




Chapter One

An Overview of *African Women in Governance: Policies and Stakeholders' Participation*

Tinuade Adekunbi Ojo 

*Centre for Race, Gender and Class,
University of Johannesburg* 
Johannesburg, South Africa

Introduction

The advancement of women's representation in governance decision-making remains an evolving challenge, despite decades of international advocacy and the establishment of various gender equity policies. While African women have gained greater opportunities to participate in governance at local, national, and regional levels, their representation remains disproportionately low compared to men, with full parity achieved in only a few contexts (Cousins & Wiggins, 2022; Zulu, 2023). Although African governments have increasingly acknowledged the value of women's participation, the translation of commitments into practice has faced significant impediments. These include deeply entrenched cultural norms, socio-economic barriers such as poverty and limited access to education, experiences of violence and marginalisation, and structural limitations within governance systems themselves (Archer et al., 2021; Nzeadibe, 2020).

Amid these systemic challenges, African women leaders continue to make notable strides, thereby generating positive momentum for gender inclusion. Prominent examples include figures such as Cissé Mariam Kaïdama Sidibé of Mali and Gertrude Mongella of Tanzania, alongside women occupying

significant roles across countries like Burkina Faso, Tanzania, and South Africa (Emejulu & Puwar, 2019; Chipunza et al., 2021). However, this progress remains uneven. While some nations demonstrate improvements in participatory governance, others exhibit stagnation or regression (Murray & Sinclair, 2022). Scholars stress that although governments frequently endorse gender-inclusive policies, implementation often remains rhetorical rather than substantive (Smith & Chappell, 2022).

Historically, African women's exclusion from governance has been shaped by structural discrimination embedded within family, educational, and cultural systems, as well as by colonial and post-colonial legal frameworks that entrenched patriarchal authority (Mlambo-Ngcuka, 2021; Singha & Singha, 2024). Pre-colonial systems, organised around kinship hierarchies and the control of women's labour and reproduction, positioned women at the lowest rung of power structures (Dery et al., 2022). Colonial administrations reinforced this marginalisation by consolidating male elites as intermediaries of state power (Eferebo, 2024). Post-independence political regimes similarly relegated women to subordinate roles, often reducing their political legitimacy to symbolic tropes such as the "Mother of the Nation," which simultaneously celebrated and constrained women's political agency (Tarkhanova, 2021; Krige, 2025).

Despite these historical constraints, African women have consistently resisted exclusion and mobilised for change. Since the 1975 Mexico Women's Conference, states in Eastern and Southern Africa established gender mechanisms aimed at accelerating equality, often under pressure from international advocacy and United Nations lobbying (Meintjes, 2010; Donert, 2023). These initiatives, although often top-down and state-centric, created new institutional pathways for women's advancement in governance. From the 1990s onward, the influence of global women's movements, coupled with the rise of local women's organisations, led to significant policy innovations across the continent, including the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child and the African Union's adoption of comprehensive gender frameworks (AU, 2021; UN Women, 2024; Lwamba et al., 2022).

The evolution of African women's political participation emphasises the importance of local activism and international engagement. Women's organisations, often supported by international funders, have been crucial in mobilising for reforms, strengthening advocacy, and holding governments accountable (Hessini, 2020; Chikwe et al., 2024). Partnerships between local movements and international donors have sustained progress, even in contexts where state-driven reforms were fragile or inconsistent (Eyben, 2015; Basu, 2016).

Nevertheless, the intersection of women's inclusion and broader stakeholder participation remains insufficiently explored within governance discourses. Frameworks such as the Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers (PRSPs) and Transitional Results Matrices (TRMs) highlight attempts at participatory governance, yet women's voices often remain marginal within these processes (Chandi et al., 2022). This gap signals the need for more robust approaches that view women not merely as a marginalised group but as central actors in governance, socio-economic development, and democratic transformation (Banerjee & Tamale, 2020).

