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DOING GENDER, DOING LEADERSHIP

A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF WOMEN IN LEADERSHIP POSITIONS IN KIGALI, RWANDA

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ABSTRACT

Rwanda is often used as a showcase for promoting gender equality in the context of Sub-Saharan Africa. As a result of the progressive policies of the Rwandan government, women hold many high positions in the public and private sector and constitute the highest proportion in the world in a national parliament. However, there is evidence that patriarchal tendencies are still endemic in Rwandan society. Taking into consideration this unique context, the purpose of this study was to investigate how women in leadership positions in Kigali locate themselves as women and leaders and experience performing multiple roles in their private and professional lives. The theory of doing gender was employed in order to better understand this phenomenon. The study utilised phenomenological methodology, focusing on the women's experiences and perceptions. The results painted an image of a Rwandan woman leader as being extremely committed, strong, and determined to overcome the persisting bias against women in leadership positions. Moreover, the study showed that the participants find it incredibly challenging to manage their roles as career professionals and a housewives, which contributes to an ever-present feeling of guilt for not devoting enough attention to their families.

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1. INTRODUCTION – GENDER RELATIONS IN RWANDA

Urugo ruvuze umugore ruvuga umuhoro (At home, when the wife speaks, out comes the knife)

Ntankokokazi ibika hari isake (Hens do not crow where there is a cock)

Rwandan proverbs

(Burnet 2012: 190)

The Rwandan society has traditionally been characterised by a patriarchal culture, which impeded women's autonomy in all areas of life. However, there have been a few exceptions throughout Rwandan history, when women played an active role in political life. Accounts of pre-colonial times speak of the mighty Queen Mothers, who were often equally powerful as their ruling husbands. This even led some early Western explorers to describe Rwanda as a land ruled by a Queen (Hogg 2010). However, during the colonial and post-colonial times this changed and women virtually disappeared from public life (Hogg 2010).

In colonial and post-colonial Rwanda women traditionally were expected to be timid and obedient to men both within the household and in public life. Their primary responsibilities included taking care of the home and their children's education, maintaining traditions and being supportive of their husbands (Hogg 2010). Even though wives were often involved in paid labour and contributed significantly to the family budget, any household income and land were under the ultimate control of the husband (Jefremovas 1991). The consent of the husband was required if a woman wanted to start a business, engage in commerce, buy land or undertake a court action (Jefremovas 1991). On a community level, tradition obliged men to take part in meetings and represent the household on behalf of all its members. A wife was allowed to attend only if the husband was absent. In general, politics at the national, regional and local levels were dominated by men, with the exception of only a few women in prominent positions¹ (Burnet 2012).

The genocide of 1994, which resulted in the death of around 800,000 people, shattered the social, political and material structure of the country (United Nations Security Council 1999). It is estimated that in the immediate aftermath of this event as much as 70 percent of the

¹ One such prominent figure was Agathe Uwilingiyimana, killed in the first days of the genocide. She was the first and so far the only woman serving as Rwandan prime minister.

Rwandan population was female (Human Rights Watch 1996). Because their husbands were either dead, in exile or in prison, women had to assume roles previously denied to them and take on the task of rebuilding their lives, communities and the whole country. As Burnet (2008: 384) writes, “these roles included everyday tasks customarily taboo for women, like putting roofs on houses, constructing enclosures around houses, or milking cows, and additional roles in society, such as head of household or government administrator.”

Another factor that has facilitated the change in the position of women has been the political will of the post-genocide government. The Rwandan Patriotic Front, the ruling party since the end of the genocide, has implemented a number of gender sensitive policies and made gender equality a national priority. This new approach is best illustrated by President Paul Kagame’s statement that “gender equality is not just women’s business, it is everybody’s business. /.../ gender equality and women’s empowerment are critical to sustainable socio-economic development” (MIGEPROF 2010: 7). Thus, promotion of gender equality has become an indispensable strategy in the government’s plans for reconciliation, reconstruction and development. In 1999 the so-called “Inheritance Law” legislation was passed, which made it legal for women to inherit property, enter into contracts, own property separately from their husbands, and open bank accounts without the authorisation of their husbands (Republic of Rwanda 1999). The constitution of 2003 established quotas (30 percent) for women in decision-making bodies at all levels (Republic of Rwanda 2003). All these factors may have contributed to the fact that since the elections in 2008, the Rwandan Parliament has had the highest proportion of female representatives in the world, currently 56.25 percent (Parliament of Rwanda 2013). A high proportion of women have also been appointed to serve as representatives at cell, sector and district levels (Burnet 2012).

These facilitating factors have resulted in a significant improvement in the social position of Rwandan women. Many gained increased respect in the family and community, enhanced capability to speak in public forums and greater autonomy in decision making (Burnet 2011). However, this gender revolution has been also met with the resistance from the more conservative parts of the society, especially in rural areas. Many Rwandans, both male and female, blame increased women’s agency for a perceived disintegration of the institution of marriage (Burnet 2012). As Slegh et al. (2013: 21) conclude “it seems that much progress has been made in Rwanda on the empowerment of women from a legal and policy perspective, yet comparatively less appears to have changed in popular attitudes to gender roles and power

relations.” According to a nation-wide survey concluded in 2009 – 2010, 73 percent of Rwandan men and 82 percent of women stated that a woman’s primary responsibility is to take care of the family. 75 percent of the women responded that their husbands control household decision-making, compared to 57 percent of men. A staggering 40 percent of men reported having carried out physical violence against the female partner at least once in their lives and 17 percent admitted abusing alcohol regularly (Barker et al. 2011). Furthermore, it is apparent that the positive institutional changes have benefited mostly educated, urban women. While this group of women have gained access to attractive salaried positions, both within the government and the private sector, it has been noted that the rural women elected to non-paid local government positions have only experienced increased workload in addition to their existing daily chores (Burnet 2012).

2. PURPOSE OF THE STUDY AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Reading about gender relations in Rwanda and experiencing them in everyday life during my stay in the country, I found it incredibly interesting how this nation has moved from a highly patriarchal pre-1994 society to what it is now, with gender equality at the forefront of political discourse and women in leadership positions in all areas of public life. However, as noted above, there is evidence that a patriarchal mindset is still present in many areas of everyday life. This could be explained by the institutional theory, which predicts that norms and values do not change as quickly as formal institutions (North 1995)². In this context, I found it interesting to investigate how successful women in leadership positions deal with the present contradictory situation, how they position themselves as women and leaders and perform their multiple roles.

Therefore, the central research question posed in this study is as follows:

How do women in leadership positions in Kigali experience performing gender roles in their professional and private lives?

² According to North (1995: 25) “institutions are made up of formal rules, informal norms and the enforcement characteristics (...). While the formal rules can be changed overnight, the informal norms change only gradually”.

In order to better answer this question I am asking the following sub-questions:

- 1) How do these women perform and experience gender roles in their professional lives?
- 2) How do they perform and experience gender roles in their private lives?
- 3) What is their self-perception of being leaders and mothers/wives?
- 4) How does being leaders influence their private and family lives?

The existing literature on gender relations in Rwanda is limited to a relatively small number of issues. The discussion has revolved around the traditional gender roles in the society (see Jefremovas 1991), women's role in the genocide (see African Rights 1995; Adler et al. 2007, Hogg 2010), the negative consequences of the genocide for women (see Newbury & Baldwin 2000) and women's role in the reconstruction of the country after the genocide (see Powley 2003). The latest research focuses on the impact of the increased political representation of women on their position within the society (see Powley 2005; Burnet 2008, 2011, 2012; Devlin & Elgie 2008; Hogg 2009; Katengwa 2010). None of these studies however directly incorporates the perspective of the women concerned. There is a lack of research focusing on how women themselves perceive their gender roles in the dramatically changing context of gender relations. That is why, by employing phenomenological approach, this study fills the gap by giving voice to women leaders and allowing them to reflect on their experiences. Phenomenology will enable me to provide a rich, in-depth description of the experience of being a female leader in Rwanda. As Gubrium and Holstein (1997: 12) argue "we must have a good clear picture of the qualities of the world before we can attempt to explain it, let alone predict or modify it". Therefore it is hoped that this study will shed new light on the issues related to gender equality in Rwanda, inform future policies and interventions and provide questions for further research.

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

To understand better the phenomenon under study, I have chosen the theory of doing gender as a theoretical lens, which has shaped my research, influencing the questions asked and how data was collected and analysed (Creswell 2009: 46). The main assumption of this theory, developed by West and Zimmerman in the 1980s, is that "gender is not a set of social traits,

nor a variable, nor a role, but the product of social doings” (West & Zimmerman 1987: 129). Thus, gender is not something we *are*, but something we *do* in our interactions with others - not something intrinsic and stable but a dynamic result of ongoing social interactions. We do gender in the face of a constant risk of being assessed against normative conceptions of masculinity and femininity existing in society. These normative conceptions create “differences between boys and girls and women and men, differences that are not natural, essential or biological” (West & Zimmerman 1987: 137). The content of these conceptions varies across time and culture, but the unwritten obligation to behave in accordance with one’s gender is always in place. In this light gender is understood as “the relationship between being a recognizable incumbent of a sex category /.../ and being *accountable* to current cultural conceptions of /.../ a woman or a man.” (West & Zimmerman 2009: 114). Doing gender is unavoidable as long as we live in the society, where “in virtually any situation, one’s sex category can be relevant, and one’s performance as an incumbent of that category (i.e. gender) can be subject to evaluation” (West and Zimmerman 1987: 145). Moreover, West and Zimmerman (2009) emphasize that gender has an oppressive character. According to them, the existence of different gender expectations results in power and resource discrepancies, which are continually reinforced through gender accountability processes.

