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'They Forgot Their Role': Women Perpetrators of the Holocaust and the Genocide Against the Tutsi in Rwanda

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Abstract: This article is a comparative study of women's actions and agency during genocide, examining women perpetrators of the Holocaust and the genocide in Rwanda. It foregrounds women's experiences of genocide and examines why and how women perpetrators played central roles during genocide and the impact of deeply entrenched patriarchal systems in Nazi Germany and 1994 Rwanda. Despite significant differences in time, place, context, and culture, similarities between these case studies provide unique insights into the gendered nature of women's participation in mass violence. Comparing existing research about Nazi women during the Holocaust with oral histories about the 1994 Genocide against the Tutsi in Rwanda, this article examines how women were mobilized and self-mobilized to participate in each genocide, how a 'relaxing' of the patriarchal order facilitated their participation, and how gendered understandings of women perpetrators impacted their post-genocide silence and invisibility in the meta-narrative. Going beyond stereotypes that normalize men perpetrators and sensationalize women perpetrators as anomalous and monstrous, this article articulates the need for further engagement and analysis of women perpetrators in mainstream narratives and in genocide studies and prevention scholarship.

Keywords: Rwanda, Holocaust, gender, women perpetrators, comparative genocide

Introduction

Liselotte Meier was the personal secretary and mistress of the Nazi District Commissar of Lida in Belarus. During the work week, she took notes at meetings, typed up orders, managed logistics, and accompanied her boss on trips to the Jewish ghetto. All of this was done with one explicit purpose: to make the region judenfrei, free of Jews. She exercised considerable control; the District Commissar's stamp sat in her office drawer, enabling her to sign for massacres and deportations on his behalf. On the weekends,

I am grateful to the individuals who agreed to participate in this research, to Barbara Brown, Kamaya Jane, Elliott Nahmias, Betsy Anthony, and the reviewers for their comments on earlier drafts of this article, to Susanne C. Knittel for her collaborative approach to editing, and to Debórah Dwork for inspiring this study.

Journal of Perpetrator Research 3.1(2020), 156–185
DOI: 10.21039/jpr.3.1.34

she lounged in their villa, served by Jewish slave laborers, and accompanied her boss and lover on 'hunting' trips where animals and Jews were shot with equal fervor and enthusiasm.[1]

On another continent and decades later, Suzanne was 83 years old when I interviewed her at a camp for genocide perpetrators in western Rwanda.[2] A farmer by trade with limited education, she lived with her husband, daughter, and two grandchildren when the genocide reached her home in west central Rwanda. When I asked her how she came to be incarcerated, she clutched her white plastic rosary beads in both hands and her tone was matter-of-fact, even sweet: 'The reason why I'm here is because I'm accused, I actually killed my grandson, one of my grandkids during the war. That's why I came here.'[3]

This article is a comparative study of women's actions and agency during genocide, examining women perpetrators of the Holocaust and the genocide in Rwanda. It foregrounds women's experiences of genocide and examines the impact of deeply entrenched patriarchal systems on women who became perpetrators in Nazi Germany and 1994 Rwanda. The various and interlocking contexts that defined their day-to-day lives shaped the choices they made and their participation in genocide. Despite notable differences in time, place, context, and culture, as 'no two events, even though they commonly may be acknowledged to fall within a single large classification, are ever precisely alike,'[4] similarities persist that offer unique insights into the gendered nature of women's participation in mass violence. These include how, in both instances, many of the socially prescribed and perpetuated norms of gendered behavior were suspended, modified, or dissolved. Comparing existing research about Nazi women during the Holocaust with oral histories I collected and analyzed on the 1994 Genocide against the Tutsi in Rwanda, this article asks how this 'relaxing' of the patriarchal order facilitated women's participation in both genocides. This study considers the impact of gendered understandings of women perpetrators on women's post-genocide trajectories, narratives, and invisibility and exposes trends that impact our understanding of genocide and its

1 Wendy Lower, *Hitler's Furies: German Women in the Nazi Killing Fields* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2013), pp. 100–7.

2 All the names of the interviewees I spoke to have been changed.

3 Sarah E. Brown, Interview G2 with 'Suzanne' (Muhanga, Rwanda, 30 June 2011).

4 David E. Stannard, 'Uniqueness as Denial: The Political of Genocide Scholarship', in *Is the Holocaust Unique? Perspectives on Comparative Genocide*, ed. by Alan S. Rosenbaum (Boulder: Westview Press, 1996), pp. 163–208 (p. 191).

prevention, for example the normalization of men perpetrators and sensationalization of women perpetrators as anomalous and monstrous. And it argues for further mainstreaming and analysis of women perpetrators in contemporary society and in scholarship.

Literature and Theoretical Framing

Genocide opens up new avenues of action and agency for women. Cynthia Enloe notes that war, often a pretext or cover for genocide, can create opportunities for women's participation in previously closed spheres of society, and in the case of the Holocaust and the genocide in Rwanda, many of the 'given' gender roles that dominated pre-genocide society broke down.[5] In each example, the breakdown was unique and specific to that time and place in history but in each, women navigated new spaces previously closed to them. Similarities exist in the processes, outcomes, and constrained spaces afforded to women who decided to participate. Applying Deniz Kandiyoti's concept of 'patriarchal bargains,' which are specific to any given society and subject to variations but consistently shape women's capacity for agency and its constraints, we can say that the context of violent upheaval created a new space for 'renegotiation of the relations between genders'.[6] While Kandiyoti focuses on women's resistance to patriarchal forms of oppression, in the instance of the Holocaust and the genocide in Rwanda, the concept of the patriarchal bargain is useful to examine how women negotiated their gendered space and place in society and became perpetrators. Mass violence tears at the social fabric of the community and its perpetration requires accepted norms of behavior to be suspended. It is within these conflict-induced breaches that German and Rwandan women accessed previously restricted public spheres and capacities, often to the eventual detriment of society.

While this comparative study focuses on similarities in women's agency and perpetration during the Holocaust and the Genocide against the Tutsi in Rwanda, notable differences are evident and impact analysis. For example, in the German case, 12 years of Nazi rule afford an opportunity for more nuanced examination of the shifts in gendered access and dogma over time. In contrast, the genocide in

5 Cynthia Enloe, *Globalization and Militarism: Feminists Make the Link* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2007), p. 81.

6 Deniz Kandiyoti, 'Bargaining with Patriarchy', *Gender and Society*, 2.3 (1988), 274–290.

Rwanda took place over a brief period of 100 days, although violence occurred before and after the genocide in some parts of the country. This temporal difference makes a balanced comparison of mid-violence shifts in access and ideology difficult. Another key difference pertains to distance and intimacy; in Rwanda, as LeAnn Fujji points out in her micro-history study of two villages in Rwanda, the cultural, social, and physical intimacy of the violence had an impact not just on its perpetration, but also on the decision-making processes of its perpetrators and their subsequent actions.[7] That same intimacy does not exist during the Holocaust, where the Nazi regime consciously worked to create distance from the Jewish people through laws, social, political, and economic ostracization, and even the bureaucratization of mass murder. Another key difference that impacted intimacy and perpetration is the geographic footprint of each genocide. Rwanda is a small country, slightly smaller than the state of Maryland in the United States, and the genocide was mostly contained by its national borders. In contrast, the Holocaust extended well beyond Germany, a state over ten times the size of Rwanda.[8] This, too, impacted how each genocide was perpetrated and the actions its perpetrators, women included, undertook. Additional differences persist that require further study, in particular when examining post-genocide trajectories and impacts. For the purposes of this piece, however, similarities in pre-genocide mobilization, perpetration and participation, and post-genocide silence and invisibility will be the center of analytical focus.

