

From the Periphery to the Power-Rooms: Feminist Perspectives to Inclusive Democracy



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A) Introduction

It has been stated that at the current rate of progress, it may take close to 300 years to achieve full gender equality, according to the Gender Snapshot 2022 report by UN Women and the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UN DESA)¹. The gender snapshot 2022 report also notes that it will take about 140 years for women to be represented equally in positions of power and leadership in the workplace, and at least 40 years to achieve equal representation in national parliaments.

Global challenges, such as the COVID-19 pandemic and its aftermath, violent conflict, climate change, and the backlash against women's sexual and reproductive health and rights, have further exacerbated gender disparities. These challenges disproportionately affect women and girls, limiting their access to education, healthcare, economic opportunities, and political participation.²

Against a background of a worldwide backlash against women's rights, gender parity in leadership positions – in legislatures, corporations, or civil society – has proved inadequate, as women in these roles often reproduce dominant patriarchal leadership models or propagate ideologies and policies that do not actually advance equality or universal human rights. What is required is truly transformative, visionary leadership, whereby new paradigms, relationships, and structures are constructed based on peace, planetary health, and social and economic justice.³

This Think Piece seeks to draw from feminist theory and praxis, possible pathways towards a transformative shift, building on existing models that are promising and recasting the existing order and ways of doing things. This is what the world needs now, as institutions and systems of the past century have proven unable to address the challenges of multiple crises such as climate, persistent poverty, pandemics, rising fundamentalism and authoritarianism, wars, and everyday violence. We hope that this piece can contribute to building knowledge on advancing inclusive democracy in Africa and shift women from the periphery of power rooms and decision-making spaces to truly influencing the future of the continent.

¹ UN Women and UN DESA (2022) Progress on Sustainable Development Goals: The Gender Snapshot 2022

² ibid

³ Srilatha Batliwala (2022) Transformative Feminist Leadership: What it is and why it matters Think piece 2022 The power of leadership United Nations University, Gender, and Health Hub DOI: 10.37941/RR/2022/2



B) Background

The African continent has, since the pre-colonial era demonstrated some form of inclusion of women in political leadership and decision-making. In some pre-colonial regimes in Africa, queen mothers ruled alongside kings or as regents and princesses. During colonialism and post-colonial Africa has also had a long history of powerful feminist and transformational leaders who have influenced kingdom prowess, opposed colonialism, imperialism, capitalism, and authoritarianism, thus offering inspiration for a better future for the continent and its people. We recall Fumilayo Ransome Kuti, who led campaigns against unfair British taxes levied on small traders; Wangari Mathaai, a social, environmental, and political activist and the very first African woman ever to win the Nobel Peace Prize; and others. It is also worth noting that Thomas Sankara, the revolutionary and Pan-Africanist who served as President of Burkina Faso, modeled transformational leadership and re-imagined women's autonomy. However, over time, women were dislodged from positions of leadership or their power stripped to mainly ceremonial roles.⁴

Further, while the International IDEA Global State of Democracy 2023 report states that the average level of democracy on the continent remains relatively stable.⁵ However, the quality of inclusivity and democratic governance been affected by poor leadership, weak institutions, deeply entrenched negative social norms, growing inequalities, disenfranchisement and lack of economic opportunities for ordinary citizens. This has led to the backslide of democracy, which is resulting in public discontent, distrust, and apathy with democracy, traditional political parties, and policy-making processes.⁶

These challenges are further compounded by the growing numbers of authoritarian, populist and fascist states and governments inclined to repressive, divisive and sometimes violent practices that are distorting the workings of democracies. The food and energy crises, which have been made worse by the war in Ukraine, and the slow recovery from COVID-19 have also exacerbated pre-existing challenges across the continent especially for women and young women who bear the brunt of the structural and overt violence. The current wave of geopolitics has seen a rise in right-wing movement, anti-gender movement, roll back of democratic principles, just solutions to climate and subsequently growing conflict and inequalities.⁷



It is also true that Africa is not short of instruments, or legal and policy frameworks that embrace inclusive democracy, however, the implementation of these frameworks has fallen short. The reliance of Africa's democratic cultivation on foreign aid may at times be at odds with other foreign policies.


4 Farrar, Tarikhu (1997) The Queen Mothe, Matriachy, and the Question of Female Political Authority in Pre-Colonial West African Monarchy, Journal of Black Studies

5 Flinders, M. (2020, June 23). *Democracy and the Politics of Coronavirus: Trust, Blame and Understanding*. Parliamentary Affairs; Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/pa/gsaa013>

6 Flinders, M. (2020, June 23). *Democracy and the Politics of Coronavirus: Trust, Blame and Understanding*. Parliamentary Affairs; Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/pa/gsaa013>

7 United Nations. (2022). *The Sustainable Development Goals Report*. <https://unstats.un.org/>. Retrieved May 10, 2023, from <https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/report/2022/The-Sustainable-Development-Goals-Report-2022.pdf>





It is also true that Africa is not short of instruments, or legal and policy frameworks that embrace inclusive democracy, however, the implementation of these frameworks has fallen short. The reliance of Africa's democratic cultivation on foreign aid may at times be at odds with other foreign policies. The unjust foreign policies, fiscal austerity, and debt policies exacerbate domestic problems and stunt Africa's development and the progress of its majority but minoritized populations – women and the youth. An intersectional lens further exposes that people living with disabilities and other structurally excluded people who identify differently are marginalized and obscured by multiple systems and structures of discrimination and oppression.

