

African Women in Political Decision-Making – “A Voice that Still Remains a Whisper”

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The international drive for the inclusion of women in political decision-making as manifested in protocols and instruments such as The Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and the 1995 Beijing Platform for Action has also resonated on the African continent in, for example, the *Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa* (commonly known as the Maputo Protocol),¹ a binding legal framework, adopted in 2003. Among other things, the Protocol specifically includes combating all forms of discrimination against women and specifically requires states to “ensure increased and effective representation and participation of women at all levels of decision-making” (Article. 9[2]). This was followed by the equally legally binding regional *SADC Protocol on Gender and Development*, adopted in 2008,² which goes further in requiring the equal representation of women in all areas of decision-making, both public and private, through constitutional and other legislative provisions that include affirmative action (Articles 12-13). More importantly, it stipulates that states shall

¹ Of the 55 African countries that are members of the African Union, 13 countries (by mid-2019) are yet to ratify it, which include three that have not signed nor ratified it. The latter are Botswana, Egypt and Morocco. Equality Now. 2019. “Ratify the Maputo Protocol: Protect the Rights of African Women and Girls”. At: https://www.equalitynow.org/ratify_the_maputo_protocol.

² The SADC (the Southern African Development Community) consists of 15 countries (Angola, Botswana, DRC, Lesotho, Madagascar, Malawi, Mauritius, Mozambique, Namibia, Seychelles, South Africa, Swaziland, Tanzania, Zambia and Zimbabwe).

endeavour, by 2015, to have at least 50% of decision-making positions be held by women in the public and private sectors.

In the West African region the ECOWAS (the Economic Community of West African States) leaders adopted the Supplementary Act on Equality of Rights between Women and Men for Sustainable Development in 2015, which commits ECOWAS member states³ to the promotion of gender equality and equity in all sectors. It specifically stipulates (Article 11:1) that member states “shall institute affirmative action to ensure effective gender equality in decision-making positions in public and private sectors”. In 2017, the Council of Ministers of the East African Community⁴ adopted the Gender Policy, which provides for “the representation of at least one third gender at all levels of government”. The Economic Community of Central African States (ECCA)⁵ as well as the Arab Maghreb Union (UMA)⁶ have no gender equality/women’s rights frameworks, protocols or strategies.⁷

Achievements and Lack of Progress

At the 25th anniversary of the Beijing *Platform for Action* in 2020, the African continent showed that it had made slow progress in increasing women’s participation in political decision-making. This is despite all the above African instruments calling for gender equality since 1995. Large gaps still remain in women’s representation at different levels of governance and leadership – women’s voices still remain a whisper. The struggle of women to gain a fair share of political power remains a work in progress, but the achievements should nevertheless not be ignored.

Certainly one of the most acclaimed is the election in 2005 (and re-election in 2011, until 2017) of the first female head of government in

³ The 15 member states are: Benin, Burkina Faso, Cabo Verde, Côte d’Ivoire, The Gambia, Ghana, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Liberia, Mali, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal, Sierra Leone and Togo.

⁴ The six member states of the EAC are: Burundi, Kenya, Rwanda, South Sudan, Uganda and Tanzania.

⁵ The 11 member states are: Angola, Burundi, Cameroon, Central African Republic, Chad, Congo, the DRC, Equatorial Guinea, Gabon, Rwanda and São Tomé and Príncipe.

⁶ The member states are: Algeria, Libya, Mauritania, Morocco and Tunisia.

⁷ The State of African Women. 2018. “The Regional Economic Communities and women and girl’s rights” (chapter 4). At: <https://rightbyher.org/the-state-of-the-african-women/>.

Africa, Liberian president Ellen Johnson Sirleaf. Of further note was the appointment of Joyce Banda (former vice president) as president of Malawi in 2012 following the death of her predecessor. However, she lost this position after the general elections in Malawi in 2014. Also important to the region is the fact that in the African Union's 49th year of existence (2012) it elected Dr. Nkosazana Dlamini-Zuma from South Africa as its first female chairperson. In Mauritius, Ameenah Gurib-Fakim was president (with ceremonial powers) from 2015 to 2018, while Saleh-Work Zewde has been head of state of Ethiopia since 2018.