This study also employs a feminist lens to examine a more complicated narrative of women's participation in the Holocaust and the Genocide in Rwanda. In my study of gender and agency in Rwanda I note that '[t]he complicated story is necessary. It is needed to document, learn from, and prevent mass violence.'[9] The need for a more complicated narrative that overlooks generalized tropes is also affirmed by Georgina Holmes' study and critique of simplified and inaccurate media depictions of Rwandan and Congolese women as passive, agency-less victims during conflict and their experiences and reality as uniform.[10] This narrative is incomplete and negatively impacts scholarship and popular narratives

7 See Lee Ann Fujji, *Killing Neighbors: Webs of Violence in Rwanda* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2009).

8 Special thanks to Susanne C. Knittel for pointing out this key difference.

9 Brown, *Gender and the Genocide in Rwanda: Women as Perpetrators and Rescuers* (London: Routledge, 2018), p. 9.

10 Georgina Holmes, *Women and War in Rwanda: Gender, Media and the Representation of Genocide* (New York: I.B. Tauris, 2014)

about the genocide and the women who experienced it. Women played a central role, social constraints based on gender shaped their participation in genocide, and their inclusion and analysis is key to understanding international politics and history. Adding a feminist lens only enhances our understanding of these events. Dalia Ofer and Lenore Weitzman assert in their volume on women during the Holocaust that a feminist analysis contributes to more nuanced scholarship and does not 'make the Holocaust secondary to feminism'.[11] Such analysis must be thoughtfully and carefully applied. Marion Kaplan recently asserted the 'need to integrate a gender approach to mainstream Holocaust studies' but warned against an 'add women and stir' methodology.[12] Clare Bielby similarly unpacks the necessity of systematic gender analysis as we research perpetrators, even noting the gendered etymology of the word 'perpetrator'. From analyzing the category 'perpetrator' to how we define violence (and what we omit from that definition) to the fluidity of understandings of the self, Bielby argues for a critical approach to the question of gender and perpetration.[13] A careful feminist analysis challenges masculinized interpretations of genocide, moves beyond narratives that simplify or obfuscate women's agency during genocide, and provides nuance and necessary space for the complicated story.

There exists a small (compared to work dedicated to men perpetrators) but growing body of scholarship dedicated to the study of women who employ violence or facilitate the conditions for the perpetration of violence, their crimes, and their reception by society. This scholarship begins to address J. Ann Tickner's critique that 'too often women's experiences have been deemed trivial, or important only in so far as they relate to the experiences of men'.[14] This trivialization of women's experiences and, in this case, agency, is evident when examining literature on women perpetrators during the Holocaust and the genocide in Rwanda. Excellent studies exist that focus solely on men who

11 *Women in the Holocaust*, ed. by Dalia Ofer and Lenore J. Weitzman (Binghamton: Vail Ballou Press, 1999), p. 1.

12 Marion Kaplan, 'Did Gender Matter During the Holocaust?', *Sara and Asa Shapiro Lecture* (USC Shoah Foundation, April 11 2019).

13 Clare Bielby, 'Gendering Perpetrator Studies', *Discover Society*, 42 (2017), <https://discoversociety.org/2017/03/01/gendering-perpetrator-studies> [accessed 2 May 2020].

14 J. Ann Tickner, 'Feminism Meets International Relations: Some Methodological Issues', in *True Feminist Methodologies for International Relations*, ed. by Brooke Ackerly, Maria Stern, and Jacqui True (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), pp. 19–41 (p. 25).

perpetrate, rendering women perpetrators invisible.[15] Political scientist Jonathan Wadley notes that

> [t]he silencing of agency, the restriction of movement, the claiming of knowledge about threats that the protected do not possess – when viewed in relation to dominant forms of masculinity, it is apparent that such performances establish not only asymmetric relations, but relations that are asymmetric because of their relations to gender norms.[16]

This connection between gender- and sex-based discrimination and women's participation in acts of violence is examined by Laura Sjoberg and Caron Gentry in their groundbreaking study *Mothers, Monsters, Whores*. They note that 'women have been subordinated in global politics, which impacts their social and political options and frames of reference. Still, women, like men, are capable of violence. As women's freedoms increase, so will their violence.'[17] This is particularly relevant when examining women's participation in the Holocaust and the genocide in Rwanda, two instances of strictly patriarchal societies that relaxed gendered restrictions and subsequently created spaces for women's participation in genocide. Sjoberg and Gentry use case studies from both the Holocaust and the genocide in Rwanda to further illustrate the 'ordinariness' of women's participation, an assertion which also underpins this study and is further examined in the literature discussed below.

This study leans heavily on existing scholarship that examines women perpetrators during the Holocaust – this literature forms the basis of my comparison with women perpetrators in Rwanda. Scholarship on women perpetrators during the Holocaust, much of it in German, informs the field of genocide studies more broadly. In English, Susannah Heschel's chapter on feminist interpretations of women in the SS critiques the trivialization of women's agency and actions, illuminating how women perpetrators of the Holocaust are rendered invisible.[18] This

15 See, e.g., Christopher Browning, *Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland* (New York: HarperCollins, 1993); Scott Straus, *The Order of Genocide: Race, Power, and War in Rwanda* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006); Jean Hatzfeld, *Machete Season: The Killers in Rwanda Speak* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2005); Mahmood Mamdani, *When Victims Become Killers: Colonialism, Nativism, and the Rwandan Genocide* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001).

16 Jonathan D. Wadley, 'Gendering the State: Performativity and Protection in International Security', in *Gender and International Security: Feminist Perspectives*, ed. by Laura Sjoberg (New York: Routledge, 2010), pp. 38–58 (p. 53).

17 Laura Sjoberg and Carol Gentry, *Mothers, Monsters, Whores: Women's Violence in Global Politics* (London: Zed Books, 2007), p. 4.

18 Susannah Heschel, 'Does Atrocity Have a Gender? Feminist Interpretations of Women in the SS', in *Lessons and Legacies VI: New Currents in Holocaust Research*, ed. by Jeffrey M. Diefendorf (Evanston:

prompts the question: why *aren't* we speaking about the women after all this time? Heschel also provides key corrective insights employed in this study on how to analyze women without dismissing them. Claudia Koonz offers a groundbreaking history of women under Nazi rule, exploring their mobilization, integration, manipulation, and ultimately, marginalization. Their constrained and gendered participation in the perpetration of the Holocaust is aptly described by Koonz as an 'unstable combination, a passive-aggressive woman who actively facilitated the "race war" but surrendered to men in the "war between the sexes"'.[19] This unstable combination is evident at every phase examined in this piece, namely before, during, and after each genocide.

Sarah Cushman's social history of the women of Auschwitz-Birkenau offers insight into the lives and experiences of women – prisoners, guards, functionaries – who experienced the women's camp and network of subcamps.[20] Elissa Mailänder's study of women SS guards at Majdanek death camp is another innovative study that details their daily duties, violence perpetrated, and experiences, further drilling down on the extraordinary as ordinary.[21] Wendy Lower further scrutinizes the motivations, actions, and fate of several categories of women perpetrators during the Holocaust, highlighting the 'ordinariness' of women Nazis. Destigmatizing women perpetrators and looking at them as human beings elemental to a social movement like genocide is absolutely necessary to further process women's motivations, actions, and experiences before, during, and after genocide.[22] These groundbreaking and incisive studies provide the foundation for my comparative examination of women perpetrators during the Holocaust.

