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"Même s'il y a le gender il y a des valeurs d'une femme qu'on ne peut jamais laisser."

Rwandan middle-class women
on feminism and
gender equality

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Abstract:

In the context of extensive gender and development policies in post-genocide Rwanda, young, high educated women are central actors in negotiating gender equality as well as defining the emerging middle class. Based on one life-history, this paper discusses how these young women navigate through conservative and modern gender ideals and thereby position themselves as member of the new middle class.

Zusammenfassung:

Im Kontext breitgefächerter Geschlechter- und Entwicklungspolitiken in Ruanda sind junge, hochgebildete Frauen zentrale Akteurinnen bei der Aushandlung neuer Geschlechterverhältnisse und der Definition der entstehenden Mittelklasse. Ausgehend von der Lebensgeschichte einer jungen Ruanderin wird nachvollzogen, wie gebildete Frauen zwischen konservativen und modernen Geschlechtervorstellungen navigieren und sich dabei als Mitglieder der neuen Mittelklasse positionieren.

Keywords / Schlagworte: gender equality, middle-class, biography, Rwanda / Geschlechtergerechtigkeit, Mittelklasse, Biographie, Ruanda

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Introduction¹

On November 1st, 2016, a columnist of the *Rwanda New Times* wrote a commentary titled “Go tell it on the mountain, Rwanda is the best place for women” (Rwagatare 2016). And indeed, the government has earned respect in the international donor community for successfully making gender equality a top priority throughout the political agenda of post-genocide Rwanda (Mageza-Barthel 2015). A set of legal reforms have been achieved by feminists, which aim at giving women equal access to education, jobs, inheritance of land and medical care. Gender based violence is severely being persecuted, and women have been granted political participation from the local to the national level. At 61%, Rwanda has the highest rate worldwide of female representatives in national parliament. Finally, Gender equality has been chosen as a cross cutting issue in the ambitious development plan *Vision 2020* (Republic of Rwanda 2000). With it, the government plans to convert Rwanda into a middle-income country and enabling as many young people as possible to access higher education is one key measure.

Young, educated women may be regarded as the primary beneficiaries of the government’s policies. They form part of the female population, the young generation as well as the emerging middle class. At the same time, they are more than any other group subject to social observation and pressure as they challenge social (gender) norms. Therefore, this paper is about these young middle-class women in Rwanda. By showing how they navigate through conservative societal expectations and so-called modern gender ideals, I will argue that they create a definition of gender equality that differs from mainstream international discourse. Furthermore, I will demonstrate the importance of class distinctions in these debates. The making of a middle class and ideas of gender are closely intertwined – in Rwanda and beyond.

¹ This paper has been written for the *European summer school for the anthropology of development and social dynamics* (Mainz, May 2017). I’d like to thank Ann Cassiman (UK Leuven) and Pierre Petit (ULB Bruxelles) for their intriguing comments on this paper during the panel discussion. A shortened version was subsequently presented at the *European Conference of African Studies ECAS 7* (Basel, June 2017). Here my appreciation goes to Signe Arnfred (Roskilde Univ., Uppsala) for the inspiring debate in our panel “Notions of gender equality in African contexts”. In 2019, I shared a slightly adapted version at the *Public Symposium: East Africa’s Rising Middle Class: Challenges and Opportunities* (August 2019, Makerere University, Kampala). Thanks to the organizers of Konrad Adenauer-Stiftung Uganda, Goethe Zentrum Kampala and the team of FAVT (Uni Bayreuth) who made it possible.

Justine: a feminist in Rwanda²

Justine was born in the late 1980's as the oldest daughter in a family of ten children. After the genocide in 1994, Justine's father had started a successful business. Justine was even able to attend a private primary school. However, when she was twelve years old, the father left the family. Since her mother had no education and no job, the family succumbed to poverty. It was Justine who supported her mother and her siblings with a scholarship she had been granted by FAWE (Forum of African Women Educationalists) due to her exceptional performance in school.

Seven years later, when Justine finished secondary school, her father came back to the family. Because of reasons Justine didn't understand, he started mistreating her severely. Not only would he prohibit her to go out, talk on the phone or wear trousers, he also assaulted her physically. After a while she decided to move to a friends' house. But after a young man had tried to rape her there, she came back after one year. Eventually, she moved into her grandmothers' home.

Because of her outstanding grades, she received a university scholarship from the government. Justine explained to me that her studies in psychology as well as her strong Christian faith helped her to forgive her father. After finishing university, she successfully applied for a job at a NGO which works with children. With her salary, she strongly supports her family. For herself she dreams of pursuing a PhD one day, though she is planning to get married first.

