

The dynamics of gender roles and cultural determinants of African women's desire to participate in modern politics.

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Abstract

Until recently the African woman was invisible in the modern political context. Even though the trend is changing, women remain marginal in active politics. One wonders if cultural and ideological interests that privilege male representations inform women's non-participation in politics. Thus, the rise of women in African politics continues to struggle with patriarchal structures that seek to relegate them to the realm of only economic production and reproduction.

The 21st century quest to liberate women in Africa stimulates a discussion that would clarify the position of the modern African woman, among other things, in a challenging male bias society in the construction of an inclusive political system as well as rethinking and positioning women to fully participate in the governance of Africa.

This paper seeks to explore the historical perspective and kindred factors that have consciously or inadvertently excluded African women in modern politics. Attempt would also be made to recapture women's contributions to African traditional system of government and how those support systems could be transferred to modern political structure to advance appropriate and responsible governance for Africa.

Introduction

A striking question regarding lack of women's participation in modern politics is whether or not the phenomenon is only an African problem.

In the book *Black Africa*, Cheikh Anta Diop (1987) explains bicameralism as a type of governance some of our ancestors used to rule their people. Before Africa came under the dominance of any foreign powers, women had a position of influence in society. In African bicameralism women participated in the running of public affairs within the framework of a women's assembly. This assembly sat separately to the man's assembly but the two shared influence and power. The resistance against foreign invasion and occupation of West African nations such as Dahomey (Benin) and the Yorubas in Nigeria is said to be a result of the women's assembly meeting at night. African bicameralism allowed the blossoming of both males and females and allowed the full use of both the feminine and masculine mind.

Bicameralism is an ancient example of African democracy that put to full use the human resources of society in a manner that supported and encouraged everyone.

Therefore let no one fool you that in traditional Africa, women were even worse off than they are now. The question is...what happened? And the simple answer is that, today, African women are dealing with systems that stifle, disrespect, abuse and even kill her...

Foreign writers who only see the concentration of African women in subsistence, petty commodity production, and trading and, only tied to the domestic sphere of life have ignored the significant contribution of women in politics. However, one must understand the unique

socio-cultural setting of African to be able to understand the respect for social division of labor and the African arrangement of “social democracy”. The partition of African and the prevalence of myriads of ethnic groups make it difficult to negotiate for information because many Africans are regionally paranoid. Adams (2008) acknowledges that much of the scholarship on women in African politics has been rooted in case studies due to the dearth of empirical data on the subject. Essays on Africa topics in consequence, require a full anthropological and ethnographical account of the life and practices of detailed notes about Africans by Africans to produce autonomous account characterized by incarnation and indigenization rather than account born out of syncretism. Unfortunately, most of the literature on gender participation in African politics came from foreigners who might still be managing their cultural shock. Undeniably, Hesselgrave (1992) is right with his assertion that the awareness of a peoples’ worldview is prerequisite to contextualizing our message about them.

The problems in Africa, which include illiteracy/ignorance, disease, lack of infrastructure and corruptions, have led to the failure of economic growth and development. People have lost faith in the political system where few men use their ill-gotten wealth in most cases to corrupt and criminalize the democratic process. One wonders if the inclusion of more women in African politics would ease the socio-economic ills prevalent in Africa and be able to make judicious use of the uncountable natural resources with which the continent is endowed. As stated by the International Parliamentary Union (2008)

A strong and vibrant democracy is possible only when parliament is fully inclusive of the population it represents. Parliaments cannot consider themselves inclusive, however, until they can boast the full participation of women. Ever since the first United Nations World Conference on Women was held in Mexico City in 1975, the international community has paid great attention to women’s representation in, and impact on, political decision-making structures. Despite this international focus, however, women’s access to parliament has been frustratingly slow and very often disappointing (2008, p.1).

In addressing the topic of African women participation in politics key questions that need answers include:

What is the status of the representation of women in African parliaments and governments?

What factors might deter women who are considering entering parliament or government

What challenges do women parliamentarians face in being elected?

What mechanisms are being introduced to achieve more gender balanced parliaments and women representation in governments?

