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Reflections on Women's Empowerment

A Minor Field Study Performed in Rwanda, April-May 2010

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Abstract

Rwanda has the highest representation of female parliamentarians in the world. In 2008, a law against gender based violence passed the floor in the Rwandan government. This bachelor's thesis examines how women in Rwanda experience the effects of this law in terms of their own perceived acting space(s) and empowerment. A minor field study was carried out in Rwanda during April-May 2010 in order to gather material concerning women's experiences. Through feminist theories along with the methods of participant observations and semi-structured interviews I reached the conclusion that the law has affected women in a positive way. Women spoke of how they felt valued, acknowledged and protected by the new law. This has led women to gain wider acting space(s) and continue the process of empowering themselves. Female parliamentarians were considered to be helpful and protecting women's rights. However, my conclusion also includes that there is a possible overconfidence in the legal document; the existence of the law does not necessarily stop the crimes from taking place.

Key words: Women; acting space; empowerment; Rwanda

Abstrakt

Rwanda har den högsta andelen kvinnliga parlamentariker i världen. År 2008 antogs en ny lag om genusbaserat våld in Rwandas parlament. Den här kandidatuppsatsen undersöker hur kvinnor i Rwanda upplever effekterna av lagen i relation till deras handlingsutrymme och politiska självbestämmande, empowerment. En fältstudie genomfördes under april-maj 2010 med syfte att samla material om kvinnors erfarenheter. Genom att använda feministiska teorier tillsammans med metoderna deltagande observation och semistrukturerade intervjuer kom jag fram till slutsatsen att kvinnor har påverkats positivt av den nya lagen. Kvinnor berättade hur de kände sig uppskattade, erkända och beskyddade. Detta har lett till att kvinnor vidgat sitt handlingsutrymme och fortsatt processen av politiskt självbestämmande. Kvinnliga parlamentariker var ofta omtalade i termer av att hjälpa kvinnor och försvara deras rättigheter. Min slutsats inkluderar emellertid också en möjlig övertro till den nya lagen; lagen i sig hindrar inte människor från att begå brott.

Nyckelord: Kvinnor; politiskt självbestämmande; handlingsutrymme; Rwanda

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1. Introduction

Rwanda is a small and densely populated country situated in Central Africa. It is possibly, tragically, most known because of the genocide in 1994 in which Tutsis and moderate Hutus were killed by Hutu extremists (VI-Skogen, 2010). Women were targeted *as women* during the genocide in which rape and other forms of sexual violence were a repeated form of torture, especially towards Tutsi women (Price, 2006: 46-47). Political scientist Maria Wendt Höjer states that “men’s violence against women, and women’s fear of such violence, plays an important part in the maintenance of an unequal gender order” (Wendt Höjer, 2002: 209). A possible consequence of the violence and fear of such, amongst others, is a decreased physical acting space (ibid: 209).

Since the genocide, women have gained extensive political representation and today they hold the highest percentage of female parliamentarians in the world; 56 percent of the elected parliamentarians are women (IPU, 2009). Anne Phillips, professor of Political and Gender Theory, argues that there is a link between high political representation of women and gender friendly changes of the political agenda based on the idea that women have specific (political) interests that women will emphasize (Phillips, 1995). Additionally, female politicians can act as role models to other women (op. cit.: 62).

In 2008 a law against gender based violence (GBV), including rape, passed the floor in the Rwandan Parliament. This legislation was a product of women’s initiative and cooperation across party lines in parliament (Powley and Pearson, 2007: 18). However, “gender reforms on paper do not necessarily lead to an improvement of all women’s day-to-day lives” (Waylen, 2007: 46). Rights on paper are mainly of interest if implemented and if the majority of women, i.e. women from various socio-economic backgrounds, culture and religions, can access them (op. cit.: 178-179).

I was interested in finding out if women in Rwanda experienced that the new law against GBV had affected their “day-to-day lives”, as well as how they experienced their own acting space: Had it been enlarged due to the fact that their political leaders were trying to protect them? Did women feel empowered by being given a potential legal protection against gender based violence?

My aim with this study is to investigate how the new law against GBV has affected women’s perceived acting space(s), in terms of women’s socially constructed roles, and empowerment. I believe that it is important to focus on women’s own experiences in order to change what is commonly viewed as knowledge, and worth knowing. My aim therefore

implies questioning whose experiences have the power to become other peoples' knowledge, as well as a feminist project of giving space to women rather than men. By focusing on Rwandan women, whose stories are commonly unknown in a Swedish academic context, I am hoping to broaden what is included in the notion of "women's experience". By acknowledging that subordinated groups have knowledge that is usually not included in the hegemonic academic discourse norms of cultures, societies and identities can be challenged (Mulinari, 2005: 133).

The research questions that I seek to answer in this study are:

How do women in Rwanda experience their acting space(s) in terms of their gendered roles?

How do Rwandan women perceive their own empowerment?

Has this been affected by the passing of *Law No 59/2008 of 10/09/2008 on Prevention and Punishment of Gender-Based Violence*?

1.1 Positioning the I

Situated knowledge is a term created by Donna Haraway which implies that all scientific knowledge is created by a researcher who is constantly within and co-creator of the analyzed material. By acknowledging that all knowledge is situated, and consequently, never objective, the researcher needs to reflect upon her own position within the field she is participating in as well as her methods. The researcher can thereby reach a partial knowledge based on her experiences on the basis of her position in time, space, body and historical power relations (Haraway, 1988: 581-589).

During my time in Rwanda I often felt uncertain of my own role; because the role I thought I had was not always in line with the role I felt I was prescribed. My gender has, as far as I know, only been perceived as that of a woman. I am white in a racist world. And through my upbringing and academic education I perform middleclassness. The potential power asymmetry between me and the people I met in Rwanda made me insecure about my own position in those meetings because my position as the person performing the study is also depending on the context: My position is formed in the current "now" by both myself and the people I am and have been interacting with. I did not always grasp the ever changing roles in the varying contexts. Kirin Narayan writes of the hybridity of one person's self which is always present and varies depending on situations and the interaction with others. Consequently, existing positions in power hierarchies are not fixed, even though they exist,

which opens up for our multi self's to embrace new interactions (Narayan, 1993: 682). My empowered and disempowered positions, although sometimes unclear to myself, affects what I define as important, and my feminist view of the world.

By performing this study I am giving voice to something I believe is of importance. Although I cannot represent someone else, I can give academic space to my interpretation of others reflected experiences (Czarniawska, 2005: 30). Hence, all of the interpretations of the material are my own, filtered by my subjectivity and my situated knowledge.

Despite my own profoundly critical position towards heteronormativity, some aspects of heteronormativity nevertheless are present in this paper since I did not question heteronormative expressions in the contexts and cultures in which my study was performed. Looking back I believe I should have. Instead I was too focused on listening to women's stories of their experiences, rather than also questioning and challenging what they were saying about their cultures. This study might therefore reproduce some of the structures I despise, such as heteronormativity or the dichotomy of the sexes, which includes the common notion that there are only two sexes. It could also be argued that this study is racist partly because it was made possible by a scholarship which's overall condition is that the study is performed in a Third World country. Within those premises lies an idea of a division of people and countries, as well as the idea that those who are higher up in the development hierarchy (development and Third World being defined by the West itself) have the right to study those who are at a lower level in the same hierarchy. The scholarship's conditions and this study can thus be read as an expression of the racist hierarchy that is part of the Western culture (cf. Madison, 2005: 92).

1.2 Disposition

I will start the rest of this thesis with a short summary of the law against GBV. It will be followed by a review of previous research, definitions of the most central concepts of analysis for my study, and my theoretical framework. In the subsequent chapter the methods used for this study will be presented, including the mode of procedure and my empirical material, as well as ethical considerations and a further positioning of the I. I have chosen to focus more on methods and ethics rather than theoretical discussions as a consequence of performing field work, which brought me a lot of material and ethical concerns. After that, the analysis of the empirical material will be presented, followed by concluding notes.