This chapter therefore investigates the post-colonial evolution of democracy and governance in Africa with a focus on the role of women and the policies designed to enhance their participation. By situating women's political agency within shifting political and electoral landscapes, the analysis engages with historical legacies and contemporary challenges. It also explores the interplay of local activism, international frameworks, and institutional reform in shaping gendered pathways to governance. Ultimately, the persistent gap between policy rhetoric and practical implementation highlights the unfinished project of women's empowerment in Africa, while ongoing resistance and innovation by women leaders and organisations provide critical momentum towards a more inclusive governance future (Olufemi & Delaney, 2023; Onyango et al., 2021).

Women, Governance and Historical Trajectories in Africa

The role of women in governance has seldom been prioritised in African states compared to other global democracies, despite the existence of participatory governance mechanisms articulated in continental charters and protocols (Africa Barometer, 2024). Analyses of women's political participation often highlight the colonial and postcolonial eras, with comparatively limited attention to women's roles in pre-colonial governance systems. Yet pre-colonial Africa was characterised by complex and diverse political structures in which women exercised varying degrees of power and influence. While chiefly systems often emphasised male authority, kinship-based political and social structures frequently created parallel spaces where women held significant authority, particularly in matters of resource allocation, dispute resolution, and communal decision-making (Donner & Goddard, 2023; Hillman & Radel, 2023). This illustrates that women's exclusion was neither universal nor absolute in pre-colonial Africa, but rather shaped by context-specific cultural, economic, and political dynamics (Nwakanma, 2022).

Colonialism fundamentally disrupted these indigenous systems, imposing new legal and political frameworks that displaced or weakened existing gendered power relations (Akyeampong & Fofack, 2014). Women, who had historically participated in political and economic governance, were increasingly relegated to subordinate roles as colonial administrations consolidated authority through male elites such as chiefs and headmen (Eferebo, 2024). Despite this marginalisation, women actively resisted colonial authority and sought to renegotiate their agency, sometimes carving out new forms of influence within these constraints (Adjepong, 2015; Bouka, 2020). Nevertheless, the overall impact of colonial rule was a significant erosion of women's rights and stature (Ewelukwa, 2002).

The transition to independence offered opportunities for political restructuring, but gender issues were largely overlooked in negotiations, despite women's central role in

nationalist movements (Kajta, 2022). Postcolonial governance structures often mirrored the patriarchal values of colonial administrations, entrenching systemic barriers to women's political participation (Sharp, 2022). This continuity emphasises the challenge of embedding women's voices into the governance frameworks of independent African states (Meintjes, 2010).

A historical lens further reveals how concepts of citizenship shaped women's political exclusion. From pre-colonial through colonial, apartheid, and post-independence contexts, African women have faced an enduring struggle to reclaim their rights as equal citizens. Their marginalisation from public and political life created a "historical deficit" that continues to shape contemporary governance structures. Yet women have consistently played key roles in liberation struggles and post-conflict reconstruction, particularly across sub-Saharan Africa – a region that has experienced approximately 70% of the world's civil wars (Chivangurai, 2022; Smith, 2023). Despite their contributions, women remain underrepresented in peace negotiations and post-conflict governance arrangements, undermining gender equity and sustainable political settlements (Hassim, 2022).

The barriers to women's political participation in contemporary Africa are multifaceted, encompassing entrenched cultural norms, institutional exclusion, and socioeconomic obstacles. Limited access to financial resources, for instance, restricts women's capacity to contest elections, develop political platforms, or implement gender-responsive policies (Mikell, 2023; Banda, 2021). These structural and financial constraints perpetuate women's underrepresentation and highlight the urgent need for reforms that extend beyond policy rhetoric to create enabling environments for gender parity in governance.

