



Tracking Rwanda's Social Policy Evolution Since the Colonial Era

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Executive Summary

This policy brief presents Rwanda's journey through social policy transformation from the pre-colonial and colonial times to post-independence and the present day. It highlights how gender has been progressively mainstreamed in the country's social policies at different historical periods. The brief is informed by evidence from a research project titled "Gender Equitable and Transformative Post-Covid 19 Social Policy in Africa," conducted by a consortium of African researchers, including those from Rwanda, Uganda, Kenya and Tanzania. In the study, we explored the evolution of social policy in Rwanda and shed light on the critical importance of incorporating the needs and perspectives of women in all social and economic policies across sectors such as health, education, work and employment as well as water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH).

We found that in the colonial and post-colonial periods, the evolution of social policy was marked by

a narrow focus that served the interests of a small group of political elites and their allies. However, starting from 1995, Rwanda's unity government has brought about a significant shift in both the development paradigm and the orientation of social policy by prioritising inclusivity and citizen-centred development. However, despite significant progress in confronting developmental challenges and promoting gender equality challenges persist, particularly in the post-Covid-19 context. To ensure continued social transformation we recommend that the government strengthens inter-sectoral coordination of policies; enhance gender advocacy and oversight, and intensify community sensitisation campaigns. We also recommend the promotion of integrated development policies, and greater support for gender equity in agriculture and employment.

Background

Like most African countries, social policies in Rwanda are formulated in the interest of the government's political and development agenda. From the pre-colonial, colonial, post-colonial era and until 1995, Rwanda was predominantly a patriarchal state, especially in relation to leadership, land ownership and inheritance. Women's roles in national development were undervalued, although

they played memorable roles in the leadership and development of the country throughout Rwanda's history. The period of 1940-1950 was characterised by colonial policies that were ethnically divisive, causing hatred among Rwandans and grounded in ethnic divisions of 'Hutu', 'Tutsi' and 'Twa.' This period propelled the country into the civil unrests of the 1960s, 1970s, 1980s and the catastrophic 1994 genocide against the Tutsi.

Importantly, the social policies during these politically turbulent times either deliberately or unintentionally disregarded gender mainstreaming in their development processes.

Unlike today, the traditional Rwandan society during that period was characterised by patriarchal social structures of unequal social power relations and opportunities between men and women.

In 1995, after the 1994 genocide against the Tutsi, Rwanda's national unity government embarked on social structural adjustments for the country's transformational development. The government was committed to ensuring that gender mainstreaming was prioritised in all multi-sector development plans. Consequently, Rwanda signed and ratified many international gender and human rights instruments and mechanisms to eradicate gender inequality and ensure effective women's empowerment. These included: the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948), the Declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against Women (1993), the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (1995), the Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (1966), the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) in 1979, and the UN General Assembly Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children (2020) (also known as the Palermo Protocol).

Despite these actions and the government's commitment to have gender mainstreamed in all the country's development frameworks, gender equity has not been fully realised in Rwanda. Most gender policies are punitive rather than transformative and focus on penalties and compliance rather than addressing the root causes of inequality. This approach fosters resistance and hinders the achievement of genuine gender equity. Rwanda's existing social policies elicited mixed reactions during the COVID-19 pandemic because the crisis led to significant job and business losses, exposing gaps in social protection systems. The pandemic also reshaped traditional gender roles within households. For some families, this shift created opportunities for stronger bonds and shared responsibilities. However, for others, the strain of lockdowns and economic hardship contributed to a rise in gender-based violence.

The unprecedented effects of the pandemic further exacerbated poverty and vulnerability, and took a negative toll on the economy, growth and development of Rwanda. In the post-COVID-19 era, therefore, the government faces the challenge of revising existing social policy frameworks and adopting more inclusive and liberal policies that promote gender in all aspects of life. This policy brief is aimed at understanding how social policy evolved in Rwanda and the importance of considering women in all social and economic policies, including on health, education, work and employment, and water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH).

Methodological Approach

The research relied on a qualitative approach to explain Rwanda's transformative social policy evolution throughout different periods in the country's history starting from 1940 to 2022. Existing literature was analysed to understand how gender equality was prioritised in major social policy sectors of education, employment, health and WASH during this period. In addition, in-depth interviews and focus group discussions were conducted to deepen understanding of the interface between social and economic policies and existing opportunities and challenges in Rwanda.

The study interrogated the trajectory of social policy, the reasons behind social policy choices, and how the current state of social policy reflects the role of state, market, and societal institutions. It also explored the interface between social policies and economic policies, and their impact on women as well as how COVID-19 has influenced and transformed social policy.

Historical Evolution of Rwanda's Social Policy

Prior to and during colonial rule (1940s-1960s), Rwanda lacked formal social policies. Colonial authorities imposed punitive laws that primarily benefited white settlers and a few loyal clergy within the administration. Forced labour, exploitation, and the "divide and rule" tactic fostered deep social divisions and disunity. By the early 1950s, as African independence movements gained momentum, the UN pressured Belgium to reform its colonial governance in Rwanda.

