

Girlhood in a post-conflict situation: The case of Rwanda

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abstract

Girls in Rwanda have been confronted with unique challenges since the 1994 genocide. This study aims to analyse their everyday experiences, given the repercussions the genocide has had on their lives and the sociocultural pressures they face. Using a comprehensive cross-sectoral approach we examine their positions and roles through four 'lenses': security and protection, economic security, access to basic services, and participation and empowerment. This gender analysis of girlhood in a post-conflict environment reveals that girls must contend with a wide-ranging and interconnected set of gender biases and highlights the fact that they are relatively 'invisible' in programmes for women or youth, even though they play a major role in the rebuilding of peaceful communities. We conclude that post-conflict programmes would benefit from consulting with girls and young women to detect disparities in access to welfare services and resources and help shape policies and programmes that address their interests.

keywords

girls, gender, youth, post-conflict situation, empowerment

Introduction

Contemporary conflicts can be singularised by the mounting degree of contempt and high levels of violence they exert against civilian populations. Forcefully, these conflicts have raised awareness among international institutions that human security is a fundamental requirement of peace-building processes (UN Security Council Resolution 1820, 2008). In particular, there is now wide recognition of the need to consider

consequences arising from the various forms of violence perpetrated against girls and women (Gagné, 2006).

Reports and feminist research have demonstrated that women are not simply collateral casualties of war, but in fact also victims of gender-based violence (Sideris, 2000; Afshar and Eade, 2004). In light of this, UN Security Council Resolution 1325 demands that we acknowledge the unique experiences and needs of women and

girls in war-torn areas. Yet, despite youth and gender being at the forefront of two widely supported UN agendas (one devoted to child protection and development and the other to the protection and advancement of women), evidence suggests that girls and young women living in conflict-ridden regions are still falling through the cracks (World Youth Report, 2005: 174). Indeed, Kirk and Taylor (2005) claim that practical knowledge for both the development and preservation of peace must put forward strategies that comprehensively include girls and young women as effective participants and beneficiaries.

Among the arguments raised by advocates is the fact that adolescent girls and young women represent a large proportion of the conflict-affected population – one that may ultimately be able to break the cycles of violence and poverty. It is therefore imperative to pursue research on the impacts that armed conflicts have on girls and to define their roles as actors in the post-conflict period, to improve responses for them within post-reconstruction programmes.

Girls are an overlooked group within conflict-affected populations

A review of documents and reports suggests that girls are an overlooked group within conflict-affected populations (Matthews and Ritsema, 2004; Women's Commission for Refugee Women and Children, 2008). Meanwhile, an emerging body of research focusing on the study of girls in developing countries points out that it is important to realise that no 'universal age' exists to define the threshold between girlhood and womanhood (Moletšane et al., 2008). Of particular interest to us is the argument that often adolescence is an absent phase in the lifecycle of girls, who may marry and/or become mothers quite young. Furthermore, girls have specific needs which differ from those of adult women (Van der Gaag, 2008).

Feminist research has also highlighted cultural context as a determinant factor for girlhood. More broadly, literature concerning girlhood studies recommends using a cross-sectoral approach to ascertain the experiences that girls live through (Mitchell and Reid-Walsh, 2009).

Girls in Rwanda are confronted with uncommon challenges in the aftermath of the 1994 genocide. The unique problems they face as a result of the particular historical and cultural context in which they are nested, as well as their young age, represent a unique opportunity to investigate gender challenges in a post-conflict situation from their own perspective. In this article we analyse the position, roles and vulnerability of girls in Rwanda post-genocide, focusing on their gender-specific needs given an unequal sociocultural environment.

Using a comprehensive cross-sectoral approach we examine their positions and roles through four 'lenses': security and protection, economic security, access to basic services, and participation and empowerment. Through these 'lenses' our study aims to offer some answers to the following questions: What are the legacies of the genocide and war on Rwandan girls and young women? What are the entrenched social attitudes and gender biases faced by these girls and young women? How are their concerns about educational and health needs being addressed by non-governmental and governmental organisations?