Pre-Colonial Africa

Africa is a continent rich in civilisation with a profound historical narrative. Current discussions often revolve around the controversial topic of Africa's pre-colonial history, cultural achievements, and societal complexities. Scholars

and commentators should exercise caution in their discourse, avoiding sweeping generalisations that overlook the continent's diverse experiences (Dunne, 2024). As with any region, common threads link many African societies. Notably, the reliance on natural resources forms the cornerstone of their livelihoods, cultural practices, and social constructs (Sibanda, 2024). Furthermore, there exists a tapestry of shared norms and values, such as kinship and family dynamics, prevalent religious beliefs, frameworks for political governance, collective memories, oral traditions, and linguistic ties, which intricately weave together the identities of African people (Chanda, 2023).

Pre-colonial Africa consisted of extensive societies, kingdoms, and states that pursued various internal and external motivations for expansion (Green, 2016). The primary socio-political structures were predominantly governed by chiefly systems, yet kinship structures significantly influenced societal organisation, economic activities, social relations, and political engagement (Walters, 2021). Alongside the prevalent chiefly system, there existed a variety of political frameworks. The presence of large societies or states characterised by intricate political hierarchies and institutions does not imply that women were systematically excluded from political power (Nwakanma, 2022). Africa's pre-colonial history illustrates a rich diversity in the social roles and status of women, highlighting their complex positions within these societies.

Women have historically played active roles in the political governance of society. The structures of political governance and the legal systems in place were not solely the domain of men, as they encompassed a wider spectrum of participation (Galappaththi et al., 2022). Typically, societies operated with parallel political systems, one rooted in kinship and family dynamics. Through these kinship-based systems, women were often directly engaged in political governance, extending their influence beyond the traditional confines of household and family responsibilities (Donner & Goddard, 2023). In addition to their political involvement, women have significantly contributed to the economic activities of society. The existence of parallel political systems ensured that women

not only participated in these economic endeavours but also had a voice in the governance of such activities (Hillman & Radel, 2023). This dual engagement in economic and political spheres highlights the importance of recognising women's roles in shaping societal structures and decision-making processes.

Colonial Legacies

The impact of colonisation on African societies was profound and traumatic. The process devastated rural and urban life, disrupting every aspect of societal organisation (Gouni & Verny, 2023). Amongst these aspects, the governance structures were perhaps the most affected by colonial rule. Before colonisation, many African societies thrived under systems characterised by participatory democracy, localism, and inclusiveness. Decision-making involved a wide range of community members, including elders, women, youth, and various social groups (Newman, 2023). This participatory approach was evident across diverse civilisations such as the Sahelian, Bantu, and Nilotic cultures. Even in established kingdoms and empires like the Malinkes, Mandinkes, Wolofs, and Ashantis, authority was wielded within well-defined laws and traditions, reflecting a deeply rooted sense of accountability.

In pre-colonial African societies, leadership was intrinsically linked to community responsibility and accountability (Igboin, 2016). Rulers were not absolute monarchs; rather, they adhered to established customs and could be challenged by their subjects through mechanisms such as people's courts, where disputes were settled publicly (Pennington, 2023). This system of governance fostered a culture of transparency and communal involvement, where opposition to leadership could be voiced and addressed. The presence of social checks and balances allowed for a more inclusive political framework, highlighting the importance of collective decision-making in maintaining societal cohesion (Gluckman et al., 2023).

Colonialism fundamentally disrupted traditional governance structures across Africa. Focused predominantly on

resource extraction, capitalist expansion, and military authority, colonisers effectively dismantled indigenous governance systems (Hope, 2025). The implementation of divide-and-rule strategies led to significant fractures within African societies, notably diminishing the roles and status of women and youth (Oyugi, 2024). The essence of inclusivity that once characterised African governance was obliterated, leaving a legacy of exclusion and disruption. While post-colonial efforts aimed to restore traditional governance structures, these were often co-opted by neo-colonial leaders to further their own interests, sidelining genuine inclusivity (Maqashalala, 2025). In this context, the replacement of societal inclusiveness with elite dominance severely impacted governance, exacerbating inequalities and limiting participation. Post-colonial frameworks mirrored colonial precedents, once again marginalising women's roles in decision-making processes (Joseph, 2025). As African women faced the dual challenges of colonial legacies and oppressive postcolonial regimes, they mobilised collectively, organising and advocating for their rights on various fronts (Parashar & Schulz, 2021). Their resistance efforts highlighted the urgent need for reforms that promote equitable governance, showcasing their resilience and commitment to fostering inclusivity in Africa's political landscape.

