectively (p.5). Phillips observed that in efforts to improve political representation, a diversity of ideas had been privileged over diversity among representatives, implying that the identity of the office-holder is irrelevant to their ability to advocate for those who are different than them. But she argues that a politics of ideas divorced from that of presence leaves the interests of marginalized groups insufficiently addressed. This is because daily lived experiences are crucial for the development of political preferences (Wängnerud, 2012). Therefore, Phillips (1996) argues that representatives need to better reflect the people they are representing, thus, women may be best equipped to represent women’s needs. She does not contend that womanhood automatically means common goals or ideas, rather that women have some shared interests shaped by gendered experiences, which would be inadequately handled by male representatives (Kurebwa, 2014; Phillips, 1998). Wängnerud (2012) equates Phillips’ theory of change to an “invisible hand” because Phillips argues not that female representatives must be feminists or activists, but that the issues they act on will be automatically affected by shared experiences (p.145).

Phillips’ point is not that politics of ideas is insignificant, but it is insufficient: both politics of presence and ideas are necessary. She writes: “It is a parody of democracy when a parliament is dominated by one kind of person, for this inevitably suggests two categories of citizen: those who can vote and those more important ones who take the actual decisions” (2017, para.5). Her work has therefore played a significant role in propagating the idea that more women in government are required for women’s concerns to be adequately addressed (Childs & Lovenduski, 2013).

### ***2.2.3 Critical Mass Theory***

An oft-cited concept that links descriptive and substantive representation is *critical mass theory* (CMT), which asserts that female representatives will likely create only limited change until they constitute a significant minority, or critical mass, generally around 30% (Childs & Krook, 2009; Dahlerup, 2006). CMT is largely the driver of worldwide adoption of gender quotas, used to explain why small numbers of female legislators may not adequately advocate for women’s issues (Childs & Krook, 2006). It can be traced back to Kanter's (1977) work on how

organizational culture is impacted by shifts in group dynamics, but was crystalized by Dahlerup (1988) in an article about women in Scandinavian politics. In that piece, Dahlerup articulates six areas which may be affected by alterations in the ratio of women to men in the legislature: attitudes towards female politicians; performance of female politicians; political culture; political discourse; policy; and women's empowerment. However, she states that there is no magic number after which substantive representation occurs and the percentage of women in legislatures has little predictive value, or even impact, on policy achievements.

Until recently, most references to CMT positioned Dahlerup's research as supporting the validity of critical mass, despite her conclusions claiming the *opposite* (Childs & Krook, 2006). Leading scholars in the field agree that the connection between numbers and outcomes is non-linear (Childs & Krook, 2008, 2009). Dahlerup (2006) later observed that CMT "seems to live a life of its own" (p.511). As a result, our expectations of what happens when more women enter parliament are based on faulty interpretations.

#### **2.2.4 Critical Analysis**

A simplified pairing exercise would match descriptive representation with Phillips' politics of presence, while Pitkin elevates substantive representation or the politics of ideas over personal characteristics. Childs & Lovenduski (2013) observe: "After Pitkin no one regarded descriptive representation as important, while after Phillips no one regarded it as unimportant" (p.490). Both scholars are careful not to entirely discount the importance of other dimensions of representation. Phillips begins drawing the line from descriptive to substantive representation, while the misinterpretation of Dahlerup's work as CMT finishes the job. An accurate reading would instead shift attention toward the importance of substantive representation without linking it to descriptive representation.

There is some disagreement between the theories enumerated herein and each has inherent weaknesses. Phillips (1996) chides Pitkin for focusing on "the distinction between being and doing" while largely ignoring "questions of power and inequality" (p.141). Others criticize Pitkin's narrow conception of representation, limited to the electoral domain and characterized as principal-agent relationships, which discounts other forms of accountability and places where representation exists (Dovi, 2015). Additionally, Pitkin provides no practical definition

of substantive representation and subsequently, a wide range of (sometimes conflicting) criteria and methodologies have been used (Kurebwa, 2014).

On the other hand, Rosenblum (1997) argues that “the politics of presence is nondirective; it allows representatives wide discretion” (p.729). There is significant research undermining the notion that women act for women’s interests, but some scholars reason it is enough that women are *more likely* to act for women (Celis et al., 2008). Phillips sees value in increasing numbers of representatives from minority groups *even if* the policy impact is null, as it promotes the notion of equality and undoes previous marginalization (Held, 1997; Phillips, 1998).

CMT appears to support Pitkin’s descriptive representation and Phillip’s politics of presence as clear means to achieving substantive representation, which makes it an enticing advocacy tool (Dahlerup, 2006). Childs and Krook (2006) argue that feminists should “give up” on CMT and that research on the substantive representation of women should refocus on critical actors, who have a differentiated desire or ability to effect change for women (p.523). Dahlerup herself argued for considering critical acts instead of critical mass.<sup>3</sup>

The application of each theory risks essentializing women as a uniform group. Many academics and activists emphasize the importance of an intersectional perspective: the idea that multiple layers of inequalities interact to form various kinds of discrimination, and therefore, different groups of women have different concerns that need representing (Childs & Lovenduski, 2013). Phillips (1996) rightly gives attention to heterogeneity among women and warns against essentialist definitions. As Childs & Lovenduski (2013) observe: “It is only when at least the salient differences among women are mirrored by their elected representatives that there is real purchase in the descriptive argument” (p.498).

Despite their shortcomings, these theories form the backbone of feminist literature on women in politics. Together, they provide valuable ways to frame the dimensions of women’s representation, and an interesting tension to investigate in the Rwandan context.

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<sup>3</sup> A sophisticated analysis of critical acts or actors is not possible given the confines of this dissertation.

## 2.3 Global Evidence

Many feminist scholars have probed the achievement of women's substantive representation in governments around the world. Celis et al. (2008) observe: "Despite their interest in descriptive representation, these scholars do not challenge Pitkin's claim that the focus should be on what representatives *do* rather than on what they *are*" (p.102). They often explore a path from descriptive toward substantive representation – largely to understand the merits of CMT.

