

Emerging Trends in Women's Participation in Politics in Africa

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Abstract

Women have traditionally been marginalised from the structures of state that determine political and legislative priorities. In recent years, Africa has witnessed rapid escalation in female political representation. This paper illustrates the emerging trends that have been noted in women's political participation in Africa. These changes have engendered the potential for increasing women's entrance to political power. The new trends in women's political participation have been aided by an amalgamation of numerous factors. The paper examines the factors that have led to the positive changes in women's political participation. Despite the fact that, African women have made significant trends in political participation, worldwide a colossal gap is still in existence. Women have a gargantuan task before they can be acknowledged as full equals and partners to their male counterparts. The barriers to women's participation will also be analysed and finally draw recommendations to improve women's participation.

Key words: Political Participation, Emerging Trends, Gender Equality, Africa

1. Introduction

Women have traditionally been excluded from the structures of state that determine political and legislative priorities. In recent years, Africa has witnessed rapid escalation in female political representation as compared to the low rates that existed in the 1960s. Participation of women in decision-making has more and more been placed at heart of the global agenda. Confirmatory developments in African governance, which have been eased by the ever-increasing consolidation of democracy in the continent, have led to the increase in women's participation in politics. Numerous achievements have been recorded in the advancement of gender equality and women's empowerment and various policies, programmes and projects are in place to advance gender equality and women's empowerment (Republic of Zimbabwe, Ministry of Women Affairs, 1995). These changes have engendered the potential for increasing women's entrance to political power. The new trends in women's political participation have been aided by an amalgamation of numerous factors. Changes taking place in the African region have positively conferred an opportunity for more women to assume positions of leadership. Despite the fact that, African women have made significant trends in political participation, worldwide a colossal gap is still in existence. Women have a gargantuan task before they can be acknowledged as full equals and partners to their male counterparts. This paper endeavors to demonstrate the emerging trends in women's political participation in Africa. The factors that have facilitated the trends will be discussed. The barriers to women's participation will also be analysed and finally draw recommendations to improve women's participation.

2. Women in Leadership positions

The emerging trends in women's political participation in Africa have been exhibited by the increase in the number of women in parliament. Women's participation in politics is important for improved governance in Africa. Ballington (2008: 5) notes that

“The attainment of gender equality and the full participation of women in decision making are key indicators of democracy. The involvement of women in all aspects of political life produces more equitable societies and delivers a stronger and more representative democracy.”

Rwanda has been ranked first globally as it has more than fifty percent of women in its elected public offices. The Rwandan experience has proven to be a referenced landmark not only in Africa, but for all democracy (Cole, 2011:14). Other African countries such as Senegal, South Africa, Mozambique, Uganda and Angola have also been highly ranked for their level of women's representation parliament as shown in the table below. Notable improvements have also been celebrated in some Arab countries that have been traditionally associated with low rates of women's participation in politics. The Inter Parliamentary Union (2013) revealed that "with 31.6% women MPs, Algeria is now the first and only Arab country to have more than 30% women holding parliamentary seats". The Algerian case is a good example of showing the emerging trends in women's political participation. The factors that that have fueled these positive trends will be analysed later on in this paper.