C) Deconstructing the Hegemony


It is said that democratization is not a linear process, and this is equally true of Africa's democracy which is characterized by a few steps forward and many backwards. Patriarchy is institutionalized in the political and governance processes and spaces. It prescribes women's roles and systematically marginalizes their voice, agency and engagement even if and when they are elected, appointed or sit in the vicinity of influence. For example, in 2016, President Muhammadu Buhari responded to the BBC interview, when his wife, Aisha, questioned his leadership. The Associated Press reports say that he laughed it off and said: *"I don't know which party my wife belongs to, but she belongs to my kitchen and my living room and the other"*⁸ This statement was telling of the deeply entrenched social-cultural norms that perpetuate gender stereotypes and the perceptions of the place of women in public affairs.

In contrast, ten years earlier, in 2006, Ellen Johnson Sirleaf became the first female president elected in Africa and led the country for two consecutive terms. An Economics and Public Policy graduate from Harvard University, she has received more than 20 honorary recognitions and awards, including the Nobel Peace Prize, for her "non-violent struggle for the safety of women and for women's rights to full participation in peace-building work." Since leaving office she has become an ardent champion of gender justice. Reflecting on her tenure in office and what strategies she employed to advance gender justice, she noted that "what I did was to put women in strategic positions, ones that they had not held before - the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of Finance, and the Ministry of Commerce. Those are the ones where you send a message to others that all things are possible. That is our challenge right now, to get that wave of women so that nobody will ever be able to say again, 'That position is highly technical, and I can't find any woman to do it.' And I say, 'No sir. We have three or four women ready.'"⁹

The contrasting perspectives of President Buhari and leaders like Ellen Johnson Sirleaf underscore the deeply rooted negative social norms that lead to the exclusion of women from leadership and decision-making. The two leaders' perspectives are diametrically different, such that despite the increased numbers, the statement by President Buhari that women belong in the other room still rings true. The pre-existing structural and

8 Buhari Laughs Off Wife's Criticism. (2016, October 14). The ICIR- Latest News, Politics, Governance, Elections, Investigation, Fact-check, Covid-19. <https://www.icirnigeria.org/buhari-laughs-off-wifes-criticism/>

9 N. (2007, May 17). Ellen Johnson Sirleaf on Leadership Challenges. NPR. <https://www.npr.org/2007/05/17/10227733/ellen-johnson-sirleaf-on-leadership-challenges>; Gillard, & Okonjo-Iweala. (2021, September 14). Women and Leadership: Real lives, real lessons



systematic inequality and prejudice sets them up for a difficult tenure; it is unfair, unjust, counterproductive, and essentially irrational, yet deeply entrenched and actively replicated by opinion leaders, the media, and the formal and informal education systems, among others.

Ellen Johnson Sirleaf was followed closely by Joyce Banda in 2012–2014 and Ameenah Gurib-Fakim, President of Mauritius from 2015-2018. We have also had about seven other female acting Presidents' step in when the principle passed on. Many of the women leaders who have been the first in positions of leadership have had to carry the heavy responsibility of being the first to prove that women are fit to be political and national leaders.

It also true that in times of a crisis (the glass cliff), women are more likely to be called upon to take charge. Scholars like Aili Mari Tripp, in *"Women and Power in Post conflict Africa,"* have examined the impact of women in leadership roles, highlighting how women leaders can be more responsive and effective during times of crisis, as exemplified by former President Sirleaf Johnson.

D) An overview of the status of women in political leadership in Africa

Almost the same number of women and men inhabit the world. However, these figures bear little resemblance to reality when it comes to political representation and leadership. According to IDEA, as of 2021, only 24% of the 12,113 parliamentarians (upper and lower house) in Africa are women. Additionally, young women's political participation further stands low at 1.8% in sub-Saharan Africa.¹⁰ Women are also least represented at the executive leadership as President, Vice President, Prime Minister, Deputy Prime Minister. In 54 African countries, only eight (7%) of these posts are held by women.¹¹ Another study noted that only 21% of African Parliament speakers are women, with variations ranging from 35% in Southern Africa to zero in North Africa and the Horn. Women constitute only 22% of cabinet members and are predominantly assigned social welfare portfolios (including children's, women's, and youth affairs, health, education, and culture). In a sample of 12 cabinets across the country, women comprised 34% of the ministers in these posts. On the other hand, women represented just 14% of the ministers in the justice and security portfolios (including defense, safety and security, and foreign affairs).