There is no consensus about what constitutes *women's interests* or *issues*. Some researchers focus on matters directly augmenting women's autonomy or wellbeing, others on those which have gender gaps in outcomes, and others on a broader swath of topics that touch women's lives (Childs & Krook, 2009). As Childs & Lovenduski (2013) describe, many scholars consider women's policy issues to be those commonly included as women's responsibilities (i.e., childcare) and/or part of feminist movements (i.e., domestic violence). They are criticized either for essentializing women as a coherent group with a single set of needs or inferring that activist groups accurately represent all women. Studies from Western countries show that elected women are typically white, middle-class, and from elite backgrounds, and in India, the women's movement has been chastised for failing to engage lower-caste women (Childs & Lovenduski, 2013).

Albeit based on various definitions of women's interests, the global body of evidence indicates that female politicians are often more committed to women's issues and gender equality than their male counterparts (Dahlerup, 2006; Grey, 2006; Wängnerud, 2012). For example, a cross-country study conducted by Schwindt (2006) in Latin America finds that female legislators focused more than male representatives on women's equality and children's issues, and less than men on agriculture and economic policy. These interests are reflected in bill sponsorship. Bauer and Britton (2006) discover that female representatives across Africa push for a wider array of women's issues than in some Western countries, including land rights, poverty alleviation, HIV/AIDS, and sexual violence. But, it is not an inevitability that women in parliament will act intentionally on behalf of women: Childs (2006) finds that female New Labour MPs in the United Kingdom self-identified as acting for women's interests, though Galligan & Clavero (2008) observe the opposite across seven Eastern European countries.

Some studies prove that female legislators have triggered shifts in discourse, and policy, while others observe no such effects (Celis et al., 2008; Childs & Krook, 2009; Wängnerud, 2009). In South Africa, Britton (2006) finds that female representatives have played critical roles in developing and implementing laws regarding abortion, pornography, employment rights, education, basic income grants, and domestic violence. Research in Tanzania demonstrates that women's voices and interests rose in prominence during parliamentary debates and policy-making as more women were elected (Yoon, 2011). Conversely, an American study indicates that women in legislatures under 15% female pursue women-centric policies as effectively – if not more so – than men in passing bills they each put forth (Bratton, 2005). Grey's (2006) research in New Zealand finds that as representation rises, there is more debate on matters like childcare and parental leave, though the percentage at which changes occurred varied widely. Grey concludes there is no threshold or critical mass at which policy and processes are transformed.

Some scholars find that policy achievements of female MPs are determined largely by institutional factors. Wang (2013) concludes that the correlation between the number of female representatives and the timing of pro-women policy in Uganda does not match and argues that substantive change is “contingent on the presence of the other factors... within Parliament and in the external legislative environment” (p.119). Other studies show the ways in which women seek to address women's issues depends on party affiliation (Celis & Childs, 2012; Wängnerud, 2009), and party behavior can influence which women are elected and how they act in office (Childs & Krook 2006). For example, in New Zealand, women in left-leaning parties made more “gendered claims” than those in right-leaning parties (Grey, 2006).

## **2.4 Applications in African Parliaments**

The legislature is a lynchpin in democratic government: it is accountable to the people and holds other government institutions accountable (Barkan, 2009; Salih, 2005). Quoting Fish (2006), Barkan (2009) proclaims: “Stronger legislatures, stronger democracies” (p.2). As demonstrated, the seminal theories regarding women's political representation are applied across a wide range of political contexts. But the idea that increasing women's share of parliamentary seats will affect policy-making – or deepen democracy – assumes “the starting point is a fairly well-established democracy and not a single party dominant regime” (Bauer &

Burnet, 2013, p.25). Research is limited in settings better characterized as the latter, and what exists often considers these countries along similar criteria as liberal democracies.

Salih (2005) argues that parliaments are shaped by “the nature of the state...party systems...and political culture” from which they emanate (p.3), and those in Africa are fashioned from competing forces of modernity and historic traditions of “ethnicity, regional interests, and patronage” (p.261). This makes them quite distinct. African legislatures are by-and-large stronger today than ever before, but Barkan (2009) estimates that very few have fulfilled their potential to exercise vertical and horizontal accountability or real influence on policy formation. They often wield little power compared to the executive and are restricted in fulfilling legislative duties (Barkan, 2009; Salih, 2005). Representation can also be detached from normal democratic processes of building constituencies and engaging in public debate (Hassim, 2010).

These conditions have significant implications for women’s descriptive and substantive representation. Many countries that have seen dramatic gains in women’s parliamentary seats – like Mozambique, Namibia, South Africa, and Uganda – have done so using gender quotas in the wake of violent conflict (Childs & Lovenduski, 2013). Bauer and Britton (2006) suggest that women fight, become activists, or gain experience in exile during prolonged conflict situations. In the democratic transition period, there are opportunities for these women to participate in the drafting of new constitutions and laws. But Hassim (2010) asserts: “Quotas may fast-track women’s representation but they do not fast-track equality or democracy” (p.212).

When party systems are new and power is consolidated in the hands of a small elite, quotas may be unsuccessful or even impede democratic processes (Hassim, 2010). Parties may act as “‘gatekeepers’ for the representation of women” because they orchestrate the choice of candidates and the support they’re allocated (Arendt, 2018). Thus, legislators often feel compelled to toe the party line (Devlin & Elgie, 2008). Hassim (2010) warns against pursuing women’s representation in undemocratic settings, where either significant resources are spent for small improvements, or worse, female politicians may become equally complicit in consolidating power.

### **3 Methodology**

#### **3.1 Research Design**

This dissertation answers the following research questions: *To what extent does the high proportion of women in the Rwandan parliament constitute true descriptive and substantive representation of women? Secondly: In what ways are the findings regarding women's political representation shaped by increasingly authoritarian conditions fostered by the RPF?*

Originally, I sought to focus on substantive representation only, but through initial stages of research, I discovered that many Rwanda scholars presume descriptive representation despite sufficient grounds to undermine that assumption. I also observed that many mentioned the importance of political context but failed to treat it as fundamental to understanding their findings. Given these shortcomings, I expanded my research inquiry and chose to sacrifice some depth for breadth.

