

EXPC-6005 Gender and Peace Studies
Presented to: Professor Jacobo Schifter
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Women and the Rwandan Genocide

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The Rwandan genocide is considered to be unique due to the intensity, speed and the high number of deaths in a 100 day period. The Rwandan genocide is considered to be especially unique due to the involvement of women partaking, planning, and conducting genocidal acts. Is this unusual or have such atrocious and violence acts been overlooked in the past? When a woman commits murder or an act of deviance she is no longer considered to be a woman but instead a 'monster'. She becomes de-sexed. However, when a man rapes or murders or burns down houses, his sex remains the same. Why is that? It is because women are placed in a box which is labeled "caretaker", "nurturing" and even, "non-violent." But are women non-violent? According to the Rwandan genocide, quite the contrary. Although very few women, in comparison to the actual amount of perpetrators, have been persecuted, there are many more who have escaped or have been taken off trial due to this idea that women do not behave in this manner and are victims, not murderers. So, because of society's social construction of the female gender, justice has not been met for thousands of families. The murderers and the genocidal actors have been spared because they are sympathized with or the facts brought forth as evidence are simply not believable as they are women and have a record of being "feminine" before the genocide occurred.

Although a woman is spared because of her sex and the pure disbelief that a woman can act in such a way, would she still complain about having to be forced to breed, to manage a household, to keep her thoughts and ideas to herself and to not be a member of Parliament? This is the one instance where the social construction of women works in favor for them. The perception is that women are non-violent,

even in the situation of genocide, so they must be freed to continue their natural purpose in life which is to serve men. A genocide cannot occur if there is not a mass of people who believe in the genocide's purpose and necessity. A genocide will never be able to occur if there were not any followers who simply obeyed orders and went along with the propaganda, considered the rewards of aiding in the genocide, and also, due to fear. Were the women afraid, did they believe what the radio told them, or did they truly want to kill and persecute and torture?

In this reflection essay, I will analyze the role of women before, during and after the genocide. To analyze the women during the genocide will not allow me to fully understand their minds at the time, hence I believe it is necessary to study the role of women prior to this period. Secondly, I will discuss the main female actors who committed the horrendous acts, why they did it and their consequences. Thirdly, I will take the point of view of the victim's side to show that women were also detrimentally affected, portraying the other side of Rwandan women during this time. Lastly, I will analyze the transformation and the empowerment of women in Rwanda today who constitute seventy percent of the population. My main aim in this paper is to show an extreme example of why men and women, in the end, are not divided, different, and unequal via a radical method, which is to show that men and women who participated in the Rwanda genocide were actually on equal playing ground. In a time of complete chaos, where civilization is broken down and morals no longer exist, women break free of the chains of expectations and responsibility, and allow their true colors to show, exactly as men do in war and in conflict. During the genocide, males and females had morphed into one sex and this sex can be classified as "monster robots." They went from male and female to conducting monstrous acts and did it in a robotic way because they were ordered to and did this without emotion and consciousness.

There is a presumption that women are good by nature, that is, hospitable, welcoming, mild, and incapable of committing atrocities. So, women who really participated, that is, those who were violent or surpassed the expectations of them, and who cannot be explained away as innocent, are not

understood. They are treated, not like men, not like women, but something else, like monsters.¹

Prior to the genocide, women had their specific place and men had their own. It was a gender-based division of labor and was founded on a patriarchal structure in which women were unequal to men. Many Rwandan and international organizations have detailed women's subordination to men in this society, in which the Rwandan woman is a symbol of 'fertility and weakness', while the man is a symbol of strength and protection, who 'makes all major decisions.'² Responsibilities assigned to women included welcoming visitors, managing the household, educating their children and maintaining traditions while the men were to build a house, ensure the family income and defend the interests of the family, the nation and had to learn combat techniques. Besides the very traditional roles both men and women played, it was also well-known that the men were the dominating figure and violence, including sexual violence was the norm. It was considered to be a form of punishment and the women submitted to and accepted it. Vitally, before the genocide, Hutu women were known to participate in state-sponsored violence that targeted Tutsis in educational establishments and the civil service in 1973.³ Therefore, Hutu women acting maliciously and violent towards the Tutsi had already existed and can be observed to be a step towards the women's involvement in the genocide. This in turn makes the analysis complex because women were considered to be traditional peacemakers yet it was acceptable to be violent against another ethnic group with the same sex. Acting violently towards another Hutu woman was undignified while acting violently and 'masculine' towards a Tutsi woman was just and understandable. This greatly foreshadows the women's involvement in 1994.

¹ International Review of the Red Cross, Nicole Hogg "Women's participation in the Rwandan genocide: mothers or monsters?" March 2010. <http://www.icrc.org/eng/assets/files/other/irrc-877-hogg.pdf> pg. 100

² International Review of the Red Cross, Nicole Hogg "Women's participation in the Rwandan genocide: mothers or monsters?" March 2010. <http://www.icrc.org/eng/assets/files/other/irrc-877-hogg.pdf> pg. 72

³ Ibid pg. 73

Women directly and indirectly participated in the Rwanda genocide. Those educated and in leadership roles particularly conducted and plotted the atrocities while “ordinary” women took part as well, mainly through looting from the victims, showing the militia where Tutsis were hiding, and encouraged and supported the men in their killing sprees. It can be noted that these “ordinary” female civilians were still conforming to their socially constructed and traditional roles which was to advise and support men in any way that they could.