The theory of doing gender has had an enormous impact on how gender is studied, promoting the social constructivist approach as opposed to the essentialism viewing gender as a static property (Kelan 2009). However, it has been pointed out that it is often difficult to apply in research practice (Kelan 2009). Even the very precursors of the theory, West and Zimmerman, responding to the criticism, admitted that in their initial writings they “did indeed miss an opportunity to specify a method for studying gender’s accomplishment” (West & Zimmerman 2009: 116). They recommend conversation analysis as one method particularly suitable to such study and further conclude that “*any* method that captures members of society’s descriptive accountings of states of affairs to one another /.../ can be deployed for the study of doing gender” (West & Zimmerman 2009: 116). Accordingly, this study employs a phenomenological methodology in the attempt to uncover how Rwandan women in leadership positions experience doing gender in their daily lives. Doing gender is suitable for being studied thorough phenomenological research as it is an everyday practice, a part of “the unquestioned, practical, historically conditioned, pretheoretical, and familiar world of people’s everyday lives”, which is at the heart of phenomenological philosophy (Desjarlais & Throop 2011: 91).

4. METHODOLOGY

4.1. RESEARCH DESIGN

As mentioned above, taking into consideration the focus of this study and its purpose I have employed a qualitative phenomenological research design, which locates the research within the constructivist ontology and the interpretivist epistemological context. Constructivism perceives social reality as a constantly changing product of a creation by individuals, whereas interpretivism states that social science should focus on how those individuals interpret the social world (Bryman 2008: 22). Employing this metascientific position means that my research does not try to uncover objective truths but rather focuses on how the studied women perceive the reality and make sense of it.

Although qualitative methodology is undoubtedly a better fit than quantitative methods for exploring social meanings and motivations (Kalof et al. 2008: 79), it has not been free from critique. One of the drawbacks of using qualitative methods in this research is that it is difficult to replicate due to my decisive role of a researcher, using my own subjective view about what is important to focus on, the influence of my positionality and personal interactions with the studied women and finally, the lack of clear, structured methodological procedures (as compared to quantitative methods). Even though I have tried to represent the world as seen by the participants, ultimately it was me, who interpreted the meaning of what was said. Creswell (2009: 145) recommends validating research findings through member checking. However valuable for my study this procedure could be, I have decided not to use it. Knowing how busy the participants are, I did not want to put additional burden on them by asking to review my interpretations of their statements. Another limitation of this study is a limited possibility to generalise from it. This is because it has been conducted on a small, non-random sample, in a certain location and therefore it is difficult to ascertain whether the findings can be generalised to a larger population (Bryman 2004: 284).

Taking into consideration that this research focuses on individual experiences and meanings of a certain phenomenon, I have decided that phenomenology will be the most appropriate methodological approach. According to Creswell (2007: 60), a phenomenological approach is best suited for research “in which it is important to understand several individuals’ common

or shared experience of a phenomenon /.../ in order to develop a deeper understanding about its features /.../.” It is important to underline that the aim of phenomenological research is not to explain or predict but to gain a deeper understanding of a phenomenon through examination of lived experience (Creswell 2007). This is done by describing the world as it is experienced by individuals in order to discover the common meanings underlying a given phenomenon (Baker et al. 1992).

This study utilises the phenomenological approach proposed by Moustakas (1994), which clearly lays out the consecutive methodological steps of a phenomenological inquiry. The research procedure started by *bracketing*, i.e. attempting to put aside the researcher’s own experience and assumptions considering the phenomenon under examination. This was followed by analysis of the data involving a thorough and multiple reading of transcripts in order to get a general sense of data and the overall meaning. In the next step, I searched for significant statements and common patterns in the participants’ responses and categorised them into themes. Subsequently, I deleted overlapping, repetitive and irrelevant statements and clustered the remaining quotations into themes. The themes that emerged from this process represent the essence of the phenomenon of being a female leader in Rwanda and consist of “aspects or qualities that make phenomenon what it is and without which the phenomenon could not be what it is” (van Manen 1990: 107).

4.2. SAMPLE CHARACTERISTICS

The study is based on a non-probability sample, which means that its findings are not generalisable to a larger population (Kalof et al. 2008: 44). This sampling technique is commonly used with qualitative studies since their goal is “not to make statements about the larger population but to understand things in-depth and directly from the perspectives of those being studied” (Kalof et al. 2008: 161). I have used a purposeful sampling strategy whereby I, as a researcher, decide on whom to include in the sample, based on the characteristics of the target population (Overton & van Diermen 2003: 43) and a criterion sampling, recommended by Creswell (2007: 128) as a strategy particularly fit for phenomenological research, whereby all participants fulfill the criterion of having experienced the phenomenon under study. Moreover, to facilitate the selection process, I have utilised the snowball sampling technique by asking the participants whether they know any other women who suit my criteria (Bryman

2008). The strategy used was also to some extent a convenience sampling (Overton & van Diermen 2003: 43). Most of the women I have interviewed (9 out of 12) are working in managerial positions within the NGO sector. This is mainly because they were conveniently accessible through my gatekeepers, who themselves were members of the NGO sector. In order to diversify the sample, I have contacted a number of women in the business sector, yet none were willing to participate in the research. Similarly, only three women engaged in politics (members of the parliament) agreed to be interviewed. Nevertheless, I believe that this lack of diversity in the sample has not affected the quality of my data in a negative way. All of the participants fulfill the essential condition of being a woman in a leadership position. As mentioned before, a phenomenological study does not strive to be representative of a group larger than the sample (Creswell 2007).

Two main criteria have been used to determine which women to include in the study: 1) working in a leadership position, which involves managing people and some degree of active participation in the public life and 2) speaking English at a level that allows them to freely elaborate on the personal experience. I have decided to include this criterion for practical and methodological reasons. As I did not have any financial nor logistic support to carry out the research, employing a professional interpreter was beyond my financial means. I could have potentially engaged a non-professional local assistant speaking good English at a reasonably low cost but I was afraid that the quality of translation could compromise the quality of the data. Moreover, in my opinion, taking into consideration the phenomenological nature of my research, using an interpreter was not the best solution. First of all, during translation I could lose meanings and nuances in the interviewees' statements. Obviously, these would be best grasped if the interview was conducted in the mother tongue of both interviewer and interviewee however, this was not possible for evident reasons. In this situation I decided that conducting interviews in a second language, although not ideal, was still a better option than using an interpreter. Secondly, it was important to me that the interviews were more like casual conversations, whereby the interviewees could freely express their experiences in a relaxed and confidential face-to-face situation. In my opinion, the presence of an interpreter would make it more difficult.

The participants' ages ranged from 30 to 61 years of age, with the average age of 45 years. However, this wide age disparity does not seem to have resulted in any major differences in the participants' accounts of their experiences. Considering their marital status, one

participant was a widow, two were single, one was divorced and the remaining eight were married. All of the participants, except for one, had at least one child, they were thus able to reflect on their role of a mother. All participants were educated at a university level (see Annex I for the characteristics of the participants).

4.3. DATA COLLECTION PROCESS

The main data collection technique was semi-structured in-depth interviews with women in leadership positions. I conducted a total of 12 interviews, which took place in the period between mid-November 2012 and mid-January 2013. A single interview lasted on average 40 minutes, with the longest lasting an hour and the shortest 25 minutes. All the interviews were conducted at the participants' places of work. This could have had potential implications for their responses, as it made the interview situation less personal and more "official". To limit this unwanted effect, before each interview I stressed to the participants that it was important to me that the conversation was rather informal and that I was interested in their personal experiences and feelings. All of the participants were informed about the purpose of the study (Scheyvens et al. 2003). Each participant was also informed about confidentiality of the research, the right to refuse to answer any question they considered inappropriate, the right to stop the interview and the right to withdraw from the research at any time. After being given the above information, all participants expressed their verbal consent to take part in the research and for their responses to be audio recorded. During the initial interviews I asked the participants to sign a consent form. However, upon discovering that this formality seemed to make them feel uncomfortable I forewent this requirement (see Annex II for the consent note given to participants).

Following the requirements of phenomenological methodology, the questions were designed to explore feelings, experiences and perceptions of the participants. The interview guide consisted of four parts: (1) personal and family details (such as age, marital status, education, children), (2) participants' perceptions of an ideal woman, ideal man and ideal family as seen by the Rwandan society and their definition of an ideal leader, (3) participants' self-perceptions and experiences of being a woman in a leadership position, (4) participants' perceptions of their family lives (see Annex III for the interview guide). Given the

phenomenological nature of the study, the use of the interview guide was flexible, giving the participants an opportunity to elaborate on those experiences that they found important. Prompt questions were sometimes asked in order to encourage more detailed descriptions of specific feelings and situations.

