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Female street vendors' (dis)engagement with politics in Rwanda – Orientalising women's political participation

Introduction

Women's political participation was initiated as a global instrument for gender equality, set as part of the seventeen Millennium Goals by the United Nations, and its universal exercise is now under more research scrutiny than in previous times. Due to gender quotas in the Rwandan Constitution, requiring at least 30% of women at each decision-making level and other tools for the institutionalisation of women's political inclusion, Rwanda has the highest percentage of women in parliament in the world – 61.25% (IPU, 2018).

This achievement has made Rwanda the headline subject of a large number of news and NGO reports. HuffPost cites Rwanda as a success story of women's empowerment: "Rwanda's parliament leads the world in female representation" (Amour-Levar, 2018). According to the World Economic Forum, Rwanda, "as one of the poorest countries", is the one that has the fourth closest gender gap after Iceland, Norway and Finland (Thomson, 2017). Local news journalists in Rwanda have internalised this pride and even contrasted the country with other less

‘gender-developed’ countries, such as Saudi Arabia, that only allowed its women to vote for the first time in 2015 (Mbabazi, 2018).

However, one needs to be cautious about this numerical competition of women’s political participation worldwide. What does it even mean to be the front runner as an African country? For example, there are certain stereotypes about women from the Orient.¹ For example, women from the Middle East are often portrayed with a veil or a burqa (Abu-Lughod, 2002) whereas women from Africa are often associated with naked breasts or genital mutilation (Wainaina, 2005). Now, to reverse the historical ‘backwardness’ of the Orient, the project of women’s political participation aims to elevate women to be empowered, in the belief that consequently the society as a whole will also modernise. As Said remarked in his work, *Orientalism*,: “the Orient has helped to define Europe (or the West) as its contrasting image, idea, personality, experience” (2003, pp. 1–2). Similarly, by praising the success story of Rwanda, the Occident asserts its own universal idea of women’s political participation as a tool to develop the Orient to become the Occident, where women are supposedly liberal, independent, sophisticated and modern. This, again, proves the dominant power of the Occident in determining what the Orient should and should not do in global politics.

However, women’s political participation is very different in the Orient, especially in a post-conflict/colonial society such as Rwanda. This paper stems from a motivation to investigate the global political attention paid to Rwanda’s ‘success’ story for women’s political agency and the way this overshadows other inequalities and exclusions in the political arena. Moreover, beyond formal politics, such as the government and the parliament, this paper puts the focus on the more spontaneous and autonomous practices of political participation in women’s daily lives. My research aims to problematise the narrative that the Orient can be civilised, and finally progress to become the Occident, via the tool of increasing the

¹ Here, I use the Orient as a concept from Edward Said’s *Orientalism*. The Orient is known to the Occident as uncivilised and savage, and by contrast, the Occident constructs itself as modern and progressive. The concept of Orientalism is not limited to territorial division between the West and the East but also, and more importantly, incorporates a temporal notion denoting a progress narrative. In this narrative, the Orient will progress and civilise itself and become the Occident eventually. That said, Said’s framework about Orientalism can also be applied to Africa and African women.

number of women in politics. Feminists must reclaim this discussion, rethink this empowerment approach, which is mostly designed according to a western paradigm, and rather propose a decolonial agenda in non-western contexts.

In this paper, I first briefly explain the context of Rwanda as a case for analysis. Then, following the debate in Edward Said's *Orientalism* of the distinction between pure and political knowledge, I discuss whether there is a one true story in feminist ethnography. Accordingly, I explain my fieldwork methods. I applied feminist ethnographic methodology to visual methods – the drawing of pictures and exhibitions – to make a focus group into a collaborative space for the participants, which enabled me to produce knowledge together and, most importantly, to invite them to talk with the readers more directly, rather than through me. Lastly, I include two preliminary findings to unpack the Oriental reality of women's political participation in Rwanda.