The experiences and stories of women told in their own words offer complicated answers and foster difficult questions. In the preface to *Frauen*, an account of 29 German women's testimonies, Alison Owings examines her own gendered assumptions and questions about the perpetrators of the Holocaust: 'I dismissed the lot of German men as murderous woeful strangers. Women were not strangers. Nor were they destroyers or warmongers, were they? Women were nurturers

Northwestern University Press, 2004), pp. 300–321.

19 Claudia Koonz, *Mothers in the Fatherland: Women, the Family and Nazi Politics* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1987), p. 392.

20 Sarah Cushman, 'The Women of Birkenau' (Unpublished PhD thesis, Clark University, 2010).

21 Elissa Mailänder, *Female SS Guards and Workaday Violence: The Majdanek Concentration Camp, 1942–1944* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2015).

22 See Lower.

and peacemakers, were they not?'[23] Owings's question reminds me of the biases and questions I examined during the course of my interviews with women perpetrators in Rwanda.[24] The questions asked by researchers – especially those they ask of themselves – as they navigate their role as participant observers is important. And the foregrounding of women's narratives in search of that narrative nuance and complexity is at the core of this research.

This article builds on my previous research on women's agency during the genocide in Rwanda, which examines the mobilization, actions, and post-genocide trajectories of women perpetrators, comparing it to women rescuers who chose to take action to the benefit of their community, rather than to its detriment.[25] It benefits, moreover, from pioneering works that first introduced the role of women perpetrators during the Genocide against the Tutsi in Rwanda. These include a 1995 report *Rwanda Not So Innocent: When Women Become Killers,* which was the first to document instances of women-perpetrated genocide and notes that 'women and girls have been described as the principal victims of the genocide in Rwanda, thus obscuring the role of women as aggressors'.[26] Lisa Sharlach examined early on women as participants in the genocide rather than victims of the violence. She emphasizes

23 Alison Owings, *Frauen: German Women Recall the Third Reich* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1999), p. xi.

24 The methodology that underpinned the interviews and research I conducted in Rwanda is detailed in Chapter 1 of my book, *Gender and the Genocide in Rwanda*. Briefly, I will sum up several key points: I applied a modified grounded theory in the development of my research design, data collection, and comparative analysis. My research was founded upon primary source materials and based on the analysis of semi-structured interviews, additional primary and archival materials, and meetings. In-country research was conducted from 2010–2014. I encountered limitations to the use of testimonies in my work including a prevailing reluctance on the part of perpetrator participants to discuss the full scope of their actions during the genocide. This could be due to a lapse in memory due to the passage of time, my race (White) and nationality (American/Israeli), the perceived ethnicity of my translator (with whom I worked over a period of six years), or an effort on the part of the participant to misrepresent herself. Whenever possible, I endeavored to triangulate testimonies with archival materials, corroborating testimony, and transcribed documents. Also of importance, I remain cognizant of my role as a participant observer. Not only did I conduct my research in Rwanda, gathering information, observing Rwandan society, and collecting interviews, I was a participant in these exchanges and events and was thus influenced.

25 See Brown, *Gender and the Genocide in Rwanda*; Evelyn Gertz, Hollie Nyseth Brehm, and Sara E. Brown, 'Women Perpetrators: Theorizing Gender and Genocide', in *Perpetrators: Dynamics, Motivations, and Concepts for Participating in Mass Violence*, ed. by Susanne Buckley-Zistel and Timothy Williams (London: Routledge, 2018), pp. 133–150; Brown, 'Survival and Rescue: Women during the Rwandan Genocide', in *Women and Genocide: An Anthology,* ed. by Donna Gosbee and JoAnn DiGeorgio-Lutz (Toronto: Women's Press, 2016), pp. 189–212; Brown, 'Rwanda', in *Women in Conflict and Peace,* ed. by Jenny Hedström and Thiyumi Senarathna (Stockholm, IDEA, 2015), pp. 123–154; Brown, 'Female Perpetrators of the Rwandan Genocide', *International Feminist Journal of Politics*, 16.3 (2014), 448–469.

26 African Rights, *Rwanda Not So Innocent: When Women Become Killers* (London: African Rights, 1995), p. 4.

that 'few in the West realize the extent to which women participated in the Rwandan genocide'.[27] Nicole Hogg later contextualized women's participation in the genocide, examining the impact of hierarchical gender relations, norms, and socialization on their actions and possible impunity post-genocide.[28] This prompted me to further examine the prescribed and proscribed norms in Rwandan society and their impact on women's mobilization, participation, and post-genocide trajectories. Marie Berry's comparative study of women's mobilization in Rwanda and Bosnia examines how women navigate ever shifting gender norms and the political sphere, even after genocide.[29] And Lee Ann Fuji endeavored to avoid a gendered narrative of genocide by attempting (and openly discussing her inability) to achieve gender balance in her research for *Killing Neighbors*.[30] My study is decidedly not gender-balanced in that it focuses on women, and this is so by design; in this, I am endeavoring to achieve greater balance in the meta-narrative of the genocide in Rwanda. In their examination of women-perpetrated violence and denial of women's agency to commit crimes, Sjoberg and Gentry discuss Pauline Nyiramasahuko, an influential minister in the Rwandan government during the genocide in Rwanda who is the only woman found guilty of genocide by the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda.[31] And Hollie Nyseth Brehm, Cristopher Uggen, and Jean Damascene Gasanabo examine whether genocide perpetration follows age and gender distributions found in other forms of crime, further driving home the point that women perpetrators are 'ordinary,' albeit operating within patriarchal constraints. They confirm that women did participate, but more often in property-related crimes rather than direct murder, an issue I argue is related to gendered norms around women's 'acceptable' participation in genocide.[32]

My study of the silence and invisibility of women perpetrators and the impact of the loaded gendered norms that surrounded women's

27 Lisa Sharlach, 'Gender and Genocide in Rwanda: Women as Agents and Objects of Genocide', *Journal of Genocide Research*, 1.3 (1999), 387–399 (p. 392).

28 Nicole Hogg, 'Women's Participation in the Rwandan Genocide: Mothers or Monsters?', *International Review of the Red Cross*, 92.877 (2010), 69–102.

29 Marie E. Berry, *War, Women, and Power: From Violence to Mobilization in Rwanda and Bosnia-Herzegovina* (Cambridge University Press, 2018).

30 Lee Ann Fujii, *Killing Neighbors: Webs of Violence in Rwanda* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2009).

31 See Sjoberg and Gentry, 'Gendered Perpetrators of Genocide', *Mothers, Monsters, Whores: Women's Violence in Global Politics* (London: Zed Books, 2007), pp. 141–173.