I chose a qualitative case study methodology, which aligns with the conditions in which Yin (2003) recommends a case study approach, including when understanding the context is crucial for exploring the research topic. It enables examination of the Rwandan case through “a variety of lenses” to illuminate different aspects of women's representation under increasingly undemocratic governance (Baxter and Jack, 2008, p.544). This dissertation is what Stake (1995) classifies as an *intrinsic case* because my objective is to contribute to understanding this case, not to extrapolate findings for theory development or universal application. Since “a hallmark of case study research is the use of multiple data sources” which are amalgamated in the analysis (Baxter and Jack, 2008, p.544), my dissertation relies on a collection of primary and secondary sources, including academic literature, government and NGO reports, policy documents, speeches, newspaper articles, and census and other data.

The justification for choosing Rwanda as a case-study is three-fold: first, it is the greatest example of fast track success. My evaluation explores what happens in a ‘best case’ scenario, which I anticipated would show that systemic challenges to women's political representation exist even in this environment. Second, while avoiding generalizations, the Rwandan case still offers more relevant insights for developing countries adopting gender quotas than what's provided by studies in Western democracies. Finally, because of Rwanda's accomplishments,

there has been extensive research already conducted using a range of methods over fifteen years. Most of the academic texts and government documents are in English and my proficiency in French allows me to interpret the remainder. This allowed for in-depth analysis without primary data collection, which was not possible given time and resource constraints.

### **3.2 Analytical Strategy**

My analytical approach is *categorical aggregation*, which involves grouping evidence thematically to draw conclusions (Stake, 1995). This dissertation uses Pitkin's, Phillips', and Dahlerup's theories as its theoretical foundation and framing, while moving beyond a shallow application to understand whether Rwanda's female MPs actually represent the country's women and what policy achievements have been realized to benefit them. I investigate the achievement of each separately, while considering that both are essential parts of women's representation overall, as Pitkin envisioned it. I also tie the findings to the peculiarities of the Rwandan political context.

For analyzing descriptive representation, academic work probing identities in Rwanda generally focuses on the Hutu-Tutsi dichotomy, and Ansoms (2009) argues that "geographic origin(s)...equally underlie disparities" (p.293). Based on the importance of these dimensions in the Rwandan context – and the availability of information – my assessment considers to what degree female MPs reflect the ethnic and geographic characteristics of the populace (while acknowledging that many additional inequalities are likely important factors). Though it's nearly impossible to determine exact conditions, I contend that ethnic and geographic divides are so fundamental to understanding representation in Rwanda that it is still valuable to evaluate the evidence that exists and questions that remain.

In considering substantive representation, I evaluate women's legislative leadership and advocacy for women's issues, as well as female MPs' direct influence on women-friendly policies. I defer to the various definitions of concepts like women's issues or women-friendly policy adopted by the authors of studies I examine. While it may be helpful to settle on a single definition and to only consider policy domains that strictly align with it, that approach would require imposing my own views on an environment I cannot presume to fully understand.

### **3.3 Limitations**

This dissertation is limited by its sources' features. Scholars acknowledge the challenges of measuring the theories used herein, thus, throughout this dissertation I acknowledge any methodological inconsistencies identified. Some experts speculate that the Rwandan government falsifies key development indicators, such as gross domestic product and poverty levels, and strictly controls data released in order to maintain a specific public image (ROAPEadmin, 2017). As such, I critically investigate, when possible, all government data. This research would benefit from key informant interviews to counteract these limitations and provide invaluable insights into political organizing and negotiating that happens off-the-record.

Two final caveats are necessary. First, parliament is just one location of representation which does not offer a full picture of representation. Second, by focusing on the macro level – “the output of the collective action of all legislators” – there is a risk of essentializing female parliamentarians as a uniform group (Kroeber, 2018, p.242). I will feature intersectionality prominently in my analysis to counteract this issue.

## **4 Findings & Analysis**

### **4.1 The Rwandan Context**

Rwanda is perhaps most known for the 1994 genocide – the culmination of tensions between the two dominant ethnic groups, Hutu and Tutsi, which ended in over 800,000 deaths (Bauer & Burnet, 2013). As described by Longman (2006) and Burnet (2008), the RPF was formed by Rwandan exiles in Uganda in the late 1980s to contest autocratic rule, and it halted the genocide after wresting control of Rwanda’s land and government apparatus from Hutu extremists. Subsequently, the RPF established a transitional government – the Government of National Unity – that espoused multi-party democracy. In 2001, the first local elections were held and RPF leader Paul Kagame was appointed President. In 2003, a new Constitution was created and citizens voted in the first presidential and parliamentary elections. President Kagame has won every election since 2003.

Colonial rule stifled women’s rights and opportunities, and several decades of socially-conservative leadership after independence in 1962 offered scarce improvements (Longman, 2006). When civil society began strengthening in the 1980s, women established organizations committed to women’s rights and were instrumental in pushing for democratization. By 1993, Rwanda was the third African country with a female Prime Minister (Longman, 2006). But women were rendered particularly vulnerable by the genocide, as sexual violence was a favored tactic among genocidaires (Longman, 2006). In 1995, an estimated 70% of Rwandan residents were female, taking on new prominence in the public sphere or as heads of household (Burnet, 2008). Many were widowed and had weak claims to property through pre-existing laws (Longman, 2006).

