

# RWANDA: GENDER ROLES AND THE STATUS OF MEN AND WOMEN POST COVID-19

## HSC CORE: Social and Cultural Continuity & Change

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### Syllabus Content

- Students will explore BOTH continuity AND change in the selected country through a detailed study of ONE of the following aspects:
  - Gender roles and the status of men and women

#### The near future (5 to 10 years)

Students are to:

- determine current trends and suggest probable future directions for the aspect of the country studied in the focus study
- evaluate the impact and implications for the aspect of the country studied of:
  - likely changes
  - probable continuities
- predict the importance of technologies to the country studied.

### Rationale

The following resource provides a detailed insight into the impact of Covid-19 on the gender roles and the status of men and women in Rwanda post Covid-19. Through the application of various sources of statistical data, trends in labour force participation are discussed alongside government policies and initiatives. Several meaningful insights are gained into the probable futures of female workforce participation and empowerment in Rwanda in the post-Covid era.

*Rwandan pre-schooler. Source: Wikimedia Commons*

### Syllabus Outcomes

- H1 evaluates and effectively applies social and cultural concepts
- H2 explains the development of personal, social and cultural identity
- H3 analyses relationships and interactions within and between social and cultural groups
- H5 analyses continuity and change and their influence on personal and social futures

### Related Concepts

continuity and change · modernisation · tradition · beliefs and values · empowerment · cooperation and conflict



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### Introduction

As a country forever defined by 100 days in 1994, Rwanda, led by Paul Kagame and the Royal Patriotic Front (RPF), has worked tirelessly to rebuild the shattered nation following the genocide. In carrying out this process, the RPF have made it a priority to lift up women as they champion programs focused on reconciliation, reconstruction and development - electing the most women to a national parliament anywhere in the world and enacting positive discrimination legislation, thus ensuring that females are represented in all facets of society. Outlined in Vision 2020, Rwanda intended to become a middle income country by 2035, and while it has amended its original timeline, the government continues to set goals to achieve this. Focused on becoming the tech hub of Africa and home to a booming mining industry, Rwanda's GDP was steadily increasing, as were the skills and income of its residents. However, in 2020, with the arrival of an event that no one saw coming, Covid-19 has had a profound impact on the tiny nation, with the GDP now at the lowest it's been since 1994.



*Covid detection facility – Kigali airport, Rwanda. Source: Wikimedia Commons*

### Reflecting on this, what impact has Covid had on Rwanda's gender policies and its future focus?

Published in 2021, the Ministry of Gender and Family Promotion, in conjunction with UN Women, released the *Covid-19 Rapid Gender Assessment* as an overview of the extent to which the pandemic impacted women and children in Rwanda. As a resource, this document offers teachers a contemporary perspective on gender, current rates and trends of change and which groups benefit from change.

In application to the syllabus, the Rapid Gender Assessment is best linked by three key areas:

1. **Women are most affected by COVID-19 in terms of their economic activities and income sources:** A key term to note for teachers and students when examining the impacts of Covid in Rwanda, is **formal vs. informal employment**.

**Formal employment** can be best understood as working for one company under an agreed upon and fixed contract. Further to this, employees would receive set pay, hours and/or benefits, a stable location and very likely some sort of contribution to an aged pension (*What Is the Difference Between Formal and Informal Working?*, 2019). In comparison, characteristics of **informal employment** include little to no job security, no contract, and work based on need. Those employed informally often are only in a job for a few weeks or months, or work may be seasonally based (tourism).

Within Rwanda, women are most often those who comprise the 'informal' working sector. As noted by The New Times, 91.2% of women held informal employment prior to the outbreak of Covid in 2019 (*Reckoning with impact of Covid on Rwandan children, women*, 2022). Thus, as the majority of women were employed in informal sectors such as small businesses, tourism (accommodation and

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food services), and domestic and cross-border retail trade, these groups were immediately impacted by closures at the outbreak of the pandemic. As noted by a Labour Force Survey by the International Labor Organization, this meant that a high proportion of rural and urban women (59% and 52% respectively) reported that their businesses closed as a result of the pandemic, in comparison to 49% each for rural and urban men (*Reckoning with impact of Covid on Rwandan children, women, 2022*). Therefore, current trends indicate that the highest incidence of reduced income as a result of Covid closures, is amongst women in both urban and rural areas - impacting women as independent agents in contemporary Rwanda.

