

What Does Gender Equality in Rwanda Mean?

Rwanda is often associated with the devastation of the 1994 Rwandan Genocide, yet in the years since, the nation has become synonymous with reconstruction and economic development spearheaded by women.

In the aftermath of the genocide, women constituted between 60 and 70% of the surviving population and were therefore at the center of the country's recovery. Rwanda is often drawn upon as a success story for gender equality and female empowerment, and an example of how the rights and opportunities available to both genders can make or break the future of a country. Overall, Rwanda ranks third-best in the World Economic Forum's 2020 Global Gender Gap Index, which evaluates a country's progress toward gender equality through the following measures: Economic Participation and Opportunity, Educational Attainment, Health and Survival and Political Empowerment. In terms of female economic security and inclusion in society, Rwanda is the third best-performing country in Africa on the Women, Peace and Security Index (WPS Index). In 2019, the index placed female employment at 92.9%- the highest in the group and found that women have the highest share of parliamentary seats in the group at 55.7%. Furthermore, today 52% of cabinet positions are held by women (Reuters).

However, while acknowledging how far the country has come, it is crucial to look at how far the country still has to go, and the issues that are perhaps overshadowed by Rwanda's status as a leader in gender parity. Despite a top 10 position in the World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Index, the country has fallen 3 places since last year. In terms of general security and justice for women, levels of domestic violence are still high, particularly the rate of current intimate partner violence which currently stands at 20.7% (WPS Index). However, the most concerning facts are not necessarily captured by data. Although President Paul Kagame has been recognized for his work in championing gender parity and the inclusion of women in the economy and government, there have also been critics who have accused him of 'gender washing': using Rwanda's progress towards gender equality to distract from efforts to eliminate opposition to his presidency on the international stage.

As reported by Al Jazeera, 'two women who tried to run against him in 2010 and 2017 were later arrested. Victoire Ingabire was sentenced in 2012 for treason and genocide denial and was released earlier this week, while Diane Rwigara has been in custody since 2017. Rwigara has been held for a series of vague offenses against state security, in charges her family describes as politically motivated.' Furthermore, Rwigara herself has suggested that the high percentage of women in parliament does not affect substantial change: "So what if Rwanda has the highest percentage of women in parliament? It's really just part of the image. Because what do these women do?"

In short, this brief article uses Rwanda as an example of what a leader in gender equality can teach the wider world, but also as a reminder that leading the way towards gender equality does not equate to having achieved it.

'None of us will see gender parity in our lifetimes, and nor likely will many of our children. That's the sobering finding of the Global Gender Gap Report 2020, which reveals that gender parity will not be attained for 99.5 years.' (World Economic Forum). Therefore all countries

around the world, regardless of how close they are to achieving gender equality, still have work to do.

Molly Lambert, 20th December 2020