Field notes were taken immediately after each interview to record body language, the setting, atmosphere, my initial thoughts and reflections, etc. Each interview was audio recorded and transcribed. Transcription and the initial analysis was carried out while new interviews were being conducted. This allowed me to have a better understanding of the topic and examine my interview technique so I knew what to improve in future interviews. The interviews were transcribed verbatim but the transcripts did not capture every single language mannerism (Kvale 2007). The transcription included also, when needed, minor alternations in the participants' statements in order to improve readability. This was done with understanding that oral and written language are different from each other and transcription process is a translation from oral style to written style (Kvale 2007: 93). Keeping the detailed documentation, including field notes, transcripts and recordings increased confirmability of the research, allowing others to independently confirm the results, should that be requested (Kalof et al. 2008: 164).

Taking into consideration the phenomenological design of my research, which is based on participants' personal accounts, interviews were the main source of data. However, in order to get a better general understanding of gender relations in Rwanda, I conducted a prior literature review on the topic. I also gathered background data through direct observation of the daily lives of women around me, not only those in leadership positions and having professional careers, but also poorer women living both in Kigali and in rural areas. A useful data collection technique was also involving gender issues in casual conversations, reading articles in the local, English language online newspapers³ and following internet forums, such as the Rwanda Association of University Women⁴ e-mail forum. This triangulation of data sources increases credibility of the collected data, creating a more complete understanding of the individuals and the setting of interest for my study (Kalof et al. 2008: 162).

³ The New Times (<http://www.newtimes.co.rw/news/>), News of Rwanda (<http://www.newsforwanda.com/>), Rwanda Focus (<http://focus.rw/wp/>).

⁴ <http://www.ifuw.org/rwanda/index.shtml>

4.4. THE QUALITY OF DATA

Since interviews are the main data collection method in this research, it is important to reflect on the mutual dynamics between the researcher and the interviewee, which significantly influence the quality of data obtained. As Kvale (1996: 35) puts it, the “interviewer and the subject act in relation to each other and reciprocally influence each other. /.../ the knowledge produced in a research interview is constituted by the interaction itself, in the specific situation created between an interviewer and an interviewee.” I was particularly concerned about these aspects before conducting the first interviews. I feared that my interviewees might view me as a young, inexperienced Westerner, who does not understand Rwandan reality. I had concerns that I would not be able to create rapport and that the interview situation would be awkward. However, after concluding the fieldwork my impression was that indeed, these characteristics of mine were salient during the interview situation, although they did not prevent creating a rapport. On the contrary, I felt that the participants treated me a bit like a daughter or a younger sister with whom they shared their experience of being a woman in a leadership position. The fact that me, as a researcher, and the study participants share the same gender facilitated the atmosphere of openness and common understanding.

When discussing the quality of the empirical data, the specific Rwandan socio-political context must also be taken into consideration. The limitations to political space and freedom of speech in Rwanda are widely discussed (Beswick 2010; Gready 2010; Reyntjens 2011). Moreover, despite the pervasive rhetoric of the national unity, actively promoted by the government, this post-conflict society is still deeply divided along many lines, not least ethnic origin. As Reyntjens (2011: 1) writes, “Rwanda is a country full of paradoxes, difficult for outsiders to comprehend and to apprehend.” King (2009), reflecting on her fieldwork conducted in Rwanda, points to numerous methodological challenges she was faced with when conducting interviews. One of the main problems recounted by her is what she calls “selective telling”, which included “the telling of outright lies, politically sanctioned public narratives, counter-narratives that emerge in private, and the tendency of group members to tell similar narratives” (King 2009: 130). This is compounded by the fact that because freedom of speech is limited in this country, in many situations Rwandans resort to self-censorship. The laws on ‘divisionism’ and ‘genocide ideology’, whose official aim is to retain the national unity and prevent the return of ethnic conflict, are criticised by observers as being

used to charge anyone, who simply disagrees with the government in any matter (Reyntjens 2011).

King's (2009) account of her fieldwork is very similar to what I experienced during my research. While the focus of my research was on individual and private experiences of the interviewed women, I found that virtually all of the participants incorporated in their responses an appraisal of government's policy of gender equality. The comments praising the government were strikingly similar in their wording, what suggests that they were part of "politically sanctioned public narratives" (King 2009: 130). Moreover, observers report the existence of certain "truths" in Rwanda that are not meant to be shared openly with outsiders, particularly Westerners (Hintjens 2001; King 2009). There even exists a word in Kinyarwanda, *amalenga*, which describes such issues (Hintjens 2001: 41). Taking into consideration this context, it is difficult to assess whether the participants of my study were entirely truthful and open in their responses. It is possible that to some extent, even when talking about their personal lives, they were trying to present the reality that upholds the government's narrative of gender equality. King (2009: 137) argues, however, that these specific "data problems" should rather be looked at as important "data points" since they shed light on the complexity of socio-political relations existing in the country. This observation is also relevant to the context of my study, as being a woman leader in Rwanda appears to be an essential part of the politically sanctioned public narrative, not merely a private experience of the women concerned.

Last but not least, not only was the data possibly filtered and distorted by the participants, but it was also influenced by my understanding, what I *heard* them say to me about their experiences. As Mikkelsen (2005: 327) writes, "we have few other possibilities when interpreting other societies and cultures than starting from our own experience". Finaly (2002: 212) points out that in social sciences a researcher is "a central figure who influences, if not actively constructs, the collection, selection and interpretation of data." This issue is especially important when conducting phenomenological research, whose goal is to understand other people's experiences and meanings as seen through *their* eyes. A constant reflection on the ways in which the researcher influences the research process is thus essential (England 1994, Sultana 2007). That is why, throughout the research process, I have been repeatedly reflecting on the issue of my positionality and my role as a researcher.

5. FINDINGS - THE EXPERIENCE OF BEING A WOMAN IN A LEADERSHIP POSITION IN KIGALI, RWANDA

During the analysis of the interview data I have identified three overarching topics. They include the participants' perceptions of: 1) gender roles existing in the Rwandan society; 2) the interplay between gender and leadership; 3) personal experience of performing roles of women and leaders. The first two topics, presented in sections 5.1. and 5.2., discuss how the participants perceive societal expectations towards them as women, mothers, wives and leaders. The third topic, presented in section 5.3., explores how the participants do gender, i.e. how they perceive themselves and act in their multiple roles as women in leadership positions and how they respond to gendered expectations from society.

5.1. THE PERCEIVED GENDER ROLES EXISTING IN THE RWANDAN SOCIETY

This part discusses gender roles existing in Rwandan society, as seen by the participants. During the interviews the participants were asked to elaborate on the characteristics of an ideal Rwandan woman, man and family. It is crucial to understand such perceptions existing in a given society as they constitute a point of departure for doing gender. It is against the normative perceptions of an "ideal woman" and an "ideal man" that we are constantly assessed by the society (West & Zimmerman 1987, 2009). Section 5.1.1. presents an image of a stereotypical ideal Rwandan woman, which emerges from the interviews. Such a woman is described as: a) quiet and humble, b) caring for her family, c) successful at balancing work and family obligations, d) maintaining a good relationship with the community and in-laws. Participants particularly stress the view that an ideal modern woman should be educated and successful in her professional life but at the same time is placed under demanding societal scrutiny when it comes to her obligations as a mother and a wife. Underlining how difficult it is to excel in both areas, one of the participants aptly describes such a stereotypical woman as a "kind of superwoman". Section 5.1.2. presents the participants' image of a stereotypical ideal man. In this case the participants focus on one single characteristic – man's role of a breadwinner. They comment that, unlike a woman, a man is not expected to be involved in keeping the household and it is acceptable for him to care for the family from a financial perspective only. Section 5.1.3. presents characteristics of an ideal Rwandan marriage and

family. The participants single out the following features: a) lack of conflict, good communication and honesty, b) having educated and well-behaved children, c) good reputation and respect.

5.1.1. CHARACTERISTICS OF AN IDEAL WOMAN

a) Quiet and humble

The interviews reveal that, according to Rwandan tradition, a good woman is “someone who is caring, who is gentle, who is humble, who is not outspoken” (Louise⁵). Based on her own experience, Grace recounts how this norm of behaviour is instilled in women from an early age:

In our culture women are not supposed to, you know, be up and talk, people will start doubting you're just making noise: “That one, we know her as somebody who makes noise” [laughs]. /.../ There is the way the culture has been shaping us, that we don't talk when men do. /.../ Like when we were young, if my mother would hear me making noise with boys, she would say: "What's wrong with you? You know that women... Stop doing that. You're supposed to be polite!" You know, there is a way they have brought us up.. in that polite manner. Sometimes you don't even know you have the right to speak /.../.”