Taken together, the historical and contemporary trajectories of women's engagement in governance emphasise resilience and exclusion. From pre-colonial kinship-based authority to colonial displacement, from nationalist mobilisation to postcolonial marginalisation, African women have navigated shifting political landscapes marked by opportunities and constraints. Understanding this history is critical to addressing present-day inequities and designing governance systems that integrate women not as marginal participants, but as central actors in shaping Africa's political and socio-economic futures.

Women Leadership and Governance

Women's leadership is a vital driver of empowerment across Africa, not only for women but also for broader marginalised groups in society. Governance, increasingly understood as a

public instrument of empowerment, provides African women with a legitimate claim to participation given their central role in the continent's social fabric. However, external forces and colonial legacies have historically undermined African women's governance identities, erasing their political and historical contributions (Meintjes, 2010). Despite these challenges, women's involvement in governance spans traditional, political, religious, economic, and educational domains, reflecting a deep-seated history of engagement and influence (Chaminuka et al., 2015).

Prominent African women leaders have demonstrated that empowerment in governance extends beyond formal political structures. Figures such as Winnie Madikizela-Mandela, Jeanette Kagame, and Evangeline Barongo illustrate how leadership at the grassroots and community levels can evolve into national and even continental significance (Chaminuka et al., 2015). Their trajectories affirm that women's leadership contributes to mobilising marginalised groups, strengthening democratic institutions, and advancing inclusive development. Nevertheless, women remain significantly underrepresented in political decision-making, which constrains the inclusivity and responsiveness of governance structures across Africa.

The continued underrepresentation of women in governance emphasises structural and systemic barriers. These challenges include entrenched patriarchal norms, limited financial resources, and the adoption of Western democratic systems that inadvertently reinforced gender marginalisation (Meintjes, 2010). Yet, examples from countries such as Rwanda and Uganda demonstrate that affirmative action policies, such as gender quotas and reserved seats, can improve women's political participation. Still, in many African states, women's representation at local and national levels remains far below global averages, limiting their ability to shape policies and drive equitable social transformation (Smith, 2022).

To address these disparities, scholars emphasise the need for holistic strategies that combine institutional reforms with initiatives that enhance individual women's leadership

capacities. Mentorship, networking, and education programmes are critical in dismantling cultural barriers and enabling sustainable political participation (Miller et al., 2022; Karam, 2021). By learning from the experiences of influential women leaders and adopting targeted interventions, African nations can move towards governance systems that better reflect gender equity and social inclusion. Ultimately, the empowerment of women in governance is not only a matter of justice but also a prerequisite for building resilient, democratic, and inclusive societies.

Current Landscape of Good in Governance

The 21st century has heralded considerable transformation in Africa, with the region emerging as one of the fastest-developing areas worldwide. A key outcome of this progression is the trend towards increased democratisation at the local level, despite the continent remaining the least democratic globally (Meintjes, 2010). Elections for political, economic, service, and development organisations have proliferated, yet gender governance remains a secondary consideration during these formative processes.