The importance of women in leadership positions in enhancing the rise of women in other political decision-making positions has clearly been illustrated in the case of Liberia. Under President George Weah, Sirleaf's successor, little has been done to increase or even maintain the level of political input and leadership that women had enjoyed under Sirleaf. During her tenure she appointed various women to several high-level positions, including the ministers of commerce, administration and finance. Her successor appointed only two women to his cabinet of 17 ministers (less than 12% representation).⁸ Despite the decade-long leadership of a female president, a broader culture of women in political positions of political authority never developed in a society that is largely male dominated. In the 2017 elections, 21 of the 22 presidential candidates were male – and most surprising was the absence of a woman on the presidential ballot of the party that birthed Sirleaf's ascent to power. The end of Sirleaf's tenure seems to indicate a reversal of the progress made.⁹

Over the past 25 years Sub-Saharan Africa has registered a modest increase in the proportion of women in political decision-making, from 9.8% in 1995 to 24.7% in 2020. Rwanda is the world leader with 61.25% female representation in parliament, followed by South Africa in ninth place (46.58%). Only three other states have passed the 40% mark: Namibia (43.27%), Senegal (43.03%) and Mozambique (41.2%).

⁸ G. Senah, 2018. "Women's Appointment in Weah's Cabinet Under 12 Percent". *The Bush Chicken*, 2 March. At: <https://bushchicken.com/womens-appointment-in-weahs-cabinet-under-12-percent/>.

⁹ N. Tulay-Solanke, 2018. "Where are the women in George Weah's Liberia?". *World Policy*, 30 May. At: <http://worldpolicy.org/2018/05/30/where-are-the-women-in-george-weahs-liberia/>.

In addition to the above states, a further seven¹⁰ have reached the 30% minimum requirement by 2020. Five states have below 10% female representation – these include Benin (7.23%) and Nigeria, with the lowest percentage on the continent (3.63%). Women’s representation in half of the African countries as of 2020 was still below 20%.¹¹

Although women’s representation in some countries such as Egypt increased substantially from 1.8% in the 2012 elections to 15.1% in its last election in 2015, in others, like the Seychelles, the proportion of women dropped from a high of 43.8% in 2012 to a mere 21.21% in the 2016 election.

While great emphasis is put on women’s representation in parliaments, their appointment to cabinet positions is even more significant given the policy-making power of cabinet. However, the number of women appointed in cabinets is generally low. Only 11 countries reached the 30% mark at the beginning of 2019, with Rwanda (51.9%) and South Africa (50%) reaching parity. The cabinets of more than half of the states (31) consist of less than 20% women. However, of significance is the fact that leaders in some countries with low representation of women in their parliaments (below 15%) have compensated by appointing 30% (or more) women to their cabinets (for example, Mali [34.3%], Mauritania [31.8%], Zambia [30%] and São Tomé and Príncipe [33.3%]).¹²

Utilising Gender Quotas¹³

The representation of women would not have even reached the levels mentioned above if it had not been for the use of quotas in more than half

¹⁰ These are: Ethiopia (38.76%), Tanzania (36.9%), Burundi (36.36%), Uganda (34.86%), Cameroon (33.89%), Zimbabwe (31.85%) and Angola (30%).

¹¹ Inter-Parliamentary Union. 1 May 2020. At: <https://data.ipu.org/women-ranking?month=5&year=2020>.

¹² Inter-Parliamentary Union. 2019. “Women in Politics”. At: <https://www.ipu.org/file/7167/download>.

¹³ Three main quota types can be identified: **Party candidate quotas** – i.e., quota provisions adopted by individual political parties to regulate the gender composition of their own candidate lists; **Legislated quotas** – quota provisions by law, regulating the gender composition of all candidate lists, and binding for all parties; and **Reserved seats** – a specified number of seats reserved for women (International IDEA – Gender Quotas Database. 2020. At: <https://www.idea.int/data-tools/data/gender-quotas/database>).

of African countries (28) – 13 countries have legislated quotas in the form of reserved seats for women in their parliaments, while 15 have constitutional and/or legislated candidate quotas.¹⁴ These generally range between 20% and 30%. However, in a number of countries, such as Liberia, the quota is much lower – only five parliamentary seats have been reserved for women in terms of the Equal Representation and Participation Act passed in 2016.