In the above statement Grace says that in Rwandan tradition a woman, who is outspoken is disregarded as “somebody who makes noise”. She also mentions that according to the culture, women should not speak when men do. Finally, she describes how her mother would reprimand her for behaving boisterously and playing with boys, saying that such behaviour is not suitable for a girl.

b) Caring for the family

In a traditional view the ideal woman should be married and have children. Her primary responsibility is to take care of the family and keep the household. Jessica describes such a woman, who fulfills all these responsibilities, as a superwoman: “A good woman from a Rwandan perspective is one who knows how to keep her house well, it means taking care of the children, taking care of the husband, /.../ a kind of superwoman.” Agathe underlines: “An ideal woman is a woman who cares for her family, is there for them. /.../ The family is very,

⁵ All participants' names have been changed to ensure confidentiality.

very important.” This shows that it is traditionally believed in Rwanda that the family should be a priority for a woman and stresses the great value attached to family life.

c) Balancing work and family

Besides being good housewives, modern Rwandan women are encouraged by society to engage in paid employment. Supporting the family financially is seen as an asset: “If a woman is able to take care of the children in terms of home care, and even working at the same time, that is an added advantage because you're supporting your husband also” (Grace). However, even though women’s paid employment is perceived as something positive, the traditional norm that household matters are the sole responsibility of women remains unchanged. Thus, several participants describe an ideal woman as juggling both her career and family obligations. Agathe explains: “You need to really do both, work but also, most importantly, care for the family, care for the children and for the husband”. Similarly, Jessica states: “It's good for a woman to work, but also to know how to keep the house. I am not expecting her to perform in one area and leave the other behind”. These statements describe the burden placed on Rwandan women by society, whereby they are expected to do well as full-time workers and be exemplary housewives. In this context, Claire emphasizes that no matter how important her professional position is, a woman should never forget her role as a devoted mother and humble wife:

Even though my country is on a good way to empower women, but women also have to know their role of a mother and the role of a spouse. They can't say "I'm a senator, I'm a chief justice, I'm whatever" and forget the function of a spouse and mother /.../. You have to respect your husband, even if he has a lower position than you. You have to respect him as a husband, you give him respect and affection as husband.

Interestingly, in her statement Claire expresses the view that the promotion of gender equality should not result in the destruction of the traditional role of woman as a mother and wife, showing her attachment to the long-established patriarchal values. The participants also note that it is considered inappropriate for a woman to stay at work long hours, thus neglecting her family responsibilities: “Despite what you do formally in the office, you are not expected to stay in the office long hours” (Agathe). In this context, Louise says that taking an evening course for her degree while having a daytime job would not be possible, were she not single: “If I was a married woman I don’t think I would have achieved it because it would be too late

to go back so maybe my husband would be cross with me". She identifies family obligations as a common hindrance for a woman's career: "Some women decide to put off their not achieved ambitions satisfying the needs of their husbands or their families". Also Grace notes that because of family obligations women are less flexible than men in terms of the time they can devote to their career. This, in her opinion, hinders women from advancing their careers:

After 6 o'clock a woman will tell you: "I'm rushing home to see my kids, I haven't see them for the whole day. And I have to prepare the table for my husband." /.../ But a man will never mind. He can stay for an hour. /.../ Because he will just ring the wife and say: "I'm sorry, I'm not coming, I have a lot of work at the office and I will come home late" but a woman will never come home late, the man will even start shouting: "The work made you even to not remember your children and your home!"

Grace states that men typically have no issue in working longer hours, whilst women may feel that they cannot compromise their family obligations, or are simply afraid of their husband's negative reaction. Similarly, remaining outside home in the evening and socialising in a company of unrelated men is a taboo for women. Grace explains how women who engage in such activities are viewed with suspicion:

If you're a woman and you say: "I'm going to have a beer" and have it with men only, people will start questioning, they will say: "What's wrong? Why? Why is she going out with men? Maybe one of them is her friend or boyfriend or something else?"

Agathe emphasizes that this often deprives women of an opportunity to network, creating another barrier to career advancement:

The challenge as a woman is because culturally - I know things are changing, there is civilisation and all that – but you have to be at home at some good hours in the evening. But to meet people, to make relationships, to discuss, it would be probably ok for men to meet after their work around 8-9, talk over drink, it's not in me, naturally it's not in me. /.../ That is not with me and many women and that's where we miss it, yeah.

It is worth mentioning that not only does Agathe say that socialising after work is inappropriate for women from a cultural perspective, but she also claims that it is not part of a woman's "nature". It suggests that she views this behaviour as an inherent characteristic of

women, originating in their sex, rather than solely a result of societal pressure. This finding is in line with West's and Zimmerman's (1987) argument that, even though most of the differences between men and women are a product of social interactions, they are commonly sanctioned as "natural". This leads to such differences being viewed as uncontestable and unchangeable.

d) Maintaining a good relationship with the community, relatives and in-laws

Maintaining a good relationship with the community and receiving guests at home is another responsibility traditionally ascribed to women and a norm they are judged against as housewives. As Delphine explains: "For the Rwandan, when they think of a good woman, it is someone /.../ who is good with relationships with others, who lives in good relations with neighbours and all people." Similarly, Jessica describes an ideal Rwandan woman as "the one who knows how to be social with people, which means that her household has many friends". Rwandans traditionally attach significance to welcoming guests with generosity and honour. It is woman's responsibility to make sure that guests are received with due care. As Grace explains:

In our tradition, when you welcome people, when people come to your home and you are able to give them a cup of tea, they say: "This woman is a good woman". You should be polite to them and greet them, be humble, /.../ that's what they call a good woman in our tradition.

Grace says that it is important for a "good" woman to act towards the guests of the household in a polite, humble and generous manner.

After getting married a woman is also expected to maintain a close relationship with her husband's family. A nuclear model of family is not a common phenomenon in a Rwandan context and focusing only on one's closest family could be perceived as alienating relatives and in-laws. This also means considering and following opinions and advice given by members of the extended family. As Emma explains:

As a Rwandan woman I have to take into consideration also his family, not just look at me and my husband but also look at our parents and brothers and sisters. It is our culture. It means that when you enter into your husband's family you have to behave like them, not introducing yours. /.../ So you don't just think that this is our house, it's me and you and our children /.../.

Emma underlines that getting married means not only entering the husband's family but also "behaving like them". In not "introducing yours", Emma indicates that women should not attempt to change their new family's habits, which shows how important the influence of in-laws is in Rwandan tradition.

5.1.2. CHARACTERISTICS OF AN IDEAL MAN

All of the participants point to the primary role of a man as a breadwinner. It is noted that, unlike women, men are not blamed if their involvement in household responsibilities is restricted to merely providing for the family from a financial perspective. As Jessica says, a man should "try" to spend time with his family but most of all should support it financially:

A good man is someone who can take care of the household, which means who works and brings income to take care of the house, /.../ who tries to be at home. But most focus is on the financial perspective.

However, Agathe points out that together with the process of women entering the workforce, men should assume some of the responsibilities at home:

In the Rwandan culture a man is not blamed for not being at home early. So you know, just when the man provides for the family, that's ok. But for the changing world it's very difficult. You find that what you need is a man who helps a woman in the home.

In her statement Agathe suggests that the present arrangement, where men are not expected to spend time at home and women are responsible for all the household chores, is not fair and should change, together with other shifts in gender relations occurring in Rwandan society.

Other characteristics of an ideal Rwandan man, identified by the participants include "strong" (Esther), "in charge of everything" (Giselle), "outgoing" (Louise), "enterprising" (Louise), "not a drunkard" (Jessica).

5.1.3. CHARACTERISTICS OF AN IDEAL FAMILY

a) Lack of conflict, good communication and honesty

When talking about the characteristics of a stereotypical ideal Rwandan family the participants underline the importance of peaceful relations between its members. As Claire states: “a perfect family is a family who do not struggle with each other and the members live in unity.” Esther says that such family is one “which is stable, where there is no conflict.” Sylvia notes that effective communication between spouses, admitting to mistakes and correcting them is a prerequisite to a long lasting and peaceful marriage:

A good marriage is usually where there is a good communication. It is where if you don't do things well you say to your partner "I'm sorry" and you agree to the mistake but you also agree to correct it. And usually what breaks marriages is poor communication.

Delphine underlines the importance of honesty and openness: “You don't have those things that you can't tell to your husband or to your wife, you have to share everything, just talk about everything.” Living in peace and unity and being open and honest to each other are thus seen as the necessary elements of an ideal family.

b) Educated and well-behaved children

Agathe explains that having children, in the Rwandan context, is a basic condition for the family to be considered happy:

A perfect family in the Rwandan culture is a family that has children. Ok? You must have children. /.../ A family that does not have children, we don't imagine they are happy. Even if they may be happy we don't think they are.