The legacies of the genocide as experienced by Rwandan girls

The genocide that took place in Rwanda in 1994 was marked by horrific forms of violence, particularly against girls and women. Officially, half a million women were raped. As has been highlighted in many reports, rape was part of the genocidal plan and a tactic used for the systematic degradation of girls and women; perpetrators deliberately set out to infect female victims with HIV (Human Rights Watch, 1996; Amnesty International, 2004). A study carried out



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Young mother and child in Rwanda – or are they siblings? Either way, much of the care for this young child will fall on the shoulders of the older girl.

by an association of widows against violence on women during the war and genocide revealed that 80% of the victims surveyed showed signs of trauma, with a staggering 66% of them testing positive for HIV (AVEGA, 1999). Since there are no disaggregated statistics for girls, one is not certain whether the designation of 'women' in these statistics encompasses girls. The lack of sensitive information based on age has led to gaps in the provision of specific counselling and therapeutic services for young female rape survivors.

Another consequence of the genocide was a drastic change in the demographic profile of the country. Immediately after the killings, girls and women formed 70% of the entire Rwandan population. Many survivors had to contend with the loss or absence of their families: active

members of the family (adult men and women) were either dead, in exile, or in prison. This meant that a significant fraction of young orphans, mostly girls, had to assume the roles of both provider and protector for their families. Children aged 13 to 20, out of necessity, had to become heads of families, taking upon themselves the care of much younger children. According to the first available national statistics, in 1996 child-headed households comprised 13% of all Rwandan families. Over time this number has decreased somewhat (Ministry of Finance and Economic Planning, 2007: 152), but the ravages of HIV/AIDS seem to be perpetuating the situation: today more than 100 000 households are run by children. In some rural areas the proportion of families managed solely by women or girls can reach up

to 38% (Gervais and Mitchell, 2008).

Adding to the pressures weighing on young people is the absence of traditional support mechanisms, communities having been torn apart. Thus, many orphaned girls live in foster or adopted families where they are subjected to abuse; they are frequently engaged in long hours of domestic labour and often forced to miss school (Women's Commission for Refugee Women and children, 2001).

Economic security: Head of household and domestic labour

Young girls' economic needs and strategic interests are often not addressed by donors. As heads of families, for example, they are not targeted as beneficiaries in community development projects that provide seeds, tools or credit to reduce food shortages in rural areas (Gervais, 2006b, 2004). As heads of families or domestic servants, young girls very often cannot attend school and therefore lack the skills to be viable in the labour market or benefit from economic development initiatives. Moreover, they do not have the collateral or collective support of a feminine or mixed association that would entitle them to be part of the micro-credit projects funded by donors. Indeed, the latter interventions do not typically seek out adolescents, especially adolescent girls. The Rwandan government, for its part, has initiated a women's credit fund to specifically support the engagement of women in rural areas in income-generating activities. It is unclear how much of this support is reaching young women and girls who are heads of households (Ministry of Gender and Family Promotion (MIGEPROF), 2009a).

A few initiatives targeting youth in rural areas and aiming to develop their technical and entrepreneurial skills are being implemented by international NGOs and UN agencies (Gervais, 2006a). Most of the time, however, these small projects reproduce gender stereotypes during their design and implementation phases. For instance,

in rural areas boys and young men are trained in carpentry, masonry or handicraft production, with start-up capital provided for income-generating activities. Meanwhile, vocational skills training offered to girls focuses on activities such as sewing, knitting and hair-styling. This contrasts with the fact that the genocide led to an important shift in the roles occupied by Rwandan women; the reconstruction period forced girls and women to take on what were traditionally men's roles, bringing an increased share of responsibilities but also opening up opportunities to participate in economic activity (previously restricted) (Gervais, 2006b). Hence, too often NGOs and donors, in bestowing support to enable the economic security of girls, are insensitive to the fact that they are actually perpetuating traditional gender roles and contributing to the disempowerment of girls.

Post-genocide, widowed women were unable to inherit their dead husbands' property. Young orphans, having inherited land and possessions from their parents, had to contend with the covetousness of other family members or even strangers. The establishment of a law on inheritance, granting equal access to property in 1999, provided the first legal framework for protection of the rights of married women and orphaned girls. Nevertheless, lacking the capacity and resources to navigate the official bureaucracy, orphaned girls still tend to be unable to legally defend their land or property rights. Given the shortage of land and Rwanda's particularly extreme overpopulation, property that girls inherited from their parents is very often claimed by male adults (Agency for Co-operation and Research in Development, 2001: 26). Furthermore, as observed in other post-conflict experiences, when new land acts become effective, customary law nonetheless prevails (Zuckerman and Greenberg, 2009: 7). Customary law denying women property rights has long been embedded in the minds of people in Rwanda, and the belief that men should decide is still largely endorsed (especially in rural areas).