African women’s conversation about themselves:

In Ghana, only 1,376 representing 7.95 per cent of the 17,315 candidates contesting the 2010 District Assembly Election were females as against 15,939 representing 92.05 males (GNA, 2010). In a dialogue on African Women in politics in Abuja, Nigeria, Pan-African News Wire (2010) echoes Malam Kabiru A. Yusuf’s remark that “It is accepted by even the most obdurate male chauvinist that women are the natural partners of men in the home. But when it comes to their role in wider society, in the economy, politics, art and culture, many men are unwilling to concede [to] them their due. But society cannot progress unless all of us, men and women, young

and old, have equal chance to achieve our potential,” (PANW, 2010 p.1). Thus, African women have a crucial role to play in Africa’s renaissance in the 21st century.

In her contribution, Samia Nkrumah opines that

Despite the fact that women make up 51 percent of Ghana’s population, this figure is not reflected at the decision making level. The cold fact however is that [women] have fallen short of the 30 percent representation stipulated by the United Nations that would make decision-making truly meaningful in any society. However, a throw back and current activities of women provides the indication that it is possible women can make a difference in the political front of Africa. Some African women who have made statements by their actions and positions include Queen Yaa Asantewaa of Ghana, Queen Amina of Zaria, Nigeria, [Nzinga Mbembe of Angola] and recent icons like Winnie Mandela of South Africa, Wangari Mathai of Kenya and Ellen Johnson Sirleaf of Liberia (PANW, 2010, p.1

In Winie Mandela’s assertion, Women should rise up to the challenge of their marginalization in male-dominated society by declaring that “Nothing about us without us” and proceed to swell the ranks of all social and political structures where the future of Mankind is discussed. Women have pivotal roles to play in shaping our regional and continental agenda. Women should not only be the backbone of our economies but also our politics. As we address our economic agenda we must also address women’s issues and their daily struggles to build a better life for all (PANW, 2010)

In her contention, Senator Kofoworola Bucknor-Akerele, questions “Why women are hamstrung in politics? The former deputy governor of Lagos State claims that, women have in the last 50 years failed to achieve equality with men because the African society still believes that a woman still lacks the financial capability to run political campaign and political parties are dominated by men. She said men are reluctant to back women for elective positions and that women have been brainwashed into supporting men rather than their own gender. According to her, the African society still believes that women are better at domestic aspects and not good in governance. Women are also discouraged from politics by violence and thuggery (PANW, 2010).

She said men dominate party office positions and women are marginalized in decision-making process in most of African countries. In few countries including South Africa some political parties have reserved some position to the women. “The African National Congress (ANC) of South Africa must be commended for acceptance of 50% of office positions for women in the party. Many other political parties in Africa only reserve few positions for women in their parties,” she said. Women marginalization in politics is obvious in Nigeria where parties have little or no positions reserved for women. An example is the Peoples Democratic Party (PDP), which comprises 50 positions in the National Executive. Apart from the National Women Leader and 2 Deputies, only 2 ex-officio positions from the six geographical zones are reserved for women. She said in order to allow for more participation of African women in politics, countries must entrench in their constitutions some limitations to women representation. She said countries that have adopted quota system or affirmative actions have fared better than those that have not. “The first country to include a 20% quota representation in its constitution, Tanzania, has now

upgraded that to 30% in its constitution. Burundi followed with 30% and then Rwanda,”

“Rwanda has 56.3% female representation in parliaments while South Africa has 44.3%. Angola has 37.3%, Uganda 31.8% and Nigeria 7%. By contrast Nigeria with 7% female representation in parliament does not subscribe to the affirmative action.” (PANW, 2010)

Most countries in Africa have adopted universal adult suffrage and political systems of their former colonial master, which instead of uplifting the standard of women, marginalized women. “Many women who had taken part in struggle for independence found that they were marginalized when it came to being fielded for parliamentary seats or political appointments,” she said.

According to Hajiya Naja’atu Mohammed in PANW (2010), in spite of their numerical strength, Nigerian women have failed to be supportive of women candidates during elections in order to achieve their desire for adequate representation in government. In her assertion, this problem amongst the women folk has aggravated the existing political plight already imposed by their male counterparts in the political space who prefer to see them only “as sex objects and instruments of pleasure”.