Moreover, a good family is one where “the children can go to school, so they will improve their lives” (Esther) and “perform well” (Agathe). Moreover, importance is attached to having children who are disciplined and “don't quarrel with other children” (Agathe). These statements show how highly valued education is in Rwandan society. It is seen as a way to ensure a better life for children in the future and more broadly, a route to development of the country.

c) Good reputation and respect

An ideal Rwandan family should enjoy a good reputation, whereby its members behave in a respectful way. In Claire's words a good family is one "where they are not excessive drunkards, where you don't have domestic violence. /.../ Also, when you are a man and a woman, respect each other. There can't be prostitutes, a good family must avoid all those bad habits." Several other participants also talk in this context about problems that plague many Rwandan families, such as alcoholism, domestic violence and prostitution. An ideal family is seen as one, whose members are not involved in any of these shameful behaviours.

To sum up, the participants' view of an ideal woman, as seen by Rwandan society, paint a picture of a quiet and humble woman, who engages in paid employment to support the family budget but most of all, is a devoted and caring housewife. The discussed personal traits of an ideal man seem to be in opposition to what is expected of a woman. This may suggest that, in the participants' view, men and women have their own strictly determined roles which are different but compliment each other. When it comes to the participants' statements about ideal family life it can be argued that they mirror values deemed important and promoted in post-genocide Rwandan society, such as peace, harmony, mutual understanding, dignity and education.

5.2. THE PERCEIVED INTERPLAY BETWEEN GENDER AND LEADERSHIP

The following section discusses how, according to the participants, gender influences leadership in the Rwandan context. Section 5.2.1. presents how the participants characterise women leaders. They are described as a) putting others first, b) transparent and honest, c) attentive to detail, d) committed, e) lacking self-confidence. All of the participants have a positive image of a woman leader, and many express the opinion that not only are women as good as men, but often they make better leaders. The only weak side that the participants identify is women's lack of self-confidence, which is seen as a barrier to reaching their full potential as leaders. Most of the participants place blame on the traditional patriarchal norms still existing in society, which perceive leadership as a male domain. Section 5.2.2. presents

the participants' perception of men as leaders. When discussing men's leadership style the participants are rather critical, describing them, in opposition to female leaders, as selfish, dominating, corrupt and overly self-confident.

5.2.1. WOMEN AS LEADERS

a) Putting others first

Women in leadership positions are described as being selfless and focused on serving others. According to Grace, putting others first is an innate characteristic of women, emanating from their biological role of a mother, who ensures that her children are fed before she herself eats: "We are naturally mothers, you eat when you stop feeding your children. So we always have that in mind that we put serving all these people first. /.../ I can't give myself a big share when others are hungry." In Esther's opinion "women have a desire and a will to do what is beneficial for the community and the country". Both of these statements show that in the participants' view women leaders see their leadership as a service to others, rather than a fulfillment of their own aspirations.

b) Transparent and honest

The participants point out that besides being selfless, women are "not easily corrupted" and "not attached to material things" (Claire). Moreover, they "are more honest and have more integrity than men" (Jessica). Grace notes that this is one of the reasons why so many women are appointed for government positions in Rwanda. She views women as abstemious and focused primarily on meeting the needs of their families. As in her previous statement, she attributes this women's characteristic to their biological role of mothers: "naturally women don't want to own any business, they just want to feed their children. /.../ Women are more ambitious, yet they can be content whilst their basic needs are catered for." According to Pelagie,

generally women are honest when they are in a high position and they are afraid to do things badly because of their families, their dignity. They base their life on dignity, because of the education they have from the family that women must be honest and have respect in what they do.

In Pelagie's view, women's honesty and transparency stem from the influence of Rwandan tradition, which places particular importance on women's dignity and respect.

c) Attentive to detail

The participants find women “meticulous” (Esther) and focused on detail. Interestingly, Agathe links this women’s quality to their experience in running a household: “Most of them look at the detail /.../ and they try to do things as they would in their homes. So that detail, I think it lacks in men.” According to Yvonne, women tend to capture details, whereas men look at the wider picture:

When you see a woman, she's someone who wants to know things in detail and look in details. And in whatever you do, the achievement is not for big things but in details. So if you look at the achievements in a global way, maybe men are better leaders but if you want to do the achievements in details, then women are better than men.

In this context Louise adds that women are better leaders because “while men are good at dominating, women tend to come down and address the issues as they are.” Women leaders are thus seen as being more attentive to detail and down to earth, as opposed to men’s leadership style, characterised by domination and looking from a global perspective.

d) Committed to work

The participants view women as goal-oriented and extremely committed to their work. Claire has no doubts in this matter: “It is proven that women are better leaders because they have a commitment, they have a commitment to perform.” Also Pelagie talks about women’s extraordinary commitment and determination: “As a woman when you're a leader, you are committed to achieve properly what you are supposed to achieve. It is that determination of women, really.” In Louise’s opinion, “women have the will to improve and to do better than men, they have a stronger need to get things done.” She thus explains women’s exceptional commitment to work by their need to prove themselves as better leaders than men.

e) Lacking self-confidence

The only weakness of women leaders highlighted by the participants is their lack of self-confidence. The participants blame traditional patriarchal values for this situation, where women, despite being very competent and capable, underestimate their own potential. Louise explains how women, influenced by the patriarchal culture, often perceive men as better leaders: “Some women actually think that men are better leaders because of the lack of self-

confidence. /.../ they lose high-self esteem because of the culture. And that tends to bring them down.” Agathe describes women as being more “natural” than men, in the sense that they are not over confident, unlike the majority of men. She concludes that, while women should be more self-confident in order to succeed, they should not try to copy the male way of behaviour:

Women naturally lack confidence but they can be good leaders if they gain this confidence /.../. I think women should boost their confidence but they should not try to be like men. I've realised that women who try to be like men are not natural. So women should continue to be natural but have the confidence that is necessary.

In this statement Agathe says that women “naturally” lack self-confidence, meaning that this characteristic is seen by her as a result of belonging to female sex category, rather than a consequence of the societal pressure, as stated by other participants.

5.2.2. MEN AS LEADERS

Men in leadership positions are characterised, vis-à-vis their female counterparts, as “selfish” (Grace), “good at dominating” (Louise), “too energetic” (Louise), “self-confident” (Agathe), “risk-takers” (Jessica), “not transparent” (Grace), “impatient” (Grace), “lacking attention to detail” (Agathe). It is interesting that most of these characteristics are nothing else than negative reflections of women’s leadership traits. Many participants talk about the common perception in Rwandan society that men are better leaders than women. Similar to others, Louise attributes this situation to the existence of patriarchal tradition in the Rwandan society:

From the patriarchal system we tend to think that a man was born to be a leader and the Bible says that man is a leader, so in most cases in our communities or in our society people tend to think like that.

Contrary to the way girls are brought up – as quiet, polite and humble – self-confidence is the main trait encouraged in boys since their early age. As Agathe explains:

Normally they're confident by the fact that they are born men and because in the family they are told to be confident, they are meant to be confident, so when they go to leadership they are

confident. But that does not necessarily mean that they do better things in terms of leadership than women.

According to Agathe, values and norms of behaviour instilled in young boys make it easier for them to run the show in the adult life, even though they do not necessarily have better capacities than their female counterparts.

The above findings about women and men as leaders show how strong, in the participants' view, the interplay between gender and leadership is. It appears that the participants perceive one's gender to be a defining factor in what kind of leader they are. Their statements point to both natural and societal sources of these differences. Regarding the distinction between nature and society as the origins of differences between men and women, West and Zimmerman argue that the vast majority of these differences, which are commonly perceived as natural are in fact a product of social interactions: "Doing gender means creating differences between /.../ women and men, differences that are not natural, essential, or biological. Once the differences have been constructed, they are used to reinforce the 'essentialness' of gender" (West and Zimmerman 1987: 137). This shows how doing gender is a self-sustainable and self-perpetuating process, whereby gender differences created by society are presented as a part of natural order and on this basis are constantly recreated in everyday life.

5.3. PERSONAL EXPERIENCE OF PERFORMING GENDER ROLES AS WOMEN LEADERS

In the following part the participants discuss their personal experience of being women in leadership positions. They reflect on their strengths and weaknesses as leaders and speak about balancing their roles as wives, mothers and career professionals. Section 5.3.1. presents what the participants say about themselves as leaders. They identify the following characteristics: a) committed, b) working hard to prove that they are as good as men, c) assertive and outspoken, d) easily approachable and outgoing, e) promoting team work, f)

being too demanding of themselves and others. Section 5.3.2. discusses the participants' opinion regarding the influence of gender on their leadership. In this context they talk about: a) their authority being undermined because they are women, b) being treated "as a man" and c) being listened to with curiosity or ignored. Section 5.3.3. presents the participants' perceptions regarding the family – career balance. All of the participants elaborate extensively on this issue, which suggests that it is of primary importance to them. Two main themes emerge in this context: a) experiencing family – career balance as something extremely challenging and b) feeling guilty for not spending enough time with the family.