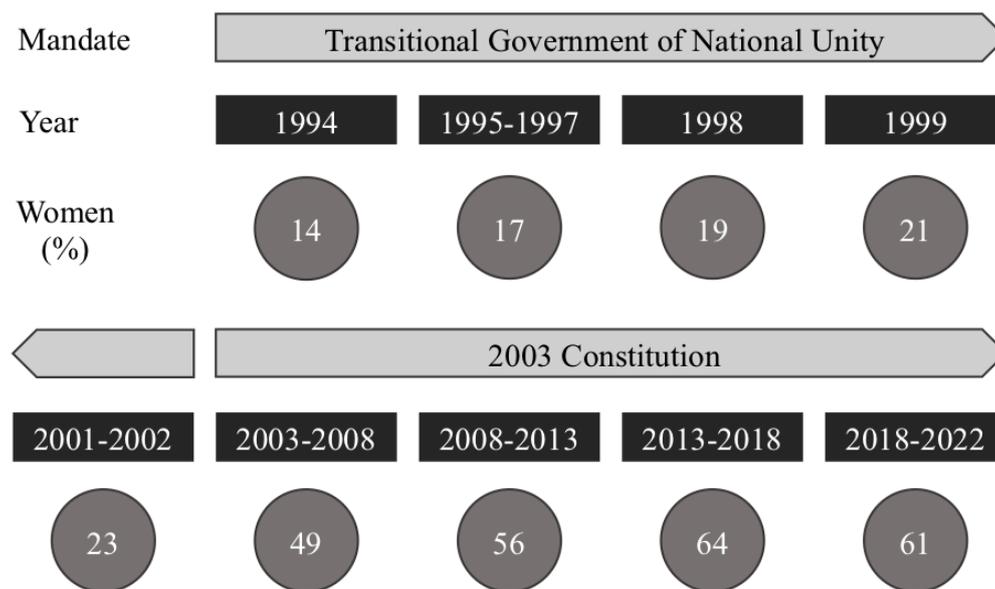
RPF leaders have promoted women since its inception, selecting women to serve as ministers, secretaries of state, Supreme Court justices, and legislators in the transitional government (Burnet, 2008). They created the Ministry of Gender and Family Promotion (MIGEPROF), directed all departments to mainstream gender equity into policies, and established women’s councils at each level of government (Burnet, 2008). The 2003 constitution enshrined a 30% reservation of seats for women in the bicameral parliament<sup>4</sup> and sub-national government

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<sup>4</sup> Of the Chamber of Deputies’ 80 seats, 53 are directly elected from proportional, closed party lists. The rest are indirectly elected, with 24 seats reserved for women and elected by district-level women’s

bodies, and in 2007, changes to Rwandan law mandated that 30% of party lists for all elected positions must be female candidates (International IDEA, 2019). As a result, Rwanda ranks highest on the global list of women in national parliaments, with over 61% of the lower house (Chamber of Deputies) and 38% of the upper house (Senate) comprised of female representatives (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2019b).

*Figure 1: Women in the Chamber of Deputies*



Source: Republic of Rwanda Gender Monitoring Office, 2019

Rwanda has made significant development progress by many measures – the country is stable, the economy is growing, and the state is expanding public services (Reyntjens, 2015). Yet Rwanda is a hegemonic party democracy with semi-authoritarian conditions. The RPF keeps a firm grip on government activities, priorities flow downwards, citizens have little means to claim their rights, and civil society lacks independence (Abbott & Malunda, 2016; Burnet, 2008). To disguise its authoritarian behavior, the RPF makes a spectacle of increasing political participation through decentralization and “a complicated, tiered electoral system for Parliament and presidency” (Burnet, 2008, p.366). Many experts affirm that the RPF stifles dissent through suppression of the media, civil society organizations (CSOs), and opposition parties (Bauer & Burnet, 2013; Reyntjens, 2015). This environment has important implications

councils (Bauer & Burnet, 2013). These seats include two women from each province and the capital (Bauer & Britton, 2006). This dissertation focuses primarily on the Chamber of Deputies because Senate seats are appointed (Longman, 2006).

for women's political representation, which are explored throughout the rest of this dissertation.

## 4.2 Descriptive Representation

Phillips (2017) states, "fair representation is...about achieving a rough correspondence between the range of experiences, perspectives, and concerns in the electorate, and the range among those who act and speak on our behalf" (para.7). In Rwanda, the idea of descriptive representation is seemingly taken for granted since 61% of elected deputies are women. There is no specific list of criteria that determines when the legislature is representative *enough*, nor the data required to *prove* that women in parliament are not reflective of the populace. But there is sufficient evidence that many female MPs do not mirror the population they are meant to represent on ethnic and geographic lines, and that elections are inadequately free and fair, to raise questions about the realization of true descriptive representation or politics of presence. Unfortunately, these questions will likely remain unanswerable for some time.

### 4.2.1 The Ethnic Divide

In 2004, the RPF prohibited the use of ethnic classifications, with penalties for invoking Hutu, Tutsi, or other identities (Lacey, 2004). While some have emphasized the merits of this approach for promoting unity, others argue it has complicated advocacy for marginalized groups (Freedom House, 2019). It makes understanding the ethnic make-up of parliament extremely difficult. Roeck, Reyntjens, Vandeginste, and Verpoorten (2016) built a database that captures ethnic identities of leaders in the executive branch, provincial leadership, military and police, judicial branch, and diplomatic corps from 1995-2016, using data archived by the University of Antwerp.<sup>5</sup> Based on this dataset, we see that, on average, 15% of the Rwandan population is Tutsi, but 48% of female ministers and secretaries of state can be identified as Tutsi (Guariso, Ingelaere, & Verpoorten, 2018). Roeck et al. (2016) also show that Tutsis held 60% of executive branch posts in 2016. With the exception of provincial executives, all other departments were predominantly Tutsi. While this dataset does not measure parliamentarians, given then RPF's well-documented political consolidation, we can speculate that similar trends

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<sup>5</sup> The database authors write that it was constructed from publicly available information, "complemented by input from sources in both countries [Rwanda and Burundi]," and ethnic identification was not included in cases of "doubt" (p.14). Because no further details are provided, I regard this data as possible indications of real conditions, not as absolute measures of reality.

might emerge from the legislative branch. Qualitative research supports these conclusions (Berry, 2015). Ansoms (2009) describes the Rwandan political class as “mainly Tutsi, nearly always urban-based, and often born and raised in a neighboring country,” whereas most citizens are “Hutu, rural peasants, and born and raised in Rwanda” (p.296).