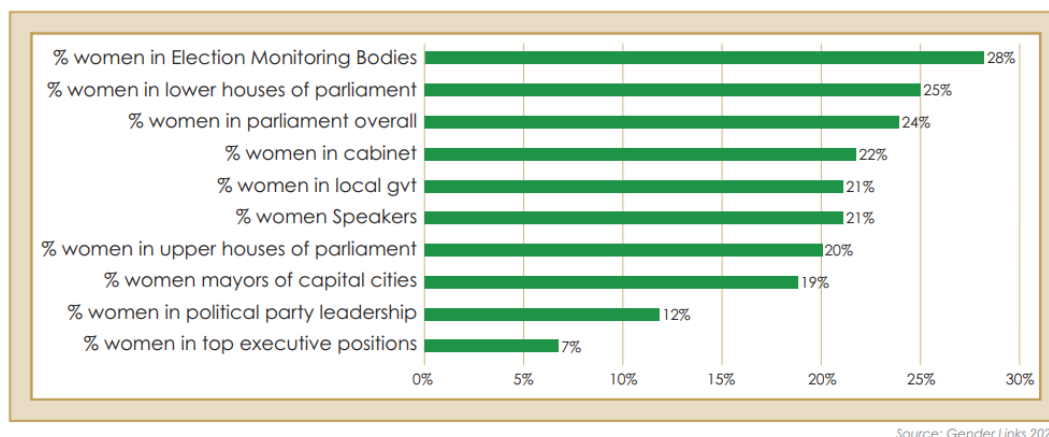
Figure 1 below shows that the proportion of women in parliament in Africa is 24% while in local government it is 21%. Women are least represented in top executive positions. This is a correlation in the low representation in top political party leadership positions – currently at 12%. Most African political parties are led by men yet at least half of the electorate are women. There is need to promote women in political party leadership structures.

¹⁰ Interparliamentary Union (2023) Women in Politics 2023 <https://www.ipu.org/file/16459/download>

¹¹ *Taking Stock of Regional Democratic Trends in Africa and the Middle.* (n.d.). IDEA. <https://doi.org/10.31752/idea.2021.2>



Figure 1: WPP in Africa at a glance



Women's Political Participation – Africa Barometer 2021 7

Figure 1 Women's Political Participation in Africa at a glance¹²

E) A recap on current barriers to women's participation in promoting democracy.

The exclusion of women seeks to serve the patriarchal order, militarized masculinities, and patronage politics and governance, all of which are at odds with the principles and values of democracy. Women play in the same game and share the same space as men but are subject to different rules, which are less favorable, with all the odds against them. The reality of women's representation in parliaments shows that political gender quotas do not automatically translate to any form of power transition in favor of gender and social justice. Women can still be excluded from politics in different ways, even when the state has adopted affirmative action or women's rights protocols.¹³

According to Bjarnegård and Zetterberg¹⁴, autocrats have mastered the use of women's rights to bolster their credibility and they warn that bundling gender equality and democracy has led to the rise of gender-washing.¹⁵ This is an area that needs utmost focus if we are to advance and strengthen women's substantial participation and leadership in politics and public life. This is evident during political campaigns when gender equality is used as a trump card for winning votes.

12 International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA). (2021). *Women's Political Participation- Africa Barometer*. Retrieved May 10, 2023, from <https://www.idea.int/sites/default/files/publications/womens-political-participation-africa-barometer-2021.pdf>

13 African Feminist Reflection and Action Group: Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung Escritório Moçambique. (n.d.). <https://mozambique.fes.de/en/topics/african-feminist-reflection-and-action-group>

14 Bjarnegård, & Zetterberg. (2022, June 3). How Autocrats Use Women's Rights to Boost Themselves. Retrieved September 15, 2023, from <https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/06/03/autocrats-gender-equality-women-rights-rwanda/>

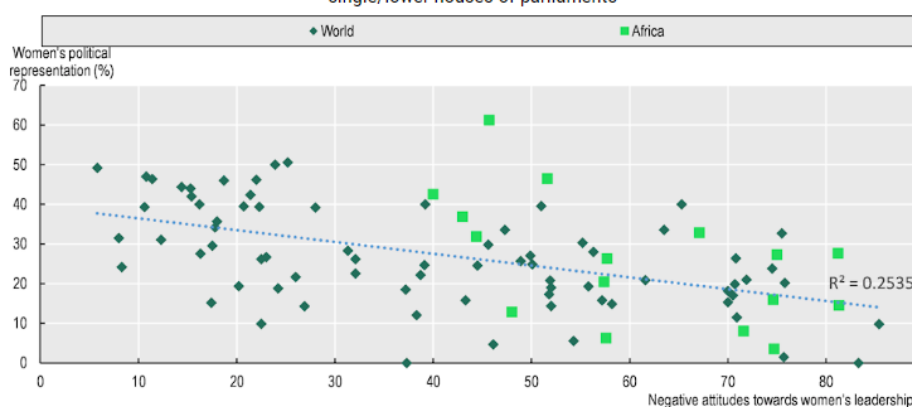
15 Bjarnegård, & Zetterberg. (2022, June 3). How Autocrats Use Women's Rights to Boost Themselves. Retrieved September 15, 2023, from <https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/06/03/autocrats-gender-equality-women-rights-rwanda/>