5.3.1. PARTICIPANTS' SELF-PERCEPTION AS LEADERS

a) Committed to work

Most of the participants underline that they are goal-oriented and passionate about their work. Claire talks about her determination: "My strong side is determination. I never think that I can fail. I make a target and I try to achieve it". Jessica mentions her commitment and passion for work: "I can say that my strong side is that I like what I'm doing, I'm a committed person, I like to achieve targets that we have set". Esther talks about being wholeheartedly involved in her work: "I take my work very personally, I feel one with it and get really involved". Grace describes how her commitment to work leads to the situation when work-related concerns fill every single moment of her time, not only during the day but also night time:

Even if I'm at home with my computer /.../ or even when I'm sleeping I may say: "What is my programme tomorrow? I have to do so and so, I have to meet so and so. Oh! And I have to finish this, this has a deadline, I have to sign a, b, c, d". You know, as I'm going to bed, sometimes I say: "I think I won't be able to meet the deadline. Let me wake up early". And sometimes I say: "Oh it's time to jump out off this bed and finish that work". And sometimes I wake up around 3 o'clock and I do my work [laughs]. It's all about commitment.

These statements present the participants as totally devoted to their work, passionate about it and determined to achieve the set goals, regardless of circumstance.

b) Working hard to prove that they're as good as men

This extraordinary commitment that the participants put into their work may be attributed to their desire to prove that they are as good, or even better, leaders than men. Claire explains that women should work hard to overcome the bias against them existing in society:

There are those people who could say that women can't perform as well as men. So we have to show them that women are capable, so that in whatever we do, we have in mind that I can't give up because there are other forces who wish that I failed. So we try to perform in order to prove them that women are capable.

Agathe talks about her experience of becoming an executive director of a renowned Rwandan research institute:

Before I came here, there were three executive directors here, who failed and they were men. And when I came, I was like: "Will I manage? Because they were three men, professors, will I manage?" And then I wanted to work so hard to make sure I make a difference. /.../ So I worked hard and when you get a success once, it can make you work even harder. And that's what made me gain confidence and I felt I made a big step. /.../ But being a woman I think that you have to prove yourself first /.../ and then confidence comes.

In the above statement Agathe describes the gradual process of gaining self-confidence and how she had to work hard to prove to herself that she will be a better leader than her more experienced male predecessors.

c) Assertive and outspoken

Many of the participants assess themselves as being assertive and outspoken, contrary to what is traditionally expected from women. Louise: "I have a courage of conviction, I actually say what I think, whatever I feel convinced about, I'm open about it". Because, according to the existing stereotypes, a woman should avoid being too outspoken, Sylvia is unsure whether this characteristic of hers should be counted among her weaknesses or strengths: "Some people say that it's a weakness, some people say it's a strength but I'm an assertive person, I don't keep in my heart what I feel is right, I speak out". However, despite what society thinks, she appears to feel good about being an open and assertive person.

d) Easily approachable and outgoing

The majority of the participants mention that they have an outgoing nature and, in spite of their leadership position, they define themselves as easily approachable. Louise describes herself as a “people person”. Agathe underlines the importance of being “simple” and close to her subordinates: “I find myself being simple to people, I mean I don't like distancing myself from the people I lead. So I try to make friends with the people who I work with.” Giselle says that her outgoing personality facilitates her work: “I'm a social person so it makes my work easier as a leader because I'm easily approachable, easily listen to other people's opinions, whether it's somebody who is a way below me or somebody that is above me.” Underlining the importance of being close to people and sociable, Yvonne describes her recipe for being a good leader in the following way: “Keep smiling, enjoy being together with others, you can be strong but at the same time not be the one that no one will approach you, so it is important to be someone who is enjoyable to be with.” In her statement Yvonne underlines that being a sociable person does not diminish one's authority and strength as a leader.

e) Promoting team work

Many of the participants stress how vital promoting team work and participatory leadership is for them. Giselle talks about her leadership style as promoting participation and mutual understanding instead of “being a boss”:

I'm the kind of leader who is open to people's ideas and inputs in whatever I do. /.../ I think that my leadership is really geared towards not being a boss but being on the same page with other I'm working with.

Esther says that, in her opinion, working as a team improves the quality of work as it makes everybody feel responsible for the outcome: “Team work is very important to me. It brings more effectiveness and productivity when everybody feels being a part of the answer and results and it creates a sense of responsibility.” According to Jessica,

as a leader you need to recognise that you cannot do anything alone, so you are a team and one depends on the other's work, on the other's performance. And then you try to help people to understand it, so that we can all have the same main objective, the same target, the same vision and the same purpose.

Jessica explains how important it is for her to understand and instill in her subordinates the true spirit of team work. She recognises the importance of a common understanding of vision and goals. This shows that the participants reject a top-down approach and are committed to a participatory leadership style.

f) Too demanding of themselves and others

Most of the participants identify the downside of being very committed and hard-working as their tendency to be too demanding, not only of themselves but also others, especially their subordinates. This perfectionist trait leads them to working too hard and expecting their subordinates to do the same. Louise: "I think the weakest side I have is that I overwork myself because of being result-oriented. Whatever the case is, I actually work and overwork myself, and maybe even others, to ensure that we get results". Grace describes how she gets irritated when her subordinates are not as productive as she would wish them to be. She also talks about her annoyance when they do not stay after hours, even though she realises that it is their right to leave work after the office hours:

I don't want see somebody who is not productive here /.../. Sometimes I say: "You did this work the other day, you've been doing the same, the same. For the whole week you've been doing only this?" /.../ sometimes it really annoys me. I don't want to work with lazy people. /.../ I don't want them to go home, sometimes I say: "People, you just wait to see that it's five o'clock and then you're just getting out. That means you're not working, you're just waiting to go". Sometimes it annoys me. But I can't tell them anything /.../, it is their right, it is time to go home, maybe they have other duties after five. But me, I want everybody to be active.

This statement shows that Grace expects her subordinates to have the same passion for the job as she does, to go beyond seeing their tasks as merely a nine-to-five job. She is disappointed when she realises that often this is not the case. Also Sylvia admits that she has difficulty understanding that her co-workers might not be similarly committed to wholeheartedly to achieving targets that have been set:

My weakness is that I usually want to achieve. People say it's not a weakness, it's a strength. But sometimes people don't understand you. You know, I'm like a pusher. I don't feel that I can fail to do something if I put my heart or my soul in it. But sometimes I feel that I'm not at the same level with other people. And then becomes a problem because I think: "Why can't you do it?". I don't

think I can say about anything that I can fail. There is no "fail" in my vocabulary. I usually say: "I can do it" and "We can do it" and I don't see why people say: "We can't do it".

Sylvia describes herself as a “pusher”, who pushes other people towards achieving the goal, even when they think that it is not attainable. Other participants also talk about their tendency to be too strict towards their subordinates. Claire describe situations when she becomes a “dictator”, when other people disagree with her visions or are not committed enough to achieving a target. However, she realises that such behaviour is not constructive and tries to avoid it:

My weakness is that sometimes I can be a dictator. /.../ I can be very rigid with someone who thinks differently than me. When I have set the target, when you are not determined, it is difficult for me to understand you. I have such a weakness because I'm a perfectionist. So sometimes I'm not very tolerant. But because I know my weakness I try to fight against it.

In a similar vein, Jessica says that she can be too “authoritarian” and “push” people when they do not share her commitment to achieving a target:

My weakness is that by trying to achieve I can be someone who pushes people, sometimes maybe I have that authoritarian trait because I want to achieve things. /.../ Yeah, because for instance I want to meet the target, whatever the cost is. For me, I can even spend a night here but meet the target. And then maybe Liliane will not be able to spend a night here, maybe Patrick will fall sick, maybe Marie will have her problems, but I want to achieve whatever the cost is. Yeah. I can be someone who pushes, pushes too much, wanting things to be done quickly, to be done on time.

Jessica admits that sometimes she fails to understand that her co-workers might have personal issues preventing them from committing wholeheartedly to achieving the target, while she is ready to work on it round the clock, regardless of any of her own personal issues.

5.3.2. THE PERCEIVED INFLUENCE OF GENDER ON HOW THE PARTICIPANTS ARE TREATED AS LEADERS

a) Their authority undermined because they are women

Several participants mention that, besides the fact that so many women now hold leadership positions in Rwanda, there still exists a perception that men are better suited to be leaders.

Louise says that in this situation women need to work hard to challenge these perceptions and become accepted as leaders: “Sometimes they think that women have no capacity but if you show your strength, you work well, they appreciate it.” In this context Delphine talks about her personal experience when women in the group that she leads would rather have a man as a leader, even though the group is specifically a women’s group and consists only of women:

In our group, the women have this in mind: "A woman is someone like me". They think it's better if we have a man in the group because a man is someone who has a knowledge that they don't have. /.../ So I am supposed to be a leader of them whilst they have that in mind. It was very difficult for me in the beginning but slowly, slowly I see that a woman can do something, can be a leader.

Men are considered by these women as having kind of knowledge lacking in women and as being more capable of performing a leadership role. Delphine describes how challenging it has been for her to gain authority as a leader, in the situation where the members of the group perceive her merely as “someone like them.” Speaking about how she won the competition for her current post, Agathe describes how the members of the board expressed their doubts about her capabilities because she was a young woman, unlike her predecessors who were men with extensive professional experience:

The chair of the board and the board, they were like: "Okay, she passed the interview but will she manage? Because she seems to be good and all that but she's young and inexperienced and older men who have been here have failed".

