Wilson Center

The Southern Voices Network: Research Paper No. 5

WOMEN'S ACCESS TO POWER AND DECISION-MAKING IN AFRICA: ADDRESSING OBSTACLES AND OFFERING SOLUTIONS

by
Rhoda Osei-Afful,
Southern Voices African
Research Scholar

There is widespread agreement that equal access to power and decision-making for men and women is fundamental to representative and responsive governance. This has been highlighted in governance and development discourses against a background of women's unequal and limited access to public office. Women's substantive representation in political positions is crucial to closing the gender gap in decision-making structures. Within Africa, tremendous strides have been made towards improving women's political inclusion in recent years. This has resulted in significant and record-breaking milestones that have seen women assume various positions of power. Such achievements have taken place within the continent's relatively short history of democratic governance. At the same time however, many African countries still lag behind in improving access to power and decision-making for women as women generally continue to face well-known challenges that threaten their effective participation in politics and government. Addressing such challenges requires committed and sustainable efforts that involve key actors at all levels of society. This policy brief highlights the current situation on women's access to power in Africa, the challenges that need to be addressed to allow for more access, and offers relevant recommendations for African and US policymakers.

Please note that this paper was originally titled "Africa Program Brief 11"

AFRICA'S MIXED PICTURE AND THE CONTINUING CHALLENGES TO WOMEN'S POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

Significant improvements in women's access to power and decision-making bodies have taken place in Africa. The average percentage of female representation in national parliaments (single/lower house), has doubled in less than two decades[1] and currently stands at 22.6% . A considerable number of African countries (12 out of 52 with data available) have more than 30% female representation in single/lower house parliaments and 4 of the top 10 performing countries in the world with regard to female participation in national parliaments are African – Rwanda, Seychelles, Senegal and South Africa. Each of these four countries has an impressive female political representation of more than 40% in single/lower house parliaments. Beyond quantitative representation in national parliaments, women on the continent have risen to key positions such as house speakers, chief justices, deputy/vice-presidents, prime ministers and presidents. In some African countries women now hold powerful ministerial portfolios like Finance (Nigeria) and Defense (South Africa). Factors contributing to these significant improvements have included the adoption of gender quotas, openings accompanying political transitions and peace negotiations, strong and vibrant national women's movements, strong political will and international and regional efforts.

However, at the same time that such progress has taken place on the continent, women's overall access to power and decision-making on the continent remains generally low compared to the percentage of representation of their male counterparts, and women hold very few positions of power overall. In many African countries, few women get appointed or elected into key positions as cabinet ministers and mayors.

The majority of political parties in most African countries do not have any serious interventions targeted at addressing the imbalance in access to power between men and women.

Women's representation in decentralized local government structures is also low, despite its importance to deepening popular participation in governance. Political party leadership is heavily male-dominant even though these parties shape and influence policy processes and can facilitate or constrain women's political participation within and beyond the party.. Negative socio-cultural norms that adversely affect women's overall status and access to power persist throughout Africa, causing many women to continue to shy away from competitive politics. Thus, even though the right of all persons to participate fully in national life is enshrined in national laws in most African countries, practical challenges do not make the achievement of such rights a reality for women. The issues highlighted here have a negative

impact on women's overall participation in politics and government and do not promote fair, democratic and representative governance. Some of these challenges are further elaborated upon below.

WOMEN'S ACCESS TO POWER AND DECISION-MAKING WITHIN POLITICAL PARTY STRUCTURES

Political parties can and do shape the nature of women's participation in politics and access to power[2]. Internal party policies, rules and structures – both formal and informal – can serve to constrain or facilitate women's participation in political processes. Although women constitute an important constituency for political parties in Africa, women's access to leadership positions within political party structures is generally very poor. The faces of party leadership continue to be male-dominant and women hold secondary or less significant party positions. This is particularly worrying since much of what political parties do has various implications for women, whether it is the selection or placement of electoral candidates, the appointment of high profile office holders (if the party is in power) or the shaping of public policy.

It should be recognized that some political parties on the continent have adopted measures, such as voluntary gender quotas and candidate fee waivers, as mechanisms for boosting women's access to power and decision-making. The majority of political parties in most African countries, however, do not have any serious interventions aimed at addressing the imbalance in access to power between men and women. Voluntary

party candidate quotas, for instance, have been adopted in only a handful of countries. Many parties have created special women's branches or political wings, but these have been less useful in projecting and promoting women and women's interests within and beyond the party. Despite having huge and strategic potential, such as has been unleashed in South Africa in the case of the African National Congress (ANC)'s Women's League, women's wings are often deployed as electoral machineries for mobilizing female voters for the party's electoral gains. They have indeed been criticized for being used to relegate and marginalize women within the parties[3]. Thus, even though political parties play a critical role in influencing women's access to power, many in Africa are yet to take serious initiatives to facilitate women's access to power and decision-making.