WORLD CLASSIFICATION									
Rank	Country	Lower or single house				Upper house or Senate			
		Elections	Seats	Women	% W	Elections	Seats	Women	% W
1	Rwanda	92008	80	45	56.3%	92011	26	10	38.5%
2	Andorra	4 2011	28	14	50.0%	-	-	-	-
3	Cuba	2 2013	612	299	48.90%	-	-	-	-
4	Sweden	9 2010	349	156	44.70%	-	-	-	-
5	Seychelles	9 2011	32	14	43.80%	-	-	-	-
6	Senegal	7 2012	150	64	42.70%	-	-	-	-
7	Finland	4 2011	200	85	42.50%	-	-	-	-
8	South Africa	4 2009	400	169	42.30%	4 2009	53	17	32.10%
9	Nicaragua	11 2011	92	37	40.20%	-	-	-	-
10	Iceland	4 2013	63	25	39.70%	-	-	-	-
11	Norway	9 2009	169	67	39.60%	-	-	-	-
12	Mozambique	10 2009	250	98	39.20%	-	-	-	-
13	Denmark	9 2011	179	70	39.10%	-	-	-	-
14	Ecuador	2 2013	137	53	38.70%	-	-	-	-
"	Netherlands	9 2012	150	58	38.70%	5 2011	75	27	36.00%
16	Costa Rica	2 2010	57	22	38.60%	-	-	-	-
17	Timor-Leste	7 2012	65	25	38.50%	-	-	-	-
18	Belgium	6 2010	150	57	38.00%	6 2010	71	29	40.80%
19	Argentina	10 2011	257	96	37.40%	10 2011	72	28	38.90%
20	Mexico	7 2012	500	184	36.80%	7 2012	128	42	32.80%
21	Spain	11 2011	350	126	36.00%	11 2011	266	91	34.20%
"	Tanzania	10 2010	350	126	36.00%	-	-	-	-
23	Uganda	2 2011	386	135	35.00%	-	-	-	-
24	Angola	8 2012	220	75	34.10%	-	-	-	-

Source: Inter-parliamentary Union (2013)

Additionally to the above mentioned positive rankings, the election of Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf of Liberia as the first female African Head of State in 2005 was a milestone in women's representation at the highest level of national decision-making (Economic for Commission for Africa, 2009). The positive trends have also been exhibited in Malawi 2012 where Joyce Banda became the president after the death of President Bingu waMutarika. Correspondingly, in several African countries women hold or have held positions typically regarded as male conserve as indicated below;

Ruth Perry, Chairwoman of the Council of State of Liberia (3 September 1996 to 2 August 1997); Sylvie Kinigi, Prime Minister of Burundi (10 July 1993 to 7 February 1994); Mame Madior Boye, Prime Minister of Senegal (3 March 2001 to 4 November 2002); Luísa Dias Diogo, Prime Minister of Mozambique (17 February 2004 to 18 January 2010); Maria das Neves Ceita Baptista de Sousa, Prime Minister of São Tomé and Príncipe (7 October 2002 to 18 September 2004); Rose Francine Rogombé, Acting President of Gabon (June 2009-October 2009); Maria do Carmo Trovoada Pires de Carvalho Silveira, Prime Minister of São Tomé and Príncipe (8 June 2005 to 21 April 2006), Specioza Kazibwe; Vice President of Uganda (1994-2003); Joice Mujuru, Vice President of Zimbabwe (December 2004 to Present); Thokozani Khuphe, Deputy Prime Minister under the GNU in Zimbabwe (from 2009 to 2013) and Joyce Banda Vice president of Malawi (2009 to April 2012) (Economic for Commission for Africa, 2009: 169).

This exhibits women who have held and women who hold public offices in areas which have previously been a preserve of men. The aforementioned women confirm the emerging trends in women's participation in politics in Africa. The recent trends in women's political participation have led to an increase in women's influence in political issues from diverse angles. Women have made much influence in the constitution making processes. South Africa is one of the countries where women took part and played a vigorous role in the process of drafting the new South African constitution, which guarantees women rights to equality, freedom and security of the person, freedom from violence, the right to make decisions concerning reproduction, and the right to security and control over one's own body (Tripp: 2001). There has been a noted trend also in countries such as Zambia, Malawi and Uganda where women influenced the inclusion into constitutions sections on women's rights (non-discrimination, support of affirmative action, and curbing violence against women). Women have also been influential in processes that have led to improving women's legal status. Women such as Margaret Dongo in Zimbabwe, Charity Ngilu and Wangari Maathai in Kenya, and Winnie Byanyima in Uganda emerged among the fiercest opponents of corruption and patronage politics in their respective countries (Tripp; 2001). This shows that women have played an important role in politics.