2. Prevention and punishment of GBV

I will here give account of the aim, key definition and some of the penalties of the GBV-law.

Law No 59/2008 of 10/09/2008 on Prevention and Punishment of Gender Based Violence is “aimed at preventing and suppressing gender based violence” (article 1). Article 2 defines gender based violence as “any act that results in a bodily, psychological, sexual and economic harm to somebody just because they are female or male. Such acts result in the deprivation of freedom and negative consequences. This violence can be exercised within or outside households”. Article 2 further defines other key concepts of what the law classifies as gender based violence, which are: Polygamy, concubinage, adultery, rape, conjugal rape, forcible abduction, sexual slavery aimed at achieving self-satisfaction, indecency and harassment. The law also includes maternity leave (article 8), rights of pregnant women (article 9) and neglecting one’s child (article 18). It is illegal not to report acts of GBV when it is known to a person (article 36).

I find it noteworthy that conjugal rape, i.e. raping one’s spouse, is seen as a much milder crime since the penalty is 6 months to 2 years, in comparison to rape outside of one’s marriage, a crime that can lead to imprisonment up to 20 years (cf. articles 19 and 16).

3. Women in Rwanda

In conversations with Rwandan women we often spoke of women’s various roles and how these are currently changing in terms of financial empowerment, status, access to education and juridical gender equality. This led me to conclude that women’s roles are socially constructed.

I will here introduce some of the previous research about women in Rwanda, aiming to present a background of women’s socially constructed roles and representation in the political sphere.

In *Culture and Customs of Rwanda* (2007) Julius O. Adekunle states that Rwanda is an explicit patriarchal culture in which women are the main care takers of children and the home (Adekunle, 2007: 98-100). He continues to argue that women’s roles changed after the genocide; women became the head of many households, they engaged in politics and became active throughout the culture. Many women have since formed cooperatives in order to empower themselves economically and politically, and in 1999 the Ministry of Gender and

Women in Development was created by the government to promote women's empowerment and to apply gender mainstreaming to all its programs and policies. Although women's rights have been enlarged after the genocide, women are still dependent on men (op. cit.: 111-112).

Aili Mari Tripp, Isabel Casimiro, Joy Kwesiga and Alice Mungwa write about why and how women in Africa have become more present within the political sphere, and why some African countries have been more successful than others in passing legislations concerning women's rights in *African Women's Movements: Transforming Political Landscapes* (2009). Their basic conclusion rests on four components; the upspring of active and independent women's movements, institutions within Africa put in place to spread international norms concerning women's rights, women's access to resources in order to advance, as well as new opportunities within the country due to major changes in the society, e.g. end of conflict (Tripp et al., 2009: 1-2).

According to Tripp et al., women in Rwanda cooperated across ethnic lines for peace during the genocide (op. cit.: 87). After the genocide, women were given an opportunity to participate in civil society and politics as a consequence of the political rules being rewritten (op. cit.: 6). Through pushing for legislative changes, women's organizations played a big part in creating a more female-friendly constitution (op. cit.: 108) as well as policies pursuing women's rights (op. cit.: 132). Tripp et al. conclude that a high female legislative representation does not need to be linked to democratization, which they point out is the case in the authoritarian state of Rwanda (op. cit.: 152).

The consequences of the high representation of women in Rwanda's parliament are investigated by Clair Devlin and Robert Elgie in their article *The Effect of Increased Women's Representation in Parliament: The Case of Rwanda* (2008). They conclude that although Rwandan female parliamentarians are more prone to bring women's issues forward, the high number of women in parliament hardly affects policy output (Devlin and Elgie, 2008: 237). However, many female parliamentarians put women's issues in front of party politics and tend to focus more on women's economic development than their male colleagues (op. cit.: 244-248). Some women also try to integrate a gender perspective in their work, no matter the issue or their official field of work (op. cit.: 249).

This has been confirmed in previous studies by Swedish students who have received funding from Sida to perform minor field studies (MFS) in Rwanda for their C- or D-papers. In 2004-2005, Helle Schwartz analyzed "variations in the representation of women's interests caused by gender (in terms of MPs gender) and quota (in terms of MPs elected on quota)"

(Schwartz, 2005: 3). Her conclusion was that “female MPs represent women’s interests to a greater extent than male MPs” (Schwartz, 2005: 3).

During the autumn of 2005, Anna-Maria Ohlsson investigated if women’s councils, and other institutional arrangements, have served the purpose of political empowerment for Rwandan women. She found that women were empowered at an immediate level but that it was harder to tell if the strengthening of women’s resources actually leads to political action.

In 2009, Susanna Rudehill examined what factors enabled the high number of women in parliament, what structural and personal restrictions women parliamentarians have met and what their impact have been on gender equality so far. As part of her conclusion she found that women in politics do influence policy makings, but that there is a problem with implementing such.

My study is thus a deeper investigation of how female politicians in Rwanda can affect women’s everyday lives, through women’s perceptions of the implementation of the GBV-law in relation to women’s own acting space and empowerment. It can therefore be seen as a continuation of earlier MFS’ conducted in Rwanda on the subject. My contribution to this field is an investigation of how women in Rwanda experience the affects of the existence of the law against GBV in terms of acting space(s) and empowerment.

4. Women’s access to power

This study emanated from postcolonial feminism which criticizes the West and its culture as the norm for the rest of the world, as well as for defining others as subordinated. Chandra Talpade Mohanty argues that Western feminisms often performs “research” and produce “knowledge” which does not question the Western definitions of such and presupposes Western feminists interests when writing and researching about women in the Third World (Mohanty, 2005: 195). I took my Western feminist values with me to Rwanda, and my work is based on them. However, my experience is that field work is performed in dialogue with others and is a process which includes an exchange of ideas, allowing all participants to gain new knowledge and experiences. In conversations with women in Rwanda we often came to discuss women’s roles and empowerment. Two concepts therefore became more prevalent and important than others for this study; acting space and empowerment. These concepts compose the tools of my analysis and will be defined below. Although these concepts are

similar I have used them in slightly different ways: Acting space mainly focuses on a person's perceived possibilities and potential, whereas empowerment includes gaining more actual power.

4.1 Acting space

Professor of political science Maud Eduards uses the term acting space as one of the cornerstones in her research about women's organizing and feminist theory in *Förbjuden Handling*¹ (2002). She defines acting space as implicating freedom of choice, autonomy, ability to access new arenas or broaden already accessed arenas as platforms for actions, transcending borders, and having the possibility to influence the political agenda. According to Eduards, women's subordination to men is not a woman's individual problem but a collective one. Therefore she focuses on women's collective actions and collective solutions. She argues that women's collective organizing can affect their acting space(s) in three different ways; it can improve women's material situation, gender stereotypes can be pointed out and questioned in society, and the sisterhood can become important in itself - strengthening women's confidence (Eduards, 2002: 16).

I would like to add, as a complement, the definition I formed together with other feminists in Rwanda and used whilst in the field. We thought of acting space as the power to independently access the rights which are important to one self. This was often linked to gender. My interpretation is that the ability to access and enlarge one's acting space is a crucial component of one's empowerment.

4.2 Empowerment

Srilatha Batliwala argues that the term *empowerment* has replaced many other goals of development since the 1980s, making it a universal remedy for social problems. The concept grew out of "popular education" and through debates by women's movements and feminists, in mainly the Third World (Batliwala, 1994: 127-129). In her text *The Meaning of Women's Empowerment: New Concepts of Action* (1994) Batliwala presents her operational definition of the term as "the process of challenging existing power relations, and of gaining greater control over the sources of power" (Batliwala, 1994: 130). Women need to recognize and

¹ *Forbidden Action* (author's translation)

understand the asymmetrical power structure they are part of, before they can change them. One problem is that many women have internalized the patriarchal order as “natural”. Therefore, the idea of empowerment needs to be externally brought into women’s consciousness, preferably by female activists. Women’s empowerment is consequently both a process, and a goal in itself; to challenge the patriarchy, to transform the institutions that uphold women’s subordination against men and to distribute resources to poor women. However, the redistribution of power needs to be multidimensional in order to have an actual impact on women’s position and status *vis-à-vis* men. Furthermore, women’s empowerment can also be met with resistance from men who do not wish to share their power within the public sphere, or when women challenge the patriarchal norms within the family (ibid: 130-131). In order to change the traditional power hierarchy most women need to be integrated in the process of empowerment, which also includes forming collectives as part of the process. Empowerment means that women can gain access to material and knowledge, and therefore make informed choices of their own. It is thus a form of consciousness-raising. Support from both women’s collectives and female activists are needed for the process of empowerment to be successful (op. cit.: 132, 135). Furthermore, women need to unite into a political force in order to change their own status and position in society, as well as to challenge what power actually is in order to form new concepts of power (op. cit.: 134). The experience of becoming part of a collective is thus crucial for women’s empowerment.