The board, despite choosing Agathe for the outstanding qualities she presented, doubted in her abilities just because of her age and gender. This shows that they were influenced by patriarchal tendencies, which link authority with being male and experienced.

b) Treated “as a man”

Several of the participants state that, because of their personal traits and modes of behaviour traditionally associated with men, they are often treated as if they were men. Sylvia recounts that others compare her to a man because she is not shy about expressing her opinions and feelings openly: “People tell me that I'm like a man but I don't think that I'm like that. You know, it's my right to say what I know and what I feel.” Louise says that she is treated like a

man because in her behaviour she displays characteristics, which are stereotypically associated with men, such as decision-making, assertiveness and courage:

Because I go beyond what they would have expected a woman to be or how to handle issues I observe it from people with the patriarchal tendencies thinking: "This woman is a man". So I'm actually considered as a man. Because I can take decisions, I can give my views, I can, I can, I can. And unlike some other women, who may shy away from everything, I don't shy away from anything.

It seems, however, that the participants do not mind being perceived and treated "as men". As Sylvia explains:

I think because of who I am, normally they never treated me like a woman. Because I tell them: "I'm like you. Even though I'm a woman but I'm like you". So I never had someone saying that: "Because Sylvia is a woman..." You know, they never treated me like that. That's one of the best things I have done in my life. Nobody will tell me "Keep quiet because you're a woman" or treat me differently.

In the above statement Sylvia describes her effort to convince men that she is "like them" and concludes that succeeding in being treated equally with men is one of the best things she has achieved in her life.

c) *"Woman's talk": listened to with curiosity or ignored*

According to Rwandan tradition, attending meetings and speaking in public is an exclusively male domain (Burnet 2012). The participants mention that this perception still echoes in society and affects how they are treated in their professional lives. Grace describes this tendency of women to keep quiet:

When we are in a meeting, women hardly ever talk. In our culture women are not supposed to, you know, be up and talk. People will start doubting that you're just making noise: "That one, we now her as somebody who makes noise."

According to Grace, the traditional perception is that women "just make noise", meaning that they talk too much and what they say is not relevant. Giselle describes experiencing such treatment, when her statements are disregarded as "woman's talk":

Sometimes people have a tendency to brush off when I'm talking, /.../ they say: "Women talk like that" or: "They like talking a lot". So some people still have these perceptions and just brush it off, saying: "That's woman's talk".

However, both Grace and Giselle talk also about certain situations when they, as women, are listened to. Giselle expresses her uncertainty about the underlying reason of such situations, whether people are simply “curious” what women have to say, after they have been given a voice in the society, or is it because some people genuinely believe that women have something exceptionally valuable to say:

These days, because women have been given more voice, /.../ people have started listening to women. But sometimes people want to listen to you just because you're a woman. I don't know if that is because they want to see what it is that is coming out of a woman's mouth or they actually think that it might be something very /.../. So I still don't know exactly what they are thinking in their minds but sometimes there is a tendency to listen.

Grace notes that she is listened to when she speaks about her work:

Sometimes there is a way that they will think we are experts. So that's why they listen when I talk about what I do or if I'm giving a presentation about what we have been doing. Then they will sit and listen.

Grace says that in such situations she is seen as an expert. It can be argued that her gender identity is then overshadowed by her role of an expert. She is thus listened to because she is an expert, not a woman.

5.3.3. FAMILY – CAREER BALANCE

a) Challenging experience

All of the participants talk extensively about how challenging it is for them to balance their family and career obligations. The fact that it constitutes a major part of each interview shows how significant this issue is for the participants. As discussed in the previous section, the participants perceive having a career and being a perfect housewife as one of the main societal requirements from a woman. Giselle describes how important it is for her to fulfill both of

these roles, being educated and having a successful career and devoting herself to the family at the same time:

To me, as a person, I find it important that I should be educated in order to live in this fast growing world. I also feel that it is important, while getting educated and working, to still have the role of a woman, take care of my family in the best way I can.

Jessica describes being a mother and a person in a leadership position as a constant struggle. She says that it is impossible to be an exemplary mother and have a successful career at the same time:

To be a leader and a good mother is challenging. /.../ If you have been a good leader, it means that you are career oriented, you'll not be very present at home. Your children will not enjoy your presence as they are supposed to enjoy.

In this context Grace talks about experiencing a dilemma when she had to choose between staying at home when her child fell sick and fulfilling her career obligations. She admits that even though certain work tasks, such as attending meetings, can be easily delegated to her employees, she prefers to do it herself, rather than take a day off to care for her child:

It's not easy when you are a woman leader and at the same time you have other responsibilities at home, you have family responsibilities. If your child gets sick in the middle of the day and you have so many meetings, sometimes you have to cancel the meetings, or you delegate somebody but then you think: "Maybe if I had gone, I would meet so and so, I would tell them about what we do and maybe he would get interested", you know? You think that when you delegate somebody, they will only attend the meeting and will give you a report and that would be all /.../. With all that, sometimes it's not easy when you're a woman and a mother.

Many of the participants talk about the support they receive from their husbands. It is noteworthy that they perceive their husbands' involvement in household chores as "supporting", rather than "sharing". This means that nominally the household is still their domain of responsibility despite the husbands taking some of the burden. However, even though the husbands' involvement is only supplementary, the participants seem to be very appreciative and describe their husbands' efforts as something unusual and going beyond

Rwandan culture. Esther describes how her domestic help was shocked when Esther's husband decided to prepare an omelette for his wife:

In our family, according to African, or Rwandan societal culture, man must not go to the kitchen /.../. But in my case sometimes, a long time ago, when I was young and had little children, sometimes my husband would go to prepare for me an omelette and the domestic help was like: "Oh, the patron should not go to the kitchen!" [laughs] and he was like: "I can do it, I know what she prefers". Yeah, but it's not in our culture.

Esther talks also about how her husband supported her in childcare, for example by taking the children to and from school:

He dealt with children many times, when they were young it was him who went to school to pick them up and also in the morning he would take them to school. Because I used to go to work early with the driver but my husband was able to drive the children to school.

Delphine describes a rather non-traditional arrangement in her family, where she is in paid employment and her husband is unemployed and stays at home with their child:

My husband doesn't have a job now, he's at home, takes care of our boy but he also has to go outside to search for, as a husband he has to search for something. /.../ When I reach home I have to do the activities as a mother. But if my husband sees that there is something he can do, he does it. If he can help me with cooking, he helps /.../. Let's say, if the housekeeper is not there and I have to go to work, he will stay at home and do everything and they cook and eat together with my boy. There is no special work for him and work for me.

Delphine underlines that the current situation is only temporary and her husband is actively seeking employment because "as a husband he has to search for something." This shows how important the obligation of a man as a breadwinner is. Moreover, it seems that even though the husband spends most of the time at home, his role is still restricted to only supporting his wife, as Delphine recounts that she still has to do all her "activities as a mother" after she comes back from work.

b) Feeling guilty for having little time for the family

The feeling of guilt for having little time for their families is an experience common to all of the participants. Grace describes herself as “married to work” and confesses that she is so absorbed in her work that she finds herself completely forgetting about her family. Even her weekends are often devoted to work and other social engagements, not the family:

You're just married to the work. Really, I see sometimes I forget about the family. /.../ And I have a 2.5 year-old baby, which needs me. Balancing is to me, it has always been challenging, to the extent that during the weekend I want to be here. On Saturdays I'm always here. And sometimes I say: "I think I'll be working half day and another half I'll go to the family" but sometimes I need to do some other stuff, I have a wedding to attend or something else.

It is noteworthy that Grace says that she “wants” to be at work on Saturdays, implying that it is her own choice to do so and not a pressing need. Agathe expresses the same feeling, admitting that it is purely her choice to work more “than the norm”. She confesses that work matters absorb her even when she is at home with her family:

Nobody tells me: "Spend little time with your family". I could spend enough time. But I think this job is demanding to the extent that I always want to, you know, do something more than the norm of the day. So even when I'm at home I'm thinking of some unfinished work.

Grace talks about her experience of juggling work and childcare obligations shortly after giving birth. She tells how she came back to work just two weeks after the delivery because her organisation was in a difficult situation. She describes the experience as extremely challenging:

It has been so challenging, so much challenging. To the extent that when I gave birth, usually the law says that you have to take three months off work. But sometimes I didn't take three months. /.../ I remember when I gave birth to the first born, this organisation was shaky, we were really struggling. /.../ And I gave birth through a cesarean section. I only was in the hospital for one week and one week at home and the next week I started coming to work. Coming and go breastfeed, coming for 2-3 hours, go breastfeed, for the rest of the day, come for 2-3 hours and go. You know? It is so challenging.

Not being involved in raising their children is a major source of guilt for the participants. Some of them describe how their young children miss them. Esther shares:

It was very difficult when the children were still young /.../. Sometimes they asked my husband to go and see me at work: "Why does she stay there so much time? You have work but you have come back but mummy, she's still there!"