In post-genocide Rwanda economic security and the issue of land ownership are critical factors to consider for empowering girls. The majority of rural girls or girls in foster care receive insufficient tools or provisions from post-conflict programmes to enable even the most basic living conditions that would allow their reintegration into ordinary life.

Safety and protection: Gender-based violence and HIV/AIDS

Insecurity remains a daily concern in the lives of girls. Girls are often raped on their way to and from the fields or school, either early in the morning or after dark. Of the more than 3000 rapes recorded by the Rwandan Police in 2005 and 2006, 78% were committed against victims under the age of 18. Employers of domestic workers are ranked first on the list of perpetrators, with teachers a close second (MIGEPROF 2008: 12). According to a National Youth Council study (Mitchell and Kanyangara, 2006), teachers in some schools continue to impose corporal punishment even though it has been declared illegal, and demand sexual favours (typically from girls). Sexual violence and exploitation is seen as a contributing factor to girls dropping out of school; it can lead to early pregnancy and early marriages, further exacerbating the impact of violence on girls (EICV, 2006). Moreover, girls who are heads of families do not benefit from outside protection, and therefore live in a climate of permanent insecurity, being constantly vulnerable to attempts of intimidation and sexual assault, particularly at night.

Legacies of the genocide and war have contributed to transmission of HIV/AIDS. Already a problem before the genocide, the mass rapes that occurred within the conflict's time frame significantly increased transmission of the virus in Rwanda. Of those women (and girls) who survived the genocide and were alive in 2004, Amnesty International (2004: 3) found that 7 out of 10 were living with HIV/AIDS. Many of those infected are now dying, causing a crisis at family

level since so many of them are single household heads. Their deaths are also having repercussions on the national economy in sectors where girls and women have assumed a greater role (Gervais 2006b, 2004). In addition, the burden of caring for those with HIV/AIDS-related illnesses or for children orphaned by AIDS very often falls on young girls, who are then unable to attend school (Ministry of Local Government, Information and Social Affairs, 2003).

Access to basic services

Mental health, typically a post-conflict issue, is often neglected in peace-building programmes. Until 1997 treatment for victims of rape was unavailable at any medical institution in Rwanda (Women's Commission for Refugee Women and Children, 2000: 10). The health care system, always severely under-resourced (rural health centres were generally staffed by only one nurse), broke down completely in many areas during the genocide. Treatment for post-traumatic disorders was mainly undertaken by women's associations. However, women activists have rarely been adequately trained in counselling and their organisations operate with very modest external financial support (if any at all) from aid agencies.

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The funding and development of programmes providing psychological treatment and care for traumatised survivors and victims of sexual violence have been a low priority. Consequently, specific counselling and psychotherapeutic services for young female rape survivors were not designed and implemented in post-genocide Rwanda, even though female adolescents are at greater risk of psychopathology and gynaecological complaints (Amone-P'Olak, 2005; National University of Rwanda, 2005).

Young married girls' health care needs have not been sufficiently addressed in the post-reconstruction period. Most donors and the government finance maternal health services as a priority because of the positive externalities of improved health for the child. They fail, however, to understand the specific constraints of girls and young women. Even if Rwanda has legislated the age of marriage to be 21, early marriages still occur in rural communities. In fact, the extent of early marriages (often forced) in Rwanda is not known. To avoid the law these marriages are not registered. Married young girls face intense pressure to become pregnant, and most give birth without skilled attendants (2005 Demographic and Health Survey (DHS)). In 2005 4.1% of mothers were aged 15-19 years and in 2008 the ratio remained the same (2008 Interim DHS). In addition to facing the health risks that come with bearing children when their bodies are not yet fully developed, married adolescents have higher HIV infection rates than unmarried sexually active adolescents (UNICEF, 2001).