5. Women’s subordination

The two feminist theories that I will present below compose the theoretical framework of this study, i.e. the theoretical frame that the key concepts of analysis are placed within. They can both be positioned within standpoint feminism since they share the idea that women’s organizing is a requirement to critically understand a society in order to transform it into an equal society, as well as an epistemological base in concepts such as woman and experience (Lykke, 2009:221, 227). Even though the two theories are written in and from a Western context, I believe that the theories can be adequately applied to Rwanda’s society because of how women in Rwanda spoke of their position in relation to men and my impressions of such (cf. MacKinnon, 2005: 26). The theories focus on two different origins of women’s

subordination to men; sexual abuse and deprivation of creating one's culture. I found expressions of both in the Rwandan culture, as I do in my own.

5.1 Radical sex inequality

Professor Catharine A. MacKinnon's theory on sex inequality is described by herself in *Women's lives, men's laws* (2005) as; "sex inequality is a hierarchy that is substantively sexual at base and merges especially crucially with inequalities of gender and class" (MacKinnon, 2005: 2). MacKinnon states that a woman is a person who is systematically abused by men in a hierarchal order of inequality. Due to women's collective history of exploitation, disempowerment and subordination women can be seen as a group (op. cit.: 24-25). MacKinnon thereby assumes a universal patriarchy, something that Mohanty criticizes Western feminism for. Mohanty argues that Western feminist research reproduces the hegemony they prepossess in relation to other feminists/feminisms by reducing the complexities of women's lives around the world when declaring the conditions of the Other, thus making the Other become the deviant but also a homogenous subordinated group (Mohanty, 2005: 197). According to MacKinnon the experiences of all women make up what women's gender is. Even though many other bases of oppression exist, such as class, race or sexuality, women are oppressed as women, no matter race, class or sexuality. The identity of being a woman is also necessary for juridical purposes of sex equality, and by criticizing the concept of "as a woman", women are dis-identified (op. cit.: 29-31).

MacKinnon argues that sexual violence is a gender-based form of expressing the unequal power relation of the sexes (MacKinnon, 2005: 242). According to this; hardly any legal attention embraces the question of whether the persons having sex are social equals or not (op. cit.: 243). Inequalities based on power structures of e.g. age, class and gender as a basis for pressuring a person to have sex needs to be included in the judicial system, because if not, there is a false assumption of an already existing gender equality (op. cit.: 246-247). The social power hierarchy in a culture or society affects and determines the extent and expression of sexual violence since sexual aggression is socially constructed and not biologically determined (op. cit.: 240-241). The sexual abuse of women by men, as the foundation of women's subordination to men, therefore (re)creates the gendered identities of a culture.

I believe that the law against GBV would not have been passed unless the violence existed. The conversations concerning GBV that I participated in during my time in the field, mainly

targeted women as the victims, thus being in line with MacKinnon's theory of women as victims of men's violence. However, MacKinnon disregards men as victims of GBV by not taking their experiences into account. This is perhaps done because the experiences of male victims of GBV are seldom voiced, or because if men would be recognized as victims too then perhaps the theory of an overall patriarchal structure would be hard to keep intact.

5.2 The exclusion of women

In *The Everyday World As Problematic - A Feminist Sociology* (1988) Dorothy Smith writes about how women have been excluded from the processes of forming culture, ideology and knowledge in Western societies (Smith, 1988: 17-18). Her argument of why and how women are subordinated to men differs from MacKinnon's. But she too presupposes that there is a "standpoint of women" and that women are oppressed as, and because they are, women (op. cit.: 223). According to Smith it is men who have had the monopoly of constructing "the forms of thought and the images and symbols in which thought is expressed and ordered" (Smith, 1988: 18). Therefore women's experiences have not been taken into account when the language of traditions was formed, depriving women of the means to form a way of thinking regarding their own experiences and how to raise consciousness about their social situation and concerns. As a result, women have been limited to form thoughts, ideas and symbols that can be accepted by the dominant discourse, created by and for men, based on men's experiences. Our way of creating knowledge; the symbols, images and forms of thought, is consequently constructed by a biased culture. Women and girls have also for a long time been denied access to education, excluding them from developing necessary skills for accessing power and creating cultural norms. Moreover, Smith argues that the ruling elite has the power to create how the population thinks (ibid: 18-19). As a consequence of women's subordination to men throughout society women have difficulties affirming authority for themselves (op. cit.: 34).

I have chosen to use Smith's theory because it highlights that women's empowerment is not created in a vacuum; if women were equal to men, women would not need to empower themselves. This touches upon a historical aspect, which implies that women have been kept away from positions of power, i.e. the positions in which cultural symbols and expressions are formed. This has shaped women's access to power as well as their gendered position as subordinated men.

Smith, and to some extent MacKinnon, can easily be criticized for unifying women's experiences. Joan W. Scott states that the problem with unifying characteristics of experience is that they exclude large parts of people's activities by not regarding them as experiences. The described unified experience of a group can also essentialize, and turn into the ontological basis of the same group's identity, history and politics. A false notion of objectivity can be created by recalling (a unifying) experience, because whose experience is included, and who is to make that choice, needs to be addressed in order to critically reflect upon the history created (Scott, 1992: 30).

Hence, Smith's generalization about women excludes certain women by denying a variety of experiences. Moreover, Smith does not take the asymmetrical power relations among women into account when writing about women (cf. Lykke, 2009: 225). Neither MacKinnon nor Smith raises the problem of women organizing as women, fighting for women's rights as a group, which can lead to a stagnation of existing gender roles and strengthening the division of the sexes - preserving and recreating women as the deviant sex (cf. Minh-ha, 2005).

I agree with MacKinnon's and Smith's argument of an overarching universal power hierarchy of the sexes in which women are subordinated men because of their gender. However, I also believe that it is important to point out the criticism that Mohanty and Scott bring forward; as women's experiences varies greatly. During my time in Rwanda I tried to keep my mind open to what people told me about asymmetrical power structures and not assume that the power hierarchies of my own culture are expressed in the same ways in the cultures I meet. I have chosen to use the theories of MacKinnon and Smith regarding women's subordination to men because they can be well applied to the material I gathered during my time in the field.

6. Methods and empirical material

I went to Rwanda in April 2010 to perform a minor field study in order to talk to women, from possibly various socio-economic backgrounds, about their experiences of being a woman and the new law against GBV. I used two qualitative methods to gather my material; semi-structured interviewing and participant observation. I will start this section by describing the basic foundations of the two methods and presenting my empirical material. This will be

followed by some of the ethical considerations that have been of importance for this study, and my experienced positions in the field.

6.1 Semi-structured interviewing

In *Feminist Methods in Social Research* (1992) Shulamit Reinharz describes semi-structured interviewing as a technique to gather data about people's personal experiences in their own words. The method relies on open ended questions which creates a space where the respondents can voice their perceptions of reality in a nuanced way. This is important from a feminist perspective; to let women's voices be heard and their ideas recognized. Semi-structured interviewing allows both the interviewer and the respondent to enter discussions with each other and ask for clarifications (Reinharz, 1992: 18). Furthermore, this method gave me more freedom to ask context dependent follow-up questions during the interviews, thus making the study more interviewee orientated (cf. op. cit.: 21). I believe that this method allows the interviewee to emphasize what she believes is of importance either for the study, or for her to tell.