Countries with legislated candidate quotas include Algeria, Lesotho, Mauritania, Angola and Tunisia, while reserved seats for women have, for example, been legislated in Uganda, Tanzania, Zimbabwe, Kenya, Morocco, Rwanda and Senegal, though they each use different mechanisms to elect reserved-seat members of parliament (MPs). In Tanzania, for example, 113 of 393 seats (i.e., nearly 30% of all parliamentary seats)¹⁵ are reserved for women (allocated to political parties in proportion to their share of the electoral vote). Women also contest in the open seats, and only 25 were elected from the 264 constituency seats in the last election, in 2015. Therefore, without special seats, women would occupy less than 10% of parliamentary seats.¹⁶ In Zimbabwe women can compete freely at the national level, but an additional 30% of the seats in parliament (91 seats) are reserved for women and are distributed among parties on a proportional basis. When the quota was introduced in 2013, the representation of women in parliament increased from 15% (in 2008) to 33%.

An additional 10 African countries have voluntary party quotas, where one or more parties commit themselves to either a 30% representation of women on their party lists or a zebra system on party lists.¹⁷ This has contributed to the large presence of women in parliament in some countries: the African National Congress (ANC) in South Africa, the Front for the Liberation of Mozambique (Frelimo) in Mozambique and the South West Africa People's Organisation (SWAPO) in Namibia have been the dominant

¹⁴ International IDEA – Ibid.

¹⁵ When the quota was introduced in 1995 only 15% of the parliamentary seats were reserved for women. Over the years this percentage progressively increased.

¹⁶ Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2015. "Women in Parliament in 2015 – The year in review", pp. 4-5. At: <https://oig.cepal.org/sites/default/files/wip2015-e.pdf>.

¹⁷ International IDEA, 2020. Op. cit. "Zebra lists" means that women's and men's names are alternated like the black and white stripes of a zebra.

parties in the elections for the past 20 years. The problem, however, is that when these parties start to lose support, women's overall representation in parliament also drops, as opposition parties do not necessarily follow a quota system.

Critics of the adoption of quotas – particularly reserved seats for women – have argued, for example, that women elected to reserved seats lack an independent electoral or organisational base, and that this may reinforce the continued dependence of women on quota provisions;¹⁸ that reserved seats are just a way to appease and ultimately sideline women;¹⁹ or that quotas can create a glass ceiling and prevent women from being elected beyond the quota or being considered for non-reserved/general seats.²⁰

However, in countries such as Rwanda in particular, reserved seats did not prevent women from being elected to "general" seats too. In addition, Burnet²¹ found that in Rwanda, "gender quotas have made a significant impact on gendered ideas about the public sphere". This is especially pertinent considering the country's history of a deeply engrained system of patrimonial politics.

On the other hand, the special-seat system has created a stigma against special-seat MPs, and voters tend to look down on these MPs. Wang and Yoon²² have, for example, also found that quota women in parliament in Uganda are not treated on par with other MPs, whereas winning a constituency in Tanzania seems to present additional political opportunities: women are more easily appointed to higher-level political positions compared to those women who entered parliament through the special

¹⁸ I. Tinkner, 2004. "Quotas for women in elected legislatures: do they really empower women?", *Women's Studies International Forum*, 27(5-6), pp. 531-546.

¹⁹ P. Norris, 2006. "The impact of electoral reform on women's representation", p. 209. *Palgrave and Macmillan Journal*, 41(2), pp. 197-213.

²⁰ D. Dhaherup, and Freidenvall, L. 2010. "Judging gender quotas – Predictions and results", p. 415. *Policy and Politics*, 38(3), pp. 407-425.

²¹ J. Burnet, 2012. "Women's empowerment and cultural change in Rwanda", p. 204, in S. Franceschet, M. Krook and J. Piscopo (eds.). *The impact of gender quotas*. New York: Oxford University Press.