For this paper, I use the data from female street vendors in Kigali, the capital of Rwanda, to investigate their engagement with politics. In Kigali, female vendors are one of the groups that find it most difficult to participate and influence the political decision-making processes, yet are heavily influenced by them on daily basis. A clear example is a by-law, initiated in 2015 and further enforced in 2017, which was designed to punish street vendors for being an “unfair competition for customers with legitimate businesses paying rent and taxes” (Ntirenganya, 2017). Incarceration in prison is the most common form of punishment for vendors who are caught by the police as they are unable to afford the hefty fines imposed. Consequently, many female vendors face a great deal of violence from local forces when continuing to sell on the street. In the past two years, many meetings have been organised by local leaders at the sector and cell level² to persuade the female street vendors to leave the streets and move their businesses to the official market. However, official markets involve a regular payment of rent and taxes are deducted from the vendors' incomes thus offsetting the potential indoor benefits of safety and hygiene. Many vendors found it difficult to pay the fees on a regular basis and many also pointed out that, for women, street hawking allowed them to fulfil their domestic duties more easily.

² In Rwanda, the administrative structure consists of five tiers: provinces and the city of Kigali, districts, sectors, cells and villages.

Background

In 1994, Rwanda was the site of the Genocide against the Tutsi, in which an estimated one million people were brutally murdered. In response to this, a large number of women's organisations emerged with the aim of helping women survivors. One of the premises for these movements was the progressive belief that having more women in political institutions would subvert the historical exclusion of women in political spaces. Thanks to their mobilisation, gender quotas and other mechanisms were established to promote women's inclusion in politics in the post-genocide period. After almost a decade-long transition period led by the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF), in 2003 the Rwandan government implemented several progressive policies to improve gender equality, with a specific focus on women's political inclusion. With this institutional transformation, Rwanda has achieved the highest women's legislative representation (61.25%) in the world (IPU, 2018).

Yet, as Josephine Mukabera, a Rwandan gender scholar, remarked "not all women experience the empowerment of women elites".³ This paper uncovers the reality of female street vendors' engagement experiences in politics from two aspects. First, most female street vendors actively disengage themselves from politics due to the long-standing war and conflict backgrounds, much of which stems from the colonial legacy in the country. Second, female street vendors' lives are still framed in a patriarchal dichotomy of public and private spheres, and this is attributed to the economic underdevelopment in Rwanda within the global system. That said, this paper aims to debunk the Western perception of women's participation in politics and to propose a decolonial approach to this matter in post-colonial/conflict societies.

³ Josephine Mukabera delivered a presentation, "Women's Political Participation: A Focus On The Local Governance of Rwanda," at the Aegist Trust Research and Policy Conference in Kigali in May 2019.

Methodology and methods – Is there a true story in feminist ethnography?

One of the biggest concerns of feminist ethnography is questioning the authenticity and accuracy in its data collection due to its participatory nature. In order to address this, this section begins by explaining the epistemology of feminist ethnography, acknowledging that knowledge production is partial and situated, and that there is no such thing as an absolute monolithic truth. Building on this, I explore the central question of objectivity in feminist ethnography and the authority shared with the participants in the field.

Politics of knowledge production

In *Orientalism*, Said argues that “no production of knowledge in the human sciences can ever ignore or disclaim its author’s involvement as a human subject in his own circumstances, then it must also be true that for a European or American studying the Orient there can be no disclaiming the main circumstances of *his* actuality” (2003, p. 11). In other words, no knowledge is pure but political.

Following his work challenging the politics of knowledge production, some feminist scholars made some interventions to centre women, gender and sexuality in academic studies (Abu-Lughod, 2001; Enloe, 1989; Yuval-Davis, 1997). According to Lila Abu-Lughod (1990: 16), feminist ethnography seeks to “make women and gender politics visible and legitimate, even central, as areas of inquiry”. This methodology challenges the conventional academic imagination of what constitutes knowledge, evidence and convincing argument (Ackerly and True, 2010: 25).