32 Hollie Nyseth Brehm, Cristopher Uggen, and Jean Damascene Gasanabo, 'Age, Gender, and the Crime of Crimes: Toward a Life-Course Theory of Genocide Participation', *Criminology*, 54.4 (2016), 713–743

behavior coincides with Rwanda scholar Erin Jessee's work on Rwandan women who had confessed to or been convicted of participating in the genocide. She found that gender norms continue to impact women perpetrators who felt they experienced gender-based discrimination and stigma because of their (alleged or proven) participation in the genocide.[33] This also speaks to my theory that women perpetrators denied their participation in the genocide because it violated gendered expectations of 'acceptable' conduct for Rwandan women. And it confirms findings in my chapter with Gertz and Brehm, in which we argue that men who perpetrate genocide are considered 'ordinary' while women who perpetrate genocide are deemed 'aberrant, flawed, or inhuman'.[34]

Several comparative studies exist that focus on gender and genocide during the Holocaust and in Rwanda. Reva Adler, Cyanne Loyle, and Judith Globerman conducted interviews of ten women perpetrators incarcerated in Rwanda and draw parallels with women perpetrators of the Holocaust. They note that 'the situation of Rwandan women in 1994 also resembles the circumstances of German women during the Third Reich'.[35] Four key similarities are highlighted: first, women perpetrators were far fewer than men perpetrators, due in part to constraints placed on their participation and the primacy assigned to their place in the home. Second, both displayed a 'predilection for property crimes,' including theft of goods, home, and land. Third, they acknowledge the agency of women who seized the opportunity to enter the public sphere and advance themselves professionally during each instance of genocide. Finally, in recorded interviews, both groups of women expressed a naivety about the larger machinations of each genocidal regime and an inability to refuse when ordered to participate.[36] While the fourth similarity is not supported by recent research on women perpetrators of the Holocaust or my own research on women perpetrators during the genocide in Rwanda, the first three similarities inform this study's analysis and focus. In addition, Kimberly Allar's comparative critique of representations of women perpetrators during the Holocaust and the genocide in Rwanda looks at popular and academic depictions of

33 Erin Jessee, 'Rwandan Women No More: Female Génocidaires in the Aftermath of the 1994 Rwandan Genocide', *Conflict and Society Advances in Research*, 1 (2015), 60–80.

34 Gertz, Brehm, and Brown, 'Women Perpetrators', p. 146

35 Reva N. Adler, Cyanne E. Loyle, and Judith Globerman, 'A Calamity in the Neighborhood: Women's Participation in the Rwandan Genocide', *Genocide Studies and Prevention*, 2.3 (2007), 209–33 (p. 226).

36 Ibid.

women perpetrators.[37] Allar identified an array of essentialized narratives of women as life-givers, peacemakers, and, in the instance of women who perpetrated genocide, dehumanizing rhetoric that reduces them to inhuman monsters, sadists, or she-devils. These gendered tropes limit discourse and stymie our understanding of women perpetrators of genocide. This article seeks to correct some of the gendered stereotypes identified by Allar that limit academic discourse on women perpetrators of genocide.

Despite 50 years and a continent separating them, women perpetrators like Liselotte and Suzanne played central roles during the Holocaust and the genocide in Rwanda, albeit within the context of a deeply entrenched patriarchal system that constrained women. The following sections will examine the pre-genocide historical context and gendered mobilization, the notably relaxed though still constrictive social structures that facilitated and shaped women's perpetration during genocide, and the prevailing silence and invisibility of women perpetrators post-genocide.

Pre-Genocide

Although, as Victoria Barnett argues, 'ultimately it is the individual who decides what is moral, and acts accordingly,'[38] social and political measures implemented and enacted by the Third Reich and the Rwandan government facilitated and constrained women's agency during both genocides. Their participation was the result of deliberate and gendered mobilization processes that specifically targeted women in Germany and in Rwanda and encouraged them to become functionaries of genocide.

In pre-1933 Germany, despite promises of equality and gender inclusion in the Weimar Republic, women did not enjoy the same access to economic opportunities, political representation, and education as did men. Even as the Nazi party preached a brand of race-based hatred, prejudice, and discrimination that would impact entire swaths of the population, it promised women reforms that would liberate them. Sarah Cushman notes that 'gender influenced how the Nazis applied their

37 Kimberly Allar, 'Setting the Picture Straight: The Ordinary Women of Nazi Germany and Rwanda Who Participated in Genocide', in *Aftermath: Genocide, Memory and History*, ed. by Karen Auerbach (Victoria, Australia: Monash University Press, 2015), pp. 21–47.

38 Victoria J. Barnett, *Bystanders: Conscience and Complicity During the Holocaust* (Westport: Praeger Publishers, 1999), p. 19.

racist ideology'.[39] Throughout the 1920s and after they came to power in 1933, the Nazis encouraged (and later required in certain instances) girls and women to join in sex-specific Nazi organizations; later, membership often became compulsory. These groups offered new avenues for women to engage in activism and provided an 'acceptable' space in which they could occupy leadership positions and wield influence.[40] They also provided a space for sex-specific political indoctrination and racist propaganda. Organizations like the National Socialist Women's League and the League of German Girls, both founded early on in the Nazi party, helped to realize Hitler's belief that 'a proper education should burn the racial sense and racial feeling into the instinct and intellect, the heart and brain of the youth entrusted to it'.[41]

Women were also recruited into the workforce. But even as German women were afforded some real estate in public and political spheres through organization membership, the positions they could occupy and how far they could advance remained tightly controlled. This was constituent with Nazi ideology and practice: 'From the outset, the Hitler regime strove to limit the role of women to that of wife and mother, restricting their rise in the civil service and most professions. Women were routinely discouraged from academic achievement.'[42] The Nazi party promoted a rigid set of gender norms that harkened back to the '*Kinder, Küche, Kirche*' (children, kitchen, church) policies of the German empire, enacting a series of measures that codified women's domesticity and motherhood, including the Law for the Encouragement of Marriage and the Cross of Honor for the German Mother.[43] Manipulation of German history helped to further limit the role of women to homemaker, wife, and mother, and glorified their domesticity as a return to 'tradition'. So while there was a 'relaxation' of certain boundaries that had previously restricted women's participation in social spheres and promises of further liberation and reform, there still existed a repressive system that controlled women.

Not everyone was seduced by Nazi promises. Karma Raubut, a young girl during the Third Reich recalled, 'women under Hitler, that was something completely dreadful. A German woman does not wear

39 Cushman, p. 28.

40 Ibid., p. 30.

41 Lower, p. 39.

42 Shareen Blair Brysac, *Resisting Hitler: Mildred Harnack and the Red Orchestra* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 376.

43 Lower, pp. 29–30.

makeup, she may not smoke, she should have a thousand children and… Ach, that still brings a chill to my spine.[44] But Nazi-imposed norms were not easily rejected. By 1934, the Nazis exercised considerable control and laid the groundwork for a totalitarian government that punished dissent with incarceration in concentration camps. This push/pull, at once liberating women and constraining them, was a recurring theme of the Third Reich. Women were a key component of the Nazi totalitarian vision of governance. Claudia Koonz noted the extent of Nazi ambitions: 'If Nazi leaders had had their way, nothing would have remained private; everything, including the illusion of loving families and apolitical women, had its use.[45] Even their 'body positive' approach, encouraging women to forgo cosmetics and artificial beauty enhancement measures that seemed pro-women, were part of an effort to control German women's exposure to western modernity. Still, the opportunities afforded to women to participate in the Nazi party and the eventual genocide were revolutionary.

German women were actively recruited by the Nazi government using myriad devices, including government-controlled propaganda. Leni Riefenstahl's film *Triumph of the Will* glorified the Nazi party in the early years of its rule. Riefenstahl portrayed women throughout the film as lively, active, front-and-center contributors to Nazism through physical and reproductive labor. They were not found among the soldiers marching in formation since their role in the film mimicked their role in the Nazi party: highly gendered and often restricted to auxiliary functions.

Some women joined Nazi efforts because of the social and economic opportunities it afforded. Especially after the invasion of Poland in September 1939, the Third Reich recruited unmarried women as teachers, secretaries, and nurses, offering them previously unthinkable opportunities for work, travel, and adventure. These positions also provided women a socially acceptable escape from village life, early marriage, or other gender-restrictive mores of German patriarchy, even under the Weimar Republic.[46] Also important, positions in the Nazi genocide machine offered an opportunity to exercise power. As labor and concentration camps became more permanent and widespread and the number of women prisoners increased, women guards were recruited, initially through the National Socialist Women's League and later

44 Owings, pp. 344–5.
45 Koonz, p. 389.
46 For more on the recruitment, see Lower, pp. 32–74.

through vaguely worded newspaper advertisements and word of mouth referrals.[47] Cushman describes the experience of one woman guard:

> For Käb, a camp guard in the women's camp, Auschwitz served as an opportunity, not a threat. She earned more in that position than in almost any job she could have found in Germany. She achieved a degree of power unavailable to most women in Europe at that time. Her authority did not exist vis-a-vis men, but rather in relation to women prisoners.[48]

In the instance of Käb and other women guards, this newfound power was a chance to exercise domination and control at the expense of their prisoners.