DECENTRALIZATION AND WOMEN'S LOW PARTICIPATION IN LOCAL GOVERNMENT STRUCTURES

Across Across Africa, decentralization has been embraced in recent decades as a medium for delivering more inclusive and participatory governance. This is a departure from the more highly centralized and personalized mode of governance that had characterized the history of modern public administration on the continent[4]. Renewed interest[5] in decentralized local government structures is part of a set of governance reforms that swept through the continent in the 1980s and 1990s. There are high expectations that decentralization of power and resources will be an important vehicle for empowering local citizens, broadening political participation

and citizen engagement with government and driving development at the local level. Of particular importance is the expectation that decentralization can empower historically marginalized groups in communities, such as women .[6]

> Women's participation at the local level can be an important entry point and training ground for women's advancement in politics, making women's unhindered access to power and decision-making at this level as critical as the national level.

Indeed women's participation at the local level can be an important entry point and training ground for women's advancement in politics, making women's unhindered access to power and decision-making at this level as critical as the national level. Although local government positions are the closest in terms of access for many African women, their significant presence in such structures is yet to be solidified. While some African countries have extended gender quotas to local government structures, similar to what exists at the national level, many still do not have anything of the sort. Unfortunately, socio-cultural norms that impede women's access to power and decision-making are also more pronounced at local communities. In parts of the continent, the manner in which local government has been surrounded by asymmetrical social relations and informal institutions has had serious implications for women's political participation at this level.[7]

SOCIAL NORMS AND WOMEN'S ACCESS TO POLITICAL INCLUSION

The notion of gender equality has been highly popularized in the last few decades due particularly to international and national level efforts but this is yet to translate at the local level into a complete change in negative socio-cultural norms and attitudes that limit women and girls in diverse respects. Socio-cultural norms and practices in Africa continue to be identified as key challenges confronting women's accessing of power and decision-making. Some such norms, for instance, do not find competitive politics and power to be an appropriate arena for women, while gender role stereotyping is very much a reality and limits the aspirations of females. Women do not enjoy the needed support that can enable them to fully participate in political processes. Female officeholders are viewed or assessed from gendered lenses, and conclusions are often generalized for all women. Thus, although the recent past has witnessed intense global and local campaigns promoting women's equality on various issues, much remains to be done in terms of achieving attitudinal change. Unfavorable and negative social norms continue to confront women on the continent

WHAT NEEDS TO BE DONE?

Addressing the socio-cultural challenge through civic education programs

The increasing adoption of gender quotas by African countries may be inadequate for addressing women's political marginalization unless they are accompanied by attitudinal

changes on the part of society. Long-standing socio-cultural norms and practices are difficult to change over a relatively short period of time; however, changes in such norms and attitudes may not take place in the long-term unless they are addressed by well-planned and sustainable interventions. Increased public education programs, and strategic civic education targeting of such negative practices, are needed to draw more attention and awareness to this challenge. At the same time, as the next generation of Africans are being born and socialized, civic education should be incorporated into school curricula to emphasize the principles of equal opportunities and equal capabilities of both men and women.

Deepening engagement with political parties

Engagement with political parties has often been a tricky and delicate issue for local and international actors. It is critical, however, for actors like women's movements and non-governmental organizations to participate in discussions and explore solutions with political parties in order to address the problem of low female participation. Such efforts, for example, may help identify how inter-party relationships among women's groups can be strengthened to deliver policy for women. The international community and NGOs can also implement capacity-building programs that focus and support women's political wings with technical assistance that seek to identify and address women's issues, such as limited access to power and decision-making entities. Due to their high potential, women's wings need to be empowered to shape political party attitudes and policies toward women and women's

issues. As the ANC's Women's League has demonstrated, a vibrant and well-positioned women's wing can do a whole lot to push for an agenda that includes women's equal access to power and representation.

Promoting women's participation in local government structures

More women need to make their way into local government structures. Even though capacity is often highlighted as one of the challenges limiting women's political participation, there is also no lack of capable women on the continent. And while women need to take up the challenge and step into competitive politics at all levels, it is important to provide them with support mechanisms. Such support mechanisms may take various forms including training and capacity-building programs.

Support to the African Union

At the continental level, the African Union (AU) has been pushing strongly for gender parity on various issues, including governance and political participation. Its efforts have included devising legal, administrative and institutional frameworks to help the organization and its member states mainstream the concept of gender equality. The organization's Solemn Declaration on Gender Equality in Africa (SDGEA), which was adopted in 2004, requires member states to report annually on their progress in gender mainstreaming.[8]

However, despite the important steps that the AU has taken, the organization is still limited

to the extent that it can pursue some of these objectives within member countries. The AU faces several challenges including the weak-binding nature of its mechanisms; the lack of political will among some member states to comply with its institutional frameworks; the failure of some members to take appropriate steps to domesticate and implement its instruments; and its limited resources that make it difficult to adequately monitor gender mainstreaming by member states. Given its commitment to pursuing gender parity on the continent, it is important that the organization is supported with the necessary resources to work on these issues.