“Some women, including young girls in their teens, were participants in the carnage, hacking other women and children, and sometimes even men, to death. Some of these women joined the killings willingly. Others were forced in the same manner that men were forced, at the point of a gun, by threats and other forms of intimidation. They participated in massacres and in the murder of their neighbours as well as strangers. They joined the crowds that surrounded churches, hospitals and other places of refuge, wielding machetes, nail-studded clubs and spears. They excelled as 'cheerleaders' of the genocide, singing and ululating the killers into action. They entered churches, schools, football stadiums and hospitals to finish off the wounded. Above all, women and girls stripped the dead — and the barely living — stealing their jewellery, money and clothes. Most victims of the massacres were buried completely naked because of women's looting sprees inside the places of massacres.”⁴

Pauline Nyiramasuhuko was a social worker and was the Minister of Family Affairs and Women's Development. On 30th April, 2009 she was, “...charged with conspiracy to commit genocide, genocide or complicity in genocide in the alternative, direct and public incitement to commit genocide, as well as multiple crimes against humanity. The indictment charges that Nyiramasuhuko participated in a plan to exterminate Tutsis, and supervised and ordered attacks whilst also encouraging and assisting atrocities committed by the Interahamwe militia.” A witness, 5Prisca Mukagashugi stated

⁴ African Rights (Organization) "Rwanda Not So Innocent, When Women Become Killers" August 1995. <http://www.scribd.com/doc/21263653/Rwanda-Not-so-Innocent-When-Womens-Became-Killers-Africa-Rights-August-1995> pg. 1

⁵ The Hague Justice Portal "Pauline Nyiramasuhuko" 2011. <http://www.haguejusticeportal.net/index.php?id=10482>

that Nyiramasuhuko played an important role in laying down the foundations for the mass murders in Butare. Apart from indoctrinating [the people], Pauline took care of the logistics for the militiamen who came in from Kigali to set fire on Butare. She distributed grenades and supplied the petrol for the burning down of houses in the rural areas and distributed machetes and other useful equipment to the assassins. The daughters of Bihira, a Tutsi businessman from Butare, were kept at her house for [her son] Chalôme, to rape.⁶

Surprisingly, Nyiramasuhuko was part-Tutsi. Analysts think she might have taken control of the assassination of Tutsis to avoid her own fate. "However, her sister claimed that her racism was ardent and that she loathed working with Tutsi in the ministry before the genocide (Landesman, 2002). Another viewpoint, theorized by Robert Jay Lifton, asserts that Nyiramasuhuko's racism and genocidal acts were an attempt to eliminate the Tutsi in her; she was trying to destroy the defiled part of herself (Landesman, 2002)."⁷

Not only were political female leaders heavily involved in the 1994 genocide but also Catholic nuns, Sister Maria Kizito and Sister Gertrude Mukangango. The lawyer for the civil claimants contended that, "These nuns have never been servants of God. They are monsters.' He likened Sister Gertrude to Nazi Germany's Eichmann and described Sister Kizito as a 'vulture'.⁸ Sister Gertrude had

⁶ African Rights (Organization) "Rwanda Not So Innocent, When Women Become Killers" August 1995. <http://www.scribd.com/doc/21263653/Rwanda-Not-so-Innocent-When-Womens-Became-Killers-Africa-Rights-August-1995> pg.50

⁷ Blizzard, Sarah Marie "Women's role in the 1994 Rwanda Genocide and the Empowerment of Women in the Aftermath" August 2006. http://smartech.gatech.edu/xmlui/bitstream/handle/1853/11577/blizzard_sarah_m_200608_mast.pdf?sequence=1 pg. 38

⁸ International Review of the Red Cross, Nicole Hogg "Women's participation in the Rwandan genocide: mothers or monsters?" March 2010. <http://www.icrc.org/eng/assets/files/other/irrc-877-hogg.pdf> pg.98

purposely refused to feed an estimated 3,500 refugees who sought asylum in the monastery and called them "dirt." She later called on communal policemen and soldiers to force the refugees back from where came from to which they subsequently died at the hands of the nicknamed 'animal', Sister Kizito. She was known to hand out cans of petrol to the Interahamwe which burned alive their victims. She was also known to have stolen possessions from the corpses and cursed those Tutsis who had ripped up their money before meeting their death.

The above two cases, a political figure and Catholic nuns, show extreme cases of women perpetrating in the genocide; however, on the other end of this spectrum, female genocidaires were either forced to commit the atrocities, feared for their lives and their family if they did not cooperate, had bought into the constant and intense propaganda or either 'went along' with the crowd. Taken to its extreme, a minor involved in 'uncountable' killings described the times she went along with a group of people to massacre Tutsis as 'fun, like playing a game.'⁹ Also, most Rwandan women who were interviewed stated that they had no control over their men and when the genocide began, they had acted like "beasts" and that it was "impossible" to stop them.¹⁰ Women were taught to never contradict their men, so at a time when they were exceptionally violent, women feared their men tremendously, especially as it was well-known that moderate Hutus or those who opposed the genocide were murdered just as quickly as a Tutsi. Many analysts and scholars who have strenuously studied the topic of women's participation in the Rwanda genocide all stated that there are many reasons for why women partook in the crimes, that it is incredibly complex and cannot be concluded to one reason alone, and that due to there being thousands of female perpetrators, it is

⁹ International Review of the Red Cross, Nicole Hogg "Women's participation in the Rwandan genocide: mothers or monsters?" March 2010. <http://www.icrc.org/eng/assets/files/other/irrc-877-hogg.pdf> pg.88

¹⁰ International Review of the Red Cross, Nicole Hogg "Women's participation in the Rwandan genocide: mothers or monsters?" March 2010. <http://www.icrc.org/eng/assets/files/other/irrc-877-hogg.pdf> pg. 80.

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