



Jessee, E. (2017) Mobilizing Transnational Gender Politics in Post-Genocide Rwanda by Rirhandu Mageza-Barthel. *Journal of Modern African Studies*, 55(01), pp. 166-168. (doi:[10.1017/S0022278X16000720](https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022278X16000720))

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Deposited on: 07 November 2017

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Mobilizing Transnational Gender Politics in Post-Genocide Rwanda by
RIRHANDU MAGEZA-BARTHEL
Farnham, UK: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2015. Pp. 1+187. US\$ (hbk).

Rirhandu Mageza-Barthel's new book, *Mobilizing Transnational Gender Politics in Post-Genocide Rwanda*, represents a valuable contribution to understanding gender equality policies in present-day Rwanda. It offers a crucial middle ground between popular media accounts that celebrate the nation for its impressive inclusion of women in politics—most notably, the 2013 parliamentary elections in which women candidates secured 64% of the available seats—and academic accounts that warn that while women's visibility in public life is at an all-time high, the current President Paul Kagame and his political party, the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF), dominate parliament, making it difficult for women parliamentarians to implement meaningful changes to counter the lack of agency still endured by rural Rwandan women across the country. Mageza-Barthel does this by bringing interviews with women political activists who were intimately involved in high-level negotiations with the international community and the Rwandan government into conversation with important shifts in international and domestic policies aimed at promoting gender equality. In the process, her analysis tells us much, not only about how integral these political actors were for influencing Rwanda's current gender equality policies, but also how they were able to impact present-day norms supported by the United Nations and other international institutions, successfully challenging “women's invisibility in theories of how politics is done” (p. 17).

Mageza-Barthel begins with a brief overview of the 1994 genocide in Rwanda, followed by discussion of how the unprecedented sexual violence inflicted on women prompted a small cohort of women genocide survivors to advocate for gender equality. Chapter 1 then provides a framework for understanding the late twentieth

century evolution of gender norms within the United Nations (UN), against which Chapter 2 then explores how these efforts played out in the context of post-genocide Rwanda, and to a lesser extent, across Africa. This sets the stage for a return to Rwanda's pre-genocide gender norms in Chapter 3—characterized, with few exceptions, by women's exclusion from politics, business, and other potential avenues to power—during the nation's colonial and post-independence period, during which ethnic tensions were often leveraged by leaders to distract the public from more pressing political challenges. This ultimately led to the emergence of the extremist Hutu *Pawa* (Power) movement that bore primary responsibility for perpetrating the genocide, including the extreme sexual violence endured predominantly by women associated with the nation's ethnic Tutsi minority, but also Hutu and Twa women who had married or had children with Tutsi men, among other social ties. With the RPF's military victory, and their stated commitment to establishing “a *participatory* and *representative democracy* as a remedy for the abuse of power it accused the previous regimes of exercising,” women genocide survivors were provided with a critical opportunity for advocacy (p. 66; emphasis in original).

Chapter 4 then focuses on how this advocacy work played out in the context of the 1995 Beijing World Women's Conference, which subsequently informed gender equality policies implemented by the RPF's broad-based transitional government. Of particular importance, Mageza-Barthel demonstrates the balance that needed to be maintained throughout these negotiations, highlighting how advocates worked with existing gender norms—for example, eschewing overtly feminist rhetoric in favor of “motherist” terms and relying on influential male allies “as conduits to further women's interests” (p. 95). Chapter 5 then evaluates the sustainability of the subsequent advances, particularly the revision of the 1999 Matrimonial Regimes Law

to ensure women's inheritance rights, and the drafting the 2003 Constitution to ensure relevant international gender norms were implemented domestically. Mageza-Barthel finds that the input of women advocates was instrumental to this process, but still required the support of influential men in several instances. Nonetheless, their achievements during this period established a foundation for ongoing meaningful involvement of women in Rwandan politics as demonstrated by the laws that were enacted after 2003—the topic of Chapter 6. Considering the 2005 Organic Land Law and the 2008 Gender-Based Violence Law, Mageza-Barthel argues that following monumental success in influencing the 2003 Constitution, ongoing efforts have met with “spotty affirmation of women's rights,” particularly regarding the Organic Land Law (p.142). This spotty affirmation largely results from the women advocates' inability to anticipate which policies might have the best outcomes for rural women, highlighting the salience of class divisions in the post-genocide period. Ultimately, Mageza-Barthel concludes that a select cohort of Rwandan women have had a high degree of success in making their voices heard, both in influencing UN gender norms and in shaping post-genocide Rwanda's political sphere, though sizeable challenges remain, particularly in meeting the diverse needs of rural Rwandan women.

Taken together, Mageza-Barthel maps the remarkable accomplishments and sizeable challenges experienced among a small cohort of Rwanda women who have been able to become valuable “agents of reconstruction” in debates around gender equality since the genocide (p. 94). Her contribution would be enhanced, however, had she conducted a more thorough analysis of Rwandan gender norms, currently limited to women's exclusion from politics during Rwanda's colonial and post-independence period. While this limited historical scope allows her to cast the advocates whom she has interviewed as exceptional, which indeed they are, analysis

of Rwanda's pre-colonial and colonial history would have allowed her to connect them to a legacy of powerful women elites whom wielded an impressive degree of political power in their own right—most notably in the role of *umugabekazi* (Queen Mother). Of particular relevance, the *umugabekazi* and other notable Rwandan women elites, most of whom were of Tutsi heritage, were often faced with similar tensions in negotiating political power, both with their male counterparts and with the kingdom's diverse rural majority. This is a minor missed opportunity, however, in what is otherwise a rich contribution to knowledge on post-genocide Rwandan politics and the impact that women from the global South have had on UN gender equality norms.

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