WOMEN'S RIGHT TO BE AT THE TABLE - (THE GLIMMER OF HOPE?)

It is important to note that across the continent, women have become highly conscious of their right to gender equality, as well as their ability to lead alongside their male counterparts. According to the Afrobarometer, 72% of women across 34 African countries indicate they should have equal rights as men and another 68% believe women are just as capable as men to be political leaders. While this sense of consciousness is significant, it will need to be able to translate into having more women actually gain access to public offices. Achieving this will require sustainable and committed effort on all fronts involving actors at the local, national, regional and international levels to see this issue as a fundamental human right. As attention is increasingly being put on the quality, contribution and output of female office holders, particularly in advancing the gender

agenda, it is important to not also lose sight of the fact that women need to be at the table.

REFERENCES

1."Women in Parliaments: World and Regional Averages." Women in Parliaments: World and Regional Averages. October 1, 2014. Accessed October 20, 2014. http://ipu.org/wmn-e/world.htm.

2.Ballington, Julie, Randi Davis, Elizabeth Powley, Mireya Reith, Lincoln Mitchell, Carole Njoki, and Alyson Kozma. "Empowering Women for Stronger Political Parties." NDI.org. October 1, 2011. Accessed October 20, 2014. https://www.ndi.org/files/Empowering-Women-PolitParties-ENG_0.pdf.

3. Goetz, Anne-Marie, and Shireen Hassim, eds. No Shortcuts to Power: African Women in Politics and Policy Making. New York: Zed Books, 2003.

4. Kauzya, John-Mary. "POLITICAL DECENTRALIZATION IN AFRICA: EXPERIENCES OF UGANDA, RWANDA, AND SOUTH AFRICA." UNPAN. December 1, 2007. Accessed October 20, 2014. http://unpan1.un.org/intradoc/groups/public/documents/un/unpan028411.pdf.

5. Olowu, Dele, and James S. Wunsch. Local Governance in Africa. Colorado: Lynn Reinner, 2004.

6. "Decentralization, Local Power and Women's Rights." IDRC.2008. Accessed October 20, 2014. http://www.idrc.ca/EN/Documents/policy-recommendations-on-decentralization.pdf

7. Beall, Joe. "Decentralizing Government and Centralizing Gender in Southern Africa: Lessons from the South African Experience." United Nations Research Institute for Social Development. August 1, 2005. Accessed October 20, 2014. http://www.unrisd.org/80256B3C005BCCF9/(httpAuxPages)/344E133781A2FF4AC12570A70030A651/$file/OP8 pdf.

8. "Solemn Declaration on Gender Equality in Africa." Afrimap.org. July 1, 2004. Accessed October 20, 2014. http://www.afrimap.org/english/images/treaty/AU_GenderSolemnDec04.pdf.

RHODA OSEI-AFFUL
SOUTHERN VOICES AFRICAN RESEARCH SCHOLAR

Rhoda Osei-Afful is a Southern Voices African Research Scholar with the Africa Program at The Wilson Center. Rhoda is also a Research Officer with the Ghana Centre for Democratic Development (CDD-Ghana) where she works mostly on elections and gender-related projects. Ms. Osei-Afful is a member of the research team for the Gender and Political Settlement research stream of the University of Manchester-based Effective States and Inclusive Development Research Project (ESID), for which she just concluded initial field work. She is also a key member of CDD-Ghana's Election Team and was the lead officer for the Center's Ghana Election 2012 Observation Project which saw the nation-wide deployment of over 4,000 domestic elections observers during Ghana's last elections. Ms. Osei-Afful has also supported the implementation of various projects for the CDD-Ghana including the Transparency and Accountability Project (TAP) and the Local Democratic Debate Project. Ms. Osei-Afful holds a MPhil in International Affairs from the Legon Centre for International Affairs (LECIA), University of Ghana and a BA in Sociology and Political Science from the same university. She also holds a Certificate in International Election Observation from the Kofi Annan International Peace-Keeping Training Center (KAIPTC) based in Accra.

STAY UP TO DATE ON ISSUES FACING AFRICA BY READING OUR BLOG:

FOLLOW US ON:

http://www.wilsoncenter.org/program/Africa-Program

http://africaupclose.wilsoncenter.org/

https://Facebook.com/AfricaProgram

https://Twitter.com/AfricaUPClose

THE AFRICA PROGRAM