



# New Trends in Women and Politics in Africa

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## Abstract

This chapter looks at the increase in women as legislators, presidents, prime ministers, chief justices, and in other political leadership roles that took place after 1990 in Africa. It explores the reasons for this increase, linking it to political liberalization and a decline in major conflicts on the continent. It also took place within the context of changing international norms regarding gender equality, resulting in authoritarian and democratic rulers alike seeking internal and external legitimacy by promoting women as political leaders. Women's movements similarly played a key role in bringing about these changes. The article shows the limits of many of the arguments used to explain women's leadership cross-nationally and how they do not necessary explain African dynamics. Regional dynamics and even subcontinental dynamics need to be accounted for.

## Keywords

Women Legislatures Executive Judiciary Quotas Post-conflict dynamics

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## Introduction

Africa saw some extraordinary changes in women's political representation after 1990 and especially after 2000. The numbers of female legislators tripled between 1990 and 2010. More women began running for the presidency, and women were increasingly claiming positions as heads of state and government, speakers of the house, cabinet ministers, parliamentarians, local government leaders, and members of the judiciary.

Some of these gains began leveling off around 2015, particularly female legislative representation. Many of the explanations in the literature for women's increased representation in this period are based on global trends; however, there are specific conditions in Africa that challenge some of this general reasoning. This chapter looks at the ways in which African countries, including those in North Africa, reflect and diverge from these patterns. What becomes evident is that cross-national generalizations are useful only up to a point and that regional dynamics need to be accounted for. Even Africa itself is such a large continent, that subregional dynamics would also warrant separate analysis; however this is beyond the scope of this chapter.

Even though women had played prominent leadership roles in the precolonial period, they were sidelined during colonialism, and these legacies of marginalization continued into the post-independence period. This marginalization happened even in countries where women had participated actively and even fought in independence struggles and wars of liberation, such as Algeria and Rhodesia/Zimbabwe. The emergence of single-party states in which power was highly centralized around the executive and the creation of numerous military regimes served to further exclude women from power (Bauer [2011](#)). The few women who found their way into leadership positions were generally tied to patronage networks, often married or related in other ways to those in power.

It was not until the political opening that occurred in many African countries in the 1990s that women's organizations emerged and began to push for greater representation of women in politics. The end of numerous civil wars in the 1990s and especially after 2000 also propelled many women to seek positions of power.

Women had always held leadership positions at the local level as chiefs and other traditional authorities. In some cases, these institutions became even more important as state institutions crumbled in the face of conflict and poor management during the years of economic downturn after the 1970s. Political opening not only allowed for women to move into new positions of power in formal institutions, it also gave rise to women's leadership in some of these traditional institutions (Bauer [2016](#); Becker [2006](#); Nyamnjoh [2003](#); Steegstra [2009](#); Stoeltje [2003](#)). In Botswana, for example, where women's representation is low in the legislative and executive branches, women became visible at the local level as chiefs. They sought to represent women in their communities around issues of poverty, children, domestic violence, substance abuse, youth unemployment, inheritance, and land (Bauer [2016](#)).

This chapter explores women's representation primarily in formal political institutions: in the executive, national legislature, and judiciary. Local level politics is beyond the scope of this chapter, although many of the patterns evident in these other areas are becoming visible in subnational politics as well. The rest of the chapter explores some of the main reasons for these changes, starting with alternative explanations derived from cross-national research, which are evaluated in light of the literature emerging from African cases.

## Executives

## Heads of State

Prior to 2000, only a handful of women (9 in all) had aspired to the presidency in Africa, whereas in the short time period between 2010 and 2015, at least 31 women ran as presidential candidates. Up until 2000 there had been only three heads of state: Carmen Pereira in Guinea Bissau (1984); Ruth Perry, who served as chair of the Council of State of Liberia (1996); and Sylvie Kinigi, who served briefly as president in Burundi in 1993–1994 (Table 1). Of the 14 women who held the position of head of state, 8 were acting presidents, who served for a very short time.

### Table 1

Women heads of state

<b>Years in office</b>	<b>Name</b>	<b>Country</b>
1984	Carmen Pereira (acting)	Guinea Bissau
1993–1994	Sylvie Kinigi (acting)	Burundi
1996–1997	Ruth Perry, Chairperson, Council of State of Liberia	Liberia
2004	Elizabeth Alpha Lavalie	Sierra Leone
2004, 2005	Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka (acting)	South Africa
2006–2018	Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf	Liberia
2008	Ivy Matsepe-Casaburri (acting)	South Africa
2009	Rose Francine Rogombé (acting)	Gabon
2012–2014	Joyce Banda	Malawi
2012	Monique Agnès Ohsan-Bellepeau (acting)	Mauritius
2014–2016	Catherine Samba-Panza (acting)	Central African Republic
2015	Monique Agnès Ohsan- Bellepeau (acting)	Mauritius
2015–2018	Ameenah Gurib	Mauritius
2018–	Sahle-Work Zewde	Ethiopia

Source: Worldwide Guide to Women in Leadership,  
<http://www.guide2womenleaders.com> (<http://www.guide2womenleaders.com>)

Most women heads of state are from countries such as Liberia, Malawi, and Mauritius with very low percentages of women in legislatures. Ellen Johnson Sirleaf was the first elected female head of state in Africa when she took over the presidency of Liberia in 2006, winning reelection in 2011. She has served the longest of any female head of state at this writing. Joyce Banda, who had been vice president of Malawi, took over as president when the former president died in 2012. And Ameenah Gurib, who was president of Mauritius from 2015 to 2018, was the first Muslim female head of state in Africa. None of these countries had high levels of female legislative representation.