Women earn names from their female counterparts “obaa-barima” (a masculine woman) rather than solidarity when they come out to contest for a political position. Other impediments of women in African politics include financial constraints, harassment and intimidation by male politicians.

In her contribution in PANW, (2010) titled “The Road to Parliament: Less Travelled by Women, Ms. Syada Greiss, Member of Parliament, Egypt said, “Prevailing cultural, social and economic conditions continue to act as barriers to greater political participation of women. Moreover, there is a passive attitude by the electorate, and women lack the necessary financial resources for election campaigns.

Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf became the first elected African female head of state in 2005. In a statement released as a President, she said:

“Africa's women have led in the past, and will lead in the future; African politics has often excluded women, but Africa's women have played a much bigger part in it than they are given credit for. It is time for our women to be judged on their own merits and stake their rightful claim on the new Africa” (2010: 29).

She advises her women folks that;

“Look closely and a different story has always been there, behind the headlines. Africa has been home to some of the world’s only matriarchal societies, and history has promoted women across the continent to positions of power by our continent's most revered leaders” In conclusion, the president noted, “My candidacy was dismissed by some who declared that no woman could govern Liberia, a post-conflict country, and who had ever heard of such a thing in Africa” (Johnson-Sirleaf, 2010:29).

In Britton's (1999) research, the 1994 elections pushed South Africa from 141st in the world to seventh in the world in terms of women occupying seats in the national government. However, increase in the numerical representation of women in the South African parliament continues to face disproportionate challenges, which may hinder their full participation. Because of these challenges, over one-half the women interviewed by Britton (1999) did not plan to return to parliament because they feel the institution does not have a place for their voice and that they have been and can be more effective on the ground.

The role and interaction of women in African society:

In African societies women interacted with political structures by mobilizing and organizing themselves to impact the state, society, and legal systems in different political cultures. Thus African women's participation in the political arena, their challenges and struggles for their rights and their impact on their countries' laws and policies has a long history.

In Africa, like other societies, gender roles are nurtured roles and responsibilities conferred on either gender as a result of the social constructs of respective societies. For example, in some societies farm work could be predominantly a male responsibility while in others it is accepted as women's affair (Onyioha and Nwagbara, 2009). Nevertheless, a fairly common thread running through the fabric of most African societies is the culture of deference and subservience of the African womenfolk to their male counter-parts. Thus, in many African societies ranging from the agrarian communities through the pastoral steppes to the modern urban settings, women still generally work a step behind their male compatriots. Onyioha and Nwagbara (2009) cites the following cases to illustrate the point:

First, amongst the Pokot people, a part of the Kalenji ethnic group of the Nilo-Hamitic linguistic family in Western Kenya and Eastern Uganda, the women in the farm communities share work in the fields with the men folk in land preparation and cultivation while exclusively taking care of household chores, such as fetching water, grinding grains, cooking and caring for the children. With the pastoralist Pokot, the women milk the cattle and camels plus the tasks of sewing, weaving of female adornments and making of the unique butter called ghee. In both cases, the Pokot women carry out the role of overseeing the preparation and initiation of grown young girls into womanhood.

In a good number, African societies employ the matrilineal culture in which a progeny's inheritance derives not from the father and his family as in most societies, but from the mother and her maiden family. This practice, which is fairly widespread in Ghana and some communities in Nigeria, imposes added responsibilities on the womenfolk. For, in such societies, in addition to the general female roles, the women must see also to the upkeep, training and signeural entitlements of their children. Interestingly, the girl-child in matrilineal societies is as valued as the boy-child, if not more so. However, in places where Islam has taken root such as in supra-Saharan Africa from Egypt to Mauritania and some other parts of the continent, the role of the women has been greatly shaped by the strict precepts of that religion and their extant interpretations in those societies.

African women in pre-colonial society:

In pre-colonial African society, women generally played the critical roles as agents of propagation of its genetic stock, preservation of its culture, cohesion of society and economic growth; through birthing and nurturing of babies, upbringing of children, exertion of collective moral coercive force for the common good, and partaking in socio-economic endeavors. Thus, if the much admired African way, of extended family ties – or communalism – in which people are obliged to be responsible for other relatives beyond their nuclear families - is to survive much is owed to the resilience and fortitude of the African women for which we must be respectful and reverent to this special breed of human species.

