Introductory Notes

At present, a major topic of debate and media coverage is the 'New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD). The key components of this initiative include 'The Peace, Severity, Democracy and Political Governance Initiative and the 'Peer Review Mechanism'. In return for substantive capital flows from Western countries, African 'leaders' have pledged to take joint responsibility for promoting and protecting democracy and human rights in their respective countries and regions by developing 'clear standards of accountability, transparency and participatory governance at the national and sub-national levels.'

The Peer Review mechanism refers to global sanctions that will be applied to countries that allegedly violate the 'norm' of good governance established by NEPAD. As I read the two articles providing a gendered account of the recent elections in Zimbabwe and the application of religious law in Northern Nigeria, I could not help wondering what African country would have been able to avoid sanctions if violence against women and the multitude of ways that have been used to disfranchise them, were among the major criteria used to consider and subsequently sanction countries who fail to conduct 'a free and fair elections'. In this short essay, I will attempt to briefly sketch some of the gendered trajectories of the democratisation process in Africa during the last decade.

Poverty and Citizenship

Much has been said about the 'lost decade' in Africa with reference to the devastating consequences of the 'crisis' that engulfed the continent in the 1980s and the neo-liberal solution that was imposed by International Financial institutions in the form of Structural Adjustment Programmes (SAPs). The 'crisis' continues unabated to the present signaling of the failure of SAPs to reverse the trend towards economic decline and social disarray. There is also ample evidence revealing that it is poor women who have borne the disproportionate burden of the ever-deepening crisis. More concretely, poor women were forced to stretch their already long working days in order to compensate for shortfalls in public sector resource commitments. It is only recently however that we have become aware of the political dimensions of the phenomenon that feminists have conceptualised as 'time poverty'. The recent election in Zimbabwe is but one reminder that time is a critical citizenship resource.

Steps Towards Autonomy & Road Blocks

Another significant feature of the 1980s was the emergence of independent women's organisations in a large number of African countries. As far as gender issues are concerned, in most countries, the late 1960s to 1990 was characterised by the dominance of 'Women's Wings' of the one-party state. In most cases, these organisations blocked the formation of independent women's organisations, even blocked the enactment of mildly gender friendly legislation. In a large number of cases, the first UN Decade for women 1975-1985, provided the legitimacy and the resources for the emergence of women's NGOs. There were of course a host of other contributory factors for the flourishing of women's organisations, too many to elaborate in this short essay.

Mostly using the WID framework, these organisations documented the plight of women and recommended numerous measures that the state ought to undertake in order to 'integrate women in development'. Few others tabled a more Transformative agenda. The irony, however, was that far from being responsive to new demands; 'the state' was being rolled back under pressure from SAPs. Focused on articulating their own concerns, most gender activists were not aware that the ascendance of neoliberalism signaled the rise of opposition to equality based state intervention.

Finally, the end of the 1980s, witnessed the end of the Cold War and the rapid spread of democratisation on a world scale. In Africa, this took the form of democratising states in response to local popular demand and reluctant democratisers under the new conditionality of donor countries. Within the hegemonic donor institutions, the earlier preoccupation with 'getting prices right' now turned to 'getting institutions right' through 'good governance.' These events culminated in the demise of a large number of authoritarian regimes.

The newly opened democratic space together with the growth of the transnational women's and human rights movements, emboldened the nascent women's movement in Africa as evidenced by the flourishing of national, sub-regional and global feminist networks and single-issue campaigns. In the recent past, these diverse organisations have formed coalitions, bodies that are better placed to engage in a well-organised and coherent advocacy and to mobilise both local and global solidarity. Another emergent force was that of various forms of fundamentalisms that continues to gather momentum and to challenge even the minimal gains made by women.

Disillusioned by their exclusion from the major gains of post-independent Africa, indifference to gender issues, and in large number of cases, repression by authoritarian regimes, African women embraced the democratisation process with great anticipation and enthusiasm. Women's engagement with the unfolding political process seems to have taken two complimentary forms: a call for inclusion of women in the political infrastructure and placing women's major concerns on the public agenda. More than ten years on, with few exceptions, the tangible gains can be summed up as formal rights and increased gender awareness by the public. To be sure, among the new political actors, in most countries, women have become conspicuous. In the context of a 'lean' state, translating formal rights into substantive equality is still illusory for the majority of African women.

Gender & Political Identities

Just as nationalist narratives of the colonial and post colonial period were premised on the centrality of notions of manhood and masculinity, contemporary narratives of the transition to democracy in Africa continue to give the impression that gender is irrelevant to politics. In part, such a distorted picture results from the narrow conceptualisation of political activity one that excludes certain categories of people as well as some of the most potentially democratic transformations of society [Phillips, 1991]. The two reflections on Nigeria and Zimbabwe in this issue, together with many other writings by women under the rubric of 'gender and democratisation' reveal the major difference between the immediate post-independence Africa and today. Unlike the past, highly vocal women's organisations have been able to disturb the silences and expose the centrality of women and gender in the construction of political identities.

One of the early forums for the renegotiations of state society relations or models of democratic transition were national conferences which mostly took place in Francophone Africa and were perceived by many as processes signaling Africa's 'second liberation'. Although these forums were hailed as broadly inclusive by mainstream observers, those who examined them through a gender lens found a disquieting undercurrent of gender bias. The degree of inclusiveness and overall democratic outcomes of these transitional forums varied from country to country. In some instances, a handful of women were able to participate while in others, women were excluded totally. In Niger, for instance, women were excluded from a preparatory commission charged with organising the country's National conference in 1991. The noteworthy process, however, was

women's well-organised protest against such forms of exclusion in Niger signaling women's struggle for visibility and voice and their determination to transgress conventional gender boundaries.