As in other parts of the world, women heads of state in Africa often came to power at a moment of transition, instability, political uncertainty, or crisis (Jalalzai 2008). Ruth Perry led the interim Council of State of Liberia that governed the country after the first Liberian civil war (1989–1996), which followed the ouster of president Samuel Doe in 1990 and years of political instability. Ellen Johnson Sirleaf was elected president of Liberia in 2005 after 14 years of civil war. Sylvie Kinigi served as acting president in Burundi following the death of president Melchior Ndadaye in October 1993. Agathe Uwilingiyimana served as prime minister of Rwanda from 1993 until her death in 1994, during the Rwandan genocide. Catherine Samba-Panza was also selected as interim president in the Central African Republic in the midst of civil strife in 2014 and served until 2016.

One of the factors that might make it more likely that women are elected or selected to lead in conflict or post-conflict situations has to do with the perception (whether accurate or not) that women are outsiders to the conflict and are not seen as aligned with one side or the other of a conflict. Even though women have been fighters in conflicts and have instigated conflict, the popular perception often sees them as neutral arbiters. This image is sometimes cultivated by women leaders themselves, as was the case with Ruth Perry and Ellen Johnson Sirleaf in Liberia.

Finally, as is often the case, if a country has a president and prime minister, women tend to hold the less important position. Thus, in Ethiopia, Sahle-Work Zewde was appointed the first woman president of Ethiopia in 2018. However, this position is largely ceremonial, whereas the prime minister, Abiy Ahmed, holds de facto political power.

## Prime Ministers

Many of the same patterns that apply to presidents apply to prime ministers. Up to the year 2000, there were only 3 female prime ministers in Africa, and, in all, there have only been 12. Often their tenure has been quite short, with some rare exceptions, including Luísa Días Diogo in Mozambique, who held power from 2004 to 2010 and Saara Kuugongelwa-Amadhila in Namibia, who has been in power since 2015 (Table 2).

### Table 2

Female prime ministers

1975–1975	Elisabeth Domitien	Central African Republic
1993–1994	Agathe Uwilingiyimana	Rwanda
1993–1994	Sylvie Kinigi	Burundi
2001–2002	Mame Madior Boye	Senegal
2002–2004	Maria das Neves Ceita Batista de Sousa	São Tomé and Príncipe
2004–2010	Luísa Dias Diogo	Mozambique
2005–2006	Maria do Carmo Trovoada Pires de Carvalho Silveira	São Tomé and Príncipe
2009	Cécile Manorohanta (acting)	Madagascar
2011–2012	Cissé Mariam Kaïdama Sidibé	Mali
2012	Adiatu Djaló Nandigna (acting)	Guinea Bissau
2013–2014	Aminata Touré	Senegal
2015–	Saara Kuugongelwa-Amadhila	Namibia

Source: Worldwide Guide to Women in Leadership,  
<http://www.guide2womenleaders.com> (<http://www.guide2womenleaders.com>)

## Ministers

Women have held ministerial positions longer than other formal political leadership positions in post-independence Africa. Ellen Mills Scarborough, who served as the minister of education in Liberia starting in 1948, was the first female minister in Africa. Liberia had a long history of women in high positions of power, not just as ministers but

also as supreme court justices, chief justices in the supreme court, ambassadors, mayors of Monrovia and other towns, and superintendents at the subnational county level (Tripp [2015](#)). It was not until 10 years later in 1958 that Burkina Faso had a woman minister, Célestine Ouezzin Coulibaly, for social welfare, housing, and labor.

Around the time of independence, we began to see an increase in women ministers, with 6 additional countries appointing female ministers in the 1960s, 18 in the 1970s, 15 in the 1980s, and 8 in the 1990s, and by the 2000s, the remaining 4 countries appointed their first woman minister. The types of positions women held from the 1970s to the 1990s were primarily in the areas of social affairs, the family, community development, women's affairs, education and culture, youth, sport and recreation, and public health. By the 2000s, the ministerial posts were expanded to include defense, finance, and foreign affairs, which were considered more consequential portfolios.

Women hold close to or more than 40% of ministerial positions in Ethiopia, Rwanda, South Africa, Cape Verde, Burundi, and Uganda. The global average for female ministers as of 2017 was 18.3% (including Africa). In Africa the average percent was 19.5% (see Fig. [1](#)). This gap appears to be narrowing as increasing numbers of countries incorporate higher levels of women into their cabinets and seek to exhibit gender parity.

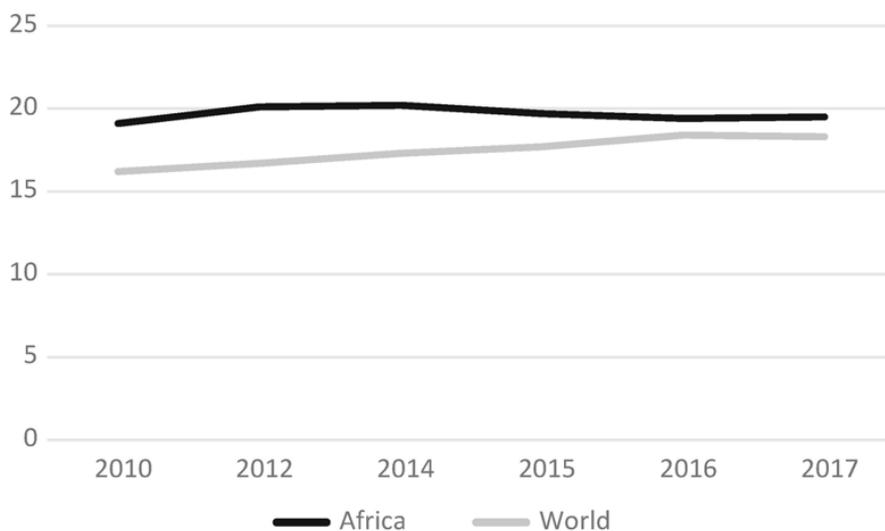


Fig. 1

Rates of female ministerial appointments in Africa and the world (2010–2017). (Source: World Bank DataBank, Gender Statistics, <https://databank.worldbank.org/> (<https://databank.worldbank.org/>))