For this study I interviewed women who defined their gender as woman, and nationality as Rwandan. At least one of the interviewees defined herself as girl because she was not married. Since she spoke of being a woman in Rwanda she is nevertheless included in this study.

I performed interviews with 39 Rwandan women in Kigali between 22 April and 10 May 2010. Five of these women were individually interviewed, of which three worked for nongovernmental organizations (NGO). In total, 34 women were interviewed in groups, based on the four cooperatives they were part of within the same organization. These cooperatives were formed as an initiative to support women living in poverty by training them in the art of handcrafts making. As a result, women organized in these cooperatives create their own employment.

In some cases the women I interviewed told me about their educational background and financial status. This, in addition to visits at most of the women's workplaces and some of their homes, led me to construe that the interviewees had different socio-economic positions.

I came in contact with the interviewed women in various ways. The sampling techniques I relied on were Convenience sampling and Judgment sampling. The former is a method used based on availability instead of representativeness. The latter requires the researcher to use her own judgment by finding atypical members of a society that are of special interest to her

study (McIntyre, 2005:105). Since I was interested in Rwandan women's thoughts and ideas, representativeness was not my main concern (except for that I did not wish to interview female parliamentarians who seem to be frequently represented). Instead availability determined whom I came to interview in all cases except for the three women working against acts of GBV at either local NGOs or at an international NGO. They were being interviewed partly because they were Rwandan women, and partly because they might have a different perspective on GBV in Rwanda since it is a topic they encounter daily through their professions. I received the NGOs contact details by various people whom I had told about my study.

The other two women were students at different levels of the educational system. I met one of the students through friends of friends, and one through field work.

The individual interviews took place in settings chosen by the interviewees themselves; either in their homes, offices or at a café. These interviews were recorded and took between 29 and 78 minutes. However, the recorded interviews were usually followed by longer conversations up to four hours. Four of the interviews were conducted in English only and one was carried out with a translator - a person that was familiar to both me and the interviewee - translating from Kinyarwanda to English.

I came in contact with the cooperatives through one of the organization's crafts shops. In a meeting with the vice-president, the secretary and a translator we decided which cooperatives I could visit for my study. The women were interviewed in three different groups consisting of 12, four and 18 women respectively. The second group consisted of women from two different cooperatives. The group interviews were all performed with a translator. At the first cooperative the women did not wish for me to interview only one of them, which had been my intent, but rather that all of the women should have the right to participate. Therefore, all of the women in that cooperative were interviewed together. I felt that this method was much more in line with what I aimed to accomplish with this study. As a result, group interviews were performed at the following cooperatives as well, something that seemed to be appreciated by the interviewees. None of the cooperatives agreed for the interview to be recorded, instead thorough notes were taken.

Most, but not all of the women in the cooperatives took part in the conversations by either answering my questions, asking questions of their own or responding to a comment. Since they were all in the room I consider them as participants because they took part of the interview by physically being present. The group interviews were carried out at the cooperatives' working spaces and took between two and four hours each. Not all of the

cooperatives had been informed by the president of the organization that I was coming, and in one case they were misinformed of what the purpose of my visit was. Therefore I began each interview with telling the women about myself, what I was doing in Rwanda and asking if I could interview them for my study.

An interview guide was used for all of the interviews (appendix A) but not all questions were asked in each interview, and they were not always asked in the same order.

By using a translator that was familiar to the interviewees I believe it was easier for them to accept my presence and conduct the interviews with me. In some of the interviews I also disclosed parts of myself in order to distance myself from the role as an objective researcher. This was not a considered decision, but rather a part of how women in my experience interact by talking with each other: If other women tell me about their everyday life, I also need to tell them about mine if they show an interest in knowing such, creating a dialogue where all involved have the possibility to learn (Madison 2005: 9, Czarniawska, 2005: 30).

6.2 Participant observation

Professors of anthropology Kathleen Dewalt and Billie Dewalt define participant observation in their book *Participant Observation – A Guide for Fieldworkers* (2002) as “a method in which a researcher takes part in the daily activities, rituals, interactions and events of a group of people as one of the means of learning the explicit and tacit aspects of their life routines and their culture” (Dewalt and Dewalt, 2002: 1). According to Dewalt and Dewalt it is the main method used for field work purposes (ibid: 1). Participant observation consists of several key elements such as oral history, narratives, conversations and informal interviewing (op. cit.: 102). I used this method in order to better understand the field which I was studying. I was hindered from participating fully by, for example, not knowing the Kinyarwanda language. The material gathered through this method partly serves as the backdrop to the material gathered through interviewing, partly as material in itself.

When using participant observation as a research method the empirical material is created by the researcher herself. Writing field notes is explained by Dewalt and Dewalt as the primary method for capturing data from participant observations (op. cit.: 141). The field notes compose the researcher’s day-by-day recording of her own field work, as well as being a resource to come back to in order to discover patterns and better understand the field. Field notes are therefore contextualizing information, data and analysis (since it is a product of the

fieldworker). During my time in Rwanda I tended to write short paragraphs about what I had seen or heard. I also wrote down my experiences of events and meetings which included my emotional reactions and interpretations.

By using the method of participant observation to gather data, the material is *per se* contextualized since it is based on field notes (op. cit.: 142-143). As a participant observer I am relying on my own experience, which is created in a specific context with other people. Both I and others are formed as acting subjects in those instances, (re)creating identities (cf. Scott, 1992: 26-28). Therefore an observer effect is obvious, meaning that the presence of the participating observer has an effect of the studied event (Dewalt and Dewalt, 2002: 150). By gaining more insight of the field, I could also reformulate hypotheses and research questions so that they more accurately described the field (op. cit.: 8).

My fieldwork was mainly carried out in Kigali and in the north and east of Rwanda, and to a lesser extent during shorter trips to other parts of the country. The data gathered through this method consists of my field notes, mainly from events I participated in or through conversations and informal interviewing. I visited two of Children of the World's (COW) projects, in which one I held a short lecture about gender to adolescents and their parents. I also visited two churches that I had been invited to. I went to a few villages to talk to people who were working against GBV; a police officer, a priest, representatives of four women's organizations, a representative for orphans, volunteer workers against GBV and a leader of a women's cooperative consisting of GBV-victims. I also met two outspoken victims, their children and one of their perpetrators. Through these meetings I was introduced by local women who knew about my study and either wanted to help me, or wanted to show me their own work. Throughout these events I felt as if I was participating more than solely observing. Before or during these events and meetings I asked the women who had brought me, and sometimes people around me, if I could take notes. A lay summary in which I presented myself and my study was often handed out to people I met in the field, as well as to some of the interviewed women (appendix B).

By being in the field I spoke to Rwandans daily, and the conversations often touched upon an aspect of my study. One ethical problem with this method is that all the people who are part of this study are not informed of such since everything I experienced could become part of my study, and sometimes I did not know until later. I spent some of my time in the field by reflecting upon the question of what happens to the I when every moment implies a possible change from being me to being the participant observer? (cf. Mulinari, 2005: 120).

6.3 Ethics and a few accompanying reflections of my position

The ethical idea this study rests on is part of its aim; to challenge the norm of whose experiences are recognized as creator of knowledge in order to widen mine and the academic notion of identity, culture and society (Mulinari, 2005: 133). However, by writing about women I implicitly also write about men, since all genders are relational categories of socially constructed identities (cf. Eduards, 2002: 17).

Throughout this study I tried to honor the code of ethics for social sciences (Vetenskapsrådet, 1990). However, the code of ethics is formed within academia; an institution which I believe is patriarchal, racist, heteronormative and a class barrier in itself (cf. Stoltz, 2005: 149-150). Instead my main ethical focus during my time in the field became sisterly respect and gratitude, which emanated from my own situated knowledge.