### The Future (5–10 Years)

- With increasing vaccination rates and reduced lockdowns and periods of isolation, women have shown themselves to be resilient in business as they have adopted a range of 'innovative coping mechanisms.' These include shifting from selling perishable products to producing and selling masks, using Rwanda's rising IT network to liaise with clients via telephone, and pairing with locals to establish a number of home delivery services (*Ministry of Gender and Family Promotion Rwanda, 2021*). To support economic recovery and the promotion of women in Rwanda, innovative programs should be supported 'in the context of on-going women's economic empowerment programmes and interventions in Rwanda' (*Ministry of Gender and Family Promotion Rwanda, 2021*) and women will continue to be funded predominantly through mutual loans offered from cooperatives.

### 2. The burden of care and unpaid care work for women has generally increased since the onset of Covid-19.

While women have made significant progress establishing themselves in macro level positions in government and industry, despite the promotion of positive discrimination - Rwanda continues to be a patriarchal society. Thus, during Covid, while women struggled to maintain steady employment outside the home, within the home, women faced the additional burden of taking on the majority of the unpaid care work; these activities included domestic work, food preparation, child care and home-schooling. As reported by the *Ministry of Gender and Family Promotion Rwanda*, most home related activities were performed by women with 71% of women allocating time to home-schooling and 60% of women heavily involved in childcare (2021). These statistics were comparable across both urban and rural environments.



Flora Umutesi at work. Source: Wikimedia Commons

### The Future (5–10 Years)

- Since the genocide, Rwanda has focused on developing a number of programs to promote women across the micro, meso and macro levels of society. While contemporary programs continue to challenge traditional mindsets related to the role of men and Rwanda as a patriarchal society - Covid presented a unique challenge that has not been seen since the outbreak of Spanish Flu. While women experienced an increased burden of care and unpaid work, this occurrence was not out of line with parallel experiences felt by women across the globe. Indeed, as countries went into lockdown and families were forced to isolate, one can conclude that this change was largely circumstantial. Therefore, in the near future, as borders are now open and international tourism resumes, Rwanda will continue to focus on the promotion of women across society; this is

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evidenced by Rwanda hosting the **145th Inter Parliamentary Union Assembly**, which will meet in Kigali in October 2022 with the general debate focusing on **equality and gender-sensitive parliaments**.

- 3. Gender based violence has been mostly reported by women - but shows evidence of continued gender based changes during Covid-19.** During periods of lockdown, concerns were raised regarding the potential increase in intimate partner violence (IPV). Since the rise of women in macro level positions, a push from the government has seen the implementation of a range of programs to challenge traditional mindsets related to power imbalances within intimate relationships. Such programs have been created to address the fact that in 2016 - one in five women had experienced physical or sexual violence by a partner (National Institute of Statistics Rwanda [NISR], 2016). Therefore, **Indashyikirwa 'Agents of Change'**, is an IPV prevention programme implemented by CARE International Rwanda, Rwanda Women's Network (RWN), and Rwanda Men's Resource Centre (Stern et. al., 2021). Thus during Covid-19, the perception of IPV across urban and rural areas indicated that the majority of Rwandans felt that IPV had declined, despite changes to living and working arrangements. However, data collected by the Ministry of Family and Gender Promotion only reflected on 'perception' and did not reflect actual numbers. Yet, based on previous trends, one can assume that IPV continues to be a concern and with the opening of borders, business and society, innovative interventions will continue in order to support existing policies and legal initiatives.

### The Future (5-10 Years)

- In the future, the government will continue to pair with NGO's to challenge traditional mindsets related to gender and the balance of power in intimate relationships. This is evidenced in the continuation of programs like **Indashyikirwa 'Agents of Change'**, which is made up of four units that both couples and gender activists can participate in, these include: a couples curriculum, community activism paired with 'trained couples', opinion leader training and women's safe spaces . Within this program, couples attend for a period of five months, with the goal that training will positively transform power imbalances in relationships, identify and manage triggers of IPV, and build skills for equitable, nonviolent relationships. (*Prevention Collaborative - Indashyikirwa*, 2021).

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