Seven of the 32 countries with over 30% women in their cabinet are in Africa. With 50% of ministerial posts held by women in Ethiopia and 55% in Rwanda, both belong to the rarified club of countries like Bulgaria, France, Nicaragua, Sweden, and Canada that have begun to appoint cabinets with 50% women. In Ethiopia, the prime minister, Abiy Ahmed, reduced the number of ministerial positions from 28 to 20 in 2018 and put women in the top security positions, including Minister of Defense (Aisha Mohammed) and Minister of Peace (Muferiat Kamil). Women also head ministries of trade, transport, revenue, labor, as well as culture and science. Ahmed and the parliament appointed a

female president, who sees herself as an advocate for women's rights. The prime minister's chief of staff, Fitsum Arega, tweeted that "in a patriarchal society such as ours, the appointment of a female head of state not only sets the standard for the future but also normalises women as decision-makers in public life" ("Sahle-Work Zewde becomes ..." [2018](#)).

It is no accident that both of the countries where women make up half or over half of the cabinet – Ethiopia and Rwanda – are post-conflict countries. The average percentage of ministers in post-conflict countries is almost 25% compared with 17% for non-post-conflict countries in Africa. The countries with the most female ministers, namely, Rwanda (55%), Ethiopia (50%), South Africa (42%), and Uganda (37%), are all post-conflict countries.

Some have found evidence to show that levels of socioeconomic development, women's labor-force engagement, and GDP per capita measurements correlate with women's cabinet representation globally (Bego [2014](#)). However Escobar-Lemmon and Taylor-Robinson ([2005](#)) did not find this to be the case in Latin America, and others have found that this is the case only after certain thresholds had been met (Hogström [2013](#)). None of these patterns are found in Africa (Hughes and Tripp [2015](#); Adams et al. [2016](#); Stockemer [2011](#)).

Similarly, women's representation in ministries has been correlated with democracy cross-nationally. Yet some of the most democratic countries in Africa have some of the lowest levels of ministerial representation, namely, Benin (14%), Ghana (17%), and Botswana (16%). Senegal (20%), Cape Verde (25%), and Namibia (24%) are in the lower middle range, and South Africa has among the highest rates (42%). Some of the most repressive countries have some of the highest rates (e.g., Rwanda).

The general literature on women's political representation finds that governments built along coalition lines have on balance less women cabinet ministers (Krook and O'Brien [2012](#); Reynolds [1999](#); Whitford et al. [2007](#)). In Africa, this takes place within a particular framework. Research by Arriola and Johnson ([2014](#)) found that less women are included in cabinets when incumbents use ministerial positions as a means of distributing patronage to procure support from ethnic constituencies and thereby build coalitions. Women are not included in such arrangements by patrons, particularly when there is a large number of ethnic groups that require accommodation. These patterns continued even after democratization. Arriola and Johnson also found that women themselves tend not to be patrons because they lack the resources and do not have the jobs, favors, and money at their disposal to distribute.

There is a high degree of correlation between levels of female representation at the ministerial level and within legislatures. Thus, if there are higher levels of female representation in the national parliament or at the local level, this is correlated with higher levels of representation in cabinet (Krook and O'Brien [2012](#); Escobar-Lemmon and Taylor-Robinson [2005](#)) (see Fig. 2). These patterns are evident in Africa. For example, one finds countries like Ethiopia, Rwanda, South Africa, and Uganda with over 30% of the ministerial and legislative positions held by women, while at the other end of

the spectrum, countries like Nigeria, DRC, Benin, Burkina Faso, Mauritius, Guinea Bissau, Egypt, and Gabon all have less than 15% women in both ministerial and legislative positions.

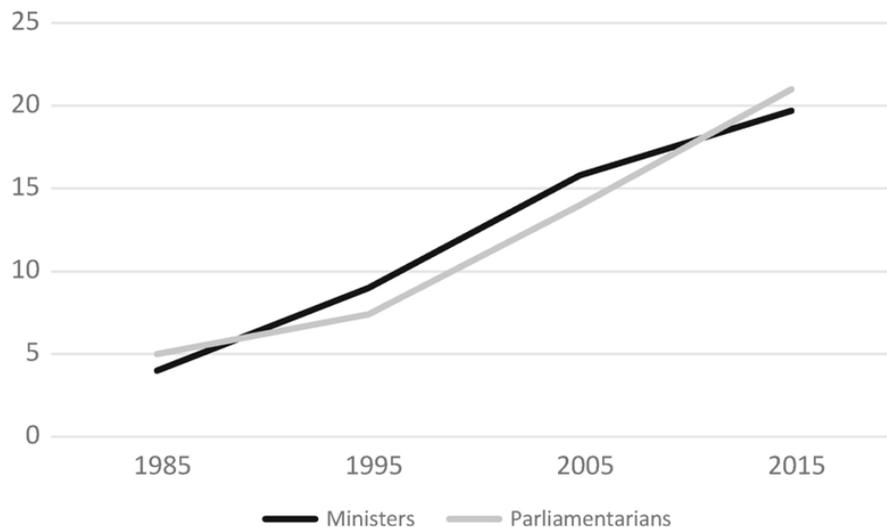


Fig. 2

Female ministers (%) and female parliamentarians (%) (1985–2015).

(Source: World Bank, DataBank, Gender Statistics,

<https://databank.worldbank.org/> (<https://databank.worldbank.org/>))

However, the reasons for this pattern of correlation between female representation in parliaments and ministerial appointments are not the same in Africa as we find elsewhere. This is true in both parliamentary and presidential systems although the levels of representation are generally said to be higher in parliamentary systems. In parliamentary systems, the supply and demand of legislators should result in direct contagion effects. The impact is less direct in presidential systems, where the president does not select cabinet members from the legislature (Stockemer 2017). However, there are only three strictly parliamentary systems in Africa, and they have quite disparate levels of female ministerial representation (50% in Ethiopia and 7% in Somalia, 10% Mauritius), thus no such pattern is evident. In Africa, the type of political system does not produce vastly different outcomes in terms of women's ministerial representation (Table 3).