In her thesis *A Decolonial African Feminist Approach to Women's Political Participation in Zimbabwe*, Danai Daisy¹⁶ highlights the paradox of the use of the quota systems in enhancing women's political participation. She observes that in Zimbabwe the electoral gender quota has been implemented through reserving seats for women in the Parliament however, it has not necessarily improved the women's agency within parliament and wider political arena. Ooko-Simbine and Obi's paper further reveals the prevalent nature of politics and democracy in general; stating that the present structures are designed to serve men better; presenting men as 'visible and active in the public sphere and relegating women to the private sphere'¹⁷. Women remain concentrated in committees that deal with social issues, education, health and family affairs. A 2018 – 2021 evaluation report by UN Women in Uganda noted that the general mindset towards politics is that politics is as a dirty game and it is far more hostile for women than men.

F) Impact of negative societal attitudes of women in political leadership

Figure 5.3. Discriminatory attitudes towards women's political leadership are linked to underrepresentation of women

Correlation between negative attitudes towards women's political representation and women's representation in single/lower houses of parliaments



Note: Negative attitudes towards women's political representation are measured as the share of the population declaring that men make better political leaders than women. Data are included for 16 African countries: Algeria, Burkina Faso, Egypt, Ethiopia, Ghana, Libya, Mali, Morocco, Nigeria, Rwanda, South Africa, Tanzania, Tunisia, Uganda, Zambia and Zimbabwe.

The graph shows the correlation between negative attitudes on women's political leadership and the proportion of their representation in parliaments. The more negative the attitudes, the lesser the proportion of women represented in parliament. A gender attitudes survey on women in political participation piloted by Gender Links in Southern Africa revealed that while citizens embrace equality, there is a tendency to doubt women's leadership.¹⁸ Attitudes and behavior form part of the informal barriers of women's political participation and representation. Subsequently, they take longer to change than the formal factors such as laws, practices, and political will.

¹⁶ Chiwaru, D (May 2023) *A Decolonial African Feminist Approach to Women's Political Participation In Zimbabwe*. Retrieved November 28, 2023, from <https://munin.uit.no/bitstream/handle/10037/29600/thesis.pdf?sequence=2>

¹⁷ ibid

¹⁸ Gender Links Women in Political Participation Attitudes Survey, 2023

The barriers to women's leadership manifest in phenomena such as glass ceilings, glass walls, and glass cliffs. Though we have increasingly witnessed women shatter glass ceilings, women remain under-represented in executive leadership and management in the public and private sectors. Glass walls, which are unconscious and internalized socio-cultural biases, result in women being limited to gender-conforming roles in political and decision-making spaces, including political parties, parliament, and policy and governance structures.¹⁹ Questions of whether women should compete in a direct seat, for example, in the context of Uganda, are due to the reconfiguration of patriarchy in relation to societal expectations and prescriptions of how women can and should participate in the elections and the public arena. Even when women break the walls or ceilings, other obstacles, such as sticky floors, predispose women to traditional caregiving roles. Self-exclusion inhibits women from taking critical political action or leadership roles. Psychological barriers lead them to reject positions for fear of not being able to 'balance' their personal lives, gender roles, and public life.

In 2021, the continent registered an improvement of 3% in the number of women members of parliament elected or nominated, but their engagement remains marginal and has raised questions about substantial representation versus numbers. Ultimately, women face a myriad of challenges that repress their political and civil rights and the growing threat to democracy presents a new layer of challenges that further predispose women to various forms of violence. The growing backslide of the gender continuum highlights the problem with the de-politicization of the gender equality agenda and the fragility of women's rights and democracy itself. Violence Against Women in Politics includes attacks against their life, reputation, bodily and mental integrity, physical and psychological deprivation of liberty, invasion of privacy, violations of freedom of expression, association, and assembly. Studies in 2021 and 2022 showed high prevalence of online violence against women and girls in politics.²⁰



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¹⁹ McCartney, K. (2016, November 16). Opinion | For Women, Glass Ceilings, and Glass Walls, Too. *The New York Times*. [https://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/16/opinion/for-women-glass-ceilings-and-glass-walls-too.html#:~:text=Both%20men%20and%20women%20internalize,roles%20and%20limit%20our%20opportunities;Folke,%20Rickne.\(2016,January11\).TheGlassCeilinginPolitics:FormalizationandEmpiricalTests.](https://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/16/opinion/for-women-glass-ceilings-and-glass-walls-too.html#:~:text=Both%20men%20and%20women%20internalize,roles%20and%20limit%20our%20opportunities;Folke,%20Rickne.(2016,January11).TheGlassCeilinginPolitics:FormalizationandEmpiricalTests.)