Citizen participation has emerged as an important element of effective governance, yet the representation of diverse demographic groups frequently exhibits considerable disparities. A critical examination of women's involvement in governance reveals a stark contrast between their significant presence in the population and their representation in political frameworks. Specifically, an estimated 30% to 40% of the population in numerous African villages and towns comprises women, yet they constitute merely about 1% to 3% of individuals eligible to run for electoral positions. Furthermore, studies reveal that women hold only 10% to 15% of seats in national legislatures across the continent, emphasising a pronounced gap between the proportion of women in the population and their actual participation in governance (Rowlands, 2021; UN Women, 2020). This disparity not only questions the inclusivity of governance processes in Africa but also highlights systemic barriers that undermine women's political representation.

The lack of female representation in governance initiatives raises critical questions about the effectiveness and legitimacy of political systems in Africa. Women play a vital role in community development and decision-making processes; consequently, their underrepresentation hampers the comprehensive reflection of societal needs and aspirations in governance. Previous research indicates that when women are included in governance, there tends to be a positive impact on policy decisions related to health, education, and social welfare (Kamau, 2022). Therefore, the absence of significant female representation not only perpetuates inequality but also detracts from the overall effectiveness of governance, emphasising the necessity for reforms aimed at enhancing women's participation in public affairs (International IDEA, 2021). In summary, the marginalisation of women in African governance structures illustrates significant flaws in democratic representation and calls for urgent attention to strategies that foster inclusivity. To address these inequities, it is essential to implement policies that empower women politically and socially, fostering environments conducive to their active participation. Engaging women as key stakeholders in governance not only promotes equity but also positions societies to benefit from diverse perspectives and experiences that can contribute to more sustainable and effective governance outcomes (Tinker, 2020). Therefore, policymakers must prioritise the elimination of barriers that hinder women's participation, promoting gender equity as a foundational principle of democratic governance in Africa.

The dimensions of good governance that are most advantageous for women – namely representation, participation, and democratisation – have historically constituted significant barriers to their engagement in civic and political life. The Pan-African movement, which emerged over a century ago, established these principles as critical for fostering political, economic, and social transformations within the continent. This movement has played an essential role in advocating for the rights of marginalised groups, particularly women, although the trajectory of governance in Africa has

fluctuated because of various factors, including the intensity of Pan-African initiatives and the effectiveness of subsequent leadership. Research suggests that while strides have been made towards inclusive governance, challenges still persist, limiting the realisation of these principles for women (Bamgbose, 2021; Otieno, 2022). The governance record of Africa has, at times, demonstrated progress and, at other times, retrenchment, driven by the depth of Pan-African advocacy and the calibre of leadership that has emerged. Influential leaders like Lee Kuan Yew have emphasised that good governance is fundamental to attracting investment and fostering economic development, thereby identifying it as essential for the sustainability and development of African nations (Kpundeh, 2020). The argument positions governance not merely as a political concern but as a vital element in economic strategy, particularly in the context of increasing globalisation and competition for investment. Challenges to governance quality, such as corruption and lack of accountability, continue to hinder economic growth across the continent (Mbeki, 2021). In the face of these persistent challenges, women have demonstrated resilience through their continuous involvement in political processes, education, and advocacy for equality. Despite encountering formidable obstacles, including socio-cultural barriers and systemic discrimination, women have sought to secure their roles in governance, striving to influence decision-making at various levels (Agbalajobi, 2022; Tchamyu, 2021). Their active engagement is crucial, not only for achieving gender equality but also for enhancing the overall governance framework in Africa. Consequently, recognising and supporting women's agency in governance is essential for fostering democratic principles and addressing socio-economic disparities on the continent.