While research is limited, one recent study illuminates the importance of ethnicity in how Rwandans consider representation. Guariso et al. (2018) conducted over 400 interviews in seven communities, and asked Interviewees to score their “perceived political representation...throughout their adult lives” (p.1364). Based on mixed-methods analysis, they are not able to identify any years in which women felt significantly more represented than men, and only one of 221 women interviewed even mentioned women’s representation. This led the research team to test for connections between ethnicity and perceived representation, using non-ethnic labels that are permitted and can be associated with ethnic identities. Guariso et al. find that “ethnicity appears more salient than gender in matters of political representation, suggesting that a Hutu woman feels more represented by a Hutu man than by a Tutsi woman” (p.1383). The quantitative results are verified by qualitative analysis of interview responses, leading the authors to conclude that ethnic identities outweigh gender identities in Rwanda, perhaps because of the historical significance of ethnic relations.

The possible shortcomings of this research loom large, including the reliability of ethnic data given the prohibition on discussing ethnicity, the validity of information provided in interviews given the sensitivity of the topic, and recall bias in evaluating past feelings of representation. Further, questions were not about parliamentary representation specifically, and Guariso et al. did not investigate what kinds of representation (i.e., local government vs. parliament) were most meaningful to interviewees. Despite these weaknesses, this is the best indication available of how ethnicity factors into political representation in contemporary Rwanda.

We must ask if a parliament that is most likely dominated by politicians of Tutsi descent can constitute genuine politics of presence while 85% of the country is Hutu. Interestingly, feminist intersectionality literature on women in politics often focuses on increasing representation of minority groups (Hughes, 2011). But in Rwanda, is it the minority that holds political power, and the challenge is to cultivate better inclusion of the majority. It is impossible to reliably draw concrete conclusions on this matter, but I reason that the evidence presented above makes claims to descriptive representation difficult to corroborate.

### ***4.2.2 The Geographic Divide***

According to the latest census, nearly 84% of Rwandans live in rural areas (National Institute of Statistics of Rwanda, 2012). Yet policy-makers have been described as “urban-based elites” with little connection to and understanding of rural Rwandans (Bauer and Burnet, 2013; Debusscher and Ansoms, 2013, p.1128). Reserved parliamentary seats for women are allocated to districts across Rwanda, but because there are fewer women with the requisite education and other credentials in rural areas, female representatives might not actually come from or live in their districts (Bauer & Burnet, 2013). It is not abnormal for the highest political figures to come from more privileged backgrounds than their constituents (Hassim, 2010), but it raises interesting questions for the politics of presence.

Given the RPF’s control of national statistics and manipulation of its public image, the data needed to prove that female MPs are not geographically reflective of their constituents is unavailable. Therefore, we must rely on findings from interview-based research, which provides sufficient doubt. For example, after interviewing several hundred Rwandans over twelve years, Burnet (2011) finds that urban (and rural elite) women have reaped greater benefits from increased women’s representation than the rest of the population, and Berry (2015) heard recurring stories of “hopelessness” and “the inevitability of poverty” among rural women (p.10).

While verging on the substantive domain, there is also evidence of instances when female MPs failed to support legislative measures that would benefit rural women, which reinforces the notion that rural women are underrepresented. For example, the Forum of Rwandan Female parliamentarians (FWP) did not advocate for women’s interests during debates around a new land law in 2003-2004. Though the majority of women in Rwanda are subsistence farmers and men often control their land rights, FWP positioned it as a matter ““for all Rwandans,”” which some believe was a tactic to avoid friction with RPF leadership around a volatile political issue (Bauer & Burnet, 2013, p.17). Many in Rwanda viewed this instance “as an example of urban elite women putting their interests ahead of less educated, and often poor, rural women” (Bauer & Burnet, 2013, p.17), and it is likely that it intensified class and ethnic tensions as well (Reyntjens, 2015). Further, Ansoms (2009) argues that the elite have made targeted efforts to “re-engineer” rural Rwanda by modernizing agriculture at the expense of smallholder farming, while caching the extremity of poverty and inequality (p.291).

### ***4.2.3 The RPF and Electoral Integrity***

Burnet (2008) writes: “The orchestrated nature of elections is an open secret in Rwanda today” (p.366). The RPF has been centralizing its power since the genocide (Longman, 2006), and Freedom House's 2019 report deems Rwanda “not free,” with an overall score of 23/100 (zero is least free) and 6/7 (seven is least free) in both political rights and civil liberties. Since the early 2000s, political dissent and freedom of speech have been increasingly suppressed, often in the name of social cohesion and denouncement of genocide (Longman, 2006). Scores of opposition officials have resigned in protest or fear – and some have been arrested, jailed, or murdered (Reyntjens, 2015). The party established a group to evaluate potential MPs, which also functions to chastise its own members who express critical opinions, painting them as “divisionist” and forcing their resignations (Longman, 2006, p.147).

The RPF has won a substantial majority in every election since 2003 (Bauer & Burnet, 2013). The first Parliamentary elections in 2003 were denounced by European Union observers as insufficiently free and fair (Devlin & Elgie, 2008). In 2019, Freedom House scored overall electoral processes 2/12, with parliamentary elections earning 1/4 (zero is least free). In 2018, the RPF won 75% of directly elected seats in the Chamber of Deputies. President Kagame won his last election, in 2017, with 98.8% of the vote. Freedom House (2019) found evidence of voter intimidation, unjust registration processes, and electoral fraud, in addition to prevention of opposition candidates from running and winning. In 2015, a constitutional amendment shortened the presidential term and reinforced a two-term maximum, but exempt President Kagame, who is entitled to run until 2034 (Freedom House, 2019). This gives President Kagame and the RPF unprecedented power to continue strengthening their authority.

If the means through which representation is realized are so deeply compromised, the descriptive representation of women – or any genuine representation – is completely undermined. This evidence adds to concerns about inflating the importance of numbers in parliament and cautions against a blind application of Western-based concepts of representation to settings with different political environments. Considering the process of electing representatives should come before attempts to evaluate the politics of presence.

### 4.3 Substantive Representation

It is well-established that we should not have pre-set expectations about the substantive impacts of women in parliament based primarily on numbers. Rwanda's national commitment to advancing gender equality is significant. Some argue that pro-women policies have helped close gender gaps in many areas, but there is general consensus that changes are not fully realized. Further, evidence about female parliamentarians' role in this progress is mixed. Women have attained leadership positions across committees and have worked to promote women's issues, yet they have few discernable legislative achievements and have even approved policies with key provisions antithetical to a feminist agenda. The Rwandan case appears to be one where a politics of ideas exists but little tangible impact is generated, which largely stems from the RPF's control over legislative activities. These discoveries add to the mounting evidence undermining CMT and the link between descriptive and substantive representation.

