Reshaping Gender through Agricultural Reform: The Case of Rwanda

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RWANDA: SOME GENERAL INFORMATION

• 80 – 90% of the population depends on agriculture;
• Heavy demographic pressure / 30% of households own less than 0.2 hectares (0.5 acres) of land;
• Farms are very small and scattered
• Land is overcultivated;
• Encroachment on marginal spaces / steep slopes;
• Long history of conflict over natural resources;
• The 1994 genocide in which mostly ethnic Tutsi (minority) were killed by ethnic Hutu (majority).
RWANDA SINCE THE 1994 GENOCIDE

• Exceptionally fast economic recovery, but growth not accompanied by significant poverty reduction;

• Led by the RPF (Rwandan Patriotic Front), the post-genocide government took immediate steps to address gender inequality. Today, half of Rwanda’s MPs are women.

• Pursuing a ‘knowledge-based’ approach to Development, the government of Rwanda (GoR) is now dramatically restructuring the country’s approach to food production, thereby refashioning the rural population itself.
GENDER ‘TRADITIONS’

• In the 1980s, Rwanda knew a fairly unambiguous division of labour: men tended (and controlled) banana groves and coffee crops; women took responsibility for seed selection (cereals and pulses) and other planting materials (e.g. sweet potato cuttings);

• Women’s legal-cum-social status was defined by the position of their husbands, fathers and lovers (Jefremovas 1991);

• Women and men struggled over any surplus that women might generate. Men owned women’s surplus, but women had ways of negotiating their rights;

• Gender struggles/negotiations took place within households and, significantly, within the agricultural cooperatives through which marshland cultivation was organized (Pottier 1989);
THE PROMISE (AND DEMISE) OF GENDER EQUALITY

- The post-genocide government put women’s legal and social disempowerment on the agenda: especially through creating the Ministry of Women and Development (1999) and by ensuring women’s political representation through nationwide elections, from the top down to grassroots ‘women’s councils’;

- The high point of the women’s movement was the way in which women in government and civil society worked together in the late 1990s to write the ‘Inheritance Law’, which made it legal for women to inherit property.

- The Inheritance Law seemed like a great victory for women and girl-children, but was also deeply flawed: women/widows had to be legally married (not customarily) to benefit; widows had to be widows because of the genocide;

- The co-optation of women into higher-level positions of governance drained women’s civil society organizations of their leadership. As a result, some of the oldest organizations imploded. Women never rallied around the crucial matter of women’s land rights (Burnet 2008).
SOCIALLY ENGINEERING THE COUNTRYSIDE: DEATH OF THE RWANDAN “FAMILY FARM”

• Given the very small acreages and dispersed fields that resource-poor farmers worked at the end of the last century, officials and foreign experts agreed that Rwanda had been entrapped in a downward production spiral since the mid-1980s.

• The GoR embarked on a restructuring of the economy away from ‘subsistence’ farming towards a ‘professionalized’ agriculture from which the land-poor would exit.

• The strategy was justified on the grounds that rationalization [read: large-scale monocropping on consolidated plots] would boost non-farm employment opportunities open to the land-poor and thus lift them out of poverty. A ‘free-market’ approach was adopted.

• The vision of a radically restructured countryside and society became enshrined in the 2005 Land Law.
THE 2005 LAND LAW

• This ‘organic’ law demanded that fragmented fields be consolidated and registered. This would ensure security of tenure (Article 20);

• Farmers whose consolidated land remained under 1ha stood to lose it since one hectare was deemed insufficient for efficient exploitation;

• The Land Law also addressed gender imbalances in customary land tenure, which was now declared obsolete (Article 4). The new law connected with the Inheritance Law (1999) and confirmed that gender discrimination in land ownership was prohibited. Further in the text, however, the law reminds citizens that only legally married women and their children can inherit (Article 36), as the Inheritance Law determined.
REVOLUTIONISING THE MARSHLANDS

• Land consolidation has its twin in the new approach to marshland development.
• In the 1980s, dry-season marshland cultivation was a safety-net in-between the two agricultural seasons;
• Today, marshlands are developed EITHER through concessions to private investors OR through the allocation of plots to cooperatives run by politically connected managers, sometimes members of the military.
• The new approach dictates that only high-value, commercial crops (rice, maize, sugarcane) be grown and monocropped – and this to the detriment of familiar household crops like sweet potatoes and sorghum.
• Research by Ansoms and Murrison (2012) shows that poorer coop members are increasingly being squeezed out of marshland cultivation, which costs them access to much needed staple crops. Unlike in the 1980s, when ‘gender issues’ (workloads and remuneration) were openly discussed, present-day cooperatives are run by male managers who rule supreme. Women’s involvement as agricultural labourers is as high as ever, but the role of women in decision-making is decreasing.
REPERCUSSIONS OF AGRARIAN REFORM & WEAKENING OF THE WOMEN’S MOVEMENT AT GRASSROOTS LEVEL

- Rural female-headed households are very likely to have poor consumption: 21% of rural people with low Food Consumption Scores (FCS) are female-headed households (UN-Rwanda 2009: 12).

- The UN-Rwanda report also mentions that:
  
  female headed households and/or uneducated heads of household are highest in the lowest expenditure quintiles. Households in the lowest expenditure quintile also tend to be more crowded, less wealthy and less frequently use improved toilets. ... They also tend to have on average fewer activities and lower access to land and livestock. (2009: 52; emphasis in text)

- One has to conclude that the great promise of the Inheritance Law – gender equality before the law – remains far from fulfilled.
REPERCUSSIONS (CTD.)

• In addition, compared with the 1980s, the reliance on markets for food consumption has become quite staggering:

  The 2009 CFSVA and Nutrition Survey show the importance of markets as a source of food: it contributed on average to 52% of the food consumed by a household, while own production contributed to 45%. (UN-Rwanda 2009: 57)

• Surely we need to ask not only how this transformation has come about, but also who in the household is responsible for making the purchases! If in the 1980s men and women argued over (fought over) the right to sell surplus, we can be assured that similar struggles are ongoing regarding the obligation to contribute to household food purchases. The increasing need to rely on the market for food procurement – another engineered facet of Rwandan society today – has serious repercussions within households. How negotiations unfold needs to be investigated.
In sum

• The GoR has set itself some formidable gender-related targets for 2012. They include: ‘the elimination of gender disparities in education’; the halving the headcount ratio of the consumption-poor, among whom women predominate; reducing the under-five mortality rate by two-thirds, and improving maternal health (Republic of Rwanda 2008: 29). Regarding higher education, ‘the number of students enrolled in sciences is planned to increase from 21% to 30%. The proportion of females enrolled is intended to increase by 40% by 2012’ (2008: 35). Rwanda is well on its way to achieve most of these targets, especially in education, health and political representation.

• The question remains, though, whether these reachable targets will have a positive impact on the lives of the majority of Rwanda’s rural women? To answer that question researchers and policy makers will need to take a close empirical look at how the restructuring of Rwanda’s rural space is in turn restructuring relations within (and between) rural households. At this stage we have questions, but no answers as yet.