Representation in Parliaments and Cabinets

Women's representation has become a symbol of modernity, democracy, and good governance (Mechkova et al., 2024). While instances of women's representation in governance are limited worldwide, sub-Saharan Africa exhibits particularly egregious disparities (Akinwale, 2023). Within this continent,

independent and sovereign nations frequently see a dearth of women leaders in parliaments, cabinets, and political parties. Despite various initiatives and an enduring struggle, women remain under-represented and marginalised in national and regional decision-making institutions and processes (Nsana, 2024). This chapter analyses women's representation in African parliaments and cabinets, drawing from the findings of the 2021 African Women Barometer Survey, which assessed awareness of the AU Gender Policy in twelve countries. The survey included a total of 9,897 participants, comprising 6,526 women (66%) and 3,371 men (34%) (IDEA, 2021). The outcome indicates that as of 2021, women hold positions as Heads of State or Government in only 21 countries worldwide, while 119 countries have never had a woman in such leadership roles. At the present pace, achieving gender parity in the highest decision-making positions is projected to take approximately 130 years. Globally, women constitute just 21% of government ministers, and only 14 countries have reached gender parity by appointing 50% or more women to cabinet positions. Given the current rate of progress, less than a one-percentage-point increase annually, gender parity in ministerial appointments is unlikely to be realised before 2077. Since independence, Women in Politics Worldwide (WIPW) initiatives have fostered a continental context advocating for African women's representation and notably emphasise the importance of policy frameworks (Chiluwa, 2025). Women's advancement has been a significant issue on the global agenda since the Beijing Platform for Action (BPFA), focusing on bolstering their representation in governance institutions (Gouws & Madsen, 2021). The 1995 Fourth World Conference adopted the BPFA, emphasising the need for national-plus reviews to expedite women's policy and decision-making enhancement (Bunsell & Daniel, 2024).

The African Union Gender Policy adopted in 2004 set a target for achieving gender equality in governance, institutions, and decision-making processes by 2010 (Kalumba et al., 2024). In line with these frameworks, constitutions advocating representative democracy highlight the necessity for free civic participation and equitable representation within local and

national parliaments (Samajdar, 2023). Yet, despite these efforts, women account for only 1,000 out of 6,550, or 15.25%, of parliamentarians in African national decision-making bodies, with eleven countries reporting figures below 10% (Kaputu, 2024). Moreover, following the 2021 elections, only 52 out of 779, or 6.68%, of ministers are women (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2021).

Barriers to Entry and Advancement

Despite increased awareness and advocacy for equity in governance structures over the past decade, significant challenges persist regarding women's entry and advancement in decision-making positions within formal and informal governance systems (Chanda & Ngulube, 2024). These challenges stem from deeply entrenched social norms that are widely perpetuated, as well as limiting structures and processes inherent in political parties (Lwamba et al., 2022). Additionally, the absence of education and pervasive poverty emerge as recurrent themes across various countries, often cited as substantial barriers to women's participation in governance structures, whether in rural or urban settings (Omweri, 2024). These obstacles are further compounded by patriarchal systems, inadequate support from male counterparts and families, aspirations for financial independence, and the extra burdens of care and domestic responsibilities that many women face (Sengar & Shah, 2024). The influence of culture is starkly evident in many of the countries studied, where traditional practices significantly limit women's participation in or access to governance structures (Omweri, 2024). These cultural norms often create an environment that discourages women's involvement in decision-making processes, reinforcing the existing disparities (Omweri, 2024). Efforts to address these issues must not only focus on elevating women's positions within political frameworks but also challenge the broader societal narratives that inhibit their participation. Ultimately, achieving gender equity in governance requires a comprehensive understanding of the various intersecting factors contributing to women's marginalisation in political spaces (Kelly, 2019).

Key Findings and Insights

The promotion of women's political participation is situated within theoretical frameworks that emphasise structural opportunities and women's capacity to translate resources into decision-making power. International institutions such as the United Nations (UN) and the African Union (AU) have played a central role in formalising commitments to gender equality through initiatives including the AU Gender Policy, the AU Parity Principle, Agenda 2063, and the UN Millennium Development Goals (United Nations, 2021; African Union, 2015, 2016). These frameworks aim not only to increase women's representation in political institutions but also to ensure their substantive participation in shaping policy agendas. Despite these commitments, however, the enforcement of anti-discrimination laws and gender equity policies remains inconsistent across many countries, undermining the transformative potential of these initiatives (Boon & Khibini, 2022).