Whilst being in Rwanda I changed my way of speaking, the words used, pace and tone of voice, as well as my dressing and over all pace of movement (cf. Madison, 2005: 99). By doing field work, I entered other peoples' lives (op. cit.: 91). D. Soyini Madison writes that by entering someone else's world the personal identity of oneself is already constructed by others stereotypical understandings (op. cit.: 104). I believe that this works both ways; my identity was already constructed to some extent by the people I met, and their identity was also partly predefined by me. However, I did not *feel* this. The experience I had has developed into a theoretical formulation that I believe took place because others have claimed that it happened. However, the power I have as the researcher cannot be ignored (op. cit.: 128). The fact that I got access to the field so easily might be an expression of my higher position in a power hierarchy in relation to those interviewed and those who invited me to various events. Barbara Czarniawska points out, through the words of Joan Acker, that access might depend on the participators' idea of what they can gain from participating. If the women of my study believed they could gain something from giving me access, I am in a position of power (Czarniawska, 2005: 26). On several occasions whilst I was performing participant observations I was asked to help women, cooperatives and organizations in various ways. All of these inquires could imply that I was in a position of power and that many of the participants were willing to help me since they might get something in return besides participating. Nonetheless, there is also a possibility that some of the women I met wanted to help me with my study because they believed it is an important topic to investigate. Many of the women I interviewed expressed an appreciation for being listened to, and I felt as if many women also felt important because I wanted to learn from them. By being in dialogue with

women I had the possibility to share my interpretation of the patriarchal structure, GBV and my culture in terms of women's roles in Sweden. The conversations we had after the more formal interviews were frequently filled with laughter and playfulness in which I often was met with curiosity, and sometimes told proud stories of personal achievements. Through our conversations we had the possibility to learn from each other and although we met on different terms we created the content of the meetings together (cf. Madison, 2005: 14).

Even though my participation in the field was done through the language of English, the definitions of words may vary depending on social context, political history and (sub)culture (Jönsson, 2005: 141). As a consequence, my interpretations of the gathered data might not reflect what the interviewee meant. Gender, for example, seemed to be used in Rwanda as a synonym to women, and gender was described by a few people as legalized equality between the sexes. However, in a Swedish scholarly context, the one which I am writing this thesis from, gender refers to the socially constructed sex (Lykke, 2009: 9).

I do not know precisely how my skin color, as a socially constructed identity, affected my work; the people I met were on most occasions friendly, and on others, suspicious. I can imagine that my skin color affected their perception of me as wealthy and in a position of power to help. However, if I would have been Swedish and black I might have had encountered the same inquiries. I do not know enough to assume that the racist power hierarchy in Rwanda project itself in the same way as in Sweden. But by being able to travel to another continent in order to conduct a minor field study, thus introducing myself as someone who is "educated" and financially well off, I had a lot of power in relation to many of the women I met, partly because I believed I did. On the other hand, the women I met also held positions of power in relation to me, because without their participation I would have had a lot less to write about.

As the author of this study I cannot represent other people than myself, but I can act as a spokesperson for those I have interviewed and present my interpretations of their reflected experiences (Czarniawska, 2005: 29). Interpreting women's pronounced experiences is a way to make their lived knowledge visible. By doing so I confirm that their experiences are of importance; my interpretations are therefore what I can offer in return to all who participated in this study. However, since I know only a little of the culture my study was performed in and the native language, the interpretations I have used through the analysis have all been from my own situated perspective; and may therefore be (unintentionally) misleading.

The interview transcripts and my field notes are not available to the reader in order to secure and protect the people who participated in this study. The interviewees' names have been changed for the same reasons.

7. Analysis

I have analyzed my empirical material, the interview transcripts and my field notes, according to four central themes (cf. Widerberg, 2002: 144-145); *Transforming women's roles; Education, work, sisterhood and consciousness-raising; Explaining the violence and reflected consequences of the law*; and *"The government has helped us"*. These themes were chosen because they were frequently touched upon by the people I spoke with regarding my study whilst being in the field. The first part focuses on women's acting space(s), the second on women's empowerment, the third discusses the consequences of the law and can be read as a bridge to the fourth part, in which I analyze women's acting space(s) and empowerment in relation to the law against GBV.

I have not separated the answers from the women of the cooperatives individually because I did not always know which woman said what due to translations.

7.1 Transforming women's roles

Many women I spoke with in Kigali and, to a lesser extent, in the north and east of Rwanda, expressed that a change had recently taken place within the country's culture regarding the role of women, i.e. the social construction of women. A special emphasis was on how women now can speak in public among men, that women can work outside of the home just as men², and that women are considered in their society. I believe that the roles of a woman affects her acting space(s) since her role partly defines what areas she has access to, and on what conditions.

Women expressed their gendered roles in slightly different terms, but there were several unifying components: To be patriotic and work hard to help develop the country; to respect herself and not let any man treat her badly; to be a good woman, i.e. be married, obey her

² The women I interviewed were mainly living in the city of Kigali and had some sort of employment. However, according to staff of UNIFEM in Rwanda, most women in Rwanda do not work outside of their home.

husband, have children - preferably boys, work (cultivating), do what the government expects her to and take care of her appearances. On the contrary, a woman should not give a speech at a feast, ask for bread for her children, be rude, angry, loud, or hurt the feeling of others. This could be seen as a restricting of women's acting space(s); women are not supposed to be angry or express themselves in ways that could possibly harm others, because if they do they might not be respected. Furthermore, a woman is not supposed to speak when welcoming visitors to her home if her husband is there, and she can only speak if she has something to add to what her husband is saying. This can be interpreted as part of a patriarchal structure.

Many women saw that the role women have in Rwanda is an identity, an identity that is something good and which is now highly valued to others. The role of women was often expressed in relation to others, i.e. men. This is in line with the theories of both MacKinnon and Smith who argue that women can be seen as a group, and thereby an identity, because they share certain aspects of life in comparison to men.

Furthermore, a woman's role is still to take care of the house and the children, even if she works outside of the home. To have children is expressed as a privilege, and something honorable that gives a person status. For a woman not to have children is expressed as *"It is a problem because the woman is not considered as a parent, and this is frustrating for her, and can cause divorce or problems in the family"* (Cooperative 4). According to a few interviewees, another problem that can occur if a woman cannot have children is polygamy, whereby a woman can be punished for not having children by being abandoned by her husband. When I explicitly asked about parenting many people I spoke with said that men and women help each other with taking care of the home and their children, or that men help women. On the other hand, several people told me that it is only women who look after children in their culture. During my time in the field I rarely saw any man take care of a child.

There is an underlying assumption of marriage in most of the women's conversations about children and women's role in society. This implies that women are depending on men for their social status. As one woman said *"When you are a woman and are not married you don't have a word"* (Cooperative 2 and 3). However, many women expressed that a woman does not have to marry (a man) in order to be accepted in society. *"But now you can manage it, a girl can manage it herself, she can say: If I want to study, I can go and study and then after I get married. It's not a big deal to be married or not to be married"* (Catherine). According to the women I interviewed (both formally and as part of my participant observations) divorce is a legal option for women. However, most women, except for two working for NGOs, did not see it as an option which could be easily accessed. At one

cooperative a woman said that *“divorce is something unusual in our culture because in our culture you have to live with your husband until death”* (Cooperative 4). By divorcing or not marrying women are challenging the stereotypical woman’s role. This can be read, in accordance with Eduards’ definition of acting space, as an effect of women’s collective organizing. Furthermore it can also be read as an expression of autonomy and freedom of choice, two important components of acting space.

What struck me was how common it was that women formed groups in order to develop themselves, such as cooperatives, micro finances, or sensitizing groups. One woman in a cooperative explained it like this *“The work is really important, the way of being together with other women like this, and if someone has a problem she can share it with someone and we are going to find a solution to this problem”* (Cooperative 4). According to Eduards’ argument this can be read as an expression of that the sisterhood is important in itself and part of women’s ability to access and widen their acting space(s) by being a platform for collective action.