²² V. Wang, and Mi Yung Yoon. 2018. "Recruitment mechanisms for reserved seats and switches to non-quota seats: a comparative study of Tanzania and Uganda", *Journal of Modern African Studies*, Vol. 56(2), pp. 299-324.

seats.²³ Nonetheless, the number of switches to open seats over the years have been small in both countries due to common obstacles to women's political participation discussed below.

Furthermore, it has been argued that the reserved-seat system "ghettoise" quotas MPs. It has created a gendered perception that constituency seats are for men and quota seats are for women. The two separate avenues to parliament resulted in the reluctance of parties in both Uganda and Tanzania to field female candidates for open seats.²⁴ In Zimbabwe, the quota system is also stigmatised. Women's participation is viewed by many as "a token or a privilege granted by men".²⁵

However, in strong patriarchal societies reserved seats may be the only practical way of starting to incorporate women into political leadership positions.²⁶ Generally speaking, countries in Africa where women account for less than 15% of members of parliament do not apply quotas.

Substantive and Symbolic Representation

Although the number of women in decision-making positions still remains an important topic among scholars, the focus on women's substantive representation – for example, their impact on policy-making and legislative diversity – has characterised the work of a "second generation" of scholars. Scholars have shown that women's representation has enhanced the influence of female MPs in various ways. These include a change in the parliamentary culture (e.g., Tanzania, South Africa and Uganda), and a change of face of parliamentary structures such as parliamentary committees. In South Africa, more "masculine" portfolio committees such as Safety and

²³ R. Meena, M. Rusimbi, and C. Israel. 2018. "Women and Political Leadership: Facilitating Factors in Tanzania". Research Report 17(1), p. 44. Tanzania: UONGOZI Institute. At: https://www.africaportal.org/documents/18149/Women-in-Leadership-17.1_1.pdf.

²⁴ V. Wang, and Mi Yung Yoon. 2018. Op. cit., p. 301.

²⁵ IFES (International Foundation for Electoral Systems). 2018. "Violence Against Women in Zimbabwe: An IFES Assessment", p. 12. Full Report. July. At: https://www.ifes.org/sites/default/files/vawie_in_zimbabwe_july_2018.pdf.

²⁶ H. Darhour, and Dhalerup, D. 2013. "Sustainable representation of women through gender quotas: A decade's experience in Morocco", p. 133. *Women's Studies International Forum*, 41, pp.132-142. At: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.wsif.2013.04.008>.

Security and Justice and Constitutional Development were, for example, chaired by women after the second democratic elections in 2000.

The increase in women's numbers has also led to the advocacy and adoption of new laws and new amendments. In Tanzania, these include the Labour Act of 1997, the Sexual Offences Act of 1998, the Land Amendment Act of 2004 and the repeal, in 1996, of the law that expelled pregnant girls from school;²⁷ in Kenya, they include the Sexual Offences Act of 2006 and Amendments to the Employment Act of 2007 to provide for paid maternity and paternity leave; and in Uganda, legislation in the areas of, for example, domestic violence, rape and female genital mutilation.²⁸ In South Africa, the Domestic Violence Act (1998), the Choice on Termination of Pregnancy Act (1996), improvements to the Child Maintenance Act resulting in the Child Care Amendment Act (1996) and the Recognition of Customary Marriages Act (1998) can all be attributed to female parliamentarians.²⁹

Also important is the symbolic role of women's representation in breaking down patriarchal attitudes and creating a new political culture in which politics is no longer a "man's world". For example, in both Uganda³⁰ and Tanzania³¹ it is acknowledged that the increased presence of women in parliament has slowly been changing people's attitudes to women in politics.

What Keeps Women Out of Politics?

The persistent resistance to women in politics takes many forms across Africa. Several factors reinforce each other to prevent or hamper women's political participation.

²⁷ Mi Yung Yoon, 2013. "Special seats for women in parliament and democratisation: The case of Tanzania", p. 147. *Women's Studies International Forum*, 41, pp. 143-149. At: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.wsif.2013.05.005>.

²⁸ A. Clayton, C. Josefsson, and V. Wang. 2016. "Quotas and Women's Substantive Representation: Evidence from a Content Analysis of Ugandan Plenary Debates". *Politics and Gender*, Vol. 13 (2). pp. 276-304 . At: <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1743923X16000453>.