Rwandan society is still not open to considering adolescent sexuality as a reality

Despite the reality that adolescents are at risk both of contracting HIV/AIDS and having to deal with unwanted pregnancies, there is a great deal of resistance to providing reproductive health services to this group. In Rwanda and elsewhere, most programmes that have been shown to effectively enhance reproductive health do not explicitly focus on youth (World Bank, 2007: 159). However, the Ministry of Education of Rwanda has recently integrated gender, sexuality and reproductive health issues into the curriculum. In the context of such curriculum integration, teachers require greater training to facilitate discussions with adolescent groups on issues

regarding sexuality. In fact, male teachers (who constitute 68% of the teacher population) are not as well trained on this matter as their female counterparts (2008 Interim DHS).

Rwandan society is still not open to considering adolescent sexuality as a reality that has to be dealt with. It is believed that youth should not be having sex. Thus, young women do not have the freedom to access information and make contraceptive choices without facing judgement from others. The high percentage of young people who considered themselves misinformed, as revealed by a survey on gender issues and family planning in rural areas (Umurungi et al., 2009), and the low prevalence of modern contraceptive use among young women aged 15 to 24 (2008 Interim DHS), confirm that there is a lack of awareness and support for adolescent reproductive health services. Public health programmes are already making efforts to address poverty constraints by making the contraceptives available free of charge and improving delivery of family planning services for married couples, but more needs to be done for young people (Ministry of Health, 2009).

In a study aimed at learning about the conditions in which young heads of households live, interviews conducted among a representative sample led to the conclusion that their rights are regularly being disregarded and their health and educational needs are often under-served (ACORD, 2001: 26). The effects of the 1994 genocide, rural poverty and conflict within families have moved several thousands of children – among them young girls – onto the streets of Kigali and provincial capitals. Young women may also be forced to sell sex to provide for themselves, and are sometimes (given a low income) obliged to live on the street (Umurungi et al., 2008). For a while actions by charitable organisations and local and international NGOs allowed material assistance to be provided to these orphans, but their security and rights have not been given any special attention.

Participation and empowerment

Important and encouraging transformations in Rwandan society have recently been achieved, as evidenced by the high participation of women in the national parliament, where they now hold 56% of parliamentary seats. This positive outcome has had an impact on girls' participatory rights: many gender-responsive laws have been adopted and more girls are accessing education. Several important initiatives have also been undertaken by Rwanda's government to promote the representation of youth and reinforce their participation in political and social decision-making. For instance, the National Youth Council formed in 1998 was given the mandate to represent youth in all aspects of national life. Additionally, the Constitution established in 2003 stipulates that a third of the seats in executive committees at the cell, sector or district levels are to be reserved for young people's representatives. It is, however, difficult to gather documented information on the representation of girls on these committees. Considering that young people are defined by law as ranging in age from 15 to 35, there is a risk that girls under 21 may be under-represented (Chapdelaine, 2006). Most stakeholders and actors in youth programmes combine children and young adults (0-35 years) without distinction.

Girls in Rwanda have taken on enormous responsibilities in the reconstruction and reconciliation processes, and for rebuilding the country. As heads of families they often assume not only the role of provider but of protector for their family unit. As single household heads, they have to take care of young children, carry out domestic tasks and devote most of their time to working in the fields. In fact, they contribute significant amounts of labour to the household, providing food, clothes and school fees for the youngest members of the family. Without their support and dedication many young orphans would have been put in foster care or would be forced to live on the streets. Their involvement



Young girls, Rwanda, September 2009.

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in the reconstruction process side by side with adult women and elders is and has been critical to the rebuilding of sustainable communities, to the fight against poverty and to handling the dramatic consequences of HIV/AIDS (Gervais and Mitchell, 2008).

Continued participation of girls in the process of peace-building in Rwanda is vital to the sustainable empowerment of communities and the long-term healing of wounds created by the genocide. For example, many girls are using art forms such as song and theatre to promote peace (Kanakuze and Mukantabana, 2009). In many instances girls have also contributed to the reconciliation of the older generation. The visiting of a prisoner accused of murdering her father by an orphaned girl is a case in point (Gloria Umutoniwase, 'Les jeunes

Rwandais, modèles de réconciliation', Syfia Grands Lacs, 31 October 2007).