According to people I met in Rwanda the society is divided into different political sections on five levels: The four provinces of Rwanda are divided into smaller districts, which consist of several sectors. These, in their turn contain cells and villages. The sector is described as “the centre of everything” or “the people’s level” since it is where the people and the government meet through e.g. marriage, registration of children and meetings. I do not know if these meetings are compulsory but people spoke of them as something everyone attended. Through field work and interviews I found out that the role of a woman is frequently spoken of at local meetings in order to sensitize women about how to behave and about their role in the house, as mothers, as wives and in society, as well as to inform them about women’s power and rights. This implies that the role of a woman is a construction which is explicitly taught to women by e.g. their political leaders at various levels. This is an example of Smith’s argument that the ruling elite have the power to create how the population thinks. I do not know if this is an expression of empowering women by informing women of their rights or disempowering women by trying to enforce women to behave in accordance with norms which are in line with an overarching patriarchal structure.

The women I spoke with about the ability to access their rights often told me that they felt that they could. At one cooperative they told me *“for example we are here, if we wouldn't have our right the men would tell us that if you go out don't come back. We do our work as we wish”* (Cooperative 4). To me this is a clear statement about one’s autonomy; something that Eduards argues is a crucial aspect of one’s (perceived) acting space. Moreover, many women

could not think of anything that they could not do because of their gender. This could be understood as an expression of satisfaction regarding one's acting space in comparison to men's. There were also women who acknowledged that there are things a woman *should not* do due to culture, but that women *can* do everything a man can do; thus implying a restricted acting space due to cultural customs.

Women's power was expressed as increasing, and women said they felt that they have an important role in their culture because they are considered as part of the society in addition to being mothers, wives, counselors and caretakers of the home. Women also told me that a lot of good things have happened to women in the name of gender equality, such as the law against GBV, and that women have enlarged their acting spaces to include areas outside of their homes. By working³ women expressed that they felt independent and empowered. By having an income their material situation improved as well as creating their own autonomy by being able to provide for themselves and their children and not depend on someone else. By working in areas that traditionally have belonged to men women are through their actions questioning, and possibly changing, existing gender roles. However, the asymmetrical power hierarchy between the sexes was seldom explicitly mentioned. On the other hand, a few women thought that women have more power than men because women both work and take care of the house and children, i.e. not experiencing their culture as patriarchal. *"Women are more empowered because they do two jobs; in offices women have more power than men since women do two jobs, after office women go home and do work there too, therefore women have more power than men"* (Cooperative 2 and 3).

My conclusion of the interviewed women's reflections on their role within society is that women feel empowered within their roles as a consequence of increased acting spaces.

7.2 Education, work, sisterhood and consciousness-raising

"The environment is very favorable for women's empowerment in terms of education, access to opportunities, for economic empowerment, [and] for decision making power" (Pauline).

The women I interviewed expressed that they felt privileged in comparison to other women because they had a job and/or were in a cooperative. A few women also told me that they felt different from other women because of their privileges and their independence.

Education was often spoken of in regard to women's empowerment *"we have the power*

³ In this context working refers to working outside of the home since the women I interviewed divided working outside of the home and working within the home; which was often referred to as "taking care" of the home

now because we have the possibility to go and learn something new at school or at the cooperative” (Cooperative 4). Women also expressed a wish to access education in order to improve their businesses. Even though many women told me that women and men have the same power in Rwanda it became clear that they do not have the same possibilities. One woman said *“I would like for my girls to go to school and not be marginalized because she is a girl [to] benefit the same things like boys”* (Cooperative 2 and 3). This implies that women do not have the same possibility to access means to gain control over sources of power such as education, as men do. Smith argues that women have been kept out of the educational system for a long time. As a result of now being able to study and having the access to form knowledge women might widen their acting space(s) by entering new areas and transcending socially constructed borders.

All of the women I interviewed were either students or somehow employed. Therefore the ability to gain independence through working was often spoken of in our conversations. Working was commonly expressed as a way to empower oneself, to develop and to gain more respect from oneself and others. In one cooperative we discussed this a bit further. There the women thought that the size of their wage also affected how much power they had. They wished to have a greater income so that they could bring more money into their family and gaining more power *vis-à-vis* their husbands. Some women were widows, for them the wage was more about being able to provide for their family’s basic needs. The ability to send one’s children to school was also mentioned as a financial aim. In one cooperative a woman pointed out the consequences of not working *“When being at home and not searching for a job and not doing anything you stay underdeveloped and in poverty”* (Cooperative 4).

Having a job was thus often spoken of in terms of development and independence. A few women expressed that being able to work was a result of gaining more rights, which was something new for Rwandan women. My impression was that the women I met were proud of their jobs, but sometimes struggling to keep them. One woman told me that her role had changed from simply waiting at home for her husband to provide an income to contributing just as much as him to the family’s finances. *“ [...] initially my role as a woman was to wait for the man to come and provide everything, but now, I am not sitting here for nothing, I am working hard to contribute to my family and so are the other people. It has changed over time and now women feel, and they understand, that they can be as useful as men in the home, they can contribute as much as men”* (Edith). Women expressed that by working they are taking responsibility for their own lives, and they frequently referred to their female political leaders as examples of how much power Rwandan women have today - and that those leaders are

taking responsibility for themselves. Many women spoke of the responsibility to work hard in order to “*acquire the feeling of confidence and self sufficiency*” (Pauline). This was expressed on numerous occasions. “*We feel that we love what we do because it is ours. And it provides us with income*” (Cooperative 1). “*Doing baskets you will show your capacity and you become responsible and respectable in front of others. [...]What we do to show ourselves respect is to resolve our problems ourselves, to provide for our own needs, without anyone else*” (Cooperative 2 and 3). If, as I argue, an acting space is required in order to empower oneself, the women’s confidence of having a job - which in this context seems to include a sense of autonomy, an arena for action and transforming existing stereotypes of women - leads to empowerment as a result of the ability to gain power and challenge current power relations. An empowerment that was said to partly be a result of women’s newly obtained rights.

When I asked the interviewees about their own strategies to empower other women many spoke of consciousness-raising, to inform other women of their rights and that women are as important as men in society. This could imply that the interviewees do not feel that women are fully equal to men, because if they would, they would not need to tell other women, i.e. women who do not know this, that they are equal to men. A few women had formed their own counter strategies with the purpose to learn from boys and men of how to not be scared, and therefore, how to broaden ones acting space to include areas previously dominated by men in order to gain more power. “*So mostly when I sit in men I hear their ideas out [...] so you sit and you think about it, ok men do this I used not to do it [...] why don't you try it out?*” (Tina). Several women also pointed out that their empowerment was not solely about financial empowerment, but rather a mental empowerment; to understand their own value and potential. Additionally women spoke of how they could educate themselves and others through advocacy and consciousness-raising.

In accordance with Batliwala’s definition of empowerment the women activists, i.e. in this study the women working against GBV via NGOs, spoke of the importance of sharing their knowledge with other women in order to empower women by informing them about their rights. This indicates an altering idea of women’s status and position in the society, thus challenging existing power relations. At one NGO, a woman told me that they are supporting classes for adult women so that they can get the education they need in order to be part of the decision making process. One woman activist said “*I do this because I want to liberate women from over dependency on men*” (Edith). This can be understood as an acknowledgment of the patriarchy and an aim to change it.

According to Smith, women's empowerment, and thereby women's positions in relation to men's, does not necessarily change as a result of women gaining insight about their rights. It is only when women understand the patriarchal order that they can start to challenge it, and in order to change their own subordination women need to understand that the patriarchy has also formed women's roles, culture and way of thinking. This was usually not expressed by the women I met. Instead of considering the patriarchal structure and how they could destroy it, women tended to focus on how they could empower themselves within existing power structures. This is in line with Smith's theory in that because women have been deprived of creating their own symbols of thought they do not have the tools to form a culture outside of the patriarchy. However, there seems to be an understanding of the existence of patriarchal structures, although not named as such, since a lot of comments about women's position in Rwanda took their starting point in women's empowerment as a process towards gender equality, implicating that they are still struggling within a patriarchal system. Although some women told me that they did not view Rwandan society as a patriarchal anymore because of the women in government and parliament, others explicitly called Rwanda's society patriarchal. On the other hand, it was expressed that the ones standing in the way of women's possible development and gender equality are women themselves "*the biggest problem is women have not woken up to this call, they still live in the past, they still fear to express themselves*" (Edith). It is my opinion that by empowering themselves women challenge existing power structures in their own society. However, this might not lead to an end of the patriarchy itself but rather a forced transformation of such.