3. Factors which have enhanced Women's increased Political Participation

There is no single factor that can be accredited for the contemporary positive trends in women's political participation. A number of factors have worked together in raising women's participation in politics in Africa. This paper will focus on factors such as; the increase in women's movements, quota systems, multi-party systems, increase in educational opportunities, funding from international institutions, global and national agreements, conventions and commitments amongst others.

3.1 Proliferation of women's movement groups

The promulgation of women's movement groups in Africa is one of the factors which have led to an increase in the number of women involved in politics. These groups have been of much importance as they have lobbied for women's political leadership. The groups have been fundamental as they have pushed for legislative and constitutional transformations. Civic education for women in a range of spheres of life has been conducted as a result of the influence of the women's movement groups. These include Action for Development (Uganda); National Women's Lobby Group (Zambia); National Committee on the Status of Women (Kenya); Women of Zimbabwe Arise (WOZA) amongst others. Their influence has been noted in transforming national constitutions in their respective countries. Consequently national constitutions in scores of African countries now give surety to the respect of human rights including equality and non-discrimination. Women in many African countries have been able to run for public office in growing numbers and have reached an average of 20.4 per cent of seats in national assemblies (IPU; 2013). This demonstrates that the various groups have led to the new trend which has led to an increase in women's political participation across Africa.

3.2 Multiparty Systems

More so, the democratization and shift towards multiparty systems in most African countries has also prompted the increase in women's political participation. The Multi-party setting has pushed the various political parties to press for wide ranging agendas, which include women's expanded political participation. A crucial element of the shift towards multiparty system has been the formation of political parties by several women. From the 1990s women managed to form their own political parties in many countries. For example Dr. Inonge Mbikusita-Lewanika started the National Party in Zambia in 1991; Margaret Dongo began the Zimbabwe Union of Democrats in 1999; while in Lesotho, Limakatso Ntakatsane formed the party, Kopanang Basotho; Charity Ngilu and Dr. Wangari Maathai headed parties in Kenya; Ruth Rolland-Jeanne-Marie led a party in Central African Republic; Amália de Vitoria Pereira led an Angolan party (Tripp, 1999). South Africa has also witnessed the formation of women's political parties through the influence of Helen Zille and Mamphela Ramphele leaders of Democratic Alliance and Agang political parties respectively. The call for forming the political parties has been prompted by the deficiency of eagerness of existing male dominated political parties to set off women's political representation. In political parties formed by men the role of women has mainly been through the women's wings. Evidence from various political parties has shown that the women's wings are a relatively toothless branch which mainly concentrates on mobilising women as voters. Accordingly the birth of women's political has been fundamental in triggering the positive changes in women's political participation in Africa

3.3 Educational Opportunities and economic empowerment

The enhancement in educational opportunities for girls and women has influenced the participation of women in politics. An improvement in women's education in most African countries has led to the emergence of a larger group of proficient women who are in a position to compete with men for political power in various levels. Schlozman and Verba assert (2001:286) that education is a 'powerful predictor of political participation'. Education has empowered many women to join political parties and form political parties enabling them to participate in political activities. Evidence from research, has shown that education is one of the most imperative paths for encouraging women to speak out. This has been made possible by the consequential acquisition of essential knowledge and improved communication skills useful for their political engagement. Education is crucial for unlocking other opportunities for women which are necessary for political participation. Education has been a foundation for women to access high-income jobs that provide the resources and contacts for political activity, and access to non-political associations such as charitable organizations or religious establishments that can be a recruitment ground for political activity (Schlozman and Verba: 2001:141-2).

3.4 Civil society

Women's political participation has also been enhanced by the growing drive from the civil society in fostering women's participation in leadership. The Civil society has also played a key role in advancing the participation of women in politics. Kellow noted that;

Civil society plays a vital role in furthering women's participation in politics and elections. This involves advocating for policies that will increase space for women's involvement, encouraging women to vote and serve as monitors in elections; supporting them to stand as candidates and run a campaign (2010: 16).