²⁰ Kalande, A. (2021). *Amplified Abuse: Report on Online Violence Against Women in Politics*. Retrieved June 10, 2023, from <https://policy.org/projects/amplified-abuse/>

Owing to patriarchy and gender inequality, the personal cost of participation in politics is unnecessarily high for youth and women candidates. As observed in an AMwA study, violence against women, including young women, including physical, psychological, sexual, and verbal violence, is used as a political tool. All the female participants discussed having suffered actual or threat of violence as a deterrent to their political aspirations and highlighted that sexual harassment of women is rife in political parties and sex is demanded as currency for advancing political ambitions.²¹ There are also institutional and political obstacles. For example, non-institutionalization of parties almost seems to be by design and most political parties are lacking in time-tested ideology.²² In fact, a study by the Global Institute of Women's Leadership noted that, "political parties are a major barrier to women's entry into politics, they need to be part of the solution".²³

G) Descriptive Representation versus Substantive Representation

Research demonstrates that despite increased representation of women in politics globally currently at 23.5% (women in parliament)²⁴, their engagement and representation remains marginal. The International IDEA Barometer on Women Political Participation highlights that women are still placed in social sectors such as Ministries of Gender, Environment, Housing whilst their male counterparts lead sectors such as Defence, Finance and Foreign Affairs. Similarly, women largely lead the social parliamentary portfolios. However, the focus of most research on women's political participation so far has been on women's descriptive representation, which privileges numbers and bodies of women in politics using comparative studies across countries.

African states with high number of representation of women in parliament like Rwanda, which stands at 61% (in parliament) have received accolades as a global model for liberal democracy without interrogating substantive representation of women and power. In as much as, the politics of proportional representation or gender



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21 Fabiano, Gaita, Musiime, & Ngobi. (2022). *Nothing without Us: Exploring Opportunities to Advance Women and Youth's Political Leadership in Kenya's 2022 Elections*. Retrieved May 1, 2023, from <https://www.akinamamawaafrika.org/nothing-without-us-exploring-opportunities-to-advance-women-and-youths-political-leadership-in-kenyas-2022-elections/>

22 Fabiano, Gaita, Musiime, & Ngobi. (2022). *Nothing without Us: Exploring Opportunities to Advance Women and Youth's Political Leadership in Kenya's 2022 Elections*. Retrieved May 1, 2023, from <https://www.akinamamawaafrika.org/nothing-without-us-exploring-opportunities-to-advance-women-and-youths-political-leadership-in-kenyas-2022-elections/>

23 The Global Institute for Women's Leadership & WFD. (n.d.). *Women Political Leaders: the impact of gender on democracy*. King's College London. Retrieved June 20, 2023, from <https://kcl.ac.uk/giwl/assets/women-political-leaders.pdf>; Beaudoux, V. (2021). *Dancing Backwards in high heels: Women, Leadership and Power*. Netherlands Institute for Multi-Party Democracy.

24 Inter-Parliamentary Union, Parliamentary Data, 2024



party are important to address historic imbalances, however it should translate into women's substantive representation, participation and engagement in the political and electoral processes. In the long run it should translate into the expansion of women's social, political and economic autonomy. Paxton and Huges note that there cannot be equality if women are not speaking and acting for themselves and are not sitting at the decision-making tables. Moreover, apart from having higher legitimacy than formal and descriptive representations, substantive representation yields far more positive results.²⁵ Additionally, while African countries have adopted special measures such as quotas and favourable electoral systems to promote women's political participation, there is a tendency to label women who have been nominated through quotas as 'tokens' for equal representation.

H) Electoral systems and special measures

Whilst there is no perfect electoral system for inclusive democracy, research has pointed towards the Proportional Representation (PR) system or mixed systems as those that favour women's participation and representation in political decision making. Similarly, special measures such as quotas, whether temporary or permanent, for women in politics help to increase women's representation in political leadership. Whilst claw back attitudes, tend to discredit women who are elected into political office through the quota system, in-depth analysis indicates that such attitudes are driven by institutionalised patriarchy.²⁶ Largely, political parties tend to allocate men seats or constituencies where the party is likely to win, giving them an added advantage. Additionally, there is sometimes no voluntary quotas for women or zebra systems to promote equal representation in the political party structure or national assembly. The lack of intra-party democracy in representation democracy coupled with power brokerage, financing and entrenched biases, disadvantages women's participation

- I) **The role of media** – Traditional and digital media can enable or be an obstacle to women's political participation, leadership and meaningful representation. Where media houses have normalised negative portrayal of women in media, gender stereotypes and biases, the media objectify and perpetrate violence and discrimination against women in politics. However, gender responsive of media practitioners has assisted in reducing these very challenges in some cases. The rise of online violence and uncensored has driven the replication of violence against women and girls (VAWG) and violence against women in politics (VAWIP). It has also driven many women out of politics due to its viral and permanent nature. The 2022 Pollicy report noted that Online violence against women (OVAWP) during the 2022 Kenya Gender Elections, "was more prevalent among women candidates than men, especially on Twitter where 2 out of 5 Twitter accounts belonging to women candidates experienced sexual harassment. Attacks against women politicians were often focused on personal traits or appearance and were sexualized in nature as opposed to their political platform or qualifications."²⁷

25 Arnesen, & Peters. (2017, August 8). The Legitimacy of Representation: How Descriptive, Formal, and Responsiveness Representation Affect the Acceptability of Political Decisions. Comparative Political Studies. Retrieved September 15, 2023, from <https://doi.org/10.1177/0010414017720702>