In both the political and military front, “pre-colonial Igbo society in Nigeria was composed of kingdoms and mini-states. Each of these polities had variations in its political structure that differentiated it from the others. However, two major political structures could be identified - constitutional village monarchies for the kingdoms and democratic village republics for most of the mini-states (Chuku, 2008).

Before the advent of colonial rule in Africa, African queens sometimes wielded political power which exceeded that of actual sovereigns. Famous queens and queen mothers, such as Nandi of the Zulu, and the queens of Egypt, which are also well documented (Aspern, 1998). Shwartz-Bart (2001) praises and summarizes about African that “These women rulers, warriors, and heroines include Amanirenas, the queen of Kush who battled Roman armies and defeated them at Aswan; Daurama, mother of the seven Hausa kingdoms; Amina Kulibali, founder of the Gabu dynasty in Senegal; Ana de Sousa Nzinga, who resisted the Portuguese conquest of Angola; Beatrice Kimpa Vita, a Kongo prophet burned at the stake by Christian missionaries; Nanda, mother of the famous warrior-king Shaka Zulu; and many others.”

In a discourse provided by Uwa (2008), with reference to Swartz-Bart (2001), the position of the Queen mother seen across Africa; in Ghana among the Akan, Egypt, Uganda, Ethiopia and Rwanda but to name a few, gave women prominent and visible political authority in running the nation. In most cases the Queen Mother was older than the King and was biologically related to him. She often had her own land, from which she gained revenue through tax and her word was law of the land she owned. She had her own courts complete with courtiers and staff. It is only through her courts that decrees, especially death sentences, made by the King could be annulled. Therefore, although the King had the technical power of the lives of those in his kingdom, the Queen Mother could often give someone back their life.

The Queen Mother among the Akan of Ghana also had very important role in terms of ensuring the well-being of the women and children of the nation. Therefore, she and her staff were responsible for designing and implementing the educational system of the land. As you can see, the nation was entirely comfortable with the Queen Mother and her staff being in control of the structure, organization, some content and day-to day running of the educational system which ALL their children were affected by. We as modern African women should remember that not too long ago the visionary women molded the minds of the entire nation. Often the Queen mother was also in charge of childbirth, coming-of-age and marriage ceremonies. In some nations, the King’s wife also played the role that the Queen mother played. For example among the Buganda of Uganda, the Kings wife had considerable power. But usually, the King’s wife either had as much power as the Queen but usually had less.

A very important role that the Queen, and sometimes also the wife of the King had was that of either selecting or endorsing the King's successor. In some cases, the Queen was responsible for nominating the King's successor and it was up to her to convince a panel of advisors to agree with her choice. In other cases, kingmakers nominated the King's successor and it is only with the Queen's consent that the heir would receive legitimacy to rule. Women also directly ruled many African nations. We should remember that this was the exception rather than the rule. However, the fact remains that some women did rule their nations with courage and self-confidence. Many of these women were Queens. African Queens had supreme power and authority over all inhabitants of her Queen-dom. Her word was law and no man or woman could defy her. She had supreme military, political, spiritual and economic power.

According to Hamdun and King (2003), in West Africa, Queen Amina ruled the Hausa state of Zazzau (in modern Nigeria) in the 14th century. She was a strong warrior and acquired a reputation as an undefeated conqueror. Queen Nzinga of Matamba reigned for 36 years in 17th century Angola. She built a strong army and fought several wars against the Portuguese. In Benin, Queen Aghangbe (or Tassin Aghangbe) was co-sovereign with her twin brother Akaba from the late 17th century to the early eighteenth century. In Hamdun and King's (2003) reference to Ibn Battuta's West African trip of 1352-1353, the North African writer (Ibn Battuta) recorded the power struggle between Emperor Sulaiman of Mali and his chief wife, Qasa Qasa. Ibn Battuta wrote, "the queen is his partner in the kingship, following the custom of the blacks. Her name is mentioned in the pulpit". [Having one's name read in the pulpit during Muslim services in the mosque is an honor due only to an actual sovereign, not a mere consort.]