Similarly, in pre-genocide Rwanda, women, regardless of ethnicity or class, were heavily restricted. Paternalism, initially propagated by the colonial powers, played a determining role in Rwanda's unique form of patriarchy that wove together an elaborate legal framework with prescriptive gender norms and traditions. Men were legally recognized as the heads of Rwandan households and women were prohibited by law from inheriting property, opening a bank account without the consent of their husband, and, representing just five percent of the executive branch of the Hutu-controlled government, were not in a political position to advocate for change.[49] A popular proverb in Kinyarwanda illustrates women's relegation to the domestic private sphere: *umugore niwe 'mutima urugo*, the woman is the heart of the home. Rwandan scholar Ezechial Sentama further elaborates on the primacy of men, explaining that,

> Whatever men could do, a woman should and must obey. And then there is a saying in Rwanda that there is no mistake for men. Even beating a woman, even wasting money, even doing whatever he wants, there is no mistake for a man.[50]

Political upheaval in 1973 had resulted in some reforms, when then-general Juvénal Habyarimana launched a bloodless coup d'état and took over the presidency. The coup marked the beginning of Hutu women's participation in violence against Tutsis, as men and women alike were

47 Kimberly Allar, 'From Recruitment to Genocide: An Examination of the Recruitment of Auxiliary Guards in Nazi *Konzentrationslager*', in *Orte und Akteure im System der NS-Zwangslager* ed. by Michael Becker, Dennis Beck, and Henrike Illig (Berlin: Metropol Verlag, 2015), pp. 169–197 (p. 175).

48 Cushman, p. 342.

49 Sharlach, p. 391.

50 Brown, Interview Ezechial Sentama (Kigali, Rwanda, 25 June 2011).

recruited to government-supported committees dedicated to compiling lists of suspicious Tutsis and led anti-Tutsi protests and campaigns on university campuses.[51] But like women in Nazi Germany, Hutu women's access to these newly available public and political spaces was tightly controlled. Over time, Habyarimana's single-party dictatorship co-opted existing women's organizations to serve the purposes of the government. After the 1990 invasion of the Tutsi-led rebel group, the Rwandan Patriotic Front, Rwanda's national army, the FAR, began to train young men under the pretense of defending neighborhoods and tracking down infiltrators.[52] Women were not recruited, characterized instead as the primary population in need of protection. These same men would later comprise the core of the Interahamwe killing militias. Still, extremists within and outside the government embarked on a multi-pronged hate campaign that included print periodicals, radio messages, and political messages that appealed directly to women as subordinates in society. As tensions escalated and violence spread, a similar push-pull was firmly in place by 1994: celebrated widely as mothers and wives but not leaders, women were recruited by Habyarimana's government, yet controlled and marginalized, useful only as vehicles for the interests of the dictatorship.

In contrast to Nazi women, the political indoctrination of Hutu women in Rwanda did not include membership in sex-specific party chapters.[53] Still, women were incited to participate in the genocide, often through print and radio media. For example, the Hutu Ten Commandments, published in 1990 and widely distributed around Rwanda, specifically addressed the agency of Hutu women. The first and second commandments promoted an 'us vs. them' paradigm, excoriating Tutsi women as ethnic agents and sexualized others, and extolling the virtues of Hutu women as mothers, wives, and secretaries. The gendered language praised them but continued to police the boundaries of their place in society. The third commandment: 'Hutu women, be vigilant, and try to bring your husbands, brothers, and sons back to reason', was especially poignant and represented a direct appeal to women's agency, tasking them to stand up to their men.[54] This direct appeal to women, telling them to eschew their traditionally sanc-

51 *Rwanda Not So Innocent*, pp. 9–10.

52 Alison Des Forges, *Leave None to Tell the Story: Genocide in Rwanda* (New York: Human Rights Watch, 1999), p. 140.

53 Brown, *Gender and the Genocide in Rwanda*, p. 48.

54 Ibid, p. 43.

tioned passivity and take action to stop Hutu men from pursuing or being persuaded by Tutsi women, is revolutionary. In a patriarchal, majority-Christian society supported by an elaborate legal framework designed to restrict women's agency and ensure their marginalization, this commandment relieved them of societal constraints. Instead, women were being encouraged to speak up and speak out. For those who preferred radio to print media, RTLM radio announcer Valerie Bemeriki, played a vital role in the extremist propaganda machine. Her fiery reports accompanied popular songs and radio chat programs that promoted anti-Tutsi ideology and hatred as well, and appealed to both sexes. As one of few women who had accessed the male-dominated sphere of radio, Bemeriki was a role model and voice of authority for Rwandan women. These concurrent mobilization efforts had a lasting impact and influenced women (and men) to participate in the genocide.

In Germany and in Rwanda, nontraditional and gendered engagement occurred as each government mobilized women to participate in genocide, often appealing to their sex and prescribed roles in society to spur their contributions. When addressing pre-genocide history and mobilization in Germany and Rwanda, the power of fear as an effective catalyst must be addressed. Gendered fearmongering intensified as both countries descended into conflict. Propaganda campaigns in both countries harnessed the latest technology and mainstream means of communication available at the time, deployed to stir up fear in the population, with deadly effect.

As the Nazi propaganda machine gained control of mainstream media throughout Germany and later in Nazi-occupied Europe, cartoon images, printed pieces, and cinema further promoted a strong sense of shared positive identity for so-called Aryan men and women and an equally strong sense of threat from 'non-Aryans,' especially Jewish men. Films like *Der Ewige Jude* (The Eternal Jew), a pseudo-documentary depicting Jews as evil, diseased, and intent on world domination, and *Jud Süß*, which played up the sexual threat of its Jewish antagonist with great drama, were produced to stoke fear in the German public. Former Nazi party member Wilhelmine Haferkamp repeated rumors that spread during the war: 'It will happen that Jews will come to power and they will kill us all. You always heard that.'[55] Manipulating an exclusionary 'us vs. them' mentality that played upon the rising fear

55 Owings, p. 29.

and uncertainty of the 1930s was effective and mobilized German women to participate in violence.

Fear was particularly intense and immediate in Rwanda, where the genocide unfolded rapidly within the country (and not outside its borders, as in Germany) and for many, unexpectedly. The radio contributed to the unfolding chaos, supplying bombastic reports detailing the Tutsi 'threat' and false updates about the ongoing and civil war with the Rwandan Patriotic Front. One woman perpetrator in Rwanda noted, 'first of all I was scared because of what I was hearing and also hearing that people were killing each other.'[56] Another concurred, 'I was scared, of course, because just the matter of hearing what was going on in the country.'[57] Repeated references to fear, chaos, shouting, and acts of violence were shared by survivors, perpetrators, and rescuers alike and catalyzed violence throughout the country.

Whipping up alarm to mobilize deadly action is not unusual, as 'fear is an essential component of the militarization package; it is necessary to convince the target audience that the world is a dangerous place and the use of force a necessary defensive measure'.[58] During the Holocaust and the genocide in Rwanda, the use and manipulation of fear further helped to mobilize women to perpetrate genocide.