According to Batliwala, women meet resistance from men when they challenge the patriarchal norms within the family. During my time in Rwanda I spoke with men who expressed a concern about women entering the labour market. These complaints focused on either the discrimination of men when filling vacant positions in the labour market, or the problem with women who do not wish to marry or who do not have time to take care of their existing families - because they rather focus on their careers. This can be understood as an expression of the assumption of women as primary caretakers of children, since none of these men spoke of men and parenting. It can also be read as a resistance of changing the existing power hierarchy of the sexes. Moreover, I met men who acknowledged that they had more power than women in their society, and that they did not wish to give it away. Additionally, a few of the women who participated in my interviews spoke of how they had encountered similar expressions of resistance.

In addition, I encountered expressions of resistance towards women's enlarged acting space(s) and empowerment by often making the women responsible for their lack of independence or for the abuse some women are victims of.

7.3 Explaining the violence and reflected consequences of the law

With one exception, all women I spoke with about the law against GBV knew about the law and its main contents. They had learned about the law through media, at local meetings and in cooperatives. I got the impression that this was a result of an extensive information campaign which seemed to be taking place at every level of the society; from large billboards in the cities to volunteers in the villages who were going from house to house to speak about GBV and the law against it. Although some people who knew about the law thought that it could prevent GBV *"It's not possible to rape and abuse within marriage because of the new law"* (Cooperative 1), others spoke of the abuse as widespread and that the victims often blamed themselves. However, my interpretation of what I heard in the field is that it is not just the victim who blames herself, but rather a common attitude that the woman had done something to deserve it. Examples which were given of what women had done to deserve the abuse included expressing frustration and anger, using abusive language towards her husband, or asking for money. In all of the conversations I participated in regarding GBV it was implicitly assumed that the victims were women and the perpetrators men. When I specifically asked about gender and violence I was told that women also abuse men. It was explained to me that the abuse of women have been legitimized for a long time, since there has been no legal prevention, leaving many to think of the abuse as part of the culture. The fact that conjugal rape is seen as a much milder crime than rape can be read as an indication of such.

However, the effects of the law were without exception spoken of in positive terms. Women expressed that they felt protected, empowered and acknowledged by the new law, *"because in old time, [...] it was your responsibility as a man to correct a woman. And in that case you had to beat her, as a correction thing, [...] which means that the woman was not considered as someone, not considered as a man - as nothing"* (Catherine). The law has possibly changed the patriarchal structure by considering women's interests as national interests. It was emphasized on several occasions that the existence of the new law has given women the right to speak in society about their experiences, thus giving them a sense of autonomy. Catherine expressed what she believed is the outcome of the law: *"[a woman] will*

become a chief of her life and will not depend on her husband's treatment" (Catherine). Another woman emphasized the legal protection of the law, *"now a woman has the right to stay in their home, they don't have to leave, if problem continue, she can divorce and she has the right to have a part of their things"* (Cooperative 4).

The women working for NGO's told me that they had been able to help many women by using the law, especially by informing women and men of the law and what it includes, in addition to enabling legal support and counseling.

One interviewee pointed out that women need to speak up about the violence in order for themselves to be free, but also so that men can learn that they are doing wrong in order for the Rwandan people to correct the problem of GBV together. According to MacKinnon it is important to acknowledge the inequalities between and within different groups in the society in order to include this knowledge when writing laws concerning men's violence against women. If not, there will be a false assumption of gender equality. The law against GBV is written in gender neutral terms. Perhaps it is aiming to include everyone, but it could end up not taking various power hierarchies into account, which MacKinnon argues are expressed through sexual violence.

Although there was a focus on female victims and male perpetrators during my time in the field one of the two victims of GBV that I met was a man. He told me that his wife had stopped abusing him when the family found out that it was illegal and after they had gone through couple-counseling with a police officer. The couple was now informing others about the law so that others too could stop the violence. This was in line with the rest of my field notes; people were supposed to learn that it was now illegal to abuse a person because of their gender, and consequently, stop doing it. This approach reminded me about what I have heard regarding the implementation of the Swedish law against child corporal punishment in the 1970s. That people would stop abuse children as an effect of making it illegal.

The other victim I met was a woman who had been abused by her husband. I do not know if he had stopped violating her or not, nonetheless, she had formed her own counter strategy to his anger by keeping quiet when he got angry. His reactions are thus affecting her acting space in terms of not feeling able to express herself. I was later told by women who had helped bring her husband back to his family that the abused woman could not support herself and her children without his income. The abused woman told me that she forgave her husband because he was the father of her children. According to the police and the NGOs I met, there are hardly any safety networks for GBV-victims, as one woman said *"they don't have anywhere to go"* (Gisele).

Even though there are a lot of aspects which could be improved in order to decrease GBV, the fact that there now is a law against it has had a positive effect on women's perceived acting space(s), possibly leading to women's further empowerment. Moreover, legalizations were often mentioned as a starting point for women's improved status in the society.

7.4 "The government has helped us"

Many women expressed gratitude and pride over their female parliamentarians and leaders, one woman put it like this "*they established laws that really protected the woman*" (Edith). Women also spoke of how the government has given possibilities and capacities to women to respect themselves and develop themselves, through education and forming markets for the cooperatives' products.

One of the recurring themes through the interviews and conversations with women in Rwanda concerning the effects of their female leaders and the law against GBV was that women could now speak in front of men "*now a woman has the right to express herself*" (Cooperative 4). Women sometimes did refer to a few other, slightly older laws that also have been put in place to protect women; the right to inherit and the right to equal pay within the workforce. Therefore, the right to express oneself does not necessarily refer solely to the law against GBV. My interpretation is that there was a belief that the female ministers and parliamentarians had given women the ability to speak among men, to express their opinions and to be respected, rather than to see this development of women's rights as a result of women's activism and women challenging the norm of what a woman can do. There is, as I interpret it, overconfidence in the ability of the laws and the government to end gender based inequalities in women's everyday lives. As a possible consequence, women might not further address the problems originating from their subordination to men. On the other hand, this could also lead to strengthening women because they believe they are no longer restricted because of their gender. Moreover, women could also continue the process of questioning the norms by continuing to widen their personal and collective acting space(s), thereby empowering themselves.

It was repeatedly expressed that women in parliament represent other women and their interests. Hence, there seems to be a strong belief in the solidarity between women and their female leaders. This is also in line with MacKinnon's and Smith's theories that women can unite as a group by sharing the same experiences of being subordinated men. It is thus not just a change of the political agenda that can come as a result of including women in politics, or

that women in Rwanda view their female leaders as role models, as Phillips argues, but rather a collective change in how women view their own capacities. As a result of feeling valued by their political leaders, women gave account of several examples of how their acting space(s) had increased and of their own empowerment, both as women and as individuals because “*women parliamentarians encourage women of their rights*” (Cooperative 1).

7.5 Conclusion

The women I spoke with in Rwanda expressed that the role of a woman has recently changed in drastic ways, partly due to their government’s work towards gender equality. As a consequence, women have gained access to areas that previous belonged to men. In accordance with Eduards’ definition of acting space, women have broadened their acting space(s). Women’s confidence has been strengthened and gender stereotypes are being questioned by women’s actions, which could be a consequence of women’s collective organizing. My interpretation is that women’s enlarged acting space(s) has led to a sense that women have more power now than previously and therefore are challenging existing power hierarchies, which is in line with Batliwala’s operational definition of empowerment. The interviewed women spoke of their empowerment as prevalent, positive and something that is their own responsibility to access. By for example creating cooperatives and micro-finances, vulnerable women are empowering themselves collectively. By working for women’s rights, women’s rights activists within NGOs are involved in the process of consciousness-raising and advocating regarding women’s rights.