By emphasising the importance of the life activity and experiences of the research participants, feminist ethnography gives voice to the street vendors to ‘talk back’ to power, patriarchal power, white power and state power. Beyond that, the street vendors interviewed are not a “ragbag collection of individuals” (Cockburn, 2015: 341), but a group of women with agency and voice. It is their struggle and resistance that renders their everyday experience available for analysis (Hartsock, 1985: 246). Due to the very nature of the various life experiences of the female street vendors,

one has to give up “the goal of telling one true story about reality” (Harding, 1991: 187). Yet what is a ‘true story’? The story generated from ethnography is constructed by various narratives provided by the research participants, and therefore there will not be a unified narrative, yet it is these varied experiences that actually represent the complex reality of Rwandan women and Rwandan politics. In this way, my use of feminist ethnography as methodology best aligns with my participatory visual methods, which invite female street vendors to draw pictures to answer questions. In this way, the reader will have a more direct visual interaction with the research participants, rather than just reading the textual interpretation by the researcher. As such, by sharing more space with the interlocutors, I intend to build a more collaborative relationship with them in the process of knowledge production. The operations of the methods are explained below.

Subjectivity in feminist ethnography

In a feminist ethnographic project, the researcher is likely to be emotionally involved in the social encounters with the research participants and the field (i.e. not impartial and potentially biased). Responding to the critique of objectivity, feminist scholars argue that all knowledge is partial and comes from an embodied and situated perspective (Abu-Lughod, 1990; Haraway, 1988). Following this argument, I think it is essential to reclaim and redefine objectivity to project the situated views of the female street vendors I spoke to. What matters in the objectivity myth is power relations rather than finding the ‘truth’. That is, it is about *who* can be heard, and whose narratives *can* be categorised as knowledge. As Nancy Hartsock asks: “Why is it that just when subject or marginalized peoples like blacks, the colonized and women have begun to have and demand a voice, they are told by the white boys that there can be no authoritative speaker or subject?” (1985: 196).

At the same time, in feminist ethnography, since knowledge production is a shared space between the researcher and the participants, the research participants have a certain amount of authority in negotiating with the researcher

about how an interview or a focus group should proceed, what themes should emerge, etc. In my visual focus group with the female street vendors on the second day, I acted as an art gallery curator and displayed all the paintings they had produced. Each of them then explained why they drew this and that and the rest of the participants asked questions about the paintings. At times, they even asked questions that I would never have thought of or be comfortable enough to ask, such as “Where is your husband in the picture?”, “Why is there no door on your house?”, “You said you have three kids, but in the picture there is only one – why?”, “Do you like drinking alcohol?” These questions not only activated the female street vendors as the knowledge producers, but also made our time together entertaining and intimate.

Methods design

Using feminist ethnography as the methodology for the group of street vendors, I used focus groups including drawing workshops, an art exhibition and semi-structured interviews on three separate days. I designed the visual methods of the focus groups with the female street vendors in a participatory and collaborative way, in order to make them as visible and engaged as possible in this process of knowledge production. On the first day, the focus group started with a very broad question such as: “tell me about the basket you use every day for selling things on the street”; “tell me about Kigali: what did it look like when you first arrived and how is it now?” I could see that, due to the contextualized nature of these questions, they felt quite comfortable, sometimes even eager to tell me what they knew, as they had much more knowledge than I did. Then, I usually had four questions for them to draw their answers. In the beginning, most of the women felt unable to draw because they did not finish school. But in the end, when they looked at what they had achieved in one afternoon, they were quite relieved or even thrilled to see their own work. On the second day, all of their paintings were put on as an exhibition where each of them explained their drawing and the rest asked questions. On the third day, based on data I gathered on the first two days, I asked questions to clarify certain pieces of information.



(These pictures were taken by my friend Yero Djigo @yero_exhibitions, a Mauritanian photographer who now lives in Kigali. Of the twelve women who attended the two focus groups, five brought their babies to our meeting.)

All the research participants' names were anonymised to ensure their security. The names used below were provided by the women themselves before the interviews.

Preliminary Findings

In this part, I discuss two preliminary findings: active disengagement with politics in Rwanda influenced by conflicts, and how the gender balance policy urged women to work in the public yet did not free them from domestic duties.

Active disengagement with politics

In his notorious work *The Coming Anarchy*, Robert Kaplan describes a minister of Sierra Leone: “[his] eyes were like egg yolks, an aftereffect of some of the many illnesses, malaria especially, endemic in his country”, going on to say that West Africa is always unsafe: “streets are unlit; the police often lack gasoline for their vehicles; armed burglars, carjackers, and muggers proliferate’ (Kaplan, 1994). Two decades later, the recently deceased Kenyan writer and journalist, Binyavanda Wainaina ironically summarised all the Oriental keywords and phrases of Africa: AK-47, female genital mutilation, Ebola, corrupt politicians, “Aids [*sic*] and War (use caps)”, etc. (Wainaina, 2005). This Afropessimism played a formidable role in women’s decision to engage with politics or not.