The Christian New Testament mentions a Candace, Queen of Ethiopia, who reigned in the 1st century A.D. as follows:

“And the angel of the Lord spake unto Philip, saying, Arise and go toward the south, unto the way that goeth down from Jerusalem unto Gaza, which is desert. And he arose and went, and behold, a man of Ethiopia, a eunuch of great authority under Candace queen of the Ethiopians, who had the charge of all her treasure, and had come to Jerusalem for worship, was returning, and sitting in his chariot reading Esaias the prophet.” (Acts 8:26-28)

The Candace was one of the Kushite sovereign queens who ruled from Meroe (in modern Sudan), of which there were at least four. 'Candace' is the Romanized form of *Kandake* or *Kentaké*, the title of the Kushite sovereign queens (Davidson, 1987).

In Southern Africa, Nehanda was one of modern Zimbabwe's most influential religious leaders. Originally a woman called Nyakasikana, she became the medium to the ancestral Shona spirit Mbuya (Grandmother) Nehanda. As Nehanda, she led a war against invading Europeans in 1896. Nehanda won a series of battles but she was eventually captured and executed (Davidson, 1987).

In Ghana, one such women leader is the Edwesohemaa (Queen of Edweso, Ghana) Yaa Asantewaa. There have been great women in history, but Yaaa Asantewaa was one of a kind, and won the title of the 'mere woman' who 'fought against the cannon' during the British colonization of Ghana. She was a woman whose bravery has won for her, international repute. Her reputation as an international figure began with her defiance of the might of British colonial hegemony. In 1900 she inspired the indomitable Asante to take up arms in defense of their sovereignty. This

was a time when the ruler of Asante had been abducted together with members of his close family and his principal advisors and sent into forced exile.

According to Brempong (2000) Nana Yaa Asantewaa defied such Akan values that require the woman to be submissive and meek (at least in public). Yaa Asantewaa, by adopting the stance that she had violated those traditional values already referred to. Thus, she was not afraid to risk the stigma of being branded as “obaa kokonyini” which means “a female cockerel” or an “obaa sagyefoo” which literally means “the female redeemer in [times of] war or [obaa-barima meaning “masculine woman].” What set Yaa Asantewaa apart from other Asante females were her strong and fighting spirit and her ideals.

In Akan matrilineal tradition in Ghana, queen mothers held and still hold important positions, including selecting candidates from the royal family for a vacant chief’s stool. Being authority on kinship matters and in girls’ initiation rites; they have to make sure that the royal lineage remains intact; they are the principal advisors of their “sons,” the chiefs; and they are authorities on kinship matters (McCaskie, 2007).

Donkoh (2000) points out that in Asante history, there, have been many instances when women have excelled in a public capacity. For example, the Asantehemaa Adoma Akosua, in 1814, was left in charge of the affairs of the Asante nation while the Asantehene Osei Bonsu went to the coast to visit his troops on the battlefield. In the period, Adoma Akosua received a Dutch embassy with whom she discussed trade. Also, Akyaa Oyiakwan, daughter of the Asantehene Osei Kwadwo (1764-77), headed two different diplomatic missions that successfully negotiated the Maclean Treaty in April 1831 with the British and with the Danes at Christiansborg Castle in August of the same year (Wilks, 1993). Again, Dwabenhemaa Ama Seiwaa, in 1843, took over as chief of Dwaben and led her people back to Asante from exile in Akyem Abuakwa in the south east of the Gold Coast after the death of her two sons in succession. Indeed, her daughter, Nana Afrakoma Panin and her granddaughter Nana Akua Saponmaa both held the dual offices of Dwabenhemaa and Dwabenhene concurrently.

African women’s roles in Society and Governance

According to Uwa (2008), in traditional Africa, women had recognized the vital roles in the economic well being of their communities. Among the Kikuyu of Kenya, women were the major food producers and thus not only had ready access to land but also had authority of how the land was to be used and cultivated. Therefore, the value of women’s productive labor in producing and processing food established and maintained their rights in the domestic and other spheres. Nowadays, although women still are major food producers either directly or through employment, they do not receive the recognition and respect that they used to.