When I met Justine for our interview, I encountered an extraordinary confident, outspoken and humorous young woman. In many ways, she represents the group of young middle-class women in Rwanda I am doing research with. She is under thirty years old, holds a university degree, and is financially independent. Moreover, Justine defines herself as being an emancipated, modern woman. In the interview, she even considers herself to be a feminist, which in Rwanda is rare as it is normally met with scepticism, if not hostility.

²My findings are based on 15 months of ethnographic fieldwork which I conducted from 2014 to 2018 in Kigali and Huye. The research is part of my PhD project "Life courses of young middle-class women in Rwanda". In this paper I will focus on one biographical interview from 2016 which will of course be anonymized to protect the identity of my interview partner.

Y Do you consider yourself a feminist?

J Yes, too much. You know, in school people used to say 'You're going to go through hell with Justine' when someone was treating a girl badly... I think the big problem is that we, the girls, we don't have self-confidence. Even if you work, you picture your future in the hands of a man. You think 'With that man my future will be like this' instead of thinking that you too, you are capable...

During debates at school people used to mock me saying 'Justine, you are making yourself a man! They need to change your sex, you should stop wearing skirts, because you want to take up the men's place.'

Later, Justine explains that she has become a feminist because of her own life history. She experienced very closely how the economic dependency on her father ruined her family after his sudden departure. She was later defenceless against his attacks; and she saw her mother being unable to help her daughter because she was "just a housewife". Her feminist orientation was furthermore nurtured by the trainings and mentorships of FAWE, the feminist organisation which supported her during secondary school. Finally, the gender policies of the Rwandan government encouraged her thinking. Nevertheless, as becomes clear in the above cited passage of the interview, she met a lot of irritation and resistance coming from teachers as well as her peers. Stating an opinion, much more a provocative one, criticising openly or aggressively arguing with a person, are considered highly inappropriate for a girl in the Rwandan context. Her friend's suggestion not to wear skirts anymore because she behaved like a man and assumed male privileges, hints at Rwandan notions of gender which persist despite all efforts to change the so-called "traditional mindset".

The buzzword "gender": interpretations of gender equality

The English term "gender" has become a buzzword not only in politics and media, but also among the Rwandan population due to massive awareness campaigns. As such, "gender" refers first and foremost to the achievement of equal rights, for instance in terms of the inheritance of land, from which girls were excluded before (Ansoms/Holvoet 2008). Likewise, families are obliged to send both their male and

female children to school, and employers must hire and promote women due to quota systems. Previously, women were not even allowed to work without the written permission of their husbands (Jefremovas 1991). Furthermore, women are now encouraged to speak out freely and take up political responsibilities from the local to the national level (Burnet 2011) and animated to claim their sexual and reproductive right (RWAMREC 2010).

Despite all this and other progress made in achieving gender equality, women's experience of everyday life often differs from the legal situation. In many cases, women are confronted with veiled, but powerful conservative notions of gender and femininity. For instance, it was repeatedly reported to me by unmarried women that it is basically impossible for them to access contraceptives because they would have to admit having sexual relationships before marriage. Doctors in the local health centre would simply refuse to prescribe it. Likewise, a woman accusing her husband of physical violence is easily seen as a disloyal wife giving away family secrets. As he will be sent to prison immediately, she is moreover left alone to provide for the family.

The government refers to these and other beliefs as "traditional mindset" that need to be overcome and shows little understanding for the restrictions women face in their lived realities. As a matter of fact, a lot of women feel that they fail to pursue their rights because the social consequences of disobeying traditional gender norms would be too high.

Yet, it is not always the men or the society that hinder women to claim their rights in a way international discourse would have it. As became clear, oftentimes the women themselves have a different definition of what every-day gender equality means to them. For instance, in the interview Justine spoke about gender-based violence and narrated the story of a neighbour who accused her husband of beating her. This was Justine's commentary:

J Because he gave her a small slap, she had him send to prison. She shouts for her rights, but she demands her rights without having done anything to get them.... Even if there is gender equality, there are the values of a woman you can never forget. In the end we are different, you are going to have your period, he never will. Sometimes women forget what they really are.

Gender is to help a woman, empower her economically, assuring her development, not marginalizing her. But that doesn't impede her from being a woman. It doesn't impede her to do housework. What are we in our family? We are the woman of the house, the woman in our family, our children need a mother.