#### 4.3.1 Leadership and Advocacy

Hassim (2010) remarks: "The ability of female representatives to mobilize within their parties and their willingness to challenge party hierarchies is an important determinant of the extent to which women will be effectively represented" (p.221). But she writes that female parliamentarians often lack the political networks and self-assurance to do so. The research shows, however, that this observation doesn't hold true in Rwanda. Arendt (2018) conducted a study across 34 African countries to understand women's *leadership equity*, which considers women's role in policy-making through the leadership positions they hold. Based on 2015 data, she ascertains that Rwandan women have served as the presiding officer of the legislature and chaired more than 40% of committees, including equal distribution across functions typically associated with men (i.e., economy, defense) and women (i.e., culture, youth, health). Rwanda receives the highest score of all 34 nations in legislative leadership equity. Similarly, in 2006, Devlin and Elgie (2008) found that women comprised half or more of the MPs on seven of eleven committees, including traditionally male domains like foreign affairs, agriculture, science, and budget.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Recent committee data was removed from the government website. I e-mailed several members of relevant parliamentary offices and requested the data, to no avail.

To understand how women's growing presence in parliament affects the prominence of women's issues, Devlin and Elgie (2008) interviewed nine of twelve women that served as deputies both before and after the 2003 election. Women's issues, including economic empowerment and girls' education, were high on every interviewee's agenda, but they insisted this prioritization was not new. However, they found it easier to elevate them as women's numbers increased. Female MPs described a more "comfortable" parliamentary culture that fostered greater "confidence," and every interviewee mentioned "female solidarity" (p.245). Several described putting "the promotion of women ahead of party politics" and acting as a "unified lobby on gender issues," though it seems this camaraderie began before 2003 (p.245).

Bauer & Burnet (2013) argue that the influx of female parliamentarians has expanded the political debate, and female MPs reported to Devlin and Elgie (2008) that the entire parliamentary agenda had come to prominently feature women's issues. They also conveyed improved relationships with their male counterparts, explaining that male MPs had become more "gender sensitive" and "true partners" as numbers grew (p.246) – which has been demonstrated through men's involvement in advancing a gender-based violence (GBV) policy (Carlson & Randell, 2013).

Interestingly, some female deputies said they devoted *less* time to women's issues as women's representation increased because they felt others had taken up the mantle and they could step into different roles. Devlin and Elgie (2008) remark, "this may be a sign that some women are moving to become 'parliamentarians' rather than constituency workers" (p.247).

### ***4.3.2 Legislative Impact***

Gender equality goals have been integrated into key government strategies, including Vision 2020, which has planned two decades of Rwanda's development. Rwanda has a National Gender Policy (2010), as well as policies focused on girls' education (2008), women in agriculture (2010), and reproductive and maternal health (2017), among others. Many of these policies emanated from the executive,<sup>7</sup> and scholars argue that female parliamentarians have had limited legislative impact beyond a 'rubber-stamping' function (Burnet, 2008, 2011; Devlin & Elgie, 2008). Even with critical mass, female representatives have difficulty

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<sup>7</sup> Bills can be proposed by the cabinet or by MPs (Abbott & Malunda, 2016).

organizing around a policy agenda (Bauer & Burnet, 2013), instead opting to follow bills initiated by the executive branch and eschewing anything potentially controversial (Burnet, 2011; Coffé, 2012; Longman, 2006). MPs infrequently orchestrate policy development unless they're in the core of the RPF establishment (Coffé, 2012). Burnet (2008) asserts that as women's political participation grows, women's impact on policy shrinks.

Bauer & Burnet's (2013) and Devlin and Elgie's (2008) research finds that many of the most notable legislative accomplishments to advance women's interests were attained *before* women achieved critical mass in 2003. This includes the classification of rape among the most egregious crimes (1996), expansion of workplace rights for pregnant and nursing women (1997), enhancement of children's rights per UN guidelines (2001), and the Constitution's gender equality provisions (2003). The female MPs Devlin and Elgie (2008) interviewed cite these laws when speaking about their successes, but each was proposed by the executive and passed by a transitional parliament less than 30% female.<sup>8</sup> Some experts cite the limited number of women in the transitional National Assembly as the lynchpin in pushing these policies forward (Bauer & Burnet, 2013), which is consistent with Bratton's (2005) argument about the power of smaller groups of women and other findings that disprove the validity of CMT (Childs & Krook, 2006).

An example from this period is Law N°22/99, known as the inheritance law, which was passed in 1999 by the transitional National Assembly. It amended Rwanda's civil code to allow women to inherit property and guaranteed the right to enter contracts, own property, and open bank accounts without the involvement of men. The legislation was developed by the Forum for Female parliamentarians (FWP), MIGEPROF, and women's CSOs. Though parliamentarians and other leaders were appointed, not elected, at this time, Burnet (2008) argues that with a 21% female parliament, women in and outside government had access to decision-makers that allowed for effective advocacy. However, she regards the most crucial reason the contentious bill became law was that RPF leaders understood the returns on supporting the thousands of widows and orphans that would benefit.

Most experts agree that the paramount accomplishment of women in parliament since 2003 has been Law N°59/2008 on the prevention and punishment of GBV. At the time, this was the *only*

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<sup>8</sup> The GBV law was in its early stages at the time of interviews.

instance that parliament, not the executive branch, initiated legislation – the result of FWP’s organizing efforts (Abbott & Malunda, 2016; Bauer & Burnet, 2013). The law outlines procedures and penalties for GBV cases, and outlaws transgressions including marital rape, polygamy, discrimination against pregnant women, and indecent public behavior. Pearson and Powley (2008) recount how the bill was developed through a highly consultative process with CSOs and the public. The FWP engaged male MPs as co-sponsors and advocates and framed GBV as a “community matter,” emphasizing consideration of mothers, daughters, and sisters instead of romantic partners (p.35). Pearson and Powley celebrate “gender-differentiated models of leadership” and laud the GBV law as indication that women “are at the forefront of activities promoting democratic governance” (pp.6-7). Most other scholars strike a more careful tone. While it’s certainly an important accomplishment, in light of the broader context, Pearson and Powley’s jubilation seems overstated. Some use the GBV law to argue that only when female representatives find “politically safe” issues will they mobilize for women’s interests (Bauer & Burnet, 2013, p.22).