Colonialism profoundly negatively affected the role and status of women in African society. Uwa (2008) continues the discourse with the revelation that, in much of pre-colonial Africa, bridewealth gave women a certain amount of economic independence and clout. In the past, African women in some societies retained a measure of control over their bridewealth, which economically empowered her to a certain extent. Sadly, with the new financial constraints experienced by males due to colonialism, especially in the form of heavy taxation, bridewealth became a source of income that males sought to control. Thus, once more, women were

excluded from a culture that had previously given women some measure of economic independence.

Among the Egba of Nigeria, women were the economic powerhouses of the nation due to the trade and market system they had developed. Among these people from West Africa, women dominated the trade and merchant exchange of goods of their community. Women were responsible for a number of things including: setting the rules of trade among themselves i.e. market taxes and tariffs; organizing and managing the market system; agreeing on lucrative terms of trade with outsiders; holding meetings to discuss how to improve their trade and marketing system and more. These women had highly developed business acumen which they used for the economic upliftment of their community. Keep in mind that many of these women were taking over the business from mothers or aunties of the same profession. Therefore, the economic knowledge they implemented had been honed for centuries. In short, they knew what they were doing. To this day, women still dominate the local market scenes in Africa but almost none can be found in the 'formal' Western-styled economic institutions that have developed in Africa since independence. Perhaps the absence of women, and thus the absence of ancient African economic knowledge are contributing to the LACK of economic organization and power in many African nations (Uwa, 2008).

In parts of pre-colonial Nigeria, newly-married women of a given town would form an organization designed to look out for their interests and those of their families. Among the responsibilities of this body was the governance of their husbands! If one of the members came to the group with a serious and valid complaint about the behavior of her husband, the group would find this mad; confront him with the allegations and keep an eye on him until his behavior improved. This method was highly effective because it did away with the often destructive and frankly, Western notion, that a marriage (or serious relationship) is only the business of the two involved. This system of inter-personal governance ensured that BOTH the man and woman were accountable to each other and treated each other with respect and dignity.

In terms of macro-political organization, in the past, most African societies had a dual sex political system, which allowed for substantial female representation and involvement in governance and administration. Till today, traditional rulers in Ghana confide in the "Abrewa" (old lady) as the last custodian to wisdom in the decision making process. Thus, this confirms that, African men and women served in different political capacities during the pre-colonial era. Chuku (2005) captures this dual-sex political system in her work *Igbo Women and Political Participation in Nigeria*

"Both men and women wielded political power and authority (though in differing degrees) in pre-colonial Igbo society, where social roles and responsibilities were the channels through which power diffused, and where gender equality was measured in comparative worth. Age, experience, ability, marital status, and rites of initiation determined hierarchical relationships in Igbo society. Individuals earned power, authority, and respect as a result of their moral probity, leadership charisma, persuasive oratory, heroic military service or gallant prowess as well as intellectual and business acumen—attributes that were not the sole possession of one gender. This article examines the participation of women, either directly." (Chuku, 2005: p.8)

Challenges and barriers for women's participation in modern politics:

Among other things, the obstacles facing African women in their participation in politics include marginalization of women emanating from cultural factors, limited access to or lack of formal education or training for many women and the female role in the labor force; masculine suppression, and economic factors. Due to economic decline, wars and ethnic conflicts, and the spread of HIV/AIDS in many African countries, women find themselves among the most poor and illiterate in the urban and rural areas (Manuh, 2007). Also, African respect for traditional culture places on them some norms that discourage women from participating in jobs traditionally reserved for men. Women who engage in such career are ridiculed and reminded in such sayings as “if a woman buys a gun it leans on the chest (bosom) of a man” or “if a woman buys a gun it leans in the room of a man” and “a woman sells garden eggs and not gunpowder.” The underlying logic in these sayings is that an ideal woman should be mild-mannered and should accept the dominant position of the man, at least in military and political matters.