In schools and universities, as in the fields, youth are banding together in work or study, more and more oblivious to the ethnic origin of their friends or colleagues. A tragic past event showcases the determination of youth to ensure peace and reconciliation within Rwandan society. On 18 March 1997 the Nyange Secondary Boarding School was attacked by Hutu militia coming over the border with the Democratic Republic of Congo. The high school students were faced with the unimaginable task of standing together, risking death, or choosing to obey the militia's request for Hutus and Tutsis to separate. As recounted by two of the students who survived that night, the common voice they took in saying "No" to ethnic

The importance of considering their experiences when designing responses to the needs of vulnerable children

division was first externally manifested by a girl named Chantal, who responded by stating "All of us are Rwandans here" (Larson, 2009). During that night another girl, Helena, whose Hutu father was in prison for having participated the 1994 killings, chose to risk her life instead of pointing out her Tutsi classmates, even under the pressure of a severe beating. Before her body hit the floor following a flurry of gun shots, Helena's last words were "We are all Rwandans." The courage these girls and their classmates demonstrated that night is honoured in Rwanda every year on 1 February as part of National Heroes Day, commemorating all who have strived for peace and unity in Rwanda (Bigabo Patrick, 'Rwandans mourn fallen heroes again', *New Times*, 1 February 2006).

For girls, an added barrier to participation is their low status in the community (as evidenced, for example, by the disproportionate number of girl victims of gender violence). However, when they have the opportunity to express their opinions and

offer their 'inside expertise', girls demonstrate strongly the capacities they have to become active participants. As we have observed in participatory visual research with girls and young women in Rwanda, their direct involvement helps not only to map out the complexity of issues but also to support the possibility of instigating change. For instance, in previous work we conducted with girls living on the street, we noted their relative absence from the discourse on access to services (Umurungi et al., 2008). We used photovoice as an intervention aimed at getting their perspectives on issues regarding safety and security, particularly in the context of their increased risk of exposure to HIV/AIDS. The overall focus was on girls and young women photographing what they saw as images of 'feeling safe' and 'not so safe'. Participants in the study were 16 girls between the ages of 11 and 14 from the province of Ruhengui. What became immediately apparent in their photographs and captions was that sports heroes, often regarded as models of social behaviour, are in fact perpetrating violence in the environment where the girls live. Photographs of what they considered threatening included pictures of the local sports field as well as the houses where the football players lived.

Interestingly, at the time the fieldwork was conducted in Rwanda, several campaigns were being designed around the role of sports heroes in promoting safe sex and addressing gender-based violence. Given the images that the girls produced, it is worth revisiting the role of sport and sports heroes through a new lens - one that targets the players themselves. We learned from young girls living on the streets of the importance of considering their experiences when designing responses to the needs of vulnerable children in the post-genocide period. The young girls from Ruhengui who participated in our study provided new and surprising insights into potential threats and insecurities which extend beyond them to concern the safety of all young girls in the country.

Conclusion

The case of post-conflict Rwanda brings greater visibility to issues of gender and age disparities, providing evidence of the critical importance of girls' participation in the reconstruction, reconciliation and development processes. In fact, the experiences of girls and young women in post-genocide Rwanda challenge the oft-held perceptions by humanitarian and development agencies that they are vulnerable children or victims unable to be involved in community-based training aimed at building the capacities of local communities. Acknowledging and appreciating the views of girls and young women would presumably lead to significant changes in the attitudes and agendas of experts or decision-makers, and potentially result in more effective post-conflict programmes.

Post-conflict projects would also benefit from sex-disaggregated data and gender analyses, as well as from consultations conducted separately with young girls and women (apart from those with boys and men). Such measures would allow inequalities in access to welfare services and resources to be detected and thus help shape new policies and programmes. As a practical means of uncovering the true problems affecting girls and women in their daily lives, participatory visual research should be used more systematically: it can allow issues, as perceived and experienced by a stigmatised population, to be clearly conveyed to stakeholders and development agencies.

We argue also for age disaggregation to ensure that girls are adequately included in programmes addressing gender. We know there are increased risks associated with poverty, maternal mortality and HIV/AIDS for girls than for women over 25. At the same time, girls and young women are, to a high degree, neglected in programmes for women or for youth, despite their major role in the post-conflict reconstruction and rebuilding of peaceful communities – taking on the responsibility of heading households and keeping together what

remained of their families.

In war-torn areas girls and young women face a wide-ranging and interconnected set of gender biases. They need a voice in decisions affecting their lives and opportunities for influencing policy. Decisions should not solely be executed by the government, NGOs and the international community. As such, community development and rebuilding programmes should be regarded as an interactive process that increases the capacity of voiceless groups to control their destinies.

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