However, the evidence indicates that Law N° 10/2009, known as the labor law, is more norm than exception. This legislation was introduced by the executive and mandates equal pay, a minimum working age of 16 for men and women, and enhanced rights for pregnant and nursing women. But, it labels men as heads of household, allows bride price payments, and fails to fully protect the scores of women working informally, women in consensual unions (a third of cohabitating women), and widows (Abbott & Malunda, 2016). The law expands paid maternity leave, but to improve incentives for international business, it extends standard working hours, which disproportionately affects working mothers (Bauer & Burnet, 2013). Many Rwandan women regard this vote by female representatives as an example of privileging the party and job security over citizen’s needs (Bauer & Burnet, 2013).

### ***4.3.3 The RPF and Political Control***

The undemocratic circumstances in Rwanda help explain female MPs’ legislative behavior. Parliament does not effectually have the power – or seemingly, the will – to check the executive branch or independently propose legislation (Coffé, 2012). As demonstrated, female representatives find themselves bound to the interests of the RPF over their constituents and dissuaded from pursuing controversial policies (Bauer & Burnet, 2013). Similarly, many people Burnet (2008) interviewed expressed that MPs only serve a real legislative function

during infrequent votes on bills put forth by the RPF and otherwise relish in the material benefits of their positions. While it was difficult for her to empirically verify this behavior, there are clear cases when representatives who broke from the RPF agenda were ousted. We must also ask if female parliamentarians are actually exacerbating the RPF's authoritarian tendencies (Bauer & Burnet, 2013). Longman (2006) argues: "Female politicians in Rwanda are in fact participating in the adoption and implementation of policies that are compromising individual liberties and increasing national and international security" (p.133).

Goetz (1998) writes: "To look for a direct policy impact is to overestimate the power of parliamentarians," particularly given the long adjustment period for new representatives and the resistance mounted by the existing legislative environment (p.253). This might be true, but the research analyzed herein suggests that the barriers to substantive representation come primarily from the authoritarian nature of the state. The legislative behavior exhibited by female MPs should be considered in this context, where the restrictions on political freedoms and genuine debate give the role of parliamentarian little meaning.

#### **4.4 The RPF's Motivations**

If the progress toward advancing women and their interests is linked to the executive branch, it begs the question as to why. The RPF's motivations can be classified into three categories: increasing party legitimacy and power, spurring economic growth, and pleasing international donors.

Burnet (2008), Longman (2006), and Reyntjens (2015) believe that the gender quota and other women-friendly efforts are means to consolidate RPF power. Arendt (2018) discusses how political parties design gender quotas "to either empower women within...legislatures or reinforce party control" (p.302). In the Rwandan case, the RPF intentionally positioned female representatives to be "overly reliant on the party" (p.314). As described previously, the RPF uses increasing women's representation to distract and disguise its authoritarianism from the masses at home and abroad, cultivating a democratic façade while it suppresses dissent and promotes party allegiance.

Other experts argue that the government is incentivized by the potential for economic growth and it only attempts to empower women in the ways it believes will meet this end (Abbott &

Malunda, 2016). Engaging in the debate about whether investing in women leads to economic development is beyond this dissertation's scope, but official policy documents clearly state that the Rwandan government expects women's empowerment to result in growth and poverty reduction (Debusscher & Ansoms, 2013). This motivation is unreliable, because when gender equality efforts conflict with economic goals, the latter takes precedent. For example, the government consistently discounts subsistence agriculture and care work, two extremely gendered occupations in which the majority of Rwandan women participate (Debusscher & Ansoms, 2013). While trying to attract foreign businesses and major capital investments, the government's modernization policies that promote "market-oriented maximum-productivity logic – without paying particular attention to gender dimensions" are likely to hurt women across the country (Debusscher & Ansoms, 2013, p.1122).

Finally, since the genocide, Rwanda has received significant foreign assistance, which has become a crucial part of its budget. Debusscher and Ansoms (2013) note that gender equality is a trendy issue among international aid-givers, which has motivated the government to double-down on it. One individual they interviewed from the donor community states: "They have to sell Rwanda, and in order to sell something you have to make a nice picture" (p.1124). This could also explain why the government places heavy emphasis on initiatives that can be quantitatively measured and easily marketable (Abbott & Malunda, 2016). More broadly, Reyntjens (2015) blames donors for enabling the government's undemocratic behavior. He remarks: "Despite knowing that each of Rwanda's elections has been deeply flawed, the international community has never seriously addressed the issue, thus giving the regime the (justified) impression that it could proceed unhindered" (p.24).

## **5 Discussion & Conclusion**

### **5.1 Situating the Rwandan Case**

The quotes highlighted in chapter one show that Rwanda has been heralded as a role model in fostering gender equality and increasing women's representation in government. This dissertation systematically casts doubt on these achievements. While Rwanda has made momentous strides to integrate a gender lens into policy and processes across the entire government, I argue that it is irresponsible to label Rwanda's 61% female parliament as a beacon of descriptive or substantive representation of women. The election of many women to the legislature is not unimportant, but celebration must come with caveats.

Based on the available data, it seems that female MPs' ethnic and geographic make-up differs considerably from that of their constituents. The theory and empirical research show us that sharing a sex or gender is not enough to ensure that a heterogeneous population is represented. The aspiration of the politics of presence is to align representatives with the represented based on multiple levels of identity that reflect a diverse range of experiences, perspectives, and needs. In Rwanda, women's interests may have gained prominence on the legislative agenda, but that has not been enough, for example, to ensure that the vast number of rural women working in agriculture have sufficient advocates in parliament. In this way, Rwandan parliament exemplifies a dearth of both politics of presence and politics of ideas. The RPF's authoritarianism is a major impediment to meaningful descriptive representation by corrupting electoral processes, orchestrating the dominance of Tutsi elites, and constricting public debate and information. Further theorizing is needed to address whether we can have true descriptive representation without true democracy; this paper suggests that we cannot.

