

BOOK REVIEW

**Review of *Mobilizing Transnational Gender Politics in Post-Genocide Rwanda* by Rirhandu Mageza-Barthel, Farnham, UK: Ashgate, 2015, 208 pp., \$78 (cloth)**

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Rirhandu Mageza-Barthel sets out to detect the ways that Rwanda “domesticated” international women’s rights norms enshrined in the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (Beijing Platform), and the United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 on women, peace, and security (UNSCR 1325). The book examines the processes through which civil society organizations, parliamentarians, bureaucrats, political appointees, and leaders within the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) political party engaged these international norms to lobby for laws or policies to protect or enact women’s rights in some cases but not in others. The book addresses an important topic. Rwanda is frequently cited as a successful model for post-conflict reconstruction and reconciliation, for rapid and efficient economic development, and for successful uptake of international norms related to women’s representation in government and gender main-streaming. The book is important reading for scholars interested in feminist international relations; in transnational women’s movements; in international human rights; in national government interactions with international conventions, treaties, and norms; or Rwandan politics regarding gender equality and women’s rights.

In her analysis, Mageza-Barthel considers several pieces of legislation or policies with direct bearing on women’s rights and gender equality. Chapter 1 lays out the international context for women’s rights and gender equality, including the ways that international norms are created. Chapter 2 creates the theoretical framework for the study by examining the growing field of scholarly work on women’s representation and women’s participation in political transitions. The book examines efforts to amend the draft

genocide code to include sexual violence among the most serious genocide crimes; advocacy for the 1999 law on matrimonial regimes, which gave girl children the right to inherit; the “engendering” of the 2003 constitution, which enshrined gender quotas in decision-making bodies as a foundational principle and reserved seats for women in the legislature, as well as debates surrounding the 2005 land law and policy and the 2008 gender-based violence law. Among the domestic policy issues she examines, Mageza-Barthel’s most detailed and insightful analysis considers the constitutional process that resulted in the 2003 Constitution, which recognized the equality of men and women, instituted a 30 percent gender quota for all decision-making bodies in government, and created reserved seats for women in the lower houses of parliament. Chapter 5, “If It is Not in the Constitution, Anyone Can Change It!” makes for enlightening reading for anyone interested in Rwandan politics or the kinds of negotiation and debate that occur in authoritarian regimes. The chapter shows the decisive role played by influential male members of the RPF in ensuring that the Beijing Platform’s 30 percent gender quota became law in Rwanda.

The book offers several important insights about the relationships between international norms and instruments and domestic advocacy for gender equality and women’s rights. Mageza-Barthel concludes that Rwanda’s Ministry of Gender aligned international norms regarding gender equality with the ruling RPF party’s stance on development as the key to reconciliation and national unity (p. 93). By framing women’s equality as a development issue, female bureaucrats and civil society activists succeeded in enlisting influential men to support the international norms promoted by the Beijing platform and codified in CEDAW (p. 95). In terms of internal Rwandan politics, the author’s most important finding is that the RPF’s leading role in promoting women’s representation in government, women’s protections under the law, and women’s equality generally, created dependency on the ruling party’s backing that curtailed autonomous lobbying (p. 98). Beyond these important insights, the author documents some of the detailed policy debates within the RPF party between 1998 and 2008. I do not know of any other

published source that covers these perspectives in this detail. Finally, Mageza-Barthel accurately captures the important continuities between women's activism in Rwanda before and after the 1994 genocide.

Other than a list of 13 interviews in the bibliography and a note in the preface thanking "all the interview partners and experts ... for sharing their insights and perspectives" (p. xii), Mageza-Barthel offers the reader no description of her research methods. The book appears to be based primarily on analysis of secondary sources and twelve interviews conducted in Rwanda and one interview conducted in Germany (listed in the bibliography). Nowhere does the author provide a description of interviewee characteristics (whether by gender, age, or political party affiliation) or an explanation of the sampling strategy or recruitment methods. In the text, she usually indicates the positions held by the interviewee quoted or cited. Where names or positions are withheld, no explanation of this decision is given. Because she does not offer a description of data analysis, it is unclear how Mageza-Barthel decided which interviewee statements were fact, which were interpretation, and which were retelling events of the past to explain or justify the present.

The majority of the book's weaknesses can be attributed to insufficient editorial assistance from the publisher. For example, throughout the book unclear writing undermines communication of the author's ideas. In addition, the book's introduction assumes the reader knows the historical background and basic chronology of the 1994 genocide of Tutsis in Rwanda. It also assumes the reader knows the feminist international relations literature and primary arguments surrounding women's representation in governance. Sometimes, the most interesting empirical evidence, particularly in the introduction or in chapters one through four are not precisely sourced. In these chapters it can be unclear whether the information came from interviews, primary sources, or secondary sources. The publishing house should have helped the author clear up these weaknesses before publication. With the ongoing destruction of academic publishing due

to neoliberal economic forces and changing publishing environment, the work of editing now falls on authors who lack the specialized skills to do it themselves and the financial resources to contract out this work. This situation is a shame. Most of all, I am sad to see such a promising work potentially not reach a broader audience due to poor editing.

Despite these weaknesses, readers will be rewarded with significant insights about the relevance of international human rights instruments and gender norms to domestic advocacy for gender equality and women's representation. I wish the author had given greater analytical consideration to the ways in which the 1994 genocide of Tutsis in Rwanda and the Rwandan women's movement's lobbying impacted international institutional frameworks, conferences, norms, declarations, and resolutions. For example, the author writes that Rwanda sent delegations to the African region's preparatory meeting in Dakar, Senegal in November 1994 (p. 79), but she does not consider the ways in which the critical areas of concern considered in the Beijing conference process had been shaped as reactions to women's victimization in the former Yugoslavia and Rwanda. Similarly, the NGO Working Group on Women, Peace and Security, who advocated for adoption of UN SCR 1325 up until 2000 and then advocated for its implementation thereafter, was formed in direct response to pleas from women's NGOs in Rwanda after the genocide and in the former Yugoslavia during and after the Balkan conflicts. While this analysis may have been beyond the scope of her project, the author should have considered the ways in which the Rwandan women's movement's contributions to the formulation and adoption of these international norms could have increased the likelihood that they were adopted, mobilized or adapted within Rwanda.