Drawn from the methodology of ‘knowledge is situated’, one of the first questions I proposed was: how do women in Rwanda conceptualise politics? I considered this question essential as their understanding of the term will influence their political activities. At the beginning of my fieldwork, I once asked in a focus group involving female street vendors: “When you think of politics, what is the first thing that comes into your mind?” One female street vendor, Rebecca, mentioned Al-Shabaab when they were asked about politics. Al-Shabaab is jihadist fundamentalist militant group based in East Africa. She said that when she had a break from work, she would listen to the radio where Al-Shabaab in Tanzania and Kenya was widely criticised. Apart from this influence from the neighbouring countries’ safety and volatility, their conceptualisation of politics is very closely connected with Rwandan conflict history. Solange, a 20-year-old said: “I think that politics is like treason, or a way for people to go together and betray a country”. Some other participants agreed with her: “It can be a political party, which is planning something wicked and they call it politics.” “Most of the people take politics as a negative thing and think that it is a battle.” One of them even said that

she turned off her radio when there was political news, waiting for a few minutes to turn it back on until the news was over. This has much to do with their personal experiences during the war and the constant state of conflict in the country, or even in the region. Some of them had gone into exile and stayed in the refugee camps in neighbouring countries until the Genocide against the Tutsi ended in late 1994, or even until the late 1990s.

The Genocide against the Tutsi, as a historical event of paramount significance, is very much a legacy of colonialism. Aimable Twagilimana, a native of Rwanda and professor of English at the State University of New York at Buffalo, wrote the *Historical Dictionary of Rwanda*. Rwanda is constituted of three ethnic groups, the Twa, Hutu and Tutsi, who share the same language (Kinyarwanda), culture, history and traditional religion. By most accounts, the Twa arrived in Rwanda first, and then the agriculturalist Hutu arrived in the 11th century from the Lake Chad region⁴ and finally the Tutsi in the 15th century. The Tutsi were pastoralists looking for pastures for their cattle, which was the symbol of wealth at that time (Twagilimana, 2015: 80). In the 16th century, the Tutsi King, Ruganzu II Ndori, conquered the other two peoples and the Kingdom of Rwanda came into being. In the pre-colonial period, Hutus and Tutsis traditionally intermarried, and thus people tended to identify themselves in terms of clans or patrilineal affiliations rather than ethnicity (Twagilimana, 2015: xlii).

According to Twagilimana (2015: xliii), when the Germans (1885–1919) and later the Belgians (1922–1962) arrived in Rwanda, they were both surprised by the highly organised social structure of the Rwandan state (i.e. it had an army and a central administration). Later, the Belgian colonisers applied the Hamitic Hypothesis of John Hanning Speke which regarded the Tutsi as “the only cousins of Europeans” because their physical appearance was more similar to that of Europeans, and more importantly because of the Tutsi centralised kingdoms in the Great Lakes (including Uganda and Rwanda) (Twagilimana, 2015, p. 154) which made them look more ‘intelligent’. Mahmood Mamdani further questioned the colonial division between Hutu and Tutsi as subject ethnicity and subject race: “While ethnicities were demarcated horizontally and were said to represent a

⁴ Lake Chad is now surrounded by Chad, Cameroon, Niger and Nigeria.

cultural diversity, races were differentiated vertically and were said to reflect a civilizational hierarchy” (2001: 656). That said, the Tutsi were constructed by the colonial power as a subject race under the colonisers, but still inferior to the Hutu who were considered the indigenous people. It was this Orientalist colonial thinking that planted the seed for the final escalation of the massacre.

