



## Policy Brief: **Promoting Children's Welfare: Legislative Strategies**

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***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 consolidation of democracy in post-conflict societies.***

Children are often the segment of the population most affected by poverty, food insecurity, and the lack of health and social services that characterize post-conflict countries. Women's leadership, however, can improve children's lives. When women achieve a critical mass in legislatures and local government, they prioritize investment in children's welfare.

Rwandan women parliamentarians have demonstrated that their inclusion in national legislatures has positive policy outcomes for children. As over 56 percent of the lower house of Rwanda's legislature, women lawmakers have used the strength of their numbers to push for progressive social policy, with children's rights among their top priorities. Their leadership on such issues is exhibited in three pieces of legislation. In 1999, they spearheaded the effort to give women and girls legal rights to inheritance and succession. They assisted in the passage of a bill on children's rights and protection in 2001. And in 2006, these legislators developed and introduced a gender-based violence bill that pays special attention to crimes against boys and girls.

When women constitute a "critical mass" of at least 30 percent of legislatures, they have the potential to lobby successfully to revise existing legislation and create new laws promoting children's welfare. Studies around the world show a direct correlation between the number of women in parliament and the passage of progressive legislation on children. In Rwanda, the constitutional quota requiring at least 30 percent women at all levels of government ensured that women's numbers were significant enough to advocate effectively for child-friendly policies. Women consolidated their position by exceeding the quota substantially in 2003 and 2008 elections.

The existence of a parliamentary caucus enhanced women's efforts to advance children's rights. In 1996, Rwandan women parliamentarians came together across political and ethnic lines to create the Forum of Rwanda Women Parliamentarians (FFRP). Among other benefits, the caucus enabled organizing and strategizing around children's issues. Promoting children's welfare was included in the FFRP strategic plan, which received technical and financial support from the international community. The FFRP screened existing legislation for bias against children and for opportunities to promote their rights and initiated new legislation to protect children.

Collaboration with civil society and consultation with the public also facilitates the development, passage, and implementation of legislation on social issues. Female government officials are more likely than their male counterparts to have strong links with local constituents and civil society; in turn, they are more likely to use those relationships to advance legislative agendas that prioritize children's rights. Consultative processes and constituent relations are hallmarks of women's leadership in Rwanda, where joint advocacy by women in the executive, legislature, and civil society is highly organized.

Policymakers and program planners seeking to improve conditions for children should support women's political participation and invest in strengthening women parliamentarians' legislative efforts.

## Findings and Recommendations

**Finding:** Women parliamentarians often advance legislative agendas that prioritize the rights and status of children.

→ **Recommendation:** Engage women legislators as allies in promoting children's welfare.

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**Finding:** A critical mass of female parliamentarians is crucial to their effectiveness in influencing legislation to protect children.

→ **Recommendation:** Advocate for constitutional provisions that promote women's participation in government, such as quotas and reserved seats.

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**Finding:** Women's caucuses help build alliances and facilitate strategizing to promote children's rights in the legislature.

→ **Recommendation:** Provide technical and financial support to women's caucuses and encourage them to create an agenda that includes children's issues.

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**Finding:** Public consultations can increase the legitimacy of legislation, inform new bills, and sensitize the public on policy issues.

→ **Recommendation:** Fund public consultations to develop child-friendly legislation; use consultations to educate communities about children's issues and to solicit input from the public.

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**Finding:** Social issues such as children's welfare are addressed most effectively when men and women legislators collaborate on the bills' design and introduction.

→ **Recommendation:** Encourage collaboration among male and female parliamentarians on the development and passage of child-friendly laws.

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**Finding:** Close cooperation between government and civil society fosters better legislation on children's issues and can benefit implementation.

→ **Recommendation:** Encourage female parliamentarians to establish and use connections with civil society organizations that deal with children's issues and to collaborate with them on policy implementation.

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