### Table 3

Political system effects on female ministerial representation, 2017

	<b>Presidential system with no prime minister (13)</b>	<b>Presidential with prime minister (14)</b>	<b>Semi-presidential with prime minister (16)</b>	<b>Other (9)<sup>a</sup></b>
<b>Average rates of female ministerial representation</b>	19%	19.7%	18.5%	22.7%

Source: UN Women

<sup>a</sup>Constitutional monarchy with prime minister, monarchy without prime minister, parliamentary system, combined head of state and government

## Vice Presidents

There have been 15 countries with female vice presidents in Africa since 1975, starting with Elisabeth Domitién in Central African Republic. Specioza Wandira Kazibwe of Uganda was the longest serving president from 1994 to 2003. As with presidents, the countries with female vice presidents or deputy presidents are not necessarily countries that have promoted women's political representation or engagement as they include Central African Republic, São Tomé and Príncipe, the Gambia, Malawi, Mauritius, and Zambia (Table 4).

### Table 4

Female vice presidents

1975–1976	Élisabeth Domitién	Central African Republic
1980–1991	Alda Neves da Graça do Espírito Santo	São Tomé and Príncipe
1992–present	Kadidja Abeba	Djibouti
1994–2003	Dr. Specioza Wandira Kazibwe	Uganda
1997–2017	Aisatou N’Jie Saidu	The Gambia
2004–2014	Joyce Mujuru	Zimbabwe
2005–2008	Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka	South Africa
2005–2006	Alice Nzomukunda	Burundi
2006–2007	Marina Barampama	Burundi
2008–2009	Baleka Mbete	South Africa
2009–2012	Joyce Banda	Malawi
2010–2012	Monique Agnès Ohsan-Bellepeau	Mauritius
2015–	Inonge Wina	Zambia
2015–	Samiah Suluhu	Tanzania
2017–	Fatoumata Jallow-Tambajang	The Gambia
2018–	Jewel Howard Taylor	Liberia

Source: Worldwide Guide to Women in Leadership,  
<http://www.guide2womenleaders.com> (<http://www.guide2womenleaders.com>)

## Legislative Representation

## Speakers of the House

Women are speakers of the house in 32% (17) of African parliaments in 2019, which is higher than the world average of 19.7%, according to the Inter-Parliamentary Union. As with heads of state and government, we saw a major change with an increase in speakers of the house after 2000. Up until that time, only six women had served in this position. South Africa has had three consecutive female speakers since 1994. And Lesotho has had the same between 1999 and 2017. The Gambia has had three women since 2005. Here, the regional preponderance of southern African countries (five in all) suggests that pressure from the regional trade bloc, the Southern Africa Development Community (SADC), may have prevailed in influencing some of these choices that were out of the hands of the electorate (Table 5).

### Table 5

Speakers of the house in Africa

<b>Botswana</b>	Margaret Nasha	2009–2014
	Gladys Kokorwe	2014–present
<b>Burundi</b>	Immaculée Nahayo	2004–2007
<b>Cape Verde</b>	Carmen Peirra	1975–1980)
<b>DRC</b>	Philomène Omatuku Atshakawo Akatshi	2000–
	Almaz Meko	1995
<b>Ethiopia</b>	Muferiat Kamil	2018–
	Keria Ibrahim <sup>a</sup>	2018–
<b>Equatorial Guinea</b>	María Teresa Efua Asangono <sup>a</sup>	2015–present
	Rose Francine Rogombé <sup>a</sup>	2009–2015
<b>Gabon</b>	Lucie Milebou Aubusson <sup>a</sup>	2015–present
	Belinda Bidwell	2006–2007
<b>Gambia</b>	Fatoumata Jahumpa Ceesay	2007–2010
	Mariam Jack-Denton	2017–
<b>Ghana</b>	Joyce Bamford-Addo	2009–2013
<b>Guinea</b>	Jeanne Martin-Cisse	2010–2017
<b>Guinea Bissau</b>	Carmen Pereira	1984–1989
<b>Lesotho</b>	Ntlhoi Motsamai	1999–2012, 2014– 2017

	Mamonaheng Mokitimi <sup>a</sup>	2017–present
<b>Liberia</b>	Grace Minor	2002–2003
<b>Madagascar</b>	Marie Zénaïde Lechat Ramampy	2006
<b>Malawi</b>	Catherine Gotani Hara	2019–
<b>Mauritius</b>	Maya Hanoomanjee	2014–present
<b>Mozambique</b>	Verónica Macamo	2010–present
<b>Namibia</b>	Margaret Mensah-Williams <sup>a</sup>	2015–present
<b>Nigeria</b>	Patricia Etteh	2007
	Rose Mukantabana	2008–2013
<b>Rwanda</b>	Donatille Mukabalisa	2013–present
<b>São Tomé and Príncipe</b>	Alda Neves de Graça do Espirito Santo	1980–1991
<b>Sierra Leone</b>	Elizabeth Alpha Lavalie	2004
<b>South Africa</b>	Frene Ginwala	1994–2004
	Naledi Pandor (National Council of Provinces)	1999–2004
	Baleka Mbete	2004–2008
	Joyce Kgoali (National Council of Provinces)	2004
	Gwen Mahlangu-Nkabinde	2008–2009