The lack of reliable sources of news also influenced people's thinking. Later, I asked one of my Rwandan friends why he was not interested in politics. He explained that, in 1990, he heard a news report saying “Rwanda is strong. There is no enemy”. Then the next day, he met a person who had fled from the North saying that the RPF (Rwandan Patriotic Front) was invading the country. There was no authentic or reliable source for political news and, therefore, he chose not to listen to or believe any news anymore. Several years before the Genocide against the Tutsi, the Habyarimana regime (1973–1994) had employed different media channels to brainwash the public about the superiority of the Hutu and the evilness of the Tutsi, which incited the mass murders of the Tutsi in 1994. Although the Genocide against the Tutsi officially ended in 1994, incidents of killing occurred until the early 2000s. As a country located in one of the most volatile regions in the world, historically, its people have felt under attack.

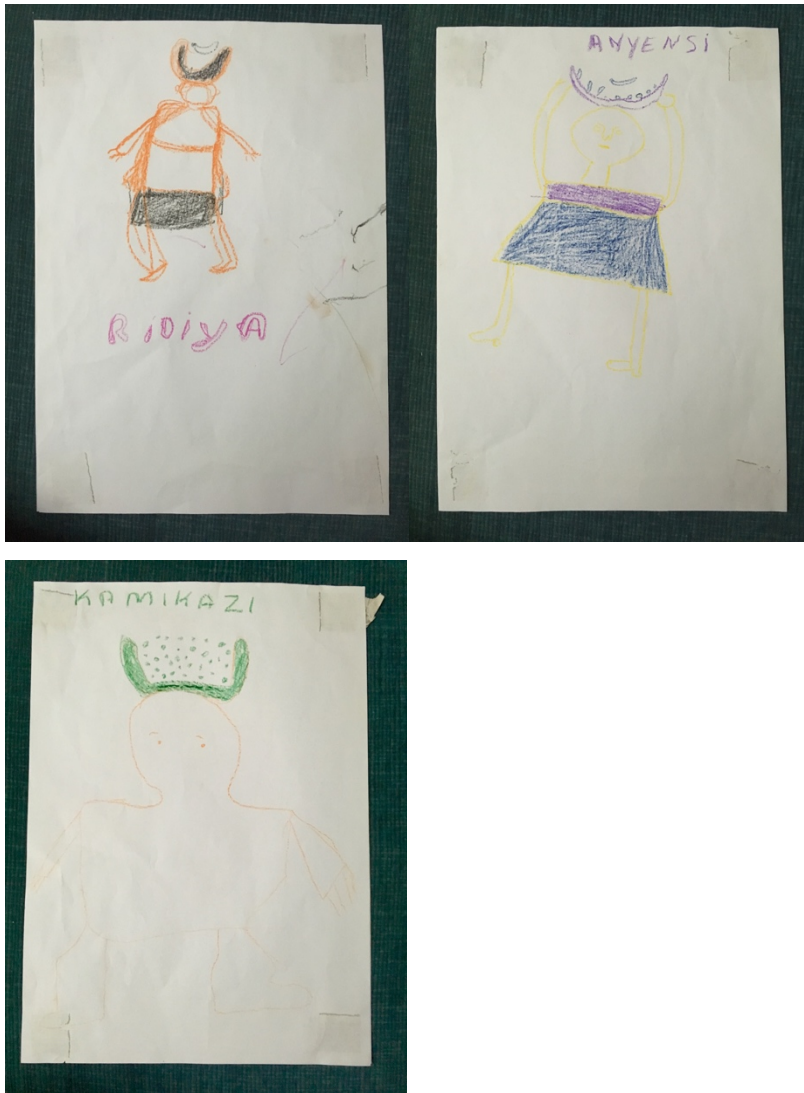
The colonial legacy of an unstable political situation and the scarcity of reliable news led to some people's choices to disengage themselves with politics that continues to this day. This disengagement with politics challenges the Occidental assumption in the discussion on women's political participation that making oneself visible and engaging with politics is inherently beneficial. In the post-genocide Rwanda context, it could be disempowering and dangerous to engage with politics.

Gendered basket

Despite the increasing presence of women in Rwandan public offices, the gendered dichotomy of public and private is still very persistent in the lives of female street vendors as one of the most vulnerable groups. It remains a challenge for women such as street vendors to step into public spaces and engage with public issues.

Traditionally, and even now in the rural areas of Rwanda, for men, going out and bringing cash back to the house is their main duty in a family; for women, they are expected to stay home to manage the household including cooking, cleaning and cultivating harvests usually being collected in baskets. Nise, a focus group member, explained that when people started to live in Kigali, they started to use these baskets for selling fruit and vegetables in the market.