26 International IDEA, Women in Political Participation Barometer, 2021

27 Kakande, A., Nyamwire, B., Saturday, B., Mwendwa, I., (2023) Byte Bullies



Recommendations

1. Accelerate implementation of existing instruments

There is no democracy without meaningful participation of women in their diverse forms. The continent is not short of instruments, frameworks, protocols and guidelines for women's political participation and representation, yet domestication of these is still an issue. Africa boast the highest representation in parliament with Rwanda at 61% yet it also includes one of the lowest representations in Nigeria at 3%. African States must invest in the re-democratization of the democracy agenda, governance processes, and spaces in keeping with **Maputo Protocol Article 9**, which declares that state parties shall take specific positive action to promote participative governance and the equal participation of women in the political life of their countries through affirmative action, enabling national legislation, and other measures. Similarly, the **AU African Charter on Democracy, Elections, and Governance in Article 3.3** calls for the promotion of a system of government that is representative; **Article 4.2** declares that State Parties shall recognize popular participation through universal suffrage as the inalienable right of the people; and **Article 8.2** indicates that State Parties shall adopt legislative and administrative measures to guarantee the rights of women, ethnic minorities, migrants, people with disabilities, refugees and displaced persons, and other marginalized and vulnerable social groups. While **Articles 17, 23, 25, 32, 33, and 44** clearly stipulate the role of member states and the AU in creating an enabling environment for women.²⁸

2. Advance National Initiatives

Across the continent, governments have adopted constitutional, legislative, and institutional provisions aimed at promoting women's meaningful participation. The provisions establish affirmative action through quotas and other approaches ranging from gender sensitive to gender transformative. Countries like Cabo Verde and Mauritius have introduced legislation imposing sanctions for noncompliance with established quotas and incentives, such as financial incentives, for parties that comply. While Malawi and Namibia have introduced 50/50 campaigns to increase representation²⁹. All these initiatives require robust funding, resource allocation, and social accountability mechanisms to deliver the desired results. The add and stir approach of women to decision-making and governance processes (including peace and political processes) should not be normalized and propagated at the expense of women and young people's substantial participation and representation in political leadership and processes. Gender equality cannot be achieved by laws alone; cultural and mindset change in the national psyche and the political and governance spaces are paramount. Additionally, there is need for different approaches for women in their various diversities. For example, women living in rural areas, womem with disabilities, indigenous women and young women all required contextualized approaches.

28 African Union, *African Charter On Democracy, Elections And Governance*. (n.d.). African Union. Retrieved July 15, 2023, from <https://au.int/sites/default/files/treaties/36384-treaty-african-charter-on-democracy-and-governance.pdf>

29 Make Every Woman Count & Equality Now. (2023, July). *20 Years of the Maputo Protocol: Where are we now?* – SOAWR. Retrieved July 8, 2023, from https://soawr.org/resources_posts/20-years-of-the-maputo-protocol-where-are-we-now/

3. Adopt and scale-up feminist approaches to building democracy

Women's rights and feminist movements have provided thought leadership on feminist gender transformative approaches to democratizing democracy on the continent. Africa is at a moment where it can no longer lightly interrogate the systems of oppression (patriarchy, neoliberalism, neo-colonialism, racism) that continue to undermine efforts to advance the social, political, and economic autonomy of the peoples of Africa, particularly women, young women, and girls. The domination, discrimination, dehumanization, and lack of dignity of women and other marginalized persons caused by these systems undermine the progress of inclusive democratic governance on the continent, resulting in a protracted state of crisis for the majority of society. Yet, women leaders have demonstrated robust capacity to lead through crises to the benefit of the larger population. Leaders such as Former President Sirleaf Johnson, former Chancellor Angela Merkel, former Prime Minister Jacinda Arden, Mia Mottley, Fummi Kuti, Hon. Millie Odhiambo, and Hon. Agnes Sadiki among others.³⁰ Sirleaf Johnson notes that though women remain underrepresented in leadership **"the pivot is an art form that women leaders have perfected globally, making them critical problem solvers that are more responsive and effective during times of crisis."**³¹ Former President Joyce Banda cautions that, "if only half of the potential leaders are identified and supported, then policy solutions remain half-forged."³²

Feminist and transformational thought leadership has propagated meaningful shifts in policy analysis and action, for instance, the adoption of the Maputo Protocol, the Solemn Declaration on Gender Equality in Africa and affirmative action, the introduction of gender policy and sexual harassment policy at the political party level, the AU Kinshasa Declaration on Positive Masculinity to end violence against women and girls, and the East Africa Youth Parliament (EAYP) 5th Assembly recommendation to East Africa Legislative Assembly (EALA) to re-table the Sexual Reproductive Health and Rights (SRHR) Bill, among others.³³ Ultimately, equitable and meaningful representation of women in parliaments and decision-making processes has substantial effect on policy outputs in terms of education attainment, labor force, broad human development, and social outcomes. In fact, studies indicate that women in politics tend to do more constituency work than men.³⁴