	Thandi Modise (National Council of Provinces)	2014–present
	Baleka Mbete	2014–present
	Trusty Gina	2004, 2006
<b>Swaziland/Eswatini</b>	Gerlane Zwane <sup>a</sup>	2006–present
	Lindiwe Dlamini <sup>a</sup>	2018–
<b>Tanzania</b>	Anne Makinda	2010–2015
<b>Togo</b>	Yawa Tzegan	2019–
<b>Uganda</b>	Rebecca Kadaga	2011–present
	Edna Madzongwe <sup>a</sup>	2005–2018
<b>Zimbabwe</b>	Mabel Chinomona <sup>a</sup>	2018–present

Source: Worldwide Guide to Women in Leadership, <http://www.guide2womenleaders.com> (<http://www.guide2womenleaders.com>). Inter-parliamentary Union, *Women Speakers of National Parliaments: History and the present*. <http://archive.ipu.org/wmn-e/speakers.htm> (<http://archive.ipu.org/wmn-e/speakers.htm>)

<sup>a</sup>Upper house or senate

## Parliamentarians

African parliaments have some of the highest rates of representation of women in the world. Rwanda, for example, has the highest rate of women legislators globally, with women holding 68% of the seats. One of the main ways in which women have increased their levels of representation has been through the adoption of quotas, especially after 1995, the year of the UN Fourth Conference on Women held in Beijing. The conference adopted a Platform of Action, requiring member states to advance women's leadership in all areas, including the legislature. Up until that time only six countries in Africa had adopted quotas, whereas today 72% of African countries have adopted some form of quota. The adoption of quotas resulted in major jumps in female representation,

sometimes almost overnight. In Rwanda, there was a jump from 17% in 1993 prior to the genocide to 64% in 2014. In Algeria there was a jump from 7.2% in 2007 election to 31.6 in the 2012 election. Quotas had especially powerful effects after the end of conflict in terms of their impact on women's representation (Fig. 3).

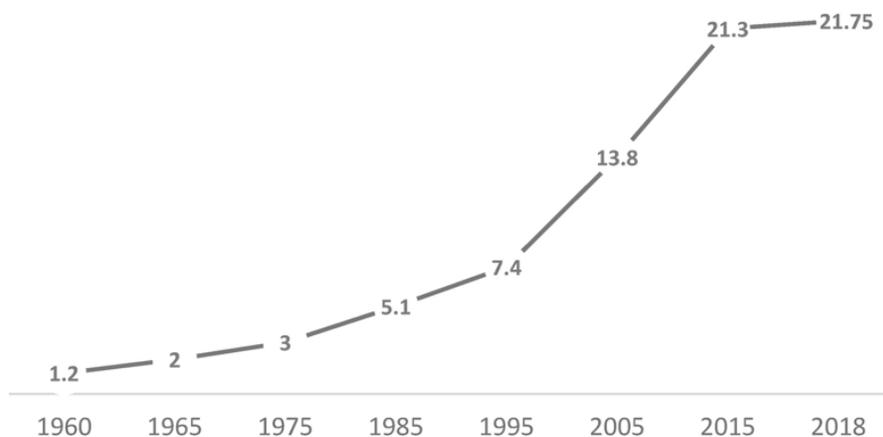


Fig. 3

Female parliamentary representation in Africa (%) (1960–2018). (Source: IPU database, *Women in Parliaments 1945–1995: A World Statistical Survey*, IPU, Geneva 1995; IPU database, *Women in National Parliaments*, <http://archive.ipu.org/wmn-e/classif.htm> (<http://archive.ipu.org/wmn-e/classif.htm>))

## Judiciary

There has been much less written about women in the judiciary than the other branches of government in Africa. The gender composition of courts is changing along with the other political institutions, and there has been an increase in chief justices between 2000 and 2015 with the increase in political liberalization. New constitutions were adopted, and the judiciaries became more independent of executive control. Women's rights movements called on governments to use new laws to advance women's status (Dawuni [2016](#)).

Dawuni and Kang ([2015](#)) examined the judicial branch of government in depth, dividing the legal systems in Africa into three main categories: common law systems, civil law systems, and systems that use both common and civil law. Civil law systems are found in 26 countries, most of which are former French or Portuguese colonies. Common law systems are found in former British colonies, 12 in all. And finally, mixed systems, which combine common law and civil law, are found in nine countries, which were colonized by multiple powers or were partially colonized. Generally, elsewhere, civil law countries have a stronger record in promoting women to chief justices than common law countries. This, however, is not born out in the African cases, where half of the common law countries have had women chief justices, whereas only one quarter have had women presidents of constitutional courts in civil law countries. One woman was selected in the nine mixed system countries (Lesotho). It is possible this is tied to the general patterns of

encouraging female leadership by the commonwealth organization and SADC, since many of the former British colonies are located in Eastern and Southern Africa (see Fig. 4).

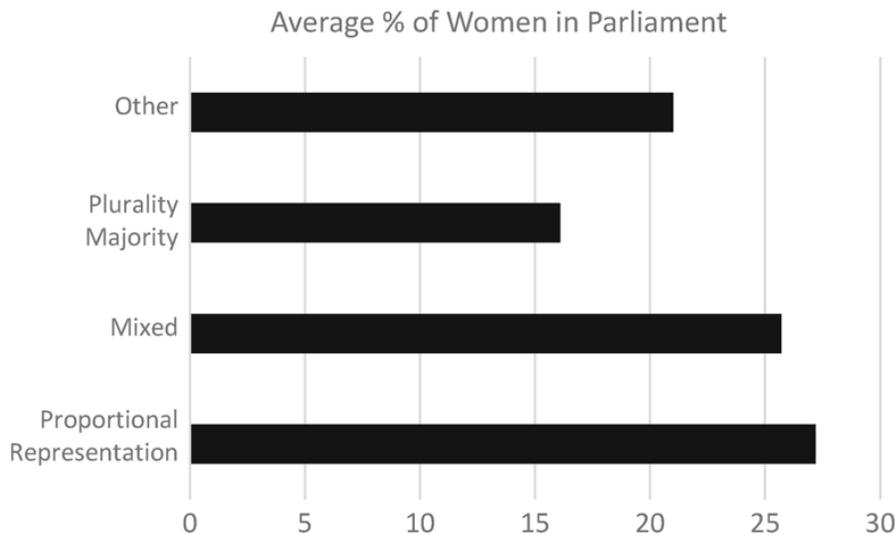


Fig. 4

Types of electoral systems and % women in parliament in Africa. (Source: Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, Stockholm, <https://www.idea.int/> (<https://www.idea.int/>); IPU database, Women in National Parliaments, <http://archive.ipu.org/wmn-e/classif.htm> (<http://archive.ipu.org/wmn-e/classif.htm>))