In addition the civil society has been instrumental in creating awareness of women's rights. Through the civil society, practices that violate women's rights have been challenged. As a result the activities of the civil society have assisted in building social acceptance of women's political participation. This support has given women the confidence as a group and also at individual level. The civil society organisations have played a key role in the emerging trends of women's political participation in politics.

3.5 International agreements and conventions

An array of international agreements and conventions have been meaningful in encouraging women to take up political offices and influence policy making in different African countries. Tripp (2001:4) asserted that "although the driving forces for these changes have been internal, international pressures and norms have given added impetus to these new demands". This explains the role that has been played by the international agreements and conventions in complementing internal efforts from various angles. A range of conventions have been ratified by the majority of African governments and these include Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), Convention on Civil and Political Rights (CCPR), Equal Remuneration Convention (ERC), Dakar Platform for Action, Beijing Declaration of 1995, Southern African Development Community declaration on Gender and Development (1997) with its addendum on Prevention and Eradication of Violence against Women and Children (1998) and The Millennium Declaration of 2000 among other. These conventions have brought to the forefront the matter of gender equality and rights which include political participation. This has gone hand in hand with the provision of donor funds to support women in politics. The accessibility of donor funds, channeled through International and local Non Governmental Organisations, Religious bodies, Embassies, and International foundations has played a crucial role in stimulating the intensification of national level organizations that support women's political activities (Tripp,1999). They have supported efforts of women to participate in civic education, constitutional reform, legislative reform, leadership training, and programs for women parliamentarians. All these have been essential in increasing women's political participation in Africa.

3.6 The Quota Systems

The positive trends in women's political participation in Africa have also been abetted by the increased number of countries that have introduced quota systems for women's representation in parliament and in local government. A landmark was accomplished in the September 2008 Rwandan elections when women won 44 of the 80 seats in parliament, the highest percentage of women elected to parliament in the world (African Development Forum, 2008).

The quota system has generated commitments to women's amplified representation by most African countries; this has been a critical factor in pressing forward women's political representation. African leaders have established quotas for women's political representation at various levels of the government structures as a strategic tactic for improving women's political participation (Bhatla et al, 2102). In this regard;

Uganda set an important precedent for Africa by providing for one third female representation in local councils. In the Mozambican elections women won one quarter of the seats in the National Assembly, largely due to FRELIMO's 35 percent quota... In South Africa, the large number of women in parliament and other key political appointments is, in part, a result of the efforts of the ruling African National Congress (ANC), which has stood for women's political advancement and affirmative action. (Jacobson, 1994:40)

The above reflection illustrates that the quota systems have played a critical role in enhancing new trends in women's participation in politics. The enhanced political representation and participation of women has been determined by the political willpower above any other factor. Procedures such as party quotas and reserved seats, have accounted for the higher female representation in Uganda, Tanzania, Mozambique, South Africa, and a number of other African countries. The largest part of the higher figures for female representation world over has been an outcome of an assortment of quota systems. These positive trends have also been noted from the Zimbabwean case as women now constitute more than one third of the 2013 parliament. According to the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women, women's representation in parliament more than doubled from 17% in 2008 to 35% in 2013 and Zimbabwe has joined the ranks of the more than 30 countries globally that have used a special electoral quota system to increase women's representation in parliament (2013). This buttresses the role that the quota systems have played in improving women's political participation in Africa.

4. Challenges faced by women in political participation

Despite the above mentioned positive trends, there are some key issues which need to be ironed out for women to fully partake in decision making in the structures of power. The issue of representation and women's visibility in leadership and decision-making remains a major gap. The election of female heads of state in some African countries has not translated into increased parliamentary representation (Cole, 2011). Liberia has a female president but has only 11% of women in the lower house and 13.3% in the upper house (IPU: 2013). This shows that there are some gaps that still need to be covered as women in politics continue to face varying impediments. The large numbers of women in elected offices have not fully transformed into considerable legislative and resource gains. In this regard, while quotas are important in addressing the exclusion of women from the public political sphere, women have not fully benefitted much from the system. In most African countries women in the reserved seats as result of the quota systems have been like chess pieces, as they have been moved by men. Thus there are several issues which need to be improved or changed for women to wholly benefit from the emerging trends in their political participation. These include revolutionising the patriarchal and religious beliefs and intensifying capacity building and enhancement programmes to boost women's participation in politics. These should go along with the positive media coverage and halting political violence against women in politics.

4.1 Patriarchal and Religious beliefs in politics

Women's increasing presence in governance institutions has generally not had much transformative impact on the subtle patriarchal cultures and practices in Africa. Progression in opening up spaces for women's political participation in Africa has not gone along with the diminishing of the patriarchal power structures. Due to the influence of patriarchy, men continue to be in authority of the state of affairs and make decisions almost exclusively, even when the issues border on women. The few African women who have mustered up enough courage and strength to speak have received very scant attention and respect. According to Tripp (1999; 6);

“The prohibitive cultural attitudes against women's involvement persist among both men and women. These are reflected in voting patterns, media coverage of female politicians, and even in blatant attempts to suppress women's assertion of their political rights and views”.

The political space is largely andocentric making it difficult for women to fully partake in politics. Kellow noted that “the demands of family and household responsibilities often preclude women from even considering participating in politics. This is reinforced by women's fear of rejection or even violence from husband and family if they strive to enter politics” (2010). The unequal division of occupations, jobs, and tasks in society places makes it difficult for women to fully take part in politics.

Religion is one of the instruments which have been used in keeping women in continuous servitude, domination, and underrepresentation in decision making. The beliefs and values of most religions are sexist and patriarchal in structure and character, as they continuously seek to suppress women. The continued reference to the subservient position of the female gender is testimony to the perception of the place of women in the scheme of things. Most religions have a patriarchal view of the relationship between the genders. This has made it difficult for women to fully participate in politics. This has mainly been reflected by the Arab countries which have around 15.7% of women in politics (IPU, 2013).

4.2 Embarking on Strengthening women's Capacities

The Government, Civil society Organisations and the Non Governmental Organisations and other stakeholders should embark upon powerful capacity building and enhancement programmes for prospective women candidates. This should go hand in hand with plans towards the establishment of a partnership or around a critical mass of competent women in politics. Civil society organisations in Africa continue to play a vital role in advancing women's participation in politics and elections. Much of the work focusing on attaching a sense of harmony among women to conquer the impediments they come across has been conducted by national women's groups in partnership and with technical assistance from international actors. Women's low perception of themselves makes it difficult for them to challenge men, participating in decision-making structures, and voting for other women. According to the Economic Commission of Africa, "in collaboration with NGOs, the media, and traditional leaders, raise awareness on the rights of women and girls through appropriate messages that would have the effect of accelerating changes in attitudes and practices that currently negatively affect their advancement in society" (2009). This should mainly be conducted in rural Africa where most women are located and most of these women are generally not aware of the laws that boost their legal status. The capacity building is crucial in driving the rural women to partake in politics. Rural women still lack basic understanding of political systems and the role of governments. As a result it prevents them from knowing their rights and how to claim them, and from appreciating how much elections can help them to seize the opportunities that will be presented. Thus intensive campaigns should be conducted in the African countries to gain meaningful achievements in the emerging trends in women's political participation.

4.3 Tackling Political Violence

As noted earlier on, women's political participation is improving in Africa, however; significant obstacles remain in the way of ensuring that the electoral process is not undermined by political violence. It is essential in African countries to eradicate political violence so that women can freely take part in the election processes. Female candidates and their supporters have been routinely confronted with gender-based intimidation that creates an aggressive climate and pushes some women to abandon their campaigns. It is of paramount importance to condense the political violence before and after elections so that women can fully participate in elections. According to the Economic Commission of Africa African governments should "address violence through sustained law reform; capacity enhancement of enforcement agencies; public awareness campaigns (inclusive of strategies to reverse the culture of silence surrounding violence), its relegation as a private issue and the impunity with which such crimes are committed" (2009). Thus violence against women during and after elections should be tackled so that women can safely partake in politics. Carrillo (2009) asserted that even though women have advanced in the quality and quantity of their political participation in more or less every country, women are still experiencing gender based harassment and violence in politics and they continue being victims of harassment and violence. This has forced some African women to renounce their positions, leaving men in the positions of power. Security sector transformations are essential in reforming the gendered relations that presently characterise African security institutions and systems. This will tackle the systems of masculinities which are the major basis for violence against women.

4.4 Media coverage of Women in Politics

Media has a great influence in human life. Media acts as both an executor and as a protagonist in promoting equal participation of men and women in elections. Media can be an accomplice to gender based discrimination by portraying stereotypical sensational images of women (Anand, undated). Women in Politics Support Unit have continuously carried out an analysis of media coverage of women politicians in Zimbabwe. From the reports it has been noted that there is need for a lot of work to be done for women politicians to be reported on more often and in a positive manner, little change has been witnessed till today (Tsami, 2012). These issues should be refined in most African countries.

This is critical due to the fact that “media coverage is the very lifeblood of politics because it shapes the perceptions that form the reality on which political action is based. Media do more than depict the political environment; they are the political environment” (Grabler, 2001). This shows that there is need for positive coverage of women in politics as media plays a great role in shaping the political environment of any country. Efforts should be made to ensure that media provides balanced coverage that empowers women. The impact of visual media as a very powerful vehicle for communicating ideas and images is tremendous. According to Matekaire;

The media plays a significant role in determining how women in politics and decision- making are viewed and perceived by society in general. The media not only plays an important role in shaping the values of society but also reflects those values...The media is a chronicler of events, an informer, an educator, a transformative space and a tool to change society. Women in politics play a vital role in ensuring the democratic governance of this country and therefore their contribution to this processes need to be analyzed in the appropriate context by the media (2003).

This reflects the great role of media in politics, amongst other factors. Political advertising has demonstrated to be an important element of contemporary elections. Political advertising influences voters in support of one candidate or another. Efforts should be made to provide equal coverage for women and men regardless of the political party. It is consequently crucial to ensure that every candidate has access to the media, in particular radio and television, since most voters gain their knowledge about politics through the media. Media should refrain from undermining the abilities of the few women politicians. Media should not portray a negative picture about women which are meant to undermine them. Mass media should recognize and accord equal value and dignity to men and women.

4.5 Campaigning Strategies and Resources

Limited knowledge of political systems and policy mechanisms restrict women’s ability to formulate an effective campaign platform. According to Kellow (2010) “political inexperience makes it much harder for women to access existing power structures and know how to influence them”. Thus there is need to support women in acquiring skills in fundraising, public speaking and campaigning skills, which are very essential to run an effective campaign and win public support. Women should be assisted with financial resources to run effective constituency campaigns such that they can compete with established men in the communities they live in.

5. Conclusion

There is no doubt that progress has been made in increasing women’s political participation in Africa. The new trends in the participation of women show a positive improvement in the participation of women in Africa. This is a positive development given that increasing the number of women in politics is a tactical means of eradicating the structural foundations of inequality between men and women. The presence of women in the political offices will enable them to stand for their needs and interests on decisions that affect their lives. A combination of factors has led to these positive developments. Quotas have been the most effective short-term strategy for getting women into office. However, women have been limited to lower house in parliament and much work is yet to be done in the upper house in most African countries. The increase in the quantity of women in political participation in the lower house has not effusively resulted in much transformation in the African political institutions to become responsive to the needs of women. Even with quotas there has been slow progression in increasing the numbers of women involved in formal politics, and additional strategies are needed to address structural issues. It is clear that there is urgent need to revolutionize the patriarchal systems which characterize the political space thereby limiting the influence of women.

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