During Genocide

The trouble with focusing on well-known women perpetrators like Ilse Koch, the wife of the Kommandant of Buchenwald known for her sadism, or Pauline Nyiramasahuko, a former government minister in Rwanda and mother-in-law of Beatrice Munyenyezi (mentioned later), is that we may wrongly think of them as deviant anomalies rather than an illustration of women's capacity to perpetrate genocide, unique only because of the power they wielded. Falling into such mental ruts costs us the opportunity to examine what half of the population was doing and renders them invisible when exploring a narrative of genocide. Tens of thousands of 'ordinary' women participated in the Holocaust, from typing orders to accompanying military units that massacred

56 Brown, Interview G4 with 'Jennifer' (Muhanga, Rwanda, 30 June 2011).
57 Ibid., Interview G3 with 'Lucy' (Muhanga, Rwanda, 30 June 2011).
58 Ibid., *Gender and the Genocide in Rwanda*, p. 51.

Jews to staffing concentration camps.[59] And an estimated 12 million women worked in various bureaucratic capacities for National-Socialist organizations that buttressed the genocidal regime.[60] Similarly, nearly 100,000 women were tried by the Gacaca Courts in Rwanda for crimes of genocide, including participating in killing militias, exposing people in hiding, and occasionally participating in acts of directly perpetrated violence. However, when examining popular narratives and scholarship on women perpetrators of the Holocaust and the genocide in Rwanda, the lens through which their participation is analyzed is colored by gendered stereotypes, assumptions, and norms.

Categorizing the crimes perpetrated by women is a difficult process. Broadly, women's crimes during genocide fall into two forms: acts of direct violence and acts of indirect violence. The former is perpetrated through the use of physical force, including killing, torture, rape, sexual assault, and beatings.[61] The latter includes acts that may not require physical force but may include looting, theft, knowingly revealing someone in hiding, inciting violence, and supervising and ordering acts of violence. Wendy Lower goes further and separates German women who participated in the Nazi government into functional categories, noting that women played a role in the Holocaust, 'not at the helm, but as the machine's operatives.'[62] Women witnesses were present at sites of mass atrocities, be it the ghettos or at mass graves or at killing centers, and they said and did nothing. Complicit by attrition, their silence was a decision and it served as a seal of approval. Others served as accomplices in the crimes perpetrated, including their support of an array of bureaucrats who enacted orders with deadly effect, aware of but numb to the 'human impact' of their work, as well as those who cheered on killing mobs, supported ghetto liquidations, or looted Jewish belongings at train stations. Actual murderers included nurses working in the Nazi 'euthanasia' program, camp guards, wives and mistresses of camp staff who also joined in the mass murder, land managers in charge of

59 Raul Hilberg offers the following noteworthy reminder: 'It must be kept in mind that most of the participants [of genocide] did not fire rifles at Jewish children or pour gas into gas chambers … Most bureaucrats composed memoranda, drew up blueprints, talked on the phone, and participated in conferences. They could destroy a whole people by sitting at their desk.' *The Destruction of the European Jews* (New York: Random House, 1985), p. 1024.

60 Alette Smeulers, 'Female Perpetrators: Ordinary and Extra-Ordinary Women', *International Criminal Law Review*, 15.2 (2015), 207–253 (p. 212).

61 Johan Galtung, 'Violence, Peace, and Peace Research', *Journal of Peace Research*, 6.3 (1969), 167–191 (p. 169).

62 Lower, p. 16.

slave laborers, and women who seized or facilitated other opportunities to kill. Their roles were complex and their crimes multifarious; some women, like Liselotte Meier, occupy multiple categories. She was an accomplice, serving as secretary and lover to the District Commissar of Lida and overseeing the bureaucratic processes underpinning the mass murder of the Jews in that region. She was also a perpetrator, planning massacres, participating in mass shootings, and joining mass hunts that often targeted Jews.[63]

For many, including survivors, it is difficult to make sense of the 'ordinary' (in the context of the utterly extraordinary context of genocide) crimes perpetrated by 'ordinary' women. As discussed later in this article, this contributes to their invisibility post-genocide and in scholarship on the topic. Consider the example of women guards at Ravensbrück concentration camp complex. During the Holocaust, statistics, reporting, and testimony accounts about women camp guards detail their role in the death and concentration camp system, even though a small percentage of camp guards, 3,508 out of 41,182 (total) in January 1945, were women.[64] As mentioned in the previous section, necessity drove the recruitment and later expansion of women's roles within the SS, including at Ravensbrück. Built just outside Berlin and consisting of over 30 satellite camps, Ravensbrück was constructed primarily for women prisoners and staffed primarily by women SS. And while Anna Fest, a former guard-in-training assigned temporarily to Ravensbrück, alleged she did not witness widespread violence perpetrated against prisoners, inmate Charlotte Müller disagreed. Müller was imprisoned at Ravensbrück and witnessed the cruelty of the women SS guards who managed the camp. She describes one episode of violence in which a guard, 'Frau Lehmann,' was beating prisoners in the prison barrack. The violence ended when she exclaimed: 'Ach, you all want to leave, don't you? I also have to give my child something to drink. It's time.' Lehmann was a nursing mother. She hung up the club she had used to beat the women and left to feed her infant. Müller exclaimed to the other prisoners 'She must have sour milk in her breasts' and turns to her interviewer to further expound, 'that is

63 Lower, pp.100–7.

64 Elissa Mailänder, 'The Violence of Female Guards in Nazi Concentration Camps (1939–1945): Reflections on the Dynamics and Logics of Power', *Violence de masse et Résistance - Réseau de recherche*, 5 February 2015, <https://www.sciencespo.fr/mass-violence-war-massacre-resistance/en/document/violence-female-guards-nazi-concentration-camps-1939-1945-reflections-dynamics-and-logics-p.html> [accessed 2 May 2020].

a woman. Such a thing happened. They are beasts, is what they are. It is simply unbelievable that human beings can be that way.' And then challenged her interviewer, also a woman, to make sense of it, asking, 'What do you as a woman say to that?'[65] This is noteworthy but not unusual: the cruelty of SS guards, men and women alike, has been reported in numerous testimonies, eye-witness accounts, and academic studies, often without the same struggle, though some studies examine the duality of SS men who displayed great cruelty but were also doting parents and devoted spouses. This example of violence may be common, but the sex and motherhood of the perpetrator proved to be hurdles for Müller's comprehension. She struggled to make sense of this 'ordinary' example of violence, common to Ravensbrück and regularly perpetrated by its guards.

Women perpetrators in Rwanda also occupied varying and often multiple positions of complicity and perpetration. Details have emerged over time, some through justice initiatives in Rwanda that have produced new and varying data about the number of women who participated and their role during the genocide. For example, several years ago, staff at AVEGA Agahozo, a prominent genocide survivor organization in Rwanda, offered three categories of crimes perpetrated by women during the genocide and ranked them 'according to the frequency and intensity of the crimes: 1. exposing those in hiding by ululating when Tutsi were found in order to draw the Interahamwe; 2. stealing resources and looting; 3. murdering Tutsis, often children'.[66] This ranking makes sense. The genocide in Rwanda was primarily perpetrated by collectives and many women participated in mobs that accompanied, directly assisted, or looted alongside killing militias known as Interahamwe, a Kinyarwanda word meaning 'those who attack together'. Women who participated in Interahamwe activities did not need to take up arms or participate in acts of direct violence. Their presence in the mobs that accompanied killing or in groups that followed their murderous path to loot bodies and property served as an implicit endorsement of the acts of violence perpetrated. Indeed, 25 of the 26 women perpetrators I interviewed in prisons and Works for General Interest (TIG) camps throughout Rwanda were tried for 'Category 2' crimes, initially defined as:

65 Owings, p. 163
66 Brown, 'Female Perpetrators of the Rwandan Genocide', p. 458.

> a) The person whose criminal acts or criminal participation place among authors, coauthors or accomplices of deliberate homicides or serious attacks against persons which caused death. b) The person who, with intention of giving death, has caused injuries or committed other serious violences, but from which the victims have not died.[67]

Category 2 was later modified and broadly re-defined in 2008 to include an array of criminal acts that include intentional murder, attack and injury committed with intent to murder, torture, and dehumanizing acts on a dead body.