In 1952, local administrative councils were established, but privileges such as quality education and healthcare remained limited to elites. Informal social classifications based on ethnicity and economic status laid the groundwork for today's *Ubudebe* categories (1, 2, and 3), which were used to guide development interventions. Between 1959 and 1994, political and ethnic tensions, especially between Hutus and Tutsis, intensified, culminating in the 1994 genocide against the Tutsi, during which many were killed, exiled to neighbouring countries and marginalised in political and social spheres of life. Following the genocide, a unity government was formed to rebuild the nation. From 1995 into the 2000s, Rwanda implemented social and economic structural adjustments, which transitioned the country from a phase of emergency aid to one of recovery and reform.

In 2005, the first National Social Protection Policy was introduced to ensure universal protection for all citizens. Other key frameworks included the National Poverty Reduction Policy (2001), Vision 2020, National Investment Strategy (2002), Economic Development and Poverty Reduction Strategy (EDPRS) I & II, and the National Employment Policy (2007). These policies were aimed at restoring dignity, upholding human rights, and reducing poverty and social inequality, particularly gender inequality. Rwanda has since aligned with broader development agendas like the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), African Union (AU) Agenda 2063, and the National Strategy for Transformation (NST1). These development goals all seek to better respond to socio-economic change, build resilience, lessen vulnerabilities, and propel Rwanda to achieving middle-income status.

Political Influence on Rwanda's Social Policy Evolution

Rwanda's social policy has historically been shaped by prevailing political dynamics. During colonial rule, policies favoured the white elite, with access to education and health services limited to a privileged few. From 1962 to 1973, power struggles between the monarchy and emerging Hutu elites led to social injustices and systemic discrimination against the Tutsi population. Under President Grégoire Kayibanda, a pro-Hutu agenda was institutionalised. Tutsi chiefs were replaced by Hutu appointees, and many Tutsis were persecuted or forced into exile.

Also, a military guard was established based on ethnic quotas (85% Hutu and 15% Tutsi). These developments, quietly endorsed by the Belgian government, entrenched ethnic exclusion across education, administration, and employment sectors, leading to mass exiles of Tutsis in 1959-1961, 1963-1964 and 1973.

The 1973 coup brought President Juvénal Habyarimana to power, initiating Rwanda's second republic. Habyarimana's government embarked on modest modernisation, which led to huge investments in infrastructure such as roads and health facilities, and improvements in water and urban development. However, ethnic discrimination persisted. In 1986, the regime rejected calls to finance the repatriation of Tutsi refugees back home, citing overpopulation. This stance fueled the Rwandan Patriotic Front's (RPF) armed resistance (1990-1994), which advocated for a multi-ethnic and inclusive political culture.

After the 1994 genocide against the Tutsi, the new government undertook major structural reforms focused on socio-economic recovery, national unity, and constitutional rights. With strong political will, Rwanda ratified key national and international gender policies. Today, there is growing public awareness of the importance of gender equality, which is now viewed as a cornerstone for sustainable development and inclusive governance.

Rwanda's Evolving Social Policy Framework

Rwanda's current social policy has transitioned from basic humanitarian aid to a broader goal of shared prosperity. This vision aligns with President Paul Kagame's 2017 statement at the Human Development Summit in Washington, DC, asserting that, *"We shall no longer limit our ambition to the eradication of extreme poverty but rather aim for prosperity and wellbeing for everyone."*

The policy adopts a multi-sectoral, inclusive approach to development processes and accountability. Key stakeholders, namely frontline ministries, implementing agencies, civil society, the private sector, and communities, now play significant roles in policy implementation and monitoring. This aligns with global frameworks such as the AU Social Policy Framework (2008) and the SDGs' principle of "Leaving No One Behind."

The scope of the policy includes access to essential health care, social insurance, welfare services, employment guarantees, and cash transfers for vulnerable groups, including children, informal workers, youth, women, the elderly, and persons with disabilities.

To support gender equality, Rwanda established the National Gender Machinery (NGM), a coordinated network of institutions including the Ministry of Gender and Family Promotion (MIGEPROF), the Gender Monitoring Office (GMO), the National Women's Council (NWC), the Rwandan Forum for Women Parliamentarians (FFRP), and the Rwanda Men's Resource Centre (RWAMREC). Each of these institutions has a distinct role, but they work in synergy to ensure gender mainstreaming in all social development strategies. The 2017 revision of the National Gender Policy reaffirmed the government's commitment to national development through equity, solidarity, and positive societal values. Overall, Rwanda's social policy now rests on four key pillars—Protection, Promotion, Prevention, and Transformation—ensuring equitable distribution of resources across social security, care services, emergency assistance, and livelihood enhancement.

