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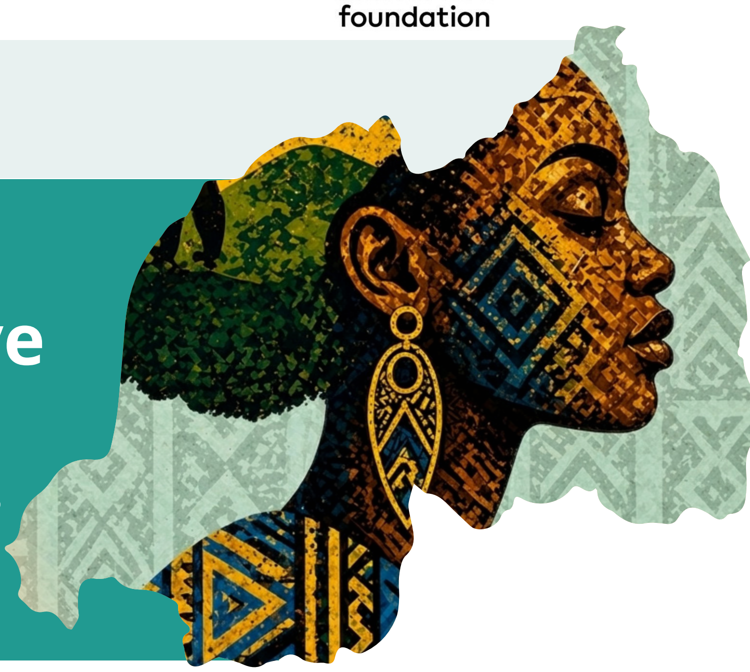
Policy Brief

Unlocking Women's Barriers and Creative Potential: Policy and Programmatic Insights for Rwanda



Executive Summary

Rwanda's creative sector has emerged as a vibrant contributor to youth employment and economic transformation. Despite this growth, women remain underrepresented in high-value segments of the sector and face structural and socio-cultural barriers that limit their full participation and leadership.

This policy brief synthesizes evidence on gendered constraints in Rwanda's creative industries and outlines policy and programmatic responses to address persistent inequities. Key barriers include pay inequity, harassment, and unsafe work environments, disproportionate unpaid care burdens, limited access to male-dominated infrastructure and networks, and gender-blind institutional policies. Addressing these barriers requires a holistic approach that includes policy and legal reforms by the government, sectoral operational guidelines by the private sector, and attitudinal change by society. Unlocking women's full participation in the creative sector would amplify innovation, employment, and inclusive growth.

Introduction

Rwanda has made significant progress in advancing gender equality. However, sector-specific inequalities persist, particularly in emerging and informal sectors such as the creative industries (Burnet, 2011; Republic of Rwanda, 2021). While the country has strong institutional frameworks and progressive legal reforms, implementation gaps remain within creative spaces.

The creative sector is characterized by informality, freelance work arrangements, project-based contracts, and reliance on networks. These features, while dynamic, often amplify gender-based disparities.

Purpose of this Policy Brief

This policy brief aims to:

- Highlight the key gender barriers affecting women in Rwanda's creative sector;
- Analyze the structural and socio-cultural dynamics sustaining these inequities; and
- Provide actionable policy and programmatic recommendations for government development partners, private sector actors, and creative associations.

The brief targets policymakers, sector regulators, development partners, creative industry leaders, and civil society organizations.

Why Gender Equality Matters for the Creative Sector in Rwanda

Gender equality in the creative sector matters for several reasons:

- **Economic Growth –** Women represent a significant share of Rwanda's youth population. Their exclusion reduces the sector's productivity and innovation potential.
- **Cultural Representation –** Women's voices shape narratives, artistic expression, and cultural identity.
- **Employment Creation –** The creative sector is increasingly seen as a pathway for youth employment and entrepreneurship.
- **Global Competitiveness –** Inclusive creative ecosystems attract investment, partnerships, and international collaborations.

Without deliberate gender-responsive policies, the sector risks reproducing traditional inequalities within a modern economic space.

Gender Inequities in Rwanda's Creative Sector: Forms and Dynamics

Pay inequity, limited access to high-value creative sector opportunities, and a dearth of leadership roles

Women in Rwanda's creative industries often earn less than men for comparable work, particularly in informal and freelance settings where compensation is negotiated individually. They are underrepresented in executive production roles, technical fields (such as sound engineering and digital production), ownership of production companies, and festival curation or decision-making boards. Access to high-value contracts often depends on informal networks, which tend to be male-dominated, limiting women's entry into lucrative projects and leadership positions.