The chances of women becoming high court judges do not seem to depend on whether they are elected or appointed. Dawuni and Kang also found that the use of quotas in the case of the judiciary, which were introduced in the 1990s, seem not to have elevated levels of women appointed to the top position in the judiciary over other selection processes. Finally, gatekeepers influence female representation in courts as in other parts of the world. Presidents, in particular, influence the composition of the high courts, and judicial commissions and parliamentary vetting committees also serve as gatekeepers, influencing judicial appointments. Where merit principles are applied, female appointees tend to do better.

## Regional Leadership

Women's political leadership extends to regional bodies as well. Women make up half of the African Union parliament. The African Union Commission was led by Nkosazana Dhlamini-Zuma from 2012 to 2017, making her the first woman to lead the organization (including its predecessor). From 2004 to 2009, Tanzania's Gertrude Mongella was the first president of the AU's Pan-African Parliament. Gambia's Fatoumata Ceesay has held the position of deputy speaker of the parliament of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), which is made up of 15 member states. Margaret Nantongo

Zziwa is speaker of the East African Legislative Assembly. Gambia's Fatou Bensouda from Gambia serves as the chief prosecutor in the International Criminal Court. All but one of the current five African judges on the International Criminal Court are women.

## Explaining New Trends in Women's Political Leadership

A number of factors help explain the aforementioned changes in women's political leadership in Africa, ranging from institutional to cultural and structural factors. Changing international norms as well as the role of actors like women's movements, political authorities, and international donors have influenced these changes. Although some factors explain the overall trends, some are specific to particular forms of leadership, like legislative representation, where quotas feature prominently whereas they have had less impact within the judiciary. Many of the explanations that are advanced cross-nationally do not apply in Africa. A few of these are discussed below, before exploring some of the explanations that are more tailored to the African regional experience.

### Alternative Arguments

#### Proportional Representation Systems

Proportional representation (PR) systems are generally correlated with higher levels of female representation (McAllister and Studlar [2002](#); Norris [1985](#); Reynolds [1999](#)). Although in Africa PR systems do slightly better than mixed systems and better than plurality systems, when examined longitudinally and statistically in conjunction with other variables like quotas and post-conflict impacts, the impact of electoral system becomes negligible (Hughes and Tripp [2015](#)). The largest number of countries in Africa have majoritarian/plurality systems, 23 in all. At least 17 have proportional representation systems and 9 have mixed systems. Mixed systems follow PR systems closely in their effects on female legislative representation. Very few changes have occurred in electoral systems. In fact, only Rwanda, Namibia, and South Africa changed to PR systems. However, PR on its own cannot explain women's representation over time in Africa.

#### Socioeconomic Development

Numerous scholars have linked socioeconomic development and GDP per capita levels to increased female political representation (Inglehart and Norris [2003](#); McAllister and Studlar [2002](#)). Some have argued that improvements in female education and participation in the labor force positively influence women's political engagement (True and Mintrom [2001](#)). While this may be the case in cross-national models, when regional effects are accounted for as in Africa, these influences are not evident.

Arriola and Johnson (2014) found that socioeconomic development does not influence cabinet portfolios, as evident in tests involving per capita GDP. Moreover, female life expectancy and labor force participation are negatively correlated (statistically significant) with female cabinet representation, as are other measures of socioeconomic status. This is also the case in other parts of the world like Latin America where labor force participation and education do not influence appointment of women as ministers (Escobar-Lemon and Taylor-Robinson 2005).

## Foreign Aid

In a study of 173 non-OECD countries from 1974 to 2012, Edgell (2017) found that foreign aid interventions targeting quota adoption have some influence. Like Bush (2011), Edgell argued that developing countries dependent on foreign aid use quotas as a way of signaling compliance with international norms regarding democratization, hoping to improve their international reputation and ensuring continued aid. Staffan Lindberg (2004), on the other hand, found no significant effects of foreign aid on women's political leadership in Africa nor did a longitudinal study I carried out with Melanie Hughes (Hughes and Tripp 2015).

## Left-Leaning Parties

Left-leaning parties in the 1970s and 1980s had been more egalitarian and therefore more encouraging of women's leadership. This includes parties associated with the liberation movements like the African National Congress (South Africa), Frelimo (Mozambique), South West African People's Organization (Namibia), and Eritrean People's Liberation Front. However, over time and with the end of the Cold War, the left-leaning party effects disappear while other factors like quota adoption and end of conflict become more important (Hughes and Tripp 2015).

## Religion

Culture is often thought of as a constraint on women's rights, in particular, religion or religiosity. Muslim majority countries are often thought of as less successful when it comes to women's rights. However, when it comes to women's political representation in Africa, religion has negligible impact, with women holding 20.1% of legislative seats in predominantly Muslim countries and 21.9% of legislative seats in predominantly Christian countries. Arriola and Johnson (2014) similarly found that Muslim countries are no different from Christian countries when it comes to female ministerial appointments. Moreover, Muslim majority countries had a larger proportion of women cabinet ministers than Christian majority countries in Africa.