Inclusive and Collaborative Implementation of Rwanda's Social Policy

The traditional view of the state as the sole designer and implementer of social policy has evolved. Today, Rwanda embraces a collaborative approach, engaging NGOs, civil society, private sector actors, and communities as key partners in social development.

At the national level, inter-sectoral coordination—led by the Ministry of Local Government (MINALOC)—guides the implementation and monitoring of social protection strategies. This coordination features both vertical and horizontal integration. Ministries formulate and disseminate sector policies, strategies, and legal frameworks. Also, specialised agencies such as the Local Administrative Entities Development Agency (LODA), Genocide Survivors Support and Assistance Fund (FARG), National Rehabilitation Service (NRS), National Council of Persons with Disabilities (NCPD), and National Early Childhood Development Program (NECDP), operationalise these strategies through guidelines and programmes.

Civil society, NGOs and private sector actors support awareness campaigns and compliance, while communities participate in planning by identifying local needs. Development partners also contribute by providing technical expertise and financial support to strengthen the system.

This inclusive model has significantly advanced gender equality and equity. Economic independence has increased, with 92% of women and 93% of men accessing finance. Gender parity in education is also nearly achieved, with primary and secondary school enrollment at 49.7% for girls and 53.2% for boys. While female unemployment (19.7% in Q3 2020) remains higher than male unemployment (13%), overall unemployment rose to 23% in 2022 (up from 22% in 2021). Nevertheless, universal access to healthcare and community-based health insurance subsidies have improved well-being. Women are the majority recipients of direct social protection programmes (58.3% women vs. 41.7% men). Land ownership among women (24.6%) has also surpassed that of men (14.27%), while nearly 60% of land is co-owned by married couples. These indicators demonstrate an important step toward economic empowerment.

In short, Rwanda's current social policy has fostered a more inclusive, protective, and enabling environment for all citizens to thrive.

Impact of COVID-19 on Rwanda's Social Policy and Adaptive Response

The COVID-19 pandemic, along with government containment measures, disrupted existing policy systems. In response, the Government of Rwanda, guided by WHO recommendations, swiftly developed a national response plan. All frontline ministries created survival and continuity strategies, embracing technological solutions for remote work and education. E-learning and remote working became widespread, with support from development partners, civil society, and the private sector. Airtime on radio and television was secured to deliver home-based learning, especially for students and a variety of soft and visual learning materials were developed. These innovations are expected to continue in secondary schools and universities. Furthermore, parents received structured guidance to support their children's education, another measure likely to be sustained.

To support vulnerable populations, food relief was distributed to households in *Ubudehe* categories 1 and 2. For broader economic recovery, the government launched economic recovery plans, including financial support for enterprises of all sizes across sectors. Remote working became standard in both public and private institutions accompanied by home-based work guidelines. And in agriculture, targeted grants and funds were allocated to ensure sector resilience, support which is likely to continue. Also, community leaders were equipped with phones, airtime, and internet access to facilitate communication about COVID-19 updates and government programmes. Despite these swift interventions, the pandemic underscored the need for stronger investment in disaster preparedness, not only for natural disasters such as floods and landslides, but also future health emergencies.

Conclusion

In summary, our research found that the evolution of social policy in Rwanda, particularly prior to 1995, was marked by a narrow focus that served the interests of a small group of political elites and their allies. However, the unity government that assumed power in 1995 has brought a significant shift in both the development paradigm and the orientation of social policy by prioritising inclusivity and citizen-centred development. This transformation has been guided by the government's overarching principle of promoting home-grown solutions to development challenges and encouraging citizens to take ownership of their developmental needs rather than depending solely on external aid. While Rwanda has ratified several international and national frameworks promoting gender equality, challenges persist—particularly in the post-COVID-19 context. To ensure continued social transformation, the government must uphold and strengthen its liberal approach to gender mainstreaming and women's empowerment across all four key development sectors—health, education, work and employment and WASH.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this research, we propose the following recommendations:

1. Strengthening Inter-Sectoral Coordination

The government should reinforce mechanisms for policy formulation, implementation, and monitoring across sectors. All frontline ministries, implementing agencies, civil society organisations, private sector actors, communities, and development partners should align their activities with the national development agenda to ensure coherence and efficiency.

2. Enhancing Gender Advocacy and Oversight

Existing gender advocacy and monitoring networks should intensify collaboration with implementing agencies to ensure gender issues are consistently addressed across all sectors.

3. Intensifying Community Sensitisation Campaigns

Targeted awareness campaigns—especially for the girl child—should reach remote communities to promote gender equality and increase rural engagement in development processes.

4. Promoting Integrated Development Policies

The government should ensure that development policies in health, social protection, infrastructure, education, and other sectors are designed to be interdependent and mutually reinforcing.

5. Supporting Gender Equity in Agriculture and Employment

There is a need to promote gender equity in agricultural commercialisation and to ensure greater inclusion of women in off-farm and other employment and entrepreneurial opportunities.

Further Readings

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