²⁹ P. Govender, 2005. "Women and Democracy: Are there signs yet of substantive equality?", in Calland, R. and P. Graham. *Democracy in the Time of Mbeki*. Cape Town: IDASA.

³⁰ K. Juma, 2011. "Women in the Parliament of Uganda, 2001-2011: Striving to Influence Legislations to Improve the Status of Women". *The Ahfad Journal*, Vol. 28(2), pp. 44-66.

³¹ R. Meena, et al. 2018. Op. cit.

- The single major barrier remains the deeply rooted cultural, religious and traditional stereotypes around the role of women in society. Women's identity is still predominantly conceived as being domestic in nature, and this continues to act as a barrier to women's entry into formal politics. The cultural beliefs based on the concept of male supremacy are perpetuated by socialisation that conceives of politics as male territory. Unfortunately, the constitutional and legal gains supporting gender equality have not affected entrenched gender roles and stereotyping in many African countries.
- The lack of political will from governments. Despite the fact that most states are signatories to the various regional, continental and international instruments that promote gender equality and the empowerment of women, little progress has been made in domesticating these commitments. Also, the enforcement of quotas in many countries is undermined by the absence of sanctions for non-compliance and a lack of statutory compliance.
- Political parties, which are the key gateway for women's successful participation in elections, are the most serious obstructers. They replicate gender relations of male supremacy and female subordination. Party leadership is controlled by men, and it is difficult for women to reach the top positions in party hierarchies where decisions are taken. The patriarchal nature of political parties often restricts women from competing in elections. In many cases women lack party backing and, in some instances, women experience active exclusion, discrimination and open hostility.
- Women often lack the necessary financial resources, which limits their capacity to participate in elections. The amount of money required for elections is often large – ranging from campaign expenses to considerable amounts that have to be paid to be consid-

ered in the candidate nomination/selection process (for example, in Ghana, Kenya and Nigeria³²).

- Electoral systems also play an important role in facilitating the political representation of women. The first-past-the-post (FPTP) single-constituency electoral system in particular makes it difficult for women to be elected. Political parties generally do not nominate women as candidates for “winnable” constituencies. The low representation of women in parliament in Ghana (13.09%), Nigeria (3.63%) and Botswana (10.77%), for example, can (along with other reasons) be attributed to the FPTP electoral system.
- The increasing violence (physical or verbal abuse) in public against women in many African countries restricts their political activities or deters them from standing for elections. Given the zero-sum nature of the political contest in countries with the FPTP electoral system, where competition is a do-or-die affair, violence against female candidates seems to be more prominent.³³
- A practical manifestation of the patriarchal nature of most African countries (where statistics are available) is the fact that women candidates have been far less visible in election-related media coverage than male candidates during the election campaign period. Gender stereotypes and stigma also characterise the coverage of female candidates.

Conclusion – The Way Forward

The African continent is certainly not short of protocols and policies initiated by the African Union and other regional bodies (and signed by many member states) that commit members to women’s equal rights. Generally,

³² In Nigeria, for example, the candidate nomination fee ranges between US\$2,300 and US\$13,000 – depending on the level of representation. Onah, E. and U. Nwali. 2018. “Monetisation of electoral politics and the challenge of political exclusion in Nigeria”. *Commonwealth and Comparative Politics*, Vol. 56(3), pp. 318-339. At: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14662043.2017.1368157>.

³³ For example, Ghana, Uganda, Nigeria, Tanzania, Zimbabwe and Zambia.

little progress has been made in domesticating these commitments. Much needs to be done to translate these strong commitments to women's equality into concrete actions and change. The pace of progress has been slow and the path tortuous. There is still a gross under-representation of women in political decision-making positions on the continent – in short, politics remains a hostile terrain for women in many countries. Legislated quotas (specifically reserved seats) seems to be the only practical way of increasing the number of women in decision-making positions, particularly in strong patriarchal societies.

In conclusion, the actualisation of gender equality and of women's rights lies in the implementation of evidence-based interventions and the constant monitoring and evaluation of progress – above all, it also requires the commitment of government leaders.