## Colonial Legacies

Colonial impacts are also marginal, especially when considered along with other factors (Hughes and Tripp 2015). French and British postcolonial states converged with similar rates of female legislative representation in the mid-1970s, but British former colonies

overtook French former colonies after the 1990s. This is probably due to the fact that many former British colonies started introducing quotas after the 1990s, often spurred on by pressures from the Southern Africa Development Community and possibly also the commonwealth association of former British colonies, which had women's political empowerment as one of its goals. *L'Organisation internationale de la francophonie* countries did not have such goals or projects. Portuguese and Belgian former colonies had higher levels of female political representation than British or French former colonies after 1975. Here the post conflict and quota effects may have come into play, submerging the independent effects of colonial legacies (Fig. 5).

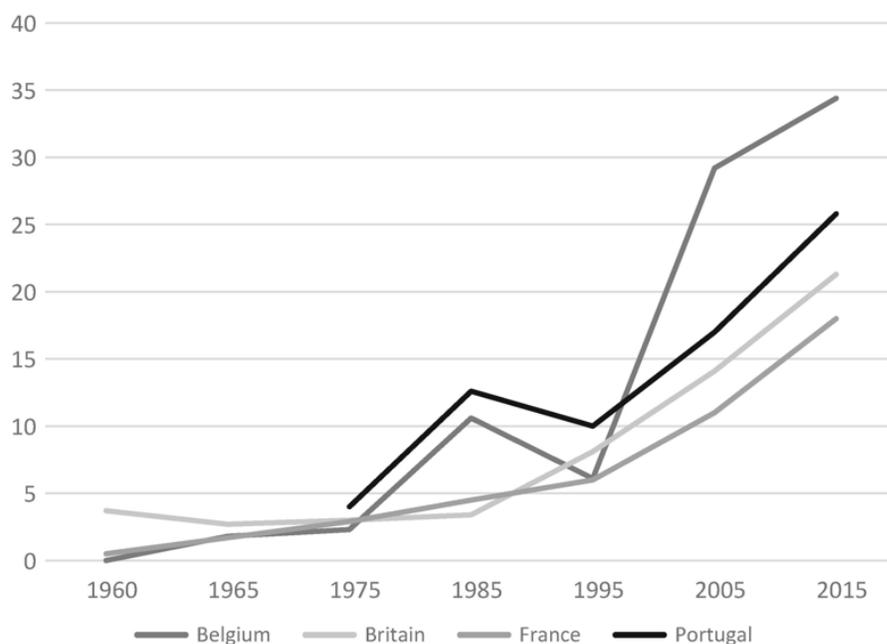


Fig. 5

Colonial legacies on women's legislative representation (1960–2015).

(Source: IPU database, *Women in Parliaments 1945–1995: A World Statistical Survey*, IPU, Geneva 1995; IPU database, *Women in National Parliaments*, <http://archive.ipu.org/wmn-e/classif.htm> (<http://archive.ipu.org/wmn-e/classif.htm>))

## Explaining Women's Political Ascent in Africa

Having eliminated the impact of democracy, socioeconomic status and GDP, left-leaning parties, cultural factors like religion, and colonial legacies, we turn to factors that have had an impact on improving women's political representation.

### Quotas

One of the most important explanations for increases in female legislative representation has been the adoption of quotas. Women in countries with quotas in Africa claim 25% of the legislative seats, while they claim only an average of 14% of the seats in countries that do not employ quotas. Three types of quotas have generally been adopted, with equal

numbers of countries adopting each (Table 6). *Reserved seats or women's lists*, mandated by constitutions or legislation or both, were adopted by countries like Tanzania and Uganda early on. These systems set aside seats in the legislature for which only women could compete. This approach guaranteed in advance that a certain percentage of seats would be held by women. While on the one hand, such systems have dramatically increased representation of women; they also tend to create a ceiling that is rarely exceeded as few women run for open seats in these systems (Edgell 2018).

**Table 6**

Adoption of quota types by African countries

<b>Legislated candidate quotas</b>	<b>Voluntary political party quotas</b>	<b>Reserved seats</b>	<b>No quotas</b>
Angola	Botswana	Algeria	Benin
Burkina Faso	Cameroon	Burundi	Central African Republic
Cape Verde	Côte d'Ivoire	Djibouti	Chad
Congo, Democratic Republic of	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	São Tomé and Príncipe
Senegal	Tanzania	Tanzania	Seychelles
Tunisia	Zimbabwe	Zimbabwe	Sierra Leone
Togo			Zambia

*Voluntary quotas* were quotas that parties themselves adopted with or without legislation mandating their compliance. Because party quotas required voluntary commitment, they were sometimes less effective than other forms of quotas. *Legislated quotas* have become more popular in recent years. Legislation is passed that requires all parties to include a certain percentage of women on their party lists and/or to arrange men and women on their party list in a way that ensures female representation. Sometimes sanctions are employed to give these quotas teeth, for example, not allowing the parties to participate in the elections.

All forms of quotas seem to have similar outcomes in Africa: Legislative seats on average result in women holding 24% of legislative seats, reserved seats 24%, and party quotas 23%. As elsewhere in the world, quotas have produced stronger outcomes over time as activists as well as domestic and international policy makers have learned to use placement mandates or sanctions better, while political parties have increased their commitment (Hughes and Paxton 2015).

In general, countries with proportional representation systems are most likely to adopt voluntary party quotas, while those with plurality/majoritarian systems are mostly likely to adopt reserved seats (Laserud and Taphorn 2007). In Africa, however, no such distinct association is apparent between quota type and electoral systems.

The design of the quotas matters, and political parties have considerable input into the ways in which quotas are implemented. The level of competition within the legislature also influences gender quota adoption and outcomes. The countries with the highest levels of political competition have the lowest levels of gender equity in representation, according to Christine Arendt. These include Benin, Ghana, Liberia, Malawi, Liberia, Mali, Sierra Leone, and Madagascar (Arendt 2018). However, Arendt shows that systems with dominant parties, such as those found in Rwanda, Tanzania, Uganda, and Senegal, are more inclined to pursue means to increase representation of women because they feel it is politically safe to do so and it will enhance their legitimacy at the same time.