Although Rwandan women are not a homogenous group a few unifying reflections regarding how women experienced the effects of the new law against GBV were expressed in my study. Women spoke of how they felt valued, acknowledged and protected within their society due to the law. This created a sense of strength and empowerment, and also a widened acting space. The law is therefore more than simply words on paper - it is a resource of women's personal empowerment by creating a feeling of equal value to men in the society. The mere fact that these women knew that they had the same rights as men seemed to make them believe that they actually can do whatever men do, without taking women's subordination to men within the culture into consideration. In my opinion, the patriarchal structure was very present. However, my impressions have been analyzed through my situated knowledge and Western understanding of how a patriarchy expresses itself. I found it

interesting that women expressed a feeling of having more power than men because they both work and take care of children. This can be an expression of challenging the Western norms of what power is to include. Through the conversations with women in Rwanda I found that we had plenty to learn from each other, but even more so, I felt that we had a lot to talk about and several similar political goals. By upholding a separation of the Third World and the West, as done by e.g. Mohanty, shared experiences and meetings – as this study rests upon – might be disregarded. As MacKinnon states, the experiences of all women compose women's gender. Experiences we perform in relation to each other.

It can be argued that the women I met, and the women of Rwanda that they spoke of, have not empowered themselves yet. Women are still taking care of children, although this can also be seen as a resource of power, they can legally divorce but not culturally and in many cases women are still depending on a man financially. However, I have yet to visit a culture where women in general are not depending on men either for economic reasons or for social status and acceptance.

My conclusion is that women are in the process of empowering themselves and that this has been affected by the passing of *Law No 59/2008 of 10/09/2008 on Prevention and Punishment of Gender-Based Violence*. The women I spoke with for this study expressed that the women-friendly legislation has had a positive effect in their day-to-day lives and that the existence of the GBV-law has had a positive impact in women's everyday lives: They feel valued by their political leaders, and consequently, they are empowering themselves by increasing their acting space(s) and challenging existing power relations by transforming the role of a woman. Throughout my analysis various examples have been presented of how women now have power and space to express their situated knowledge, implying that women can express themselves in different ways regarding the same topic, as well as being in the position to phrase what is of importance to the individual woman herself. The right to speak and the legal protection of women were often emphasized in conversations and interviews. This can be argued to be a by-product of Phillips theory that female politicians represent women's interests, which are thus separated from men's political interests. But it also implies that the policies put forward by women in parliament actually reached the Rwandan women.

My study is mainly in line with previous research regarding Rwandan women and their possibility to access power. Both Adekunle and Tripp et al. states that women have formed cooperatives in order to empower themselves, something that I have also found. Furthermore, my study shows that women's cooperatives additionally serve the purpose of widening women's acting space(s). Adekunle pointed out that women are the main caretakers of

children and the homes, something that this thesis partly confirms, and that women are depending on men. However, some of the women I met did not seem to be depending on men, thereby questioning the idea of women's preconceived dependency on men.

Tripp et al. states that women's organizing is important for creating and passing policies concerning women's rights, although this was seldom spoken of by the people I met in Rwanda, the NGO-representatives were politically involved in the processes of improving women's access to their rights and thereby improving women's lives. The women I met were clearly aware of women's politics and many expressed emancipatory purposes. This is in line with previous research, that women in Rwanda are actively participating in civil society and politics, fighting for their own rights. This study has also showed that women have experienced that the government has helped them gain more power in relation to men. Adekunle's research of how the government has put institutions into place in order to empower women, as well as Schwartz's, and Devlin and Elgie's research, which states that female parliamentarians prioritize women's interests and rights more than their male colleagues, confirm my findings.

Devlin and Elgie as well as Rudehill, question the impact female parliamentarians have had on policy output. Tripp et al. stated that Rwanda is an authoritarian state, which could possibly limit parliamentarian's power to influence the political sphere and obstruct their free speech in parliament. Howsoever this is the case or not, I found that the women I met felt acknowledged, strengthened and supported by their female leaders' work regarding women's rights. An aspect I believe is important to include when evaluating policy output. By gaining new legal rights, the women I met expressed feelings of being supported and protected, thus claiming a wider acting space and consequently, empowering themselves.

Since this study partly rests on a radical feminist theory of how the inequalities between the sexes are upheld by men's sexual violence towards women I believe it would have been interesting to continue this study by interviewing a few of the women I met on how they experience men's violence in terms of women's own sexuality, how such violence affects their acting space(s) and if women feel that they have the possibility to form their own expressions of sexual lusts and satisfaction. Do women experience being in control over their own bodies and sexualities?

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8.1 Interviewees

Catherine, personal interview by Ida Pettersson, Kigali, 2010-05-10

Edith, personal interview by Ida Pettersson, Kigali, 2010-05-05

Gisele, personal interview by Ida Pettersson, Kigali, 2010-05-02

Pauline, personal interview by Ida Pettersson, Kigali, 2010-05-04

Tina, personal interview by Ida Pettersson, Kigali, 2010-04-22

Cooperative 1, group interview by Ida Pettersson, Kigali, 2010-04-29

Cooperative 2 and 3, group interview by Ida Pettersson, Kigali, 2010-04-29

Cooperative 4, group interview by Ida Pettersson, Kigali, 2010-05-07

Appendix A - Interview Guide

What does it mean for you to be a woman in Rwanda today?

Social roles

Children

Housework

Women's rights

Autonomy/Independence

Political situation for women

Feeling of being able to express oneself

Feeling of being able to express oneself politically

Possibilities

Access to knowledge, education

Power

Influence

Marriage

What does it mean for a woman not to be married?

Do you think that women in Rwanda have a lot of power? In what ways?

Do you feel that you have the same power?

Are there things women have to do in order to be accepted in society, community?

Are there things that women cannot do, or are not allowed to do?

Are there things you wish to do in the future that you can't do now?

If you have or would have a daughter, is there anything that you wish that she will be able to do that you have not been able to do?

In 2008 a new law against GBV passed the floor in parliament, do you know about the law?

How did you first hear about the GBV-law?

Have you experienced any change in your everyday life due to the new law?

Have you experienced that the new law has affected other women's lives?

What if there wouldn't be a law?

Would that have affected you?

What consequences are you hoping that the new law against GBV will bring?

Do you have any plans, ideas or strategies of how to increase your own power (independence) or other women's power (independence)/ women's rights?

Appendix B - Lay Summary

My name is Ida Pettersson and I am a student at Lund University in Sweden, Europe. I am visiting Rwanda for almost 8 weeks, April 15th – June 7th, in order to conduct a minor field study which will form the empirical material for my Bachelor Thesis in Gender Studies.

The gathered information for my study will be analyzed by myself and will not be used for any other purposes. The analysis and conclusion will be presented in a paper of about 10.000 words. My thesis will be presented at Lund University and on a webpage which has public access.

The reason why I chose to study Gender/Woman studies at university was my passion for women's rights; I wanted to learn more about women's roles in societies in order to improve women's everyday situations, including my own, my sisters and my female friends. To me, one of the most distinct verifications of the unequal power relation between men and women is Gender Based Violence (GBV).

I was inspired to write about Rwandan women when I first heard that Rwanda held the highest percentage of female parliamentarians in the world. When I started reading about Rwanda on the internet I also found out that these women politicians, together with the rest of the government, are working hard to pursue women's rights. One achievement has been the passing of the *Law No 59/2008 of 10/09/2008 on Prevention and Punishment of Gender-Based Violence*.

For my study I am interested in how the women of Rwanda perceive if, and how, the law has affected their everyday lives. This is of importance in order to evaluate if women experience that they can access their rights, and to possibly learn from the Rwandan society that has taken gender-equality to its political heart.

I am hoping to interview women in Rwanda, including women who are working for women's rights within non-governmental organizations (NGOs). These interviews will be, as often as possible, recorded. I am also hoping to conduct participant observations at events or organizations that are dealing with the issue of GBV. This trip has been made possible due to a scholarship from Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida).