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East Africa and Indian Ocean

Economic History

Historical Linguistics

Historical Preservation and Cultural Heritage

Historiography and Methods

Image of Africa

Intellectual History

Invention of Tradition
- Language and History

Legal History

Medical History

Military History

North Africa and the Gulf

Northeastern Africa

Oral Traditions

Political History

Religious History

Slavery and Slave Trade

Social History

Southern Africa

West Africa

Women's History

Women and Politics in Africa

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Summary and Keywords

While women were never fully equal to men in the political sphere, women in precolonial Africa governed kingdoms, established cities, launched military conquests, and founded states. Some governed as sole rulers often as queens, while others governed together with a king, as a mother or sister of the king. A third arrangement involved a tripartite sharing of power among the king, mother, and sister, and a fourth arrangement involved societies in which an age set or group of elders governed the society and in which women exerted either direct or indirect power.

Women lost out in such arrangements, first, with the spread of Islam and Christianity and later with colonization. Women participated actively in nationalist movements, but their motivations sometimes differed from those of men, and were related, for example, to taxation and the desire to improve female education. After independence, women were further sidelined from political life with a few exceptions. It was not until the 1990s that we began to see the reemergence of women political leaders. This happened with the opening of political space, which allowed for the emergence of women's organizations, coalitions, and movements that pressed for an increased political role for women. The decline of conflict after 2000 created greater stability that enhanced these trends. Pressures from the United Nations after 1995 and from foreign donors strengthened domestic actors pressing for women's-rights reforms in the area of political representation.

Keywords: women, politics, parties, nationalism, quotas

African women's roles in politics have historically been circumscribed by the various types of governance arrangements found on the continent, ranging from sole rulers to dual-sex governance systems, to tripartite systems, and to councils of elders. Historically, the delineation between the public and private spheres was porous, particularly in societies where political roles were not clearly differentiated and articulated, allowing women greater latitude in taking on leadership roles. Authority in the home is not seen in conflict with political authority, as women politicians even today often draw on their roles as mothers to give them added legitimacy to run for office. Motherhood can become a basis for political authority in Africa in ways that are often eschewed by Western women politicians.

The exploration of the key forms of rule in precolonial Africa and the ways in which they were gendered shows that even though women were never completely equal with men in politics, they nevertheless were sidelined, first with the spread of Islam and Christianity and later with colonization. Women participated in nationalist movements, sometimes for reasons different from those of men, and they became involved in legislative bodies in anticipation of independence.

After independence in the period of one-party rule, women were marginalized. Later in the 1990s, they emerged in larger numbers in legislatures, as ministers, and as speakers of the house. They played larger roles in the multiparty era after the 1990s and in postconflict politics after 2000. Africa today is a global leader in many areas when it comes to women's representation in politics. Rwanda has the highest rate of legislative representation for women in the world, and Africa leads when it comes to

women in cabinets and in key cabinet positions, as speakers of the house, quota adoption, and in other areas.

Precolonial Era

Women in precolonial Africa governed kingdoms, established cities, led armies, launched military conquests, and founded new states. There were four general types of governance that had gendered implications. Some of these forms can be found to this day in parallel subnational traditional authority systems, even within the context of the modern state. They are often accommodated in the constitution either as part of the official governance structure or as a cultural institution of traditional authorities. The first of these historic governance arrangements was the sole ruler who might be a king or queen or queen regent. The second arrangement involved a female (mother or sister of the king) who ruled together with a king or chief. A third configuration involved a tripartite sharing of power among the king, mother, and sister, and a fourth arrangement involved acephalous societies in which an age set or group of elders governed the society and in which women exerted either direct or indirect power.¹

Sole Rulers

Some of the most famous women rulers in Africa were sole rulers, including the queens of Ethiopia, Angola, Nigeria, and Madagascar. In some cases they held power as regents until their sons or other male inheritors of the throne were of age.

Some of the oldest known warrior queens on the continent were found in Ethiopia, and many had a lasting impact on the country's history, often taking on mythic proportions over the centuries as their legendary status evolved. One of the earliest of these figures is Queen Makeda of circa 1000 BCE (also known as Queen of Sheba or Queen of Saba). She is said to have ruled Ethiopia for about fifty years and founded the Menelik dynasty that continued until Emperor Haile Selassie was deposed in 1974. Another Queen Ahywa (or Sofya) made Christianity the official religion of the Ethiopian Kingdom in 332 CE, and the infamous Jewish Queen Yodit is said to have destroyed the Axumite Kingdom and founded the rival Zagwe dynasty that lasted from 933 to 1253 CE. She ruled for forty years.

According to Carolyn Fluehr-Lobban, Meroë (the capital of the kingdom of Kush or Ethiopia) had at least ten reigning queens between 260 and 320 BCE and no fewer than six between 60 BCE and 80 CE. One Kandake or Candace (a common name for queens) repelled Alexander the Great's attempt to take over Ethiopia in 332 BCE. Another Candace Amanirenas resisted an invasion by the Roman governor of Egypt, Patronius, in 30 BCE. Much later, in the 19th century, Empress Menen Leben Amede served as regent for her son Ali Alulus. She also commanded her own army. Empress Taytu Betul (1850–1918) founded and named the modern capital of Addis Ababa. When Italy tried to invade Ethiopia in 1896, Betul, as commander of her army, defeated the invaders in the famous Battle of Adwa, which is said to be the most important victory of any African army in resisting colonial encroachment. She thus preserved the country's independence, making Ethiopia one of only two countries in Africa that was not

colonized. Empress Zauditu, who ruled from 1916 to 1930, was the last empress in Ethiopia's history. She saw Ethiopia's entry into the League of Nations.

Some of these ancient rulers still permeate the consciousness of people today and are referred to as symbols of historic female leadership as women seek new bases of power. Three of these leaders come from North Africa and to this day are revered in songs, statues, and popular culture more generally. One of these leaders is Tin Hinan, the 4th-century Tuareg queen and warrior woman from the Hoggar region of Algeria. Another is Dihya (also known as Kahina in Arabic), an Amazigh queen warrior who lived in the 7th century in the territory known today as Algeria. She is famous for having twice beaten back Umayyad invaders of the Aures in eastern Algeria and western Tunisia.

A third such leader is Zainab Tanfawit Nafzouia of the Almoravids, a Berber dynasty that controlled the Maghreb and Al-Andalus from 1040 to 1147 CE. She was from East Ifriquia or modern-day Tunisia and married the commander-in-chief of the Sahraoui tribe, Sahnaja Abou Bakr Ibn Omar. She was known for her skill in governance and decision making. Ibn Omar eventually moved to Niger and died. She later married his cousin Youssef Ibn Tachfi, her fourth husband, and together they selected Marrakesh as the capital of the Almoravids. They used her fortune and army to found the first great Berber dynasty.

Queen Amina Sarauniya of Zazzua (today Zaria) in Nigeria (c. 1533–1610 CE) was the first Hausa queen who gained recognition for being a military leader of Zazzua cavalry. During her thirty-four years in power, she expanded Zazzua through her military exploits to its largest size, increasing the amount of tribute paid by the conquered territories in the form of gold, slaves, and crops. She became famous for popularizing the building of earthen city-wall military fortifications, which came to be known in Hausa states as "Amina walls." To this day this type of wall is still in use.²

Some queens became famous for their role in resisting the encroachments of European powers. Queen Nzinga (1623–1663), for example, is famous to this day for leading armies to oppose the Portuguese in the territory that today is known as Angola and parts of Congo. She appointed women to key positions, including her army. She rose to fame for her role as an ambassador of her brother King Ngola Mbende in 1624 and became embroiled in a factional fight within the monarchy. At the time, the kingdom was being raided by the Portuguese for slaves and resources, in spite of a peace treaty with them. There are several accounts of how she gained power. One account suggests that her brother either committed suicide or was poisoned by her. Another account claims that she imprisoned him. Regardless, she was elected queen by a group of electors in Mbende's court and became regent of his son, Kaza. But she was opposed by a Portuguese-based rival and his supporters. They pushed her out in 1625, and the Portuguese were able to install her sister, Kifunji, as a puppet. However, Kifunji also served as a spy for Nzinga. Nzinga established herself as a leader in Matamba in 1629 and took over when the female chief Muhogo Matamba died in the 1630s. She formed an alliance with the Dutch, who took over Luanda in 1641 in order to oppose the Portuguese. She led armies into battle against the Portuguese until 1657, when she sought a new peace treaty. She died in 1663, and within eight years Matamba was taken over by the Portuguese.

Women led armies in other parts of Africa as well. Seh-Dong-Hong-Beh in Abomey (Benin) led an army of 6,000 women in 1851 against the Egbá fortress of Abeokuta. She was part of an army controlled by the king Béhanzin. Similarly, Edwesohe-maa Nana Yaa Asantewaa of Edweso (Ghana) led the resistance against the British between 1887 and 1900. In 1900 she led the final rebellion against the

British, ending in her capture. She was then sent into exile to the Seychelles together with other Asante associates, including members of the Asante court. This marked the beginning of the British protectorate in the Gold Coast (Ghana) in 1902. After her death in exile in 1921, the other members of the Asante court were allowed to return to Ghana.

Madagascar had a long line of women queens. The first women queens in Madagascar ruled the Vazimba, who migrated to the island from Indonesia between 350 BCE and 500 CE: Queen Rangita ruled between 1520 and 1530 and was succeeded by her daughter or adopted sister Queen Rafohy, who ruled another decade from Merimanjaka. There was another succession of queens in Madagascar from 1829 to 1897. Ranavalona I was the first queen of the Kingdom of Imerina, which was founded in 1540. When her husband and king Radama died in 1829, she announced that it was his intention that she claim the throne even though the heir should have been Rakotobe, the eldest son of her husband's eldest sister. She put Rakotobe to death along with other potential rivals to the throne, as was the custom at the time. Ranavalona I was known for her isolationist policies, for cutting trade ties with Europe, resisting French incursions, and for suppressing Christianity. But she was also known for adopting new foreign technologies and forms of knowledge, industrializing the economy, and professionalizing the army.³ She ended a friendship treaty with Britain and restricted the activities of the London Missionary Society and their schools. She built up an army of up to 30,000 soldiers, whom she used to expand and consolidate the kingdom, which she ruled from 1829 up until her death in 1861. The population is said to have been dramatically reduced during her rule as a result of her military exploits, deaths from an indentured servitude system, and from punishments under the judicial system.

When Radama II was crowned king after the death of Ranavalona, her niece Rasoherina was crowned queen consort. This arrangement lasted only two years, after which she usurped his throne with the help of the prime minister, Rainivoninahitriniony, who had been the instigator of the plot to overthrow the king. After she took power in 1863 her the prime minister became increasingly violent toward the queen, and eventually she deposed him and appointed his younger brother as prime minister. Rainivoninahitriniony attempted a coup against Rasoherina, but was thwarted.

Queen Rasoherina died soon thereafter and was succeeded by Ranavalona II, another of Radama II's wives and Ranavalona I's cousin. Ranavalona II ruled from 1868 to 1883 and was known for Christianizing the royalty. She was succeeded by Queen Ranavalona III, the last monarch of the Imerina Kingdom. She ruled from 1883 to 1897, during which time she tried to prevent colonization by the French by aligning herself with the United States and Britain, but in 1895 French military attacks on Antananarivo, the capital, and on the royal palace ended her reign as the French took over. The French governor Joseph Gallieni exiled Ranavalona to Algeria and abolished the monarchy in 1897.⁴

Dual-Sex Governance

A second type of precolonial power arrangement involved a female who ruled together with a king or chief. Among the Banyarwanda, Bamileke, Lunda, Chamba and Asante peoples, the king ruled together with a female leader, who was the mother or sister of the king. In Asante society, the *ohemaa* (queen mother) co-ruled with the *ohene* (king/chief) in all state matters. This was the only political position a

woman could hold, and it represented a complementarity of roles. Both the *ohemaa* and *ohene* occupied stools that embodied their spiritual ancestors.⁵ The *ohemaa* was senior to the *ohene* because the male *ohene* could not exist prior to the female, who is the source of life. There were some taboos surrounding women and warfare because women were considered physically inferior, and menstruation was seen as precluding them from warfare. Nevertheless, women rulers like Ama Sewa, Afrakuma Panyin, and Ama Saponmaa ruled consecutively in the 19th century as Dwaben chiefs. The qualities of the queen were to balance those of the king. She was the counsel for the king. Her main attributes included wisdom, knowledge, emotion, and compassion, which were seen as balancing the king's qualities of bravery and inflexibility. Women were seen as critical in their procreative roles but also as economic and social actors.⁶ The deities were also gendered and required spokespeople of their gender. Certain rituals could only be carried out by the female and male deities.

Another dual-sex governance system could be found in Swaziland, where the queen mother, whose official title was *ndlovukazi* (Great She Elephant), ruled with her son, who was king and who was referred to as *ndlovu ndvuna* (Male Elephant). Ruling from 1889 to 1921, Ndlovukazi Labotsibeni Mdluli, better known as Gwamile or Mgwam, was one of the greatest statespeople in Swaziland's history. She was regarded as one of the most savvy and gifted regents ever to govern Swaziland. Labotsibeni was credited with protecting the Swazi from colonial rule and strengthening the monarchy.⁷

Tripartite Governance

A third precolonial governance configuration involved a tripartite sharing of power among the king, his mother, and his sister. This could be found among the peoples of Buganda, Kitara, and Ankole.⁸

Buganda was a confederacy of clans, headed by a king, or *kabaka*. Women were at one time said to have ruled as *kabaka* in the 13th, 14th, and even 15th centuries. In the 1800s, the chiefs began to gain power at the expense of the king and the clans. Polygyny expanded, which undermined some of the power women had when clans were more important. The three most important positions in the court were the king, the queen mother (*namasole*), and queen sister (*lubuga*). All three could be referred to as king (*kabaka*). The *namasole* was the most important woman in Buganda, and she, like the king, appointed her own ministers, granted them land, had her own courts, collected taxes, and exercised power in the same way as the king. Her authority mirrored that of the king and was separate from that of the king. Her court was on a different hill from that of the king, and she received the same kinds of tribute and made the same kinds of redistributions as the king. She served as a king maker and mobilized her lineage and its supporters to back her son as the next king.⁹

The *lubuga* became the official wife of the king, but did not have sexual relations or children with him. She shared the throne with him and had the same powers he had, with her own land, courts, and chiefs.¹⁰ However, under British rule, both women's leadership positions were sidelined.¹¹ The British ruled the protectorate through the Buganda monarchy. The 1900 agreement between the British and the Baganda further enhanced the position of the chiefs and the prime minister (*katikiro*), who at the time was Sir Apollo Kagwa. The agreement does not mention the *lubuga*, but it does refer to the *namasole*,

who was to be paid an allowance that would be discontinued after her death. This agreement in effect sidelined the two central female positions in Buganda.

Age-Based Governance

For some societies, authority was organized through groups of elders based on age classes or associations. Each age class carried its own responsibilities and ritual obligations, and with age one gained not only authority but also respect, as younger people were to seek advice from the elders. Women past childbearing age became elders of a community, as did the men. In some societies, the age associations were mixed, in others male elders dominated and sought the advice of women, and in still others there were age-based associations separated by gender.

Women's leadership positions, as in the Ugandan case, became sidelined, first with the coming of Islam and Christianity, and later with the entrenchment of colonial rule. Except in the few instances where the colonialists allied themselves with women who proved useful in their effort to establish their rule, they generally ignored them and dealt primarily with male leaders, whom they elevated in importance, particularly in situations of indirect rule. Although there were efforts to bring women into the transition legislative councils in some British colonies and territories prior to independence, the colonial rulers were mostly interested in dealing with male leaders.

The case of Queen Madam Yoko of Kpaa Mende and Seneghum (1878–1908) in modern-day Sierra Leone was one instance where the British sought an alliance with a woman who was highly regarded for her brilliance and ambition. She used the British to gain control of Kpaa Mende. She employed diplomacy and conquest to bring fourteen chiefdoms under her rule.¹² The British made her paramount chief of the British protectorate from 1898 to 1906, but in the process she lost the support of many of her subjects because of her British alliance. Madam Yoko, however, was an exception to the rule since generally women were marginalized because the colonial administrators felt more comfortable dealing with male leaders as they had done in their home countries.

Nationalist Movements

Women leaders of the nationalist movements that fought colonial rule had the same motivation of overthrowing colonial rule, but their personal histories were quite different. Often the issues that animated women were different from those of men in the common pursuit of independence. Many of the early nationalist male leaders gained a nationalist consciousness when they studied in universities in Europe. There were some women who did so but to a lesser degree. Over two million men fought in World War II in armies outside of Africa, which also increased their awareness of their plight and increased their desire for independence. Both men and women suffered from displacement from their land, especially in settler colonies like Algeria, Kenya, and Rhodesia. They were exposed to segregation of various forms and suffered from problems related to taxation, forced labor, compulsory cash-crop cultivation, and brutality associated with these practices. Women also had their own

motivations, and they participated actively in the independence movements, even as fighters in wars in Algeria, Kenya, Mozambique, Guinea Bissau, Zimbabwe, and Eritrea.

In some countries like Algeria and Zimbabwe, they fought as nationalists, and the movements made no particular appeal to women based on promises of women's rights, while in other countries like Mozambique and Guinea Bissau, women's liberation was seen as integral to national liberation. FRELIMO (The Liberation Front of Mozambique or Frente de Libertação de Moçambique) leaders saw women's leadership as integral to creating a new type of non-patriarchal society. By 1966 the FRELIMO included a Feminine Detachment (Destacamento Feminino) contingent in the army. In 1973 the Organização da Mulher Moçambicana (Mozambican Woman Organisation) was created in exile in Tanzania. However, the nationalist movement had a fairly narrow socialist vision that was unable to accommodate the many challenges women faced during the war, while women leaders in FRELIMO rarely spoke out against the policy out of loyalty to the movement.¹³

Taxation was one issue that particularly galvanized many women in countries like Tanzania, Burundi, Cameroon, Nigeria, and Sierra Leone. In some cases, women resisted colonial taxation of single women, and in other cases they resisted taxation of women altogether. They sometimes opposed the rate of tax and also the means of taxation. Taxes had been used by colonial governments to create a wage labor force. Generally, men were forced to work on plantations or in mines in order to obtain a wage that would have allowed them to pay the tax. Taxes were also used to create disincentives for polygamy because of the added expenses per wife. And for single women taxes incentivized marriage. As Judith Byfield points out, the taxes in Abeokuta (Nigeria) pushed women further into the cash economy. Women resented the fact that they paid taxes and received nothing in return. The Abeokuta Women's Union, led by Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti, broke out in a revolt when the colonial administration sought to tax women in 1947–1948. They were taxed directly but also indirectly through their market fees. Women who sold in illegal spaces were harassed and paid additional court-imposed fines. Market women's associations in Nigeria actively protested market taxes along with price controls. With the interwar depression and the collapse of key industries that women dominated, such as the production of palm oil and indigo dyed cloth (*adire*), they felt especially oppressed by the taxes. Food sellers felt the pinch of price controls on foodstuffs. The Abeokuta Women's Union, which represented over 100,000 women, organized demonstrations for nine months during which they sang abusive songs, engaged in tax boycotts, signed petitions, sent letters to the press, and even sent a representative to London to present their case. The union had as its goal to maintain unity and cooperation of all women in Abeokuta province, a common and important refrain among women's organizations in that time period in many parts of Africa because it helped women organize across ethnicity, religion, and class. The Women's Union, for example, cut across classes and had provisions in their constitution that "no member of the Union should think herself better than others, all must move freely and happily."¹⁴ Their goal was to protect the social, economic, cultural, and political rights of women and men; encourage literacy; and fight for independence. The union succeeded in getting the female flat taxation suspended, and in 1948 women gained a seat on the transition council that was the precursor to the post-independence parliament.¹⁵

In countries like Uganda and Tanzania, women joined the independence movement to increase opportunities for women, including literacy, girls' education, and political participation.¹⁶ Women in Uganda also mobilized to expand women's rights to run for office, to vote, and to be represented

politically. In Guinea and Mali, women were brought into the nationalist movement on an equal footing and demands for gender equality, and women's greater public roles were seen as central to the independence struggle itself. Sékou Touré, the head of the *Parti Démocratique de Guinée*, offered women leaders such as Mafory Bangoura and Camara M'Balía a greater public role as women and had made women's political participation one of the four guiding principles of the party. Women participated in anticolonial resistance through their songs, dress, performance, dance, and rallies,¹⁷ but they also were involved in the 1953 general strike and the 1957–1968 railway workers strike. They opposed the French-appointed chiefs in 1955 and voted against Guinea's membership in the West African French Community.¹⁸

In French Sudan (Mali), the Women's Bureau of the *Union Démocratique des Peuple Maliens* (Democratic Union of the Malian People) was formed in 1958 and brought women into the independence movement. They demanded literacy and improvement of health services for women, according Aoua Kéita, a nationalist feminist Malian leader writing in 1975 in *Femme d'Afrique*.¹⁹

Women's Participation in the Postcolonial Period

Women began to participate in the political system already in the colonial period, often holding seats on the Legislative Council in the British colonies and protectorates. In Sierra Leone, as early as 1938 at the age of twenty, Constance Cummings-John became the youngest and first female politician to win an election in the African colonies in a modern legislative structure. She went on to serve a total of twenty years (1938–1942 and 1952–1966) as municipal councilor in Freetown. On the city council, she was concerned with such issues as market conditions, education, library facilities, and city sanitation. She also established in 1952 the Sierra Leone Women's Movement, which formed branches around the country along with a trading cooperative, a newspaper, and a variety of educational and welfare projects. She won a seat in the House of Representatives in the pre-independence 1957 elections, and in 1966 she was elected mayor of Freetown. She became the first African mayor of a major African city.

In Tanganyika, Mkamangi Elifuraha Marealle became the first African member of the Legislative Council (LEGCO). She was elected in 1955 and joined Mrs. Walker, who was a European, and Mrs. Kika, an Asian from Dodoma, as the first three women in the legislative body. Ndigwako Bertha Akim King'ori was the first nominated woman to the Legislative Council in 1957. Leading up to independence in 1961, Tanganyika had the largest percentage of women in any African parliament in 1960 with 10 percent (six) of the seats held by women.²⁰ All belonged to the Tanganyika African National Union (TANU), which won the election, and was the dominant party in the post-election legislature. Five women were elected, and one was appointed to the council by TANU chair Julius Nyerere in 1960. Ghana came a close second at the time with ten women (8.7 percent) filling specially elected seats in a parliament of 114 members. Dove Danquah was the first woman elected to parliament in Ghana in 1954 (see Table 1).

Women's organizations were instrumental in advocating for women's representation in several countries. The first two women representatives in Uganda were elected in 1954 (out of a total of sixty members), and they were British: Barbara Saben and Alice Boase. The Uganda African Women's League then wrote to the governor asking that he appoint African women to the LEGCO,²¹ and as a

result, the first African women representatives included Pumla Kisosonkole (of South African origin but married to a Ugandan), who was appointed in 1956, and Sarah Nyendwona (Ntiro), who was appointed in 1958. Similarly, the Kenya African Women's League recommended that African women be brought onto the Legislative Council, and as a result, the governor appointed Priscilla Ingasiani Abwao as the first African woman to serve on the Legislative Council in 1961 in Kenya. She was also the only woman who attended the pre-independence constitutional preparatory meeting in Lancaster House.

Other firsts included the election of the first woman, Senedu Gebru, to the Ethiopian parliament in 1957. She was a prominent educational leader and was active in the struggle against Italian incursions into Ethiopia. Wuraola Adepeju Esan was an educator and politician from Ibadan, Nigeria, who established the Ibadan People's Girls' School. She won a seat on the Ibadan Urban City Council in 1958 and in 1960 was appointed first female senator to the national parliament after independence. As so many in this first generation of women politicians, she maintained a keen interest in women's issues.²² Princess Wina Nakatindi became the first female member of parliament in Zambia in 1964. The first woman elected to parliament in Sudan in 1965 was Fatma Ahmed Ibrahim, a leader of the Sudanese Communist Party and founder of the Sudanese Women's Union.

Table 1. Legislative representation of women 1960–2015 (The data in the tables indicate percentages)

Country	1960	1965	1975	1985	1995	2005	2015
Algeria	5.1	1.4	3.8	2.4	3.4	3.4	31.6
Angola	—	—	0	8.3	9.5	15.5	36.8
Benin	0	0	0	4.1	7.4	7.2	7.2
Botswana	—	—	0	5.1	10	17	9.5
Burkina Faso	0	0	0	0	5.6	11.7	13.3
Burundi	—	0	0	9.2	12.3	30.5	30.5
Cameroon	—	2	5.8	14.2	12.2	8.9	31.1
		—	1.8	12	7.6	11.1	20.8
CAR	—	—	0	0	16.4	7.3	12.5
Chad	0	0	0	0	3.5	6.5	14.9
Comoros	—	—	0	0	2.4	3	3.0
Country	1960	1965	1975	1985	1995	2005	2015
Congo Brazzaville	0	0	9.2	5.7	4.8	12	7.4

Côte d'Ivoire	0	0	11.1	3.5	5	8	9.2
Djibouti	—	—	—	0	0	10.8	12.7
DRC	0	5.5	7	9.8	1.7	8.5	8.9
Egypt	1.8	0.8	8.9	2.2	2	2.9	—
		—	0	3.3	7.5	18	24.0
Eritrea	—	—	—	—	21	14.7	22.0
Ethiopia	0	0	1.6	0	5	2	27.8
Gabon	1	1.5	4.3	13.3	5.9	9.2	14.2
Gambia	—	0	0	6.1	0	13.2	9.4
Ghana	8.7	9.6	0	0	8	10.9	10.9
		—	0	14.7	0	14	13.7
Guinea	0	18.7	16.7	0	7	19.3	21.9
Kenya	—	0	3.5	1.7	3	7.1	19.7
Lesotho	—	—	0	0	4.6	11.7	25.0
Liberia	0	0	6.5	0	5.7	12.5	11.0
Libya	—	—	—	—	—	—	16.0
Madagascar	0	0.9	0	1.5	3.6	6.9	20.5
Malawi	—	2	6.7	4.9	5.6	13.6	16.7
Mali	0	1.3	0	3.7	2.3	10.2	8.8
Mauritania	0	0	2.9	0	0	3.8	25.2
Mauritius	—	—	0	5.7	2.8	17.1	11.6
Country	1960	1965	1975	1985	1995	2005	2015
Morocco	0	0	0	0	0	0	0

Mozambique	—	—	0	16	25.2	34.8	39.6
Namibia	—	—	—	—	18.1	26.9	41.3
Niger	0	0	0	0	3.6	12.4	13.3
Nigeria	0	0	0	0	2.2	6.4	5.6
Rwanda	—	0	0	12.9	4.3	48.8	63.8
		—	18.2	11.8	7.3	9.1	18.2
Senegal	—	1.3	4	10.8	11.7	19.2	42.7
Seychelles	—	—	—	24	27.3	29.4	43.8
		0	0	1	0	14.5	12.4
Somalia	0	0	1	4	0	-1	13.8
South Africa	1.2	1.9	0.6	1.1	25	32.8	41.5
		—	—	—	—	—	26.5
Sudan	0.4	0.4	6	8.5	8.2	9.7	30.5
Swaziland	—	—	1.8	1.8	3.1	10.8	6.2
Tanzania	10	10	8.3	9.6	11	21.4	36.0
Togo	0	0	0	5.2	1.2	7.4	17.6
Tunisia	1.1	3.7	3.2	4.3	11.5	22.8	31.1
Uganda	—	0	0	0.8	17.4	23.9	35.0
Zambia	—	5.3	5.9	2.9	6.7	12.7	12.7
Zimbabwe	—	—	—	11	14.7	16.7	31.5
Average	1.2	1.9	3.0	5.1	7.4	13.8	21.3

Source: Data compiled from Inter-Parliamentary Union, *Women in Parliaments, 1945–1995: A World Statistical Survey*, Series “Reports and Documents,” no. 23, Geneva, “Women in National

Parliaments.”

After independence, women found their leadership curtailed once again, only this time it was in the context of the single-party regimes that emerged, which often sought to depoliticize women and limit their mobilization to party-related mass organizations and women's wings of ruling parties. These organizations were often patronage-based associations that had a developmental or welfare focus and were used by politicians to increase votes and support for the ruling party. They included such organizations as the 31st December Women's Movement in Ghana, Umoja wa Wanawake wa Tanzania, Maendeleo ya Wanawake (Kenya), the Women's League (Zambia), and the Better Life for Women Movement in Nigeria. Sometimes women were reduced to providing entertainment and cooking for visiting party and government dignitaries. In some cases they managed to pass legislation to advance women's rights, as long as it did not contradict the party or those in power. Their agendas were controlled by the ruling party, as were their finances and selection of leaders, who frequently were wives and relatives of the male ruling elite.

Even in countries like Algeria, where thousands of women had joined the liberation movement and fought for independence in the trenches alongside men, women found their aspirations cut short after independence. Women's participation in politics was indicative of this trend. In the early years following independence, only a handful of women could be found in legislative bodies.

The countries that led the way initially were the first to become independent (Ghana, Sudan, Egypt), countries that had an African socialist orientation (Ghana, Guinea, Tanganyika, Sudan, and Tunisia), or countries that promoted Arab socialism in the case of Egypt (Table 1). By the mid-1980s, a new set of left-leaning countries increased female representation in Africa, including Seychelles, Guinea Bissau, Mozambique, and Cape Verde. The latter three had come out of longstanding liberation struggles against Portugal.

The influence of left-leaning parties and governments was diminished after quotas started being introduced on a larger scale after the 1995 UN Fourth Conference on Women in Beijing, which adopted a Platform of Action encouraging member states to promote the leadership of women in all areas, including politics. Prior to 1995, only seven countries in Africa had adopted some kind of quota at different times, and some like Egypt and Ghana did not maintain them for long. Today about 73 percent of all African countries have adopted gender quotas of some kind. Between 1995 and 2015, the percentage of women in parliament tripled. In the countries that have adopted quotas, women have on average 25 percent of the parliamentary seats, while those without women claim about 14 percent of the seats. A few countries without quotas like Seychelles have done quite well without them (43.8 percent), but the countries with the highest rates of female representation generally have used quotas.

The reason for this dramatic jump in female representation is partially due to the adoption of quotas. While this explains part of the reason for the developments after 1995, it does not explain everything. The one-party systems began to crumble in the 1990s across the continent, and new multiparty systems were ushered in. This new dispensation accompanied the opening of political space for civil-society actors, a more free press, and greater donor interventions. It allowed for the creation of women's organizations and movements that pressed for greater representation for women and provided training in leadership and electoral strategies for new women politicians. After the 1990s one saw more

women forming political parties in countries like Botswana, Cameroon, Kenya, Liberia, and Zimbabwe, and they headed or were secretary general of dozens more parties in at least twenty-two countries in the 1990s.²³

The other development that gave rise to greater female political representation was the decline of at least seventeen conflicts in Africa, mostly after 2000, that provided the necessary stability for governments to focus on increasing female representation and for women's-rights activists to press for change. It is thus no accident that most of the countries with the highest rates of legislative representation are post-conflict countries.²⁴

In countries with quotas, women claim 25 percent of parliamentary seats, while in countries without quotas, women claim an average of 14 percent of the seats. Of those with quotas, 34 percent have party quotas in which parties voluntarily adopt a mechanism to advantage women candidates in some way. About 37 percent have legislative quotas in which the legislation requires all parties to adopt a quota mechanism. 34 percent have reserved seats that are set aside for women of any party to run for office (see Table 2). There is some overlap because in some countries with reserved seats or legislative quotas, there are also parties that voluntarily adopt quotas.

Table 2. Type of Quota

Legislated candidate quotas	Voluntary political party quotas	Reserved seats	No quotas
Angola	Botswana	Algeria	Benin
Burkina Faso	Cameroon	Burundi	CAR
Cape Verde	Côte d'Ivoire	Djibouti	Chad
Congo DR	Equatorial Guinea	Eritrea	Comoros
Egypt	Ethiopia	Morocco	Gabon
Guinea	Kenya	Somalia	Gambia
Lesotho	Malawi	South Sudan	Ghana
Liberia	Mali	Sudan	Guinea Bissau
Libya	Mozambique	Swaziland	Madagascar
Mauritania	Namibia	Uganda	Mauritius
Congo (Brazzaville)	Niger	Kenya	Nigeria
Rwanda	South Africa	Niger	Sao Tome &
Senegal	Tanzania	Tanzania	Principe
Tunisia	Zimbabwe	Zimbabwe	Seychelles
Togo			Sierra Leone
			Zambia
15	14	14	15

Source: Global Database of Quotas for Women. A joint project of International IDEA and Stockholm University.

Some of the historic patterns of representation globally are not as important in Africa today. For example, it was once thought that democracies were better for women's political representation; however, today in Africa on average, women in democracies hold 24 percent of the seats, while in hybrid and authoritarian regimes, they hold 19 percent and 21 percent of the seats, respectively. Authoritarian regimes and democracies are equally likely to adopt quotas, although hybrid regimes are slightly less likely to do so. Also electoral system used to be more important for explaining differences in female representation, with better outcomes for systems with proportional representation systems over plurality systems. Today there is no distinct pattern of this type in Africa.

Executive Leadership

The changes in legislative representation for women after 1995 are evident in other areas of leadership in Africa. Prior to 2000, only nine women had run as presidential candidates in Africa, and only three had served prior to 2000 as head of state. Ellen Johnson Sirleaf was the first female elected president in Africa. Carmen Pereira served briefly as acting head of state in Guinea Bissau (1984), Ruth Perry was the chairperson of the Council of State of Liberia in 1996, and Sylvie Kinigi served as president briefly in Burundi (1993–1994) (Table 3). Between 2000 and 2016, at least fifty-four women ran as presidential candidates in Africa. It is interesting to note that the majority of women who have run as presidential candidates come from countries that have a very low percentage of women in legislatures, and a large number come from West and Central Africa. Those who have served as head of state or government have done so often in periods of uncertainty, unrest, and transition.

Table 3. Female Heads of State

Year	Name	Country
1984	Carmen Pereira	Guinea Bissau
1993–1994	Sylvie Kinigi	Burundi
1996–1997	Ruth Perry, Chairperson, Council of State	Liberia
2004	Elizabeth Alpha Lavalie	Sierra Leone
2006–	Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf	Liberia
2012–2014	Joyce Banda	Malawi
2012–2015	Monique Agnès Ohsan-Bellepeau	Mauritius
2014–	Catherine Samba-Panza (Acting head of state)	CAR
2015–	Ameenah Gurib-Fakim	Mauritius

Source: Worldwide Guide to Women Leaders.

Table 4. Female Prime Ministers

Year in office	Name	Country
1993–1994	Sylvie Kinigi	Rwanda
1993–1994	Agathe Uwilingiyimana	Burundi
2001–2002	Mame Madior Boye	Senegal
2002–2004	Maria das Neves Ceita Batista de Sousa	Republic of São Tomé e Príncipe
2004–2010	Luísa Días Diogo	Mozambique
2005–2006	Maria do Carmo Trovoada Pires de Carvalho Silveira	São Tomé e Príncipe
2009	Cécile Manorohanta	Madagascar
2011–2012	Cissé Mariam Kaïdama Sidibé	Mali
2012	(Acting) Adiatu Djaló Nandigna	Guinea Bissau
2013–2014	Aminata Touré	Senegal
2015–	Saara Kuugongelwa-Amadhila	Namibia

Source: Worldwide Guide to Women Leaders.

Since 1993, there have also been eleven female prime ministers. As with the presidency, many filled the prime-ministerial position only briefly or in an acting capacity because the country was going through a transition (Table 4). Since 1975 there have been twelve vice presidents. Specioza Wandera Kazibwe in Uganda served the longest as vice president, for a period of ten years

Liberia was the first country to appoint female ministers in Africa in 1948 and has had sixty-seven ministerial appointments held by women from that time until 2015. This is undoubtedly linked to the fact that the country never was colonized and had a relatively large group of highly educated women early on. Liberia was one of the first countries to grant African women the vote.²⁵ It first gave Americo-Liberian women suffrage in 1946 and then indigenous women in 1951. As early as 1948, Ellen Mills Scarborough was appointed secretary of education, and Etta Wright served as assistant secretary minister of defense from 1946 to 1956. Women held other positions of power as well. Liberia has had

four female mayors of Monrovia starting in 1970, and seven women have served on the Supreme Court since 1977, including two chief justices.²⁶

If one looks at the first ministerial appointments in African countries, they tend to be in what are considered the “softer” ministries of education, social affairs, women’s affairs, and culture. Today they are taking over key ministerial positions in defense, finance, and foreign affairs. With female foreign ministers making up one-fifth of Africa’s foreign ministers, proportionately African cabinets have more women foreign ministers than any other world region. In fact, over one-third (ten of twenty-nine) of all female foreign ministers globally are from Africa. Similarly, five of the African defense ministers are women. While this is not a large number, relative to other world regions it is proportionately more. Following this pattern, one-quarter of African parliaments have female speakers of the house, which is higher than the world average of 14 percent.

Women hold close to or more than 40 percent of ministerial positions in South Africa, Cape Verde, Burundi, and Uganda. Of the ten countries with the highest percentage of women in the cabinet, a disproportionate number (six) are postconflict countries, suggesting that post-conflict dynamics influence women’s leadership in distinct ways.

It is worth mentioning that in many countries, traditional authorities exist alongside state institutions. Women have been marginalized in most of these institutions, but some of the patterns of increased female political representation in formal institutions have become evident in these traditional governance institutions as well. For example, Mosadi Seboko became the first female paramount chief ever in Botswana in 2004. When her brother died, she would have been the next in line in succession, but her father’s relatives initially denied her the position because she was a woman. Her female relatives argued that the Botswanan constitution prevented discrimination, and she was eventually promoted. Prior to this, Seboko, who was a women’s rights advocate, had served as head of the sixteen-member House of Chiefs, which advises the government and parliament on traditional issues.

Conclusion

The growing presence of women in politics after the 1990s is not a new phenomenon, as evident in the long history of women who led armies, kingdoms, and territories either as sole rulers, in an arrangement as a dual leader with a man, or as part of a tripartite configuration. Smaller entities were often governed by a group of elders in which women had varying degrees of participation. With the spread of Islam and Christianity, women found themselves increasingly marginalized as political leaders, and with the spread of colonialism they were further sidelined. Women participated in nationalist independence movements, sometimes fighting side by side with men, but found themselves further excluded after independence in the new polities that emerged. Their political participation was circumscribed generally to women’s wings of parties or to mass organizations tied to the ruling party. Independent political action and advocacy were frowned upon.

This changed with the political liberalization that occurred after the 1990s, when autonomous women’s organizations began to emerge in larger numbers as political space opened up for civil society and a greater freedom of press and speech was allowed. The end of conflict in many countries, especially

after 2000, speeded up women's bid for political power, resulting in higher rates of political participation in post-conflict countries compared with those countries that had not experienced major conflict. The influence of international actors like the United Nations and its 1995 Conference on Women in Beijing also had an impact on pressing member states to take measures, like the adoption of quotas, to increase female representation. Generally, this occurred with combined pressure from below with the help of domestic coalitions of women's and civil-society organizations and actors.

Discussion of the Literature

Much of the literature on women and politics up to the 1990s had been conducted by historians rather than political scientists. Their focus was on individual rulers, gendered understandings of traditional governance, women's engagement of the nationalist movements, and post-independence state impacts on women. After 1990 one began to see greater engagement of the topic of women and politics by political scientists, particularly around issues of representation, quotas, institutions, adoption of women's-rights policies, democratization, and women's movements.

One area of interest has been the study of life histories of women leaders like Queen Njinga in what today is Angola: Linda Heywood, *Njinga of Angola: Africa's Warrior Queen*; Bibi Titi, the nationalist leader of Tanganyika: Susan Geiger, *TANU Women: Gender and Culture in the Making of Tanganyikan Nationalism, 1955–1965*; and Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti, the leader of the women's tax revolt in 1947–1948 in Abeokuta, Nigeria: Cheryl Johnson-Odim and Nina Emma Mba, *For Women and the Nation: Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti of Nigeria*.²⁷ A related genre involves memoirs written by women politicians and activists themselves. In this growing area of literature, one finds a wide variety of autobiographies, ranging from that of the first elected female president in Africa Ellen Johnson Sirleaf of Liberia, to women's-rights activist and environmentalist Wangari Maathai of Kenya, and Kenyan independence fighter Wambui Otieno (1998).²⁸ Both Johnson Sirleaf and Maathai were Nobel peace laureates.

Some of the earliest work in this field looked at women's exclusions from the state and the way in which the state influences gender policy.²⁹ Some focused on state feminism and the creation of national machineries to address women's-rights policy.³⁰ Others examined the way in which women's participation was curtailed in the one-party era and circumscribed to mass organizations, the role of women's movements in pressing for changes in women's political participation in the multiparty era, and women and power in postconflict contexts.³¹ Women's political participation and democratization was also of concern.³²

A large literature tackled issues of legislative representation of women, the stunning rise of women in Rwanda's legislature to the highest percentage in the world, the impact of electoral quotas and having women in the legislature, how regimes use the women in quota positions, and comparisons of the qualifications of women and male legislators. Some have looked at how the shift from a one-party to multiparty system affected women's relationship to political parties. The study of institutions has now expanded to looking at local government to women in the executive, the courts, and other such institutions.³³

The study of traditional authorities takes both historical perspectives such as Lynda Day's study of women chiefs in Sierra Leone to present-day impacts of traditional authorities on female political participation.³⁴ Another popular theme in the literature has focused on the ways in which religion influences women in politics.³⁵ New scholarship has looked at the rise of Islamist movements and women's responses to them.

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An excellent source on individual women leaders is Kathleen Sheldon's book *Historical Dictionary of Women in Sub-Saharan Africa*, 2d ed. (Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2016). Useful sources for listings of women leaders can be found online in the **Worldwide Guide to Women in Leadership**. It includes lists of women heads of state and government, queens, parliamentary chairs, party leaders, presidential candidates, ministers, ambassadors, and other leaders.

For surveys on attitudes toward women political leaders and on gender differences in attitudes toward politics, see **Afrobarometer**; **World Values Survey**; **Arab Barometer** (for North Africa).

Best news sources on African media are available from **allafrica.com** or newspapers from individual countries:

Onlinenewspapers.com

Thebigproject.co.uk

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Links To Digital Materials

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Aili Mari Tripp

Department of Political Science, University of Wisconsin-Madison

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