Another venerated aspect of cultural institution that permeates African politics is motherhood. Nothing depicts the feminine role in traditional Africa than the motherhood institution. Yet, most scholars seem to ignore motherhood as a revered institution in Africa. The idea of motherhood entitles women to speak to and for entire societies. It also prompts them to organize courageous movements against military dictatorships, to confront poverty, and environmental degradation, (Miller, 2009). However, the same idea of motherhood restricts them to subsistence chores rather than jobs that would necessitate abandonment of their children at home without due care.

One should also be privy to the fact that post-colonial African politics have been characterized by abuse of political office and power, physical violence, arbitrary and despotic rule, corruption, and nepotism, which finds African women the most vulnerable sex group. Men in most cases take advantage of their fragile counterpart.

Though the pre-legislative government era was characterized with war and violence, women played a complementary part in defending their societies.

It is a known fact that Africa's persistent economic hardships hit women more than men. Continual economic crises among women result in their inability to fund their political campaigns. For an illustration, in 1993, the only female presidential aspirant dropped out from the Nigerian presidential primaries because she could not pay the non-refundable 500,000 naira deposit required of each presidential candidate. As a result of financial constraints, women trail behind their male counterparts in the formation of political parties, party membership, election to political office, and participation in decision making and governance of the three tiers of the Nigerian government (federal, state, and local governments) (Miller, 2009). In her observation Chuku (2005) has stated that Igbo women, since the colonial period, have struggled to regain the "traditional" dual-gender system of association that fostered community-based modes of female mobilization and enabled them to maintain certain economic, political, and social organizations that protected their interests

Current African women in government.

According to IPU (2008) data, women held 10.9 percent of all parliamentary seats worldwide in 1975. After more than 30 years of pledges, prescriptions and persuasion, women occupied less than 18 percent of all parliamentary seats in 2008. For the past decade, the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) has based its work on a clear principle: that there is a fundamental link between democracy and a genuine partnership between men and women in the management of public affairs with the core aim to improve women's access to, and participation in parliament and to build real political partnerships between men and women.

The number of women in selected parliaments or House of Representatives

Country	Number of Parliamentary seats	Number of women in parliament	Percentage of women in parliament
Rwanda	80	45	56.3%
Sweden	349	157	45.0%
South Africa	400	178	44%
Mozambique	250	98	39.2%
Germany	622	204	32.8%
Pakistan	242	76	22.2%
United Kingdom	650	143	22.0%
China	2,987	637	21.3%
Canada	308	68	22.1%
Malawi	192	40	20.8%
France	577	109	18.9%
United States	433	73	16.9%
Ghana	230	19	8.3%
Nigeria	358	25	7%

Courtesy of Inter-Parliamentary Union website (*Situation as of 30 November 2010*)

Toward Reform and Improvement

While it is important to increase the number of women in parliaments in Africa and around the world, the unfortunate fact is that gender equality in parliaments remains an ideal, not a reality. In Johnsson's (2008) observation women parliamentarians continue to face difficulties in their work, perhaps none greater than operating in political structures and political parties dominated by men. He believes that the inclusion of women in political decision making is not just about women's right to equality and participation in the conduct of public affairs; it is also about using women's resources and potential to determine political and development priorities that benefit societies and the global community. In other words, it is not just a matter of right but getting it right.

It is therefore necessary for women, once in parliament, to use their positions of influence to make a difference in the decision-making processes. Women parliamentarians should endeavor to change politics and redefine political priorities to include women's views and concerns. IPU (2008) suggests therefore that, women parliamentarians should work to mainstream a gender perspective in parliamentary work through parliamentary committees and women's parliamentary caucuses, which are cross-party networks of women (IPU, 2008).

Again, it should be understood that men and women need to forge a constructive partnership between them in parliament since true gender equality can only result from including the views and experiences of both men and women.

The International Parliamentary Union (2008) has also observed that women remain concentrated in committees that deal with social issues, education, health and family affairs. While these committees are important, and oversee a large share of public expenditure, women are often absent from the debate on other issues, such as finance and foreign affairs and defense. This lack of women's participation in committees that deal with the economy, finance and the budget means that women have a lesser say in determining financial priorities and shaping national agendas. Such concentration is also true at the executive level. According to IPU (2008), of 1,022 ministerial portfolios held by women in January 2008, but only six women held a defense portfolio.