The women I interviewed did not necessarily deliver the death blow but instead facilitated murder through mob participation or exposing someone in hiding. Still, they did not represent the majority, who participated in crimes against property rather than crimes targeting people (to be discussed in the section). The lines blur as some women followed the killing mobs in search of financial gain. The high incidence of theft among women perpetrators tried by Rwanda's hybrid judicial process, the Gacaca courts (detailed later in the article) supports what one survivor described as a chronology of crimes: 'They would kill them, afterwards they would take their things, they would loot, and then they would take their cows and everything.'[68] Survivor testimonies similarly recount widespread theft perpetrated by women. One survivor recalled: 'On the path down below the field, all day you saw a long line of gatherers, backs bent beneath the burden of their fresh looting. They

67 The original four categories, stipulated in Article 51 (pp. 17–8) of 'Organic Law No 40/2000 of 26/01/2001 Setting up "Gacaca Jurisdiction" and Organizing Prosecutions for Offences Constituting the Crime of Genocide or Crimes Against Humanity Committed Between October 1, 1990 and December 31, 1994' were defined as follows: Category 1: a) The person whose criminal acts or criminal participation place among planners, organisers, incitators, supervisors of the crime of genocide or crime against humanity; b) The person who, acting in a position of authority at the national, provincial or district level, within political parties, army, religious denominations or militia, has committed these offences or encouraged others to commit them; c) The well-known murderer who distinguished himself in the location where he lived or wherever he passed, because of zeal which has characterised him in killings or excessive wickedness with which they were carried out; d) The person who has committed rape or acts of torture against person's sexual parts. Category 2: a) The person whose criminal acts or criminal participation place among authors, coauthors or accomplices of deliberate homicides or serious attacks against persons which caused death. b) The person who, with intention of giving death, has caused injuries or committed other serious violences, but from which the victims have not died. Category 3: The person who has committed criminal acts or has become accomplice of serious attacks, without the intention of causing death to victims. Category 4: The person having committed offences against assets. However, the author of the mentioned offences who, on the date of this organic law enforcement, has agreed either with the victim, or before the public authority or in arbitration, for an amicable settlement, cannot be prosecuted for the same facts.

68 Ibid, pp. 148–9.

followed along like a thread of ants behind a food scrap.[69] The prevalence of theft, repeated in survivor and perpetrator accounts and confirmed by data from post-genocide judicial mechanisms discussed later in this article, provides a window into another aspect of Hutu women's participation in the genocide.[70]

The details may change over time. The temporal nearness of the events, just 25 years after the genocide, means we will likely uncover new details, data, and testimony over time. Over 70 years later, we are still learning new information about women's participation in the Holocaust. The story of women's participation in Rwanda will continue to unfold as well.

Here I must note that Suzanne's story further elucidates the complexities of using testimony to examine perpetration. Testimony is influenced by myriad factors, including time, trauma, and the individual giving the interview. Most of the perpetrators of the Holocaust have died and in Rwanda, they are aging. For example, I interviewed Suzanne on two separate occasions and heard divergent versions of her role in her grandson's murder. Because of her advanced age, memory loss, and possible trauma, it is unclear which version, if any, is true. In her initial statement, she helped to murder her grandson because of his mixed ethnicity and at the behest of her daughter, the child's mother, who was at the time incarcerated in prison. As she continued, she described herself as an accomplice, aiding her husband and daughter as they murdered, and she accepted her guilt. In another version, she was a witness, aware of the crimes perpetrated by her husband and daughter but unable to speak out against her husband since he was the head of the household.[71] When I pressed her, she argued that she could not question or challenge the actions of her husband. Murderer, accomplice, or witness, her testimony offers a nuanced window into her thoughts, actions, and interpretations and serves as a reminder of the challenges of testimony-based research.[72]

In Rwanda, despite the temporal and cultural differences when compared to the Holocaust, survivors seem to encounter similar challenges when grappling with the violence perpetrated by women. One survivor and activist argued that women's anonymity continues because of communal silence, despite knowledge of their participation. 'This phenomenon [of women participating in the genocide], you can't

69 Hatzfeld, p. 82.

70 See Brown, *Gender and the Genocide in Rwanda*, pp. 148–150, 91–120; Hatzfeld, pp. 77–87.

71 Ibid., pp. 96–7, p. 102.

72 For more on this, see ibid., pp. 91–120.

have someone to testify about it, even in Gacaca…. The genocide, it's not something easy to understand."[73] Another survivor concurred: 'Actually it's very strange to hear about women participating in the genocide."[74] When asked why women participated in the genocide, Sentama reasoned,

> [w]omen, I could say that they forgot their role as far as the Rwandan culture is, but actually the role, the role of women we know. A woman is a mother. She is somebody who seems to have more compassion than men, you know. So they forgot their role of women.[75]

Interestingly, the survivors who, despite what they had witnessed, struggled to make sense of women's participation during the genocide in Rwanda were all men. Women survivors, stakeholders, and even perpetrators were less likely to offer overtly gendered musings when asked why women participated. Indeed, the majority of women perpetrators denied their participation completely and so the question of motivation was moot. And some women survivors and stakeholders offered an array of non-gendered rationales and explanations, including a desire for self-gain (for example, looting goods from victims' bodies and homes), ethnic hatred, or because they were following orders.[76]

Post-Genocide

In both the Holocaust and the Genocide against the Tutsi in Rwanda, a gendered lens persists and makes examination and comprehension of women's participation in each respective genocide difficult. As already noted, this extends into and beyond scholarship and impacts the popular post-genocide narrative; even the survivor community struggles to make sense of women's participation.

Evident in both the Holocaust and the genocide in Rwanda is that women played a decisive role in the perpetration of genocide and their post-genocide trajectories often differed from men. Allar notes that, '[w]hile the two cases of Rwanda and Germany were quite different, along with the experiences of the female perpetrators within the regimes, perhaps the most striking similarity is the societal emphasis and

73 Brown, *Gender and the Genocide in Rwanda*, p. 111.
74 Ibid.
75 Brown, Interview Ezechial Sentama.
76 See Brown, *Gender and the Genocide*, pp. 91–120 for more details.

resulting images emerging after the genocide.'[77] The 'ordinary' was overlooked and the 'extraordinary' was sensationalized, leading to an incomplete narrative.

Though the crimes of Nazi women are documented, the international court system was blinded by imposed gender roles, unable to comprehend the agency that the Third Reich provided women. As a result, the widely cited Nuremberg Trials focused solely on men perpetrators at the highest tiers of decision making within the Third Reich, exempting from indictment mid- and low-level bureaucrats and functionaries, including 'clerks, secretaries, stenographers, cleaning staff, and other low-level support staff working in the Gestapo and other SS offices'.[78] This benefited women functionaries of the genocide. Other mechanisms put in place to try suspected perpetrators of the Holocaust, including the denazification courts, tended to overlook women. Lower found that in both Germany and in Austria, while some women were defendants in postwar investigations and trials, they were in the minority. And efforts were inconsistent. East Germany saw the largest numbers of trials, where 220 women faced trial between 1945 and 1990.[79] Those women who did face trial were routinely classified according to Sjoberg and Gentry's 'Monster' and 'Mother' paradigms; some as sadistic, inhuman others or, more often, as maternal, emotional innocents. With gendered nicknames like 'the bitch of Buchenwald' or the 'mare of Majdanek,' women perpetrators were dismissed as inhuman aberrations rather than members of the mainstream social movement that was state-sponsored genocide.