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- 30 Johnson. (2022, March 17). *African women and girls: Leading a continent* | Brookings. Brookings. Retrieved September 15, 2023, from <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/african-women-and-girls-leading-a-continent/>; Cowper-Coles, M. (2023, July 10). *It's Not Democracy Without Women in Positions of Power*. World Politics Review. <https://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/female-world-leaders-women-politics-democracy>; Bosworth, J. (2023, July 10). *Mottley's Climate Advocacy Offers a New Model of Leadership*. World Politics Review. <https://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/mia-mottley-barbados-climate-change-financing-mitigation>
- 31 Johnson. (2022, March 17). *African women and girls: Leading a continent* | Brookings. Brookings. Retrieved September 15, 2023, from <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/african-women-and-girls-leading-a-continent/>
- 32 Banda. (2017). *From Day One: An Agenda for Advancing Women Leaders in Africa*. Woodrow Wilson Center. Retrieved September 15, 2023, from https://www.wilsoncenter.org/sites/default/files/media/documents/publication/dr_joyce_banda_from_day_one.pdf
- 33 African Union. (2021). *Kinshasa Declaration And Call For Action Of The African Union Heads Of State On Positive Masculinity In Leadership To End Violence Against Women And Girls In Africa*. . Retrieved July 5, 2023, from https://au.int/sites/default/files/press-releases/41226-pr-Declaration_Mens_Conference_English.pdf
- 34 The Global Institute for Women's Leadership & WFD. (n.d.). *Women Political Leaders: the impact of gender on democracy*. King's College London. Retrieved June 20, 2023, from <https://kcl.ac.uk/giwl/assets/women-political-leaders.pdf>; Banda. (2017). *From Day One: An Agenda for Advancing Women Leaders in Africa*. Woodrow Wilson Center. Retrieved September 15, 2023, from https://www.wilsoncenter.org/sites/default/files/media/documents/publication/dr_joyce_banda_from_day_one.pdf



4. Accelerate capacity strengthening on women's political leadership

Nawal El Saadawi, in her book *"Memoirs from the Women's Prison,"* emphasizes the importance of equipping women with the skills and knowledge needed to engage in political and social change.³⁵ There is a need for comprehensive investment in the capacity development of women, men, and all persons through formal and informal education. Women must be equipped with political skills, strategic thinking, transformational leadership skills, negotiation skills, lobbying skills, and policy development skills. Mentorship and coaching of women, young women, and men in all spheres should be prioritized to create a robust pipeline of leadership that is galvanized towards the Africa we Want. Governments must invest in civic education and engagement to change negative socio-norms and public perceptions regarding women, young women, and other minoritized persons and promote wider political participation, particularly of youth, in fostering democratization.

The media has a critical role in shifting the narrative, public portrayal, and perception of women in leadership. The media and opinion leaders should be held accountable for sexist, misogynistic, and discriminatory remarks against women, girls, and other marginalized persons.³⁶ In the same vein, opportunities for media practitioners to sharpen their gender responsive reporting skills are necessary. Such training should include editors and media house owners to shift the narrative on which news sell.

5. Scale up innovation in campaigns and civic education

There is a need to change negative public perception and mainstream narratives about women's participation in politics, through civic education and campaigns. Electoral Management Bodies and civil society have a key role in this innovation. Through positive portrayal of women in politics and storytelling, media, and government can change the negative narratives and attitudes toward women's political leadership. In Burundi, Rwanda, Somalia and Sudan, mass media campaigns using radio, social media, and events provided have proved to be effective. For example, men and husbands of the women politicians developed a positive attitude towards women's political participation and became supportive than a deterrent.

Involvement of key institutions in Africa's inclusive democracy is important – for political buy in as well as sustainability. African governments have experimented with a variety of gender focused structures and institutions- machineries, commissions, gender ministries, departments, and gender desks- all set up to promote women's rights empowerment and welfare, minimal progress has been made. Instead, it is becoming increasingly clear that democratic culture, values and norms that can advance gender equality and social justice are lacking, and that more transformational approaches are required to ensure political accountability and responsiveness to women and other disadvantaged groups.

35 Sa'dāwī, N., & Saadawi, N. E. (1994, November 18). *Memoirs from the Women's Prison*. University of California Press.

36 Women's Participation In Politics At The Local Government Level In Uganda (Occasional Paper 53). (2021, June). Retrieved November 28, 2023, from https://africa.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/2022-06/Women%20Participation%20in%20Politics%20at%20the%20LG%20in%20Uganda_Occasional%20Paper%2053.pdf





6. Cultivate cutting edge research that links grassroots to policy

There is need for robust research, documentation and decolonization of knowledge production with a feminist and gender transformative lens. Actors and partners must document the factors that led to the progress made so far and develop toolkits to shift mindsets and raise political consciousness. Political institutions should be mandated to keep gender disaggregated data to enable data mining for research. “We need data to examine the impact women leaders have on a society to better advocate for change and support evidence-based initiatives. As long as we live in the world of anecdotes, programs that promote women’s leadership will remain underfunded in the absence of measurable impact.”³⁷ Considering that the focus of research has been on women’s descriptive representation, research must document and investigate pathways for women’s substantive representation, engagement, and leadership in political and decision-making processes. Government and partners must explore Pan-African and feminist thought leadership to address the long-standing historical injustices and contemporary challenges and push past exclusionary political and economic practices that continue to systematically and structurally relegate women, young people living with disabilities, and other minoritized persons to the peripheral of public life and leadership.