Summary and conclusion:

The success of sub-Saharan Africa's democratization over the last 15 years has hinged in part on the extent to which it has managed to revitalize the region's legislatures. As Dollar, Fisman and Gatti (1999) have opined, for an African family, curbing corruption will mean not having to pay a bribe to lease a plot of land or face inflated prices for medicine at their local clinic. Open and accessible budgets will mean that parents can monitor whether funds are reaching their children's school or if revenue from natural resources such as oil is being invested in roads or wells for their village. Peace and stability will mean that women can work late in the evening without fear of harassment, and free and fair elections will mean that every citizen has a voice in their government and the opportunity to stand for office.

Committed leaders who are accountable to their citizens will enable the key building blocks of development - a thriving economy, an active civil society and effective resources for fighting poverty - to be put into place.

Improvements in governance will require empowering African women as leaders and advocates and removing the legal, administrative and traditional barriers that impede their success. As policy-makers, women can bring a unique perspective to decision-making. Through their role as caregivers in their families, women have an interest in ensuring that resources for areas such as health and education are spent wisely. Studies have also found that the greater the representation of women in parliament the lower the level of corruption. Further, countries that have successfully emerged from conflict, such as Liberia and Mozambique; have also shown that putting women at the helm of reconciliation and recovery can turn even the most impoverished countries into beacons of progress in the fight against poverty.

In support of the above assertion, Britton (1999) believes that while the South African governmental institution has shifted to reflect some of the needs of women, the capacities required to be an MP or Delegate remain fundamentally unchanged. Several women have adapted well to the institution; however, these are not necessarily the most representative women in terms of socio-economic, educational, or ethnic background. Despite these obstacles, women have created national governmental institutions and implemented key pieces of legislation intended to promote gender equity. Women are also shifting from broad, multi-party women's coalitions to issue-specific, sectorally-based task forces and organizations focusing directly on the needs of women. Notably, the obstacles women face in their integration and retention may

result from the reform strategies used by the antiapartheid movement. These strategies were patterned on western revolutionary models that did not disrupt the public/private, male/female dichotomies or transform existing state institutions, which privilege male discourse and power. For women's liberation to be complete, the nation will need to go beyond legislative revision and focus on women's empowerment in the public and the private political spaces.

Taking cues from the actions and conduct of African queens, the woman of today can learn positive lessons. She should dare to dream and have a vision; she should aspire to acquire requisite skills; and above all, she should aim to be the best at whatever she does, without permitting any negative force to stand in her way.

In Donkoh's (2000) suggestion, the African woman should strive at the following:

- She should have ideals and a clear vision; and she should be prepared to fight for the fulfillment of these ideals whenever the occasion arises. This should be done even if it means sacrificing personal and present comfort.
- Besides, privileged birth and family background s or otherwise should not prevent one from learning the nitty-gritty of life. Informed and dynamic leadership comes about if the leader personally has hands-on experience about or at least understands the instructions given. Centuries ago, what mattered most to African queens and women leaders were family values and loyalty to the state. They held up these values without allowing either their age or gender to stand in the way. They defied the might of the colonial powers of Britain and Portugal. Even though some of them eventually lost their personal freedoms in the process, this personal catastrophe did not break their spirits.
- Today, among the important aspects of life that open up all kinds of opportunities in human existence are education and marketable skills. In following the footsteps of Nana Yaa Asantewaa [and pre-colonial African queens], the woman of today should be prepared to take up the arms of education in the fight against ignorance, poverty, disease and discrimination. This means that the woman of today should not allow negative forces to stand in her way.
- The woman of today should dare to make a difference in a positive way.

Real change requires political will and partnership. Women and men must acknowledge that the equal participation of women in parliamentary processes not only benefits society, but is required in legitimized democracies. As Mr. Mosé Tjitendero, Chair of the IPU Gender Partnership Group (2000-2002) and Speaker of the National Assembly of Namibia (1990-2004) has stated,

“We believe that true equality between the sexes can only be achieved if both women and men pull forces together to break the barriers of age-old belief that women and men have different roles to play and therefore have an unequal stand in society. . . . A man of quality should not fear women who seek equality.” (IPU, 2008:2).

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