## **End of Major Conflict**

The end of major conflict, similarly, has played an increasingly important role since 2000 in boosting all forms of female political leadership. Since the early 1990s, post-conflict countries have double the rates of female legislative representation and greater numbers of women leaders in top positions when compared with non-post conflict countries in Africa. Post-conflict countries in Africa are making considerably more constitutional and legislative changes compared with non-post-conflict countries.

The post-conflict dynamics can be accounted for by three factors. First, the decline of major conflicts created opportunity structures such as peace negotiations, constitution-making exercises, and electoral reforms that allowed women activists to press for a women's rights agenda and increased representation. Second, because women's experiences during war gave them common cause, they mobilized around these concerns through their autonomous women's movements. The end of conflict also disrupted

traditional gender roles and relations and created incentives for women to demand greater rights and representation. And third, post-conflict countries tend to be more easily impacted by international influences and new norms relating to gender due to the prominent presence and influence of external actors as well as increased donor dependence (Tripp 2015).

## Democratization

Even though globally there are correlations between women's increased political representation and regime type (Davis 1997; Krook and O'Brien 2012; Reynolds 1999), in Africa this correlation is not evident (Hughes and Tripp 2015). In Africa, regime type has little impact on quota adoption, for example, authoritarian and democratic countries are just as likely to adopt quotas to increase female representation. As a result, regime type has marginal impact on outcomes when it comes to women's legislative representation especially when considered together with other factors like quotas: On average in democracies women hold 24% of the seats, in hybrid regimes that are neither fully democratic or authoritarian, the average percentage is 19%, and it is 21% in authoritarian regimes.

Autocratic leaders, for their part, sometimes sought to implement quotas and advance women in politics to divert attention from other undemocratic ambitions and human rights violations. They sought both internal and international legitimacy. They sought to gain votes from women and portray themselves as champions of women's rights. In North Africa, the adoption of quotas was sometimes a way to demonstrate a commitment to modernity, democracy, and nationalism as well as to neutralize extremist Salafist and Islamist elements.

However, when examined from a longitudinal perspective, studies show that it is not levels of democracy, but rather *democratization* that advances women's political representation over time (Fallon et al. 2012; Paxton et al. 2010). This is borne out in the African context in statistical analyses. Longitudinal analysis suggests that while the expansion of civil liberties in the early 1990s did not start out affecting women's representation, it eventually began to have an impact (Tripp and Kang 2008; Hughes and Tripp 2015). The opening of political space, thus, allowed women's organizations to mobilize to increase women's political representation.

## Women's Mobilization

Domestic advocacy coalitions, in particular, became a key variable in explaining the adoption of gender quotas in Africa, which led to elevated levels of female legislative representation. Domestic coalitions cut across ethnicity, religious affiliation, party affinity, and other differences, giving them additional leverage. They also served as a crucial connection between international actors and pressures and domestic policy makers. These coalitions were made up of women's organizations, women's policy agencies, women in political parties, women's parliamentary groups, United Nations agencies, international and domestic NGOs, and donors (Kang and Tripp 2018).

## International Pressures

Although foreign aid may not have directly influenced changes in women's political representation, as mentioned earlier, pressures from the international community have had an impact. In Africa, the 1985 UN Conference on Women in Nairobi served as a catalyst for women's mobilization across the continent. Ten years later, the UN Fourth Conference on Women, held in Beijing, led to significant increases in rates of quota adoption across the globe as women's organizations lobbied multilateral institutions to adopt treaties, conventions, and resolutions regarding women's representation, thus changing international discourse and norms (see, for example, Paxton et al. [2006](#); Snyder [2006](#)).

The African Union and regional bodies such as SADC subsequently initiated efforts to expand women's representation within their member states. SADC, for example, set targets of 30% in 1997 and 50% in 2010. However, not all SADC countries heeded these targets: Eight SADC countries do not have quotas, while seven do. International multilaterals like UN Women and the Inter-Parliamentary Union as well as bilateral NGOs like the German Friedrich Ebert Stiftung Foundation and the US-based National Democratic Institute supported efforts of women's organizations to promote leadership and other forms of training and political strategizing to women candidates.

While women's rights activists used international treaties and support to advance their own domestic goals of increasing women's political representation, leaders of countries often used quotas and the increased representation of women to signal to the international community that they were modernizing and democratizing.

## Conclusions

This chapter has shown how many of the conclusions that are drawn from cross-national studies do not adequately account for region. In the case of Africa, which itself has enormous variance, many of the conclusions drawn cross-nationally simply do not apply. The chapter argues that explanations for women's increased political representation at all political levels in Africa need to account for quotas in the case of female legislative representation, the effects of democratization and post-conflict dynamics, local women's movements and coalitions, as well as international pressures and encouragements from multilateral organizations and international NGOs.

The chapter also shows the limits of findings from cross-national studies when applied to the African context. For example, while quotas and post-conflict influences may explain legislative representation of women in Africa, levels of socioeconomic development, women's labor force engagement, and GDP per capital measurements correlate have little impact. The process of democratization, not democracy per se, has been correlated

with women's political representation. Even though globally there are correlations between women's increased political representation and regime type, in Africa this correlation is not evident.

Generally, the number of female ministers parallels that of women legislators. In Africa, the reasons for this pattern differ from elsewhere because there are few strictly parliamentary systems in which ministers are selected from the legislature. Usually, civil law countries have a stronger record in promoting women to chief justices than common law countries. The opposite is true in Africa. These are just a few examples of the kinds of discrepancies revealed in this chapter when contrasting global findings with realities within Africa. More fine-grained research needs to be done to tease out the particularities of region in the African context and reasons for these divergences, particularly in the study of local governance and different levels of the court structure.

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