Harassment, stigma, coercion, and unsafe working conditions

Creative spaces such as studios, rehearsal venues, film sets, and nightlife performance environments expose women to harassment, coercion, and reputational stigma. Challenges include sexual harassment in exchange for opportunities, lack of formal complaint mechanisms, fear of professional retaliation, and cultural stigma against women performers. The absence of sector-specific safeguarding policies leaves many women without protection.

Heavy burden of unpaid care work and domestic responsibilities

Women in Rwanda continue to shoulder disproportionate unpaid care responsibilities, including childcare, eldercare, and household management.

Creative work often requires irregular hours, night performances, travel for festivals and tours, and intensive production schedules. These demands conflict with domestic responsibilities, limiting women's career progression and availability for high-visibility opportunities.

Limited access to critical male-dominated creative sector infrastructure

Key infrastructure in the creative sector—such as recording studios, equipment rental facilities, film production networks, and technical guilds—is often male-dominated. Ownership and control of such infrastructure shape access to opportunities. Women's limited presence in these spaces restricts their ability to build technical skills and professional networks.

Gender-blind workplaces and infrastructure

Many creative workplaces lack gender-sensitive policies, including maternity protections for freelance artists, childcare-friendly event planning, safe transport arrangements for late-night events, and formal codes of conduct. The assumption that the sector is gender-neutral obscures structural inequalities and prevents targeted interventions.

Policy and Programmatic Recommendations

1. Government and Public Institutions

- National and local government institutions should strengthen and enforce legal and policy frameworks that promote gender equity in the creative economy.
- Effective implementation of labor laws and gender-sensitive policies addressing pay equity, workplace discrimination, and harassment.
- Gender should be systematically mainstreamed into national creative industry policies, accompanied by dedicated public funding or grant mechanisms targeting women-led creative initiatives.
- Government-led public awareness campaigns celebrating women creatives,
- Integration of arts and gender equality education into school curricula, would further contribute to shifting entrenched gender norms.

2. Creative Associations, Guilds, and Professional Bodies

- Strengthening existing guilds and supporting the formation of new ones can enhance collective advocacy, professional solidarity, and representation.
- Adopt and enforce gender-responsive codes of conduct,
- Establish safe reporting mechanisms, and provide structured mentorship and peer-learning opportunities to support young women's leadership development and confidence building.

3. Employers and Creative Industry Organizations

- Institutionalize inclusive workplace practices by adopting anti-harassment policies
- Ensuring equal pay for work of equal value
- Implementing transparent recruitment and promotion systems.
- Gender-sensitive leadership training and flexible working arrangements, including childcare support where feasible, are critical to addressing the realities of seasonal and project-based creative work and reducing women's economic precarity.

4. Private Sector and Development Partners

- Support women creatives through tailored financial products, business incubation programs, and entrepreneurship mentorship.
- Public–private partnerships can play a central role in mobilizing investment in women-led creative enterprises.
- Supporting women's use of social media and digital tools to scale innovation for market access, professional networking, and portfolio development, while also addressing online harassment.

5. Civil Society and Academia

- Contribute through ongoing research, monitoring, and evidence generation on gender equity in the creative sector, linking Rwanda's progress to regional and global creative economy initiatives.
- Support peer networks, informal mentorship groups, and access to mental health and psychosocial services
- Training in financial literacy and business management, particularly for women, youth, and rural creatives, remains essential.
- The establishment of women-centered creative hubs or incubators would further enhance access to shared workspaces, resources, and professional opportunities.

6. Multi-Stakeholder Coordination Platforms

- Government, creative associations, employers, civil society, academia, and the private sector should jointly establish a national coordination and dialogue platform.
- Regular consultations with women and youth creatives will help ensure that policies and programs remain responsive, inclusive, and grounded in lived realities.

Conclusion

Rwanda's creative sector holds immense promise as a driver of youth employment, cultural innovation, and economic growth. However, gendered barriers—structural, cultural, and institutional—continue to limit women's equal participation and leadership. Addressing pay inequities, harassment, infrastructure access, unpaid care burdens, and gender-blind institutional practices is essential for building an inclusive and competitive creative ecosystem. A coordinated response involving government institutions, private sector actors, creative associations, and development partners can transform the sector into a model of inclusive growth. Gender equality is central to the sustainability and success of the creative economy.

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