In one of my focus groups with the street vendors, some participants commented on the gendered nature of what the basket represents: “It’s shameful to see a man carrying a basket.” “A Rwandan man cannot carry the basket. When you don’t go, the goods stay home, and even go rotten in the house, but he cannot go to sell the goods.” As a symbol for domestic management, the basket in today’s street hawking is still limited to female street vendors. Moreover, the products sold by female and male vendors are also gendered. The products that men sell are usually manufactured, such as shoes and clothes whereas the products women sell are natural – vegetables and fruit. In other words, this cultural/natural binary of the product in street hawking is divided between masculinity and femininity.



(Pictures drawn on the first day of the drawing focus group. The question was: how do you feel as a Rwandan woman? How would you draw yourself as a Rwandan woman? In one focus group, three out of six women drew themselves as carrying baskets.)

In the interviews, few participants thought that the gender equality policy has successfully urged many women to step out of their house and start working in public. The fact that 'women can now also do men's work' was usually how they explained gender balance to me (men's work means any kinds of jobs in public). However, this movement between public/private can only be applied to Rwandan women, since it is very rare to find a man cooking or taking care of the children at home compared with the number of women who are now working in public. The close link between women and the private domain of home still applies to women

in the government: the NPR programme, *Invisibilia*, (*Invisibilia*, 2016) reported that female parliamentarians still have to carry out domestic duties at home despite their powerful positions in the public space.

However, in contrast to the independent and empowered Occidental women and Western perceptions, Rwandan women's public achievements dimmed due to their domestic duties. Marie Berry's article, 'When "Bright Futures" Fade: Paradoxes of Women's Empowerment in Rwanda' conveys this dissatisfaction as "profound impediments to women's equality are deeply entrenched and appear unlikely to dissipate any time soon" (2015, p. 3). However, I find Abu-Lughod's work on Afghan women useful in addressing the Occidental dissatisfaction with the pace and results of the Rwandan women's empowerment project. She said:

I do not know how many feminists who felt good about saving Afghan women from the Taliban are also asking for a global redistribution of wealth or contemplating sacrificing their own consumption radically so that African or Afghan women could have some chance of having what I believe should be a universal human right—the right to freedom from the structural violence of global inequality and from the ravages of war, the everyday rights of having enough to eat, having homes for their families in which to live and thrive, having ways to make decent livings so their children can grow, and having the strength and security to work out, within their communities and with whatever alliances they want, how to live a good life, which might very well include changing the ways those communities are organized. (2002, p. 787)

Abu-Lughod points out that Western-centric liberal universal human rights should not be taken for granted. Unlike women in most Western societies who can outsource their domestic duties to either machines or other labour, most Rwandan women cannot do this because Rwanda is located on the periphery of the global trading network. According to the Egyptian economist Samir Amin, colonisation integrated Africa into the full capitalist system by exploiting both its cheap labour and natural resources (1972, p. 518). Thus it is even more of a privilege for Rwandan women to have access to a washing-machine, child-care centre, ready-cut vegetables and meals from the supermarket, and even food delivery, all tools that women use to free themselves from their domestic duties in the West.

All in all, the existing private domain obligations of women in Rwanda limit their access to public activities, both in terms of time availabilities and also participation legitimacy. Yet, this seeming lack of bargain with the patriarchy is very much situated in the colonial influence on modern-day Rwanda's economic development.

Conclusion

Let me conclude by recapitulating the fakeness that I have unpacked in this paper. Under the analytical framework of Orientalism, I have shown that the politics of knowledge production drove me to feminist ethnography, where I designed a collaborative and participatory visual method for the focus group discussion. Finally, I have demonstrated two preliminary findings to problematise women's political participation as a universal human right, as one of the Western self-fulfilling prophecies for the Orient. Working with female street vendors, I have shown the complexity of their (dis)engagement with politics, and given insights into how the definition of politics is understood in Rwanda. The colonial impact on politics and economy in the context of Rwanda should not be underestimated when discussing gender politics. In all these ways, the discussion of women's political representation should go beyond the Western discourse as a universal human right.

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