This dissertation adds to the work disproving the validity of CMT. Findings in Rwanda are largely consistent with developed countries, indicating Western research is not irrelevant in the developing world. Female legislators in the transition government had many victories for women's rights with less than 30% representation. Yet the following fifteen years of legislating yielded few independent accomplishments, despite a proportion of women far exceeding 30%. Rwanda's pro-women policies come largely from the executive branch and RPF leadership, whose commitment to gender equality springs from self-serving interests, such as cultivating an illusion of democracy, maintaining a tight grip on power, positioning the country as an

international development darling, and boosting economic growth. This echoes the pragmatic argument for increasing women's representation. Parliament's most notable substantive achievements include the prominence of women's issues in legislative discussion, the engagement of male MPs, and women's leadership equity. This supports global findings that women are more committed to women's issues. More research probing their influence on a broader swath of legislative topics, including those in typically-male domains, would be valuable.

Holding Rwandan parliamentarians to Western standards of substantive representation seems somewhat unfair, given the lack of space for genuine political debate and dissent. MPs appear bound to the interests of RPF leadership who helped them obtain their seats and expect loyalty in return. Countless cases of political intimidation, manipulation, and violence make it understandably challenging to veer off course without serious consequences. One could argue that given the circumstances, the success of the GBV bill – one of the only pieces of legislation ever triggered by MPs – is an outstanding achievement of substantive change. On the other hand, female legislators who participate in this system may be complicit in propagating it, whether actively or passively.

This dissertation demonstrates the importance of institutional factors, which reflects Dahlerup's (2006) argument that development of women-friendly policies is less about numbers and more about factors that apply to all political issues, like political climate and culture, the state's feminist apparatus, presence of coalitions, etc. Childs & Lovenduski (2013) observe: "It is not enough to secure simple parity of presence in legislatures; the institutions themselves must be regendered, must be feminized" (p.509). As such, it's important to note that parliament is only one site of representation, and Longman (2006) suggests that women's presence in ministries or local government institutions may accomplish more of the substantive effects feminists desire. This is an opportunity for further exploration.

Many scholars suggest that with a more vibrant and transparent democracy, the potential for substantive change is significant (Bauer & Burnet, 2013; Burnet, 2008). Others emphasize the weight of threats to progress stemming from the pervasive economic justification for gender equality, focus on empirical measures, restricted role of CSOs in policy-making, and absence of grassroots participation (Debusscher & Ansoms, 2013). A long time horizon is often required to fully understand substantive representation – for example, it was nearly twenty

years after the New Zealand Parliament became 15% female when many women-centric policies were enacted (Grey, 2006). It thus may be too soon to speculate on the ultimate effects of a 61% female parliament.

## 5.2 Symbolic Representation

It is important to acknowledge that scholars exploring symbolic representation in Rwanda have identified positive developments. Based on ethnographic research from 1997-2009, Burnet (2011) describes cultural changes since 2003, including women's increased confidence and acceptance speaking in public, improved attitudes towards women's leadership, more equitable intra-household decision-making, and greater opportunities for women outside the home. Burnet cautions that these effects can't be attributed exclusively to women's representation, but interviewees cited the collection of women-friendly policies adopted by the RPF as the source. As a result, Bauer and Burnet (2013) suggest that women's representation in parliament is not futile, and Coffé (2012) observes: "Having a (large) number of female representatives in Parliament is a symbol that indicates to women that women matter" (p.288). This reinforces Phillip's (1998) argument that women's representation can be worthwhile even with minimal policy impacts.

Moreover, Coffé (2012) surveyed fourteen Rwandan female MPs to explore how they themselves understand women's political representation. While their characterizations do not align neatly with Pitkin's categories, Coffé finds that ten of fourteen legislators put heavy weight on symbolic representation and little emphasis on substantive representation. This leads Coffé to resolve that many female MPs hold their responsibilities as role models in higher esteem than as policy-makers. Further research could probe how this perception affects legislative activities.

## 5.3 Implications for Advocacy

Why does a causal link between descriptive and substantive representation continue to be propagated, despite the mounting evidence dispelling it? Dahlerup (2006) believes the *story* of CMT is a useful advocacy tool to get more women elected to legislatures. Global activism around women's political representation appears to combine the justice argument for increasing women's representation with the difference and democracy arguments to strengthen it. The use

of Rwanda's story exemplifies this strategy, and it has served as demonstration that the promise of women's political participation can be realized.

But that is not telling the right story, which is dangerous in several ways. First, by celebrating President Kagame and his party, the international community is helping disguise their misdeeds and incentivizing them to continue. Second, it is undermining the appropriate allocation of resources and advocacy for the promotion of women's representation. Third, it is painting an oversimplified and inaccurate picture of how real representation is achieved and preventing the generation of valuable insights that could serve the multitude of countries worldwide attempting to promote women in government.

It is easy to see the figures on women's representation like those in Rwanda and declare achievement of descriptive and even substantive representation. But this dissertation argues that we must not fall prey to simple and convenient conclusions. Instead, we should apply a critical lens to understand complex political environments. The picture may not be as pretty for leaders and activists who sincerely seek better outcomes for women through political representation, but it will reflect actual conditions and ultimately allow them to push for the right changes in the right places.

Perhaps we must accept that the case for fairness and equality is enough. It is possible to cultivate the effects on empowerment and policy we desire through boosting women's legislative participation, but these results are not automatic. Further, Bauer and Burnet (2013) rightly observe: "Deepening democracy is a task that electoral gender quotas and the women elected on them cannot be expected to accomplish on their own" (p.25). Nevertheless, increasing women's political representation is a worthwhile endeavor, and it will benefit from an honest and nuanced understanding of the Rwandan case.

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**Note:** all citations of laws and policies are made in-text only, per The American Psychological Association (APA) referencing style guide (6<sup>th</sup> Edition).