Apart from Justine's condemnation of the woman, her differentiation of a public and a private sphere is revealing. Gender equality is understood to empower women in education, business, work and politics. Nevertheless, it is very important for most women to fulfil the traditional role of a wife and mother in the realm of the family. As Justine hints with the reference to biology, these roles are considered a natural given. For instance, even highly educated and outspoken women silence in front of guests when their husband is present and rather leave to prepare food or bring drinks. They choose to respect him as head of household and acknowledge his position by some everyday gestures and services, but also by asking him for permission in economic or other decisions. Irrespective of educational or professional status, it is important for Rwandan women to perform humility and respectability, and they take pride in presenting themselves as devoted wives and mothers.

In fact, this makes the distinction between a public and private sphere fluid. To be socially respected, it is necessary for women in all professional or political positions to show that they are good mothers and servant wives in their private life.

Women who do not adhere to these roles are considered to having misunderstood the concept of gender. As I could observe during my research, this prejudice is often voiced by middle-class women when talking about uneducated women in rural areas.

Issues of class and education

When educated, urban, middle-class women talk about uneducated, peasant women in rural areas, they often see a crucial difference in terms of gender equality. On the one hand, they are convinced that most rural women live in precarious circumstances, that they are much more prone to domestic violence, have too many children and that they are too dependent on their husbands. In these cases, middle-class women tend to pity those "women on the hills", or they criticize them for not having accepted "gender" yet.

On the other hand, middle-class women often narrate stories of peasant women who went over the top when claiming gender equality. They blame them of disrespecting their husbands, neglecting housework, disregarding the children, and of showing immoral behaviour like drinking alcohol in public. Either way, middle-class women accuse rural, peasant women of not having understood gender equality properly.

These distinctions made by middle-class women towards women in lower classes can be read as boundary work. As conceptualized in social sciences (Lopez/Weinstein 2012), middle class is first and foremost a relational concept in which the demarcation to the above and the below is essential (Kocka 2004). Thereby, middle class comprises more than a certain socioeconomic status. This is for instance a meritocratic ideal, thus the idea of earning one's accomplishments with hard work, the importance of education, certain patterns of consumption, the aspiration to innovation and economic development, as well as certain lifestyles and a distinguished habitus (Heiman et al. 2012). Moreover, notions of family, gender and sexuality can be important markers of difference. As Rachel Spronk (2012) has shown in her study on young professionals in Kenya, a modern lifestyle which encompasses a free, yet responsible sexuality before marriage and a moral, affectionate sexual life after marriage, is key for this group to define themselves as members of the middle-class in Nairobi.

In the Rwandan case, interpretations of gender and gender equality seem to be an important aspect in "doing being middle class" (Lentz 2015). As explained above, middle-class women state they live the right combination of feminism and morality and have thus understood gender equality correctly. Interconnectedly, they claim to have (or plan) a modern family with a maximum of three children and a loving, equal relationship with their husband.

As Justine explains, it is therefore very important to choose an equally educated partner. She believes:

J Non-educated men commit a lot of domestic violence because they don't understand women's rights. They think it is normal to beat their wife at home. But a man who is educated has had the chance to learn human rights in school. That's why it is very categoric: there is no talking about marriage with a man who has not finished secondary school.

Apart from having understood “gender”, marrying an equally high educated partner is also important for young women to develop economically and securing the well-being of the family. In Justine’s case this is due to her childhood experience of poverty. The need for stability and the constant fear of falling back is characteristic for most middle classes as Heiman, Freeman and Liechty (2012) point out. The relatively recent and existential suffering during the war and the genocide (des Forges 1999) seems to fuel this longing for security and stability among many Rwandan middle-class families.

Securing one’s family, however, is becoming more and more difficult for young people in Rwanda because of the high unemployment rates (Sommers 2012). It is after all essential, that the husband can provide for the family. Also, only with both partners working in qualified jobs it is possible to maintain a middle-class status for the family in the long-term, like paying fees for private school. Yet, many men stay unemployed after graduation. They are then neither able to pay the costly marriage nor to provide for a family. For young middle-class women this becomes a problem, because as explained earlier, a successful marriage and prosperous family are essential for being socially accepted as adult women and as members of the middle-class.

Conclusion

In post-genocide Rwanda, young, highly educated and urban middle-class women are the primary beneficiaries of the internationally recognized gender and class policies. By adapting these possibilities into their own life choices, they become central actors in defining new roles for themselves and in reshaping notions of femininity. In doing so, they navigate through ideas of gender equality and modernity as well as restrictive societal expectations.

Middle-class women claim they live the right combination of feminism and morality. This way, they distinguish themselves from uneducated, rural women, who – in their eyes – do not understand the concept of gender equality properly. Hence, specific ideas of femininity, marriage and family have become an important factor in being middle-class in Rwanda.

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