



Policy Brief: **Strengthening Post-Conflict Legislatures**

Written by Jessica Gomez with Carla Koppell

This policy brief is part of a series derived from a three-year field program on the role of women in Rwanda. More broadly, these briefs provide policymakers, donors, and program planners with strategies for the consolidation of democracy in post-conflict societies.

Productive, strong legislatures are central to healthy democracies in post-conflict countries, fostering political pluralism and acting as a check on the executive branch. Yet too often, following a conflict, parliaments are weakened by internal divisiveness, the limited experience and skill of members, staffing shortages, and an overwhelming legislative agenda.

Increasing women's representation in government can strengthen legislatures. Rwanda is at the top of world rankings of women's political representation; it has the only majority female legislature. The elected lower house of parliament is 56 percent women. Though the legislative branch in Rwanda is still relatively weak, women have been at the forefront of efforts to improve it. Since attaining near parity in 2003, women parliamentarians have addressed gender discrimination in citizenship, inheritance, and land ownership laws.

Most important, they developed and introduced the first substantive legislation to originate in Rwanda's parliament—a bill on gender-based violence. The executive branch has put forward every other substantive law since the 2003 election of Rwanda's first post-genocide, permanent government. The Forum of Rwandan Women Parliamentarians (Forum des Femmes Rwandaises Parlementaires, or FFRP), a caucus to which all female members of parliament belong, led the bill's drafting and introduction. Crafting the gender-based violence bill, the FFRP used an inclusive approach: Extensive consultations and outreach to men and women in communities nationwide influenced the bill's provisions. In addition, women legislators involved male colleagues in the consultations and recruited them as co-sponsors.

International community support has strengthened the FFRP and the legislative branch more generally. Donors funded the FFRP's public consultations and provided technical assistance to help draft the bill. The FFRP leveraged support from the international community to implement its strategic plan and to host an ambitious international conference on women in government to mark its tenth anniversary.

To summarize, in general, the Rwandan parliament has a limited capacity to draft and introduce legislation. Women, however, have led in the development of the country's legislation, working across party lines on issues of common concern, and fighting discrimination against vulnerable groups by supporting legislative reforms. By working closely with constituents, they have improved the institution's credibility. To extrapolate, building the capacity and strength of women legislators strengthens parliaments and, over the long term, promotes democratic governance.

Findings and Recommendations

Finding: Legislatures gain legitimacy and credibility when they reflect the composition of society.

→ **Recommendation:** Support the implementation of electoral law and constitutional quotas and reserved seats for marginalized groups, particularly women.

Finding: International support is indispensable to the creation of a strong legislative branch and inclusive lawmaking in post-conflict settings.

→ **Recommendation:** Fund programs that build the capacity of members of parliament to produce and promote legislation. Such efforts may involve providing professional staff for members or committees, training on legislation drafting, and educating both parliamentarians and citizens on the roles of the legislative and executive branches.

Finding: Cross-party caucuses moderate the influence of parties' agendas and promote the cross-fertilization of ideas. For success, caucuses must allow any interested legislator to participate (i.e., they should not be limited to certain parties or to individuals named by political parties).

→ **Recommendation:** Support the creation of cross-party caucuses, emphasizing the value of inclusive governing structures.

Finding: Having public consultations on legislative topics builds the legitimacy of government, connects parliamentarians with constituents, generates useful data for drafting legislation, and sensitizes the public on policy issues.

→ **Recommendation:** Encourage consultative policymaking, especially on socially sensitive issues.

→ **Recommendation:** Allocate funds to pay for consultations with constituents in connection with pending legislation.

Finding: Women's caucuses, and caucuses in general, are useful channels for programs and funds to strengthen legislatures.

→ **Recommendation:** Support cross-party women's caucuses financially and technically.

Finding: When parliamentarians purposefully engage across gender lines to pass legislation, the relevance of an issue is highlighted and collaborative policymaking is encouraged.

→ **Recommendation:** Ensure that all programming for legislators involves men and women.

Recommendation: Ensure that training for members of parliament includes the value of and approaches to working with colleagues of the opposite sex.

Finding: Women can lead in promoting democratic governance.

→ **Recommendation:** Support programs to enable women to fulfill their potential as legislators. An emphasis on skills such as public speaking, law drafting, advocacy, coalition building, and proposal writing will pay particularly high dividends.