It is difficult to estimate the total number of women perpetrators of the Holocaust. Still, it is evident that the majority did not face justice. They benefitted from the few postwar trials that focused on low-level functionaries of the Holocaust. But this is also a result of women's efforts to deny participation, obfuscate their role, and evade justice. Holocaust survivor Elizabeth Berkovics recalled the change in tone adopted by her women captors as the Allied Forces advanced through Nazi-occupied Europe. They would remind her repeatedly to 'remember how good I was to you when the Americans come'.[80] Fearful of justice, women likely navigated this new postwar space as deftly as they had

77 Allar, p. 42.

78 Lower, p. 167.

79 Ibid, p. 169.

80 Elizabeth Berkovics, *USC Shoah Foundation Institute*, online testimony video, <https://vhaonline.usc.edu> [accessed 2 May 2020].

during the genocide – this time manipulating gendered assumptions about women's passivity and capacity for knowledge to their benefit.

Unique to Rwanda are the Gacaca courts, a formalized hybrid judicial mechanism that identified and tried women perpetrators around the country at a higher rate than post-Holocaust investigatory and judicial bodies. As a result, scholars are unable to determine the exact number of women who took part in the genocide and their crimes. In June 2012, the Gacaca courts closed and a summary report found that of the 1,003,227 suspects tried in over 10,000 courts around the country, 96,653 were women. Even accounting for the 14% average acquittal rate (pre-appeals),[81] this is a significant number of women. And the percentage of women tried in each category confirms part of the findings of AVEGA Agahozo staff. The vast majority of trials, over 90 percent, focused on property-related crimes, including looting and theft.[82] With the implementation of the Gacaca Courts, many women were called up and investigated. For a decade or more, they had led normal lives, often remaining in the same community where they had perpetrated crimes. Many were taken by surprise when they were investigated or brought to trial, with one incarcerated women explaining that post-genocide 'was like normal life again. I wasn't scared, I was there [home] until when this whole Gacaca case came up'.[83] And some believe the Gacaca courts did not fully uncover the full scope of women's participation in the genocide. 'Most of the truth from women we don't know. We don't discover all the truth about the participation of women…'.[84] Still, even with the outcome of the Gacaca courts and resulting knowledge about women's participation in the genocide, Rwandans, including some survivors, continue to struggle with the role and actions of women perpetrators.

The phenomenon of disbelief in women's ability to perpetrate genocide in Rwanda extends to the United States and its judicial system. As I discuss in greater detail in my book, *Gender and the Genocide in Rwanda*, Beatrice Munyenyezi moved to New Hampshire in the late 1990s and lived there for over a decade before a federal investigation was opened to examine her role during the genocide. A Rwandan national who eventually faced two federal trials in the United States because of her role in the genocide in Rwanda, Munyenyezi was pregnant throughout

81 Republic of Rwanda National Service of Gacaca Courts, 'Summary of The Report Presented at The Closing of Gacaca Courts Activities' (Kigali, 2012), p. 10.

82 Gertz, Brehm, and Brown, p. 139

83 Brown, *Gender and the Genocide in Rwanda*, p.111.

84 Ibid, p. 126.

the genocide. This fact was leveraged by the prosecution, who supplied witnesses able to identify her because of her maternity, as well as by the defense, who used her sex and motherhood to argue that she was incapable of leading Interahamwe killing militias, selecting and imprisoning women to be raped, and ordering murders. Munyenyezi played her part, with hunched shoulders, a tissue in hand, and eyes downcast whenever the jury was in the courtroom. During the first trial, despite witness testimony and international court documentation, the jury struggled to determine if Munyenyezi had participated in the genocide, resulting in a mistrial. But the second trial proceeded differently and mimicked a legal technique found in some Nazi war criminal extradition trials. Rather than prove her participation in genocide, prosecutors focused on inconsistencies in her immigration paperwork, arguing that she deliberately and knowingly lied about her political affiliation with the genocidal government in 1994. This strategy proved effective. 'While the first jury was reticent to acknowledge Munyenyezi's capacity to staff a violence checkpoint outside her home or shoot a nun in the head, the second jury readily accepted her capacity to lie.'[85] Munyenyezi was found guilty, sentenced to a multi-year sentence, and stripped of her U.S. citizenship.

Conclusion

Women have participated in acts of mass violence throughout history, including two of the best known case studies of modern genocide, the Holocaust and the Genocide against the Tutsi in Rwanda. As each respective post-genocide society has struggled to come to terms with and make sense of the women who joined in the perpetration of genocide, so too has scholarship. Men perpetrators have often been depicted as 'ordinary,' while women perpetrators are analyzed as 'aberrant, flawed, or inhuman'.[86] But when we dismiss women perpetrators as inhuman others, ignore their participation, or focus solely on women who were victimized or stood by, we lose an opportunity to more fully understand why and how genocide occurs and with it, how best to respond to prevent or stop it.

Genocide is a process, or rather a series of processes, and its study facilitates meaningful intervention strategies. Without a more complete

85 Ibid., p. 122.
86 Gertz, Brehm, and Brown, p. 146

and nuanced understanding of the perpetrators, including their mobilization and motivations, actions, and post-genocide trajectories, our efforts to understand and prevent genocide suffer.

Women's participation in mass-violence constitutes a key piece of the 'whole' story. And the complicated story of women's participation in the Holocaust and in the genocide in Rwanda is necessary in order to accurately document, learn from, and ultimately prevent genocide. This study is intended to join a conversation and contribute additional research – more work must be done to fully uncover the similarities *and* differences in women's agency during genocide. It is evident that they exercise agency, albeit many in a constrained context that interacts with existing patriarchal structures that prescribe and proscribe acceptable action. This requires further analysis along with the recurring existence of patriarchal structures in genocidal societies.

We need a more thorough examination of the fluidity of gender roles and norms during mass atrocities, particularly (but not exclusively) during genocide. Applying a gender lens to analysis of the processes of genocide benefits both scholarship and policy. In both contexts, the policies and norms regulating women's behavior shifted according to chronology, circumstances, and need. Understanding the gendered nuances, nature, and at times fluidity of pre-genocide mobilization, genocide perpetration, and post-genocide trajectories specific to women perpetrators provides new understandings, not just of the processes, chronology, and effects of a genocide, but also of the thinking, actions, and decision making processes of approximately half of the world's population. Applying a feminist lens additionally impacts prevention and intervention efforts, offering new insights and new points of entry, ensuring girls and women are not ignored, by attrition or more explicitly.

Though fewer in number than the men who acted during the genocide and subsequently overlooked within German and Rwandan society and beyond, women perpetrators cannot be underestimated or ignored. It is not enough to say that a woman 'forgot her role' when she perpetrated crimes during either genocide. Demystifying the processes that underpin genocide is necessary for prevention. And the full and complicated story of a woman's 'role' pre-genocide, during genocide, and following genocide offers insight into how genocide is mainstreamed, normalized, even celebrated, but also how it might be prevented. We need to stop being surprised or skeptical about a woman's ability to participate in genocide and start examining it as a significant data point for prevention and intervention.

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