Reshaping Gender through Agricultural Reform: The Case of Rwanda

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Rwanda is small and landlocked, but also ecologically diverse. For many decades, small-scale farmers have used this diversity to exploit a variety of ecological niches (hill slopes, flat lands, marshes) in order to stay food secure. With the launch of the new Land Law (2005), however, the Government of Rwanda, in collaboration with international experts, has come out in favour of a dramatic overhaul of small-scale agriculture in favour of large-scale production. The new approach rests on the idea that smallholders need to consolidate their fragmented plots and practise mono-cropping, especially of maize. Mono-cropping on consolidated plots is thought to be the antidote to the spiralling decline in land productivity. Against this backdrop, and focusing on the gendered nature of small-scale agriculture, the paper reviews the government’s progress with systematizing food production – making it commercially viable; imposing specific cropping regimes for specific altitudes – and will highlight how gender relations are being reshaped through this social engineering experiment. Some dietary consequences will also be discussed. In gender terms, from a policy perspective, Rwanda now faces an extraordinary contradiction in that its spectacular progress with women’s participation in high-level politics – half of Rwanda’s Members of Parliament are women – is not matched with similar progress in the realm of decision-making in agriculture. On the contrary, the new structures (cooperatives) for participating in Rwanda’s commercially oriented agriculture have made the workload of women as labourers as high as ever, while their role in decision-making has much decreased. The paper reviews research in progress by a number of scholars, and highlights the disconnect between the new policy orientation and realities on the ground.