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Looking to Rwanda for Lessons on Gender Equality

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Out of the devastation of violent conflict comes the opportunity to do things differently. Women in conflict are breaking new ground and demanding their countries build a new inclusive kind of democracy. This posting is the first in a series on how women are redefining democracy and governance around the globe. It discusses gender-based quotas and the successes of women in Rwanda, which in 2008 became the first country with a majority of women in the legislature.

In modern violent conflicts the victims are 90% civilian, mainly women and children (a century ago that number was 10%). Rape and sexual violence have become an increasingly popular method of warfare, reaching new levels of brutality. Women constitute an average of 18% of legislatures and parliaments worldwide. In short, when violence breaks out, women are substantially less likely to have started or to carry out the conflict and substantially more likely to suffer at the hands of those who did.

Conflicts leave governing bodies weakened or in shambles and those who are left must rebuild. Yet too often the same people are put right back into power and too often the violence repeats itself. A movement has begun to undermine this cycle of devastation. Women who have been denied some of their most basic rights are using these transitions, when the governance system is in flux and the world is more likely to be paying attention, to demand that their voices are heard. Security Council Resolution 1325 has increased their leverage. The resolution, adopted unanimously in October 2000, mandates that women be included in all aspects of conflict prevention, reconciliation and post-conflict reconstruction. Change is at hand -- and the women of Rwanda are leading the way.

Efforts to build democracies that include groups historically excluded from decision-making are making progress and gender based quotas are part of the reason. Although controversial in some countries, quotas have increasingly been put in place over the past two decades through constitutions, legislatures and political parties, both through law and voluntarily. Implementation is mixed, but today over half of all countries have some type of quota to reserve positions for women in decision-making bodies. Some quotas are gender-neutral, covering women and men. (Other common quotas include for ethnic groups and youth). Quotas can jump start the democratic process and in some situations are a necessary, temporary first step to level the field.

Rwanda is primarily known as the site of a horrific genocide during which approximately 800,000 people, mostly ethnic Tutsis, were brutally murdered in only 100 days. It is now the first country to have a majority of women in the legislature at 56%, up from a high of 18% before the conflict. Women also hold one-third of the cabinet level posts. This dramatic result came about because well-organized women crossed party lines to advocate for change, and President Paul Kagame and his party, the Rwanda Patriotic Front, supported that effort.

The 2003 Rwandan Constitution included a quota providing for 30% reserved seats for women in all decision making bodies. In 2008 women filled the 30% quota and then gained another 26% of the seats in the legislature via the political party ballot, for a total of 56%. The process and quota system is discussed in detail in a 2004 paper for International IDEA by Elizabeth Powley, who was in Rwanda tracking these advances for the Initiative for Inclusive Security. According to Powley, of the 24 women who held the reserved quota seats from 2003 to 2008, only a small number ran for those seats again. Some choose not to continue in politics. Most chose to run on political party ballots in the 2008 election, competing with the men--and many were successful, which is what catapulted the percentage of women to 56%. The reserved seats had served as an incubator for women who might otherwise have been excluded from the process, giving them the experience and confidence to run in the general election.

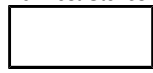
Even though Rwanda still faces many barriers to democratic governance and gender equality, there are already indications that the women led legislature is making an impact. For example, according to a recent report, the parliamentary women's caucus (the Forum des Femmes Rwandaises Parlementaires or FFRP) led a successful effort to pass ground-breaking legislation on gender-based violence in part by involving and garnering support from their male colleagues.

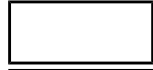
Democracy is an ever-changing and imperfect experiment. We need to learn from the women of Rwanda and the men who supported them. Using quotas to support gender equality not only enables more representative leadership in struggling nations, but it fosters change - a change that may lead to more effective leadership and increase the chances for sustainable peace. And that is good for democracy.


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Since when has noncombatants being a victim of war a new phenomenon. Read the Trojan women; in ancient times, the victor simply slaughtered all the enemy men and took the women as slaves. War sucks for everyone; this is nothing new. During wars of the past (in Europe, the kind you're thinking about) women and children may not have been bombed, but they were taxed into near starvation to pay for the wars.

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What a ridiculous comment. Of course there were civilians killed in wars from our distant past. The difference this century has made is that with new weapons - especially planes that can drop bombs from a great height - civilians are targeted in a way that they haven't been able to be in the past. It is a terrible consequence of modern warfare.

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According to Gendercide Watch 75-80% of the victims of the Rwanda genocide were male. This is typical for wars and conflicts. Your statement that the victims were "mainly women and children" is at best a deliberate distortion and at worst anti-male bigotry intended to portray women as innocent victims to men as violent criminals in the world's affairs.

In many 3rd world countries the majority of the population are under 18 hence "children" making your designation women "and children" a way to present women as the majority victims when they are inevitably the very safest group in all conflicts.

You also lie to suggest that men are responsible for starting wars. Although rulers of countries are often men, most men are not rulers of countries. In any case women when they are in power cause wars just as often as men, if not more often.

Your article advocates anti-democratic discrimination against men seeking election to office. You say men because they were born as men, ought to have less chance of being elected. That is bigotry. You support this by suggesting men are inherently more war-like than women, another slander.

Although you mention President Paul Kagame's government positively you fail to mention that it was in large part if not completely responsible for the genocide and also for the on-going war in the Congo that has resulted in millions and millions of deaths (again mostly of men and boys).

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do we democrats not believe in democracy any more? if quotas like this are OK, why not Russia's "quota" that guarantees that one small group of men known as "Putin and his pals" will have 99% of political power?

same thing, just a different number, right?

I hope having this many women in power works for rwanda, though I'm not quite ready to take lessons from that nation.

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