Also Sylvia recounts that having a career means that she spends little time with her children and they miss her presence at home:

As a working person you don't have a good time with your kids /.../. They miss you. Because sometimes when you come home they are asleep, then in the morning they are rushing to school. Sometimes they would say: "Mummy, mummy, we don't see you these days. You come late or you..." You know, so there is no good time.

In this context, Jessica is concerned that her child suffers due to lack of motherly attention. She also expresses a regret that she is not actively participating in the child's development:

I think the child is suffering, you are more present at work than you are at home and then your children are suffering from it. Even if you have support, if you have people who can assist you, sometimes it can be challenging because as a mother you cannot guarantee that you have participated in his education, you will not say that what he is becoming is your entire responsibility or your effort... It's not easy, it's not easy.

Emma confesses that because of spending little time at home she feels alienated from her family: "Coming home late, leaving early I don't know what is really happening inside my family, what is driving them, who they are, what they are doing."

It can be argued that the participants' self-assessment shows that they perceive themselves as possessing many characteristics that are gender atypical in the Rwandan context. Instead of being humble and quiet, they see themselves as strong, determined, assertive, and sometimes even authoritarian. They underline, however, their commitment to "soft" leadership style,

describing themselves as being approachable and promoting team work. This is opposed to what the perceived male leadership style is – dominating and top-down.

The above section examined also how the participants experience being a woman in a leadership position when interacting with others. West and Zimmerman (1987: 126) argue that gender should be seen “as an emergent feature of social situations: both as an outcome of and a rationale for various social arrangements /.../”. It is thus in social interactions, that we do gender by engaging in behaviour “at the risk of gender assessment” (West & Zimmerman 1987: 136). Because being a woman in a leadership position is still often seen as atypical in Rwandan society, the participants have to deal with being treated somewhat differently than male leaders. Therefore they have to take extra care to maintain their authority and to be listened to. For some the best solution is being treated “as a man”, meaning that their gender is ignored and they can enjoy the same treatment as their male counterparts.

Moreover, the above section showed how the participants experience striking a balance between their professional lives and fulfilling their obligations as housewives. As West and Zimmerman (1987) argue, household is an arena, where both men and women do gender by exhibiting their “essential natures”: “what is produced and reproduced is not merely the activity and artifact of domestic life, but the material embodiment of wifely and husbandly roles, and derivatively, of womanly and manly conduct” (West and Zimmerman 1987: 144). The participants talk about the contradiction between being ambitious and committed career professionals and fulfilling their obligations as mothers and wives. All of them describe it as a particularly challenging experience and talk about the feeling of guilt for not living up to the societal expectation of being devoted and caring housewives.

6. CONCLUSIONS

The presented findings show that the traditional gender roles ascribed to women, which prevailed before the genocide, still exist in Rwandan society. Women’s post-genocide entry into public life and an open door for career opportunities, have not led to a significant change in existing gender perceptions. One prominent change has been the additional requirement of

being an ambitious and successful woman in the career life and keeping the family as a priority at the same time. This situation puts women in the position when they are expected to work the “second shift” – performing most of the household chores, despite being in full-time employment (Hochschild & Machung 2003).

The study shows that the researched women are well aware of the gender roles existing in society and the performance of these roles constitutes a significant part of their private and professional everyday lives. It is evident that the participants live in contradiction between their expected roles of quiet and humble women, devoted to their families and what they actually are – strong and outspoken, career-oriented professionals, who spend little time at home. This conflict creates in the participants an ever-present feeling of guilt for not being involved in their family lives enough. They find attempting to balance work and family lives very challenging and difficult, a constant, everyday struggle. When it comes to their perception of women’s leadership ability, all of the participants express a positive opinion. They describe women in general as at least as good, and often much better, leaders than men. However, their personal experience of being women in leadership positions involves having to prove everyday that they are no worse than their male counterparts. This determination leads them to being extremely hard-working, perfectionist and demanding of themselves and others, sometimes even authoritarian. Despite these perfectionist and authoritarian tendencies, the participants express their commitment to team work and perceive themselves as outgoing and approachable. It can be argued that this “soft”, participatory leadership style is opposed to what they perceive men’s leadership is – top-down and through dominating. These findings show that, as West and Zimmerman (1987; 2009) argue, no one can escape doing gender. Even though the participants of this study, by virtue of holding leadership positions, break out of what is expected of women by Rwandan society, they still do gender in multiple ways, for example in how they perform their leadership, how they fight gender bias against women leaders, how they perform their roles of housewives.

It can be argued that the discussed dilemmas are to some extent similar to the experience of many women living in the Western world. The difference is that Rwanda is a much more traditional society, where values such as family, religion and respect for the tradition play a much more important role than in the post-modern Western societies. In this context, when discussing ways to overthrow the patriarchal order, West and Zimmerman (1987) argue that the mere introduction of institutional changes is not sufficient due to the decisive role that

culture plays in sustaining and recreating gender differences in everyday interactions. Based on the above findings, it is interesting to follow how the traditional patriarchal values will continue to interplay with the state-sanctioned promotion of gender equality and how gender relations in Rwanda will evolve in the future.

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ANNEX I: CHARACTERISTICS OF THE PARTICIPANTS

| Name* | Position | Age | Marital status | Children |
|----------|---|-----|----------------|--|
| Agathe | Executive Director of a research institute | 40 | married | 2 (aged 8 and 10) |
| Claire | Parliamentarian | 48 | married | 3 (aged 13, 18, 20) |
| Delphine | President of a local woman's association | 30 | married | 2 (aged 5 months and 4 years) |
| Emma | Middle level manager at an international NGO | 30 | married | 1 (aged 3) |
| Esther | Parliamentarian | 60 | married | 5 (aged between 18 and 30) |
| Giselle | Chief Operations Officer at a social enterprise | 34 | married | 1 (aged 2) |
| Grace | Executive Secretary of a nationwide NGO | 41 | married | 3 (aged between 3 and 8) |
| Jessica | Head of department at an international NGO | 33 | divorced | 1 (aged 2) |
| Louise | Country Director of an international NGO | 56 | single | none |
| Pelagie | President of a nationwide women's association | 55 | widow | 6 own (aged between 18 and 28) and 8 adopted |
| Sylvia | Director of a nationwide NGO | 53 | married | 6 |
| Yvonne | Parliamentarian | 57 | single | 2 (aged 23 and 21) |

* The participants' names have been changed to ensure confidentiality.

ANNEX II: INFORMED CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH

You are being asked to take part in a research for a Master's thesis. This form provides you with information about the study. Before you decide whether or not to take part, please read the information below and feel free to ask questions if anything is not clear. Your participation in this study is entirely voluntary. The information obtained from the interview will be anonymous.

Topic of the study:

Women leaders in Rwanda – perceptions and experiences of performing this role.

Purpose of this study:

The purpose of this study is to explore the experiences of women, who perform the role of a leader in the context of Rwanda. Particular focus is placed on individual perceptions of the interviewee in relation to gender roles.

Researcher's contact details: Karolina Wlodarczyk, karolina.wlod@gmail.com

Institution: Lund University, Sweden

What will happen if you take part in this study?

If you decide to be a part of this study, we will talk about your experience of being a woman in a leadership position and the interview will be recorded. As a follow up I will share the findings of the study and you will be welcome to provide me with any comments you may have.

If during the interview you decide to stop for any reason, that is fine. If you want to continue another time, we can arrange for additional meeting. You are free to withdraw your consent to participation in this study at any time.

Confidentiality

No identifying information will be placed on the recordings and the transcripts of the interviews. All the names will be changed. When writing the study I will avoid using any details that could lead to revealing your identity. All the interview recordings and transcripts will not be disclosed to anybody.

ANNEX III: INTERVIEW GUIDE

I. Personal details

- Age
- Education
- Are you married?/Have you ever been married?
- Do you have children? (If yes:) How many? What age?

II. Perceptions

- How do you think people in Rwanda imagine an “ideal woman”? What are characteristics of such person? Is it important for you to be similar to this “ideal woman”?
- How do you think people in Rwanda imagine an “ideal man”? What are characteristics of such person?
- How do you think people in Rwanda imagine an “ideal marriage” and an “ideal family”?
- What are characteristics of a good leader/ manager?
- Some people say that men are better leaders than women. What do you think about this opinion?

III. Self-perception

- How would you describe yourself as a leader? What are your weak and strong sides?
- Could you try to describe, what does it mean to you to be a leader and a woman?
- Do you think that being a woman influences in any way what kind of leader you are, how you perform your leadership?
- Have you ever felt that in your professional life you were treated differently (not to say in a positive or a negative way) than you would have been if you were a man? If yes, could you give me an example of such situation? What did you feel?

IV. Family life*

- How do you experience being a wife, a mother and a leader at the same time?
- Which of the household matters are you responsible for and which are responsibility of your husband? Are you happy with this division?
- Are you happy with the amount of time you spend with your family?
- What does your husband think about you working in such a responsible and important position?
- What do the rest of your family and relatives think about it?

V. Closing

- Considering everything what we talked about today, is there anything you would like to add?

* Only married women and mothers were asked the questions relating to being a wife and a mother respectively.