A Journey to Healing

Women’s Empowerment After Mass Killings

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In the wake of Rwanda’s genocide, a remarkable shift occurred in villages that experienced intense military and army violence. Women, stepping into the void left by conflict, emerged as leaders, reshaping their communities. This brief explains how female leadership spurred significant improvements in welfare, reduced violence, and influenced gender norms. These results provide a compelling case for empowering women in governance and household roles globally.

What if empowering women in politics and domestic roles is not just fair but a crucial catalyst for societal progress? In a recent paper¹, we analyze the impact of women stepping into leadership within the unique context of Rwandan villages, where gender imbalances created a power vacuum in the aftermath of the genocide. Examining the progress 16 to 21 years on, we uncover how female leadership has contributed to significant welfare improvements and sustained empowerment.

WHAT’S THE TAKEAWAY?
Armed conflict during the Rwandan genocide shifted gender dynamics, leading to women taking on new roles.

Female leadership post-genocide resulted in women’s empowerment, welfare improvements, and community improvements.

Women’s empowerment is a catalyst for societal benefits, including public goods and economic recovery.
THE SETTING

Over a harrowing period of 100 days in 1994, the Rwandan government—led by extremists of the ethnic Hutu majority—conducted an extermination campaign against the Tutsi minority that resulted in an estimated 800,000 deaths. During the genocide, the Hutu government dispatched the army and militiamen, crucial agents of this violence, throughout the country. Their reach, however, was uneven. Heavy rains frequently muddied Rwanda’s rural roads, hampering the ability of these groups to access some villages. This variable intensity of violence, influenced by natural barriers, plays a critical role in our analysis. We argue it led to different local outcomes in terms of gender dynamics and the emergence of female leadership.

Prior to the genocide, Rwandan women were constrained in their choices and heavily discriminated against in multiple facets of life. They were barred from owning land, obtained less education than men, were forced to work worse jobs, and were generally at the mercy of their husbands or other men. The genocide, however, disproportionately targeted the adult male population in certain villages, disrupting these social structures. Our results reflect this demographic shift: households in villages with high levels of armed group violence are significantly less likely to report the deaths of women, are more likely to have a female household head, and, overall, have fewer male household members. Thus, this significant demographic change likely forced women into new roles as they took over more responsibilities within their communities and households.

THE EMPIRICAL STRATEGY

Understanding the lasting effects of the Rwandan genocide on women’s leadership and welfare poses a complex challenge. In such a scenario, violence from armed groups does not occur by chance and can be influenced by various factors that might also affect the rise of women in leadership roles. To accurately assess the impact of this violence, our study employs an approach that examines the local variations in transportation costs at the village level.

The condition of the roads during the genocide was a critical factor. The perpetrators, primarily the army and militia, relied heavily on the accessibility of the roads extending from outside the village to expand their reach. Building on the findings of Rogall (2021), our analysis considers the impact of rainfall on the already challenging terrain of Rwanda—known as “the land of a thousand hills.” Heavy rainfall would make dirt roads nearly impassable, significantly limiting the arrival of armed forces to some villages.

By analyzing these transportation dynamics, we can isolate the influence of external armed violence on the villages. Isolating the influence of external armed violence allows us to understand how the presence or absence of such forces affected the local gender dynamics, the subsequent rise of female leaders, and female welfare along several other dimensions, including domestic violence and various gender norms. This method clarifies the genocide’s direct effects by factoring out other influences that could muddy the results.

WOMEN PAVING THE WAY FORWARD

Our research uncovers a causal link between the intensity of armed-group violence during the Rwandan genocide and the subsequent emergence of women in local governance. Analyzing the 2011 election outcomes, we document a significant increase in the fraction of
female politicians elected in villages that faced significant militia presence during the genocide (see Figure 1). These elected women represent a greater share of officeholders and are better educated compared with their male counterparts—predominantly having attained at least a primary education. Specifically, a 10 percent rise in conflict intensity leads to a 1 percent increase in female representation and a 2.5 percent increase in the proportion of female officials who completed primary education (see Figure 1).

Increased female political participation is not a mere by-product of diminished male competition. By the 2011 elections, demographic gender imbalances had fallen to pre-genocide levels, including those among the pool of potential candidates. This shows a genuine shift towards the empowerment of women rather than a temporary adjustment due to a reduced number of male contenders.

Beyond politics, women’s influence extends to tangible community improvements. Our results suggest that women-led villages see an increase in local public goods provision, including health care, road building, and electricity access—ranging from a 2 to 10 percent increase following a 10 percent rise in wartime violence (see Figure 2).

The positive impact of female leadership is also reflected in women’s everyday lives in these communities. Using data from the Demographic Health Survey 16 to 21 years after the genocide, we identified a pattern of progress: women in regions that experienced high military violence fare better in several dimensions. They are healthier, more educated, and enjoy more sexual autonomy. They also have more decision-making power within the household, are less likely to accept and experience domestic violence and show less support for corporal punishment of children. Furthermore, they are more likely to occupy skilled jobs and enjoy more financial autonomy. In terms of magnitudes, a 10 percent increase in genocide violence is linked with a 1 to 5 percent increase in...
these women’s outcomes years after, with the effects driven by younger generations of women.

Lastly, our findings indicate that female-led communities experience a notable decrease in post-genocide political violence. A 10 percent escalation in armed group violence during the genocide led to a 12.5 percent decrease in local political violence from 1999 to 2022, particularly pronounced since 2016. Earlier periods did not show this pattern, suggesting a change over time in the influence of female leadership on peace and stability.

**IMPLICATIONS: SHAPING THE FUTURE THROUGH FEMALE EMPOWERMENT**

Our results show that elevating women to positions of political and domestic influence can catalyze positive societal change. These effects extend beyond individual empowerment, public goods, investment in children, and less violence in post-conflict situations.

Our research reveals a significant impact on younger generations of women, suggesting that fostering intergenerational support is crucial for achieving lasting change and counteracting potential resistance to progress. Policy assessments must consider long-term outcomes that span generations, as immediate results may not fully capture the scope of an intervention’s impact.

Additionally, our study highlights the importance of avoiding one-size-fits-all reconstruction strategies after conflicts. Different forms of violence have varying impacts on communities, and, therefore, tailored solutions should consider the specific nature of the violence and its potential long-term effects. For instance, in regions severely affected by armed violence with skewed gender ratios, targeted interventions could empower women by integrating them into governance and focusing on their economic and educational development. Such initiatives would not only stabilize and rebuild communities but also ensure that women play a leading role in the recovery process.

As we look to the future, exploring these findings in other conflict-impacted regions becomes extremely important. Expanding this framework to other settings affected by violent conflicts would deepen our understanding, especially in discerning the mechanisms of intergenerational impact. Such research promises to enrich academic evidence and to guide more nuanced and effective policy-making for communities rebuilding in the wake of conflict.

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**Notes:**


**Reference:**