It is also important to analyse the barriers to women’s political participation in Africa. The politics of access which influences mechanisms for getting women in and achieving the critical mass in politics. The politics of access includes electoral systems, quotas, political party commitment, regional international obligations and civil society obligations. It should be noted that these areas are driven by political will to thrive. For example, repressive civil engagement laws will prevent a thriving civil society necessary for motivating women politicians and strengthening their capacities whilst lack of political will prolongs existence of electoral laws that do not promote women’s political participation.

7. Institutionalize Intra-Party Democracy

The political party is a critical platform for women and young people’s political participation. It determines whether and to what extent you can meaningfully participate in national political and governance processes. Governments must institutionalize intra-party democracy and promote equitable participation and representation of marginalized people. Parties must have clear conflict and dispute resolution mechanisms, party funding, internal affairs management, and accountability mechanisms. Intra-party democracy is anchored on the practice of the principles of democracy, and in order to ensure inclusive participation, political parties should develop gender equality and sexual harassment policies. Women and young people’s presence must not be instrumentalized or tokenistic.

³⁷ Banda. (2017). *From Day One: An Agenda for Advancing Women Leaders in Africa*. Woodrow Wilson Center. Retrieved September 15, 2023, from https://www.wilsoncenter.org/sites/default/files/media/documents/publication/dr._joyce_banda_from_day_one.pdf



Peer to peer learning from one party to another is important to foster inter-party democracy. The issues that affect women politicians normally cut across political parties and need to be tackled holistically. The adoption of concrete and tangible measures aimed at closing the gender-based gaps in Africa's democracy should be accompanied by accountability across political parties³⁸. For example, it is to the best interest of each political party (a) to strengthen the gender dimension at all levels and in political, economic and social governance; (b) improve the political participation and representation of women; (c) provide useful and timely information to ensure the gender factor is taken into account during recruitment and/or appointment to public policy positions; and (d) strengthen women and other marginalized persons' contribution to the socio-economic transformation of the country.

African women scholars including Fatou Sow and Dr. Sylvia Tamale have explored political party dynamics and the need for gender equality policies within parties. Their work sheds light on the challenges and opportunities for women's participation in politics. Not only does the African political landscape have to decolonize its politics, it has to work out the dynamics of political parties that serve African interests. The definition of democracy on the African Continent is under refinement with the occurring coups as tell-tale signs. This redefinition has to consider the right place for women in the democratization process of the African Continent especially in our political parties. Sylvia Tamale cautions that, while political parties in Africa have been evolving since the independence of African countries; the current transition needs to "politically infuse intersectionality into its revived agenda" as most of the changes have not paid keen interest to gender.

38 Three decades of democratic transition in Africa: What are the dividends for citizens? (n.d.). <https://www.idea.int/publications/catalogue/three-decades-democratic-transition-africa-what-are-dividends-citizens>





Conclusion


Women's rights and feminist movements and activists played a crucial role in promoting democracy Africa. Africa is currently facing a critical juncture where it is imperative to thoroughly examine the prevailing systems of inequality, namely patriarchy, neoliberalism, neo-colonialism, and racism. These systems persistently hinder the progress towards achieving social, political, and economic autonomy for the diverse population of Africa, especially for women, young women, girls and other marginalised persons. Against all odds, women leaders have exhibited strong aptitude in guiding societies through times of crisis, resulting in positive outcomes for the broader populace. The erosion of fundamental democratic principles by political entities and governing bodies has however precipitated a regression in the state of democracy, hence engendering public dissatisfaction, skepticism, and disengagement towards democracy, established political parties, and the formulation of policies. This article has illustrated how governments can shift from tokenistic and superficial representation to substantive involvement of women in political leadership, as stipulated in the Maputo Protocol.

While it is becoming increasingly clear that women's mere presence in political institutions does not necessarily translate into power and influence in political governance, the relevance of the politics of presence (proportional representation) should not be disregarded. Feminist approaches include the use and engagements of spaces that sit outside the State or formal spaces as alternative avenues and platforms for exercising political agency, leadership and governance. Responsive and accountable forms of governance demand women's effective participation and representation. This paper therefore underscores the significance of taking deliberate steps to shift the narrative and move women from the periphery to the power rooms where decisions are made. It underlines the need to address the deeply embedded patriarchal worldview, institutionalized practices and values and that privilege men over women in order to safeguard democracy and advance inclusive governance.³⁹

³⁹ M Mzomo, 2015, Women and Political Governance in Africa: A Feminist Perspective, accessed from **Women and Political Governance in Africa: A Feminist Perspective | Semantic Scholar** on 25 March 2024

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