In addition to the under-representation of women in these and subsequent forums charged with preparing the ground rules for democratisation, gender biases were evident in laws, decrees and constitutional provisions. Moreover, women who claimed the right of participation were publicly criticised, harassed and even physically attacked [Robinson, 1994:50]. During the 1996 presidential election in Uganda, women whose political views differed from their husbands faced numerous incidents of intimidation and harassment by husbands. Throughout the country, politically active women voters faced numerous types of hostilities. Observers note that, 'some were beaten, thrown out of their homes, or even killed. [Tripp, 2000]. In Zambia, politically active women paid high personal and social costs such as a high separation and divorce rate, financial constraints, isolation, and lack of logistical support as a result of their political engagement [Ferguson & Katundu, 1994:18].

Single Issue Campaigns & Constitution Writing

Undaunted by the hostile environment, women's organisations have focused their energies on exposed the limits of basic civil and political rights that exclude the "private" spheres of marriage and family life from democratic scrutiny. We now have detailed and context specific accounts of a vast array of culturally sanctioned practices that are classified as violence against women. These practices take place in a multitude of arenas: the household, the community, schools, workplaces and streets. As the piece on Zimbabwe clearly indicates, these every day forms of violence tend to accelerate during periods of political turmoil. Throughout the last
two decades, there have been numerous and some successful campaigns against the most egregious patriarchal norms contained in penal and civil codes. More specifically, these campaigns have focused their energies on exposing the numerous gender disadvantaged embedded in customary law especially those related to marriage, adoption, divorce, burial and dissolution of property upon death and calling for the use of statutory law in respect to matters of personal law. Based on gains and setbacks from single-issue campaigns and taking advantage in the Constitutional review process underway in a number of countries, women's groups are actively engaged in the process so as to ensure that 'Omissions made in the past are not repeated in the present.' (Kiragu, J, 2002).

New and Old Threats

However as is clearly indicated by the piece on Nigeria in this issue, in a number of countries reforms have been stalled by the resurgence of traditional discourses and practices. What the two pieces on Zimbabwe and Nigeria tell us, is that women are being forced into the back seat of the democratisation process 'by a plethora of developments' including new citizenship, electoral and religious laws. But the important message emerging from these two reflections is that women are actively contesting these social locations and that the relationship between gender, democracy and citizenship is indeed highly complex in multi-ethnic and multi-religious communities. It is also why the need for strategic coalition-building so elegantly expressed in the Nigerian piece in this issue, becomes an urgent challenge.

Throughout the 1990s, we have lived through and
been informed about a generalised sense of violence surrounding elections that were neither free nor fair. Few of these election observations have given a gendered account of these thwarted processes. On reading the Zimbabwe account therefore, we clearly understand the disproportionate incalculable costs that women have to pay when elections take place in a context of 'an orchestrated campaign of terror and political violence.' The horrors of widespread rape and sexual slavery notwithstanding, women victims of such atrocities have to suffer in silence in fear of being exposed to HIV/AIDS and being abandoned. Beyond such indignities, the all out effort to ensure the election of the incumbent president, resulted in denying women 'their

right to vote'.

Representation and Accountability

In cases where such a right has not been so brutally denied, women's vote has represented "Vote Banks" with little if any concession to concerns of women. The piece on Nigeria in this issue, calls on women's to
use their vote advisedly and to hold politician's accountable. In the aftermath of most elections, gender accountability has received scant attention or has
been compromised by most elected politicians. In part, demands for the election of a 'critical mass of women in local and national elections were premised on the assumption that those elected will be able and committed to the promotion of gender-specific rights. In a number of countries namely Mozambique, Namibia, South Africa and Uganda, women have gained significant numerical representation in legislatures mostly as a result of affirmative action policies and quota systems adopted by the leading political parties. Contrary to expectations, these electoral gains have raised many daunting but important questions about interest representation and accountability (Razavi, S. 2001). These questions include, under what conditions can feminine presence or women's increased numerical representation influence policy in a feminist direction? (Goetz, A.M., 1998). Who are the constituents
of women representatives and are women representatives accountable to their constituency? (Hassim, 2000).

There are no single and uniform answers to these questions. The degree to which women representatives can facilitate changes in gender power relations depends among other factors on the relative autonomy of the women's movement as well as 'the depth of engagement by women's movement with and within each party.'

The existence of an autonomous women's movement can 'direct the terms of women's inclusion as well as act as a constituency holding the dominant party to account.' Other crucial factors include the electoral system and the nature of the internal rules and structures of major political parties in particular the possibility of making these rules and structures gender-sensitive and democratic (Hassim, S. & Goetz, A. M, 2001). In the absence of all these factors, for example, changes in electoral systems alone may indeed result in numerical increase of women representatives but does not necessarily ensure the accountability of women representatives to voters.

Democratizing Policy Making

The current debate therefore is not limited to the importance of the numerical increase of women's representation in decision-making bodies but includes the nature and quality of representation. Equally important are concerns with democratizing the overall policy-making processes.

In a large number of countries, the most important policy decisions are no longer being made by national legislatures but by insulated technocrats. These further limits the changes in gender power relations that women representatives will be able to facilitate and points once again for a much more concerted effort b the women's movement for coalition -building with other democratic forces in civil society.

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