At the regional and national levels, complementary frameworks have been introduced to reinforce women's empowerment and political engagement. Regional bodies such as the Southern African Development Community (SADC) and the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) have established gender policies, while African states have institutionalised gender governance through ministries for women, gender commissions, and gender desks (UN, 2020; Awumbila et al., 2020). Some countries, such as Uganda, have also adopted affirmative action measures, including reserved parliamentary seats for women, to advance representation (Tripp, 2023). Yet, the effectiveness of these structures remains contested. Mechanisms such as South Africa's Office on the Status of Women have raised visibility for gender issues, but they often risk marginalising them as "special concerns" rather than integrating them into mainstream governance (Sung & Hock, 2019). Furthermore, reliance on male political champions can depoliticise women's issues, limiting grassroots influence and undermining the autonomy of women's advocacy (Acker, 2023; Sawer, 2022).

Despite notable progress in women's representation over the past two decades, African women continue to face significant barriers to political participation. Poverty, illiteracy, and entrenched socio-cultural norms remain powerful obstacles that restrict women's involvement in governance and decision-making (Meintjes, 2010). In many contexts, women are still perceived as subordinate to men, with roles confined to domestic responsibilities, which undermine their authority even when elected or appointed to office. Efforts to challenge these norms often expose women to ridicule or accusations of cultural rebellion, creating reluctance to participate in governance. Moreover, the under-utilisation of existing gender policies and weak institutional implementation perpetuate the gap between policy formulation and practice. Thus, while international, regional, and national frameworks provide structural avenues for women's engagement, the persistence of socio-cultural prejudice and institutional neglect continues to constrain meaningful gender-inclusive governance across the continent.

Regional Differences in Women's Governance Participation

Patterns of women's participation in governance differ across Africa, with the continent divided into four regions: North Africa, East Africa, Southern Africa, and West Africa. Countries within these regions share similar socio-economic and demographic characteristics because of their common histories and cultural heritages.

Southern Africa leads the continent in women's political participation and representation (Meintjes, 2010). The region has the highest number of women government ministers, including deputy ministers and ministers of state, and the highest rates of women in parliament and on local councils, where women comprise a majority in some areas. East African countries are further behind Southern Africa but ahead of other regions regarding women's participation in governance. Kenya, Tanzania, and Uganda have policies that strongly encourage women's decision-making in local governance, and Kenya and

Uganda have introduced legislation to increase the number of elected women at the local level. The West African region exhibits relatively low levels of women's participation (IDRC, 2010). The region has the lowest number of women government ministers, including deputy ministers and ministers of state, and the lowest rates of women in parliament and on local councils. In North Africa, women's participation in governance varies greatly across countries, ranging from strong legislative involvement in Algeria to the absence of women in executive-level government positions in Tunisia and Libya. Because of the imbalance in the representation of women between the four regions, it is hard to speak of women's governance in Africa in a general sense.

East Africa

East Africa has a multiplicity of social, cultural, regional and economic groups characterised by diversities in language, religion and cultural practices. This makes governance particularly problematic in these countries (Meintjes, 2010). For example, inequalities contribute to high rates of female poverty in Uganda, which, with the other factors operating against them, make for considerable challenges for women wanting to enter the political sphere. In the six countries of East Africa, women's participation in politics at the lower levels is estimated to be above 20%. However, in the middle and senior cadre of the political leadership ladder, it is much lower. More women have been appointed to political leadership positions than those who have been directly elected to such positions (Chaminuka et al., 2015).

West Africa

West Africa offers perhaps the most hopeful regional example for women's participation in governance. Nigeria is the region's largest economy, with relatively mature democratic institutions, and remains the most powerful actor in the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) community of fifteen states. Nevertheless, Nigeria's female population

registers amongst the world's lowest rates of voter turnout and participation, with women accounting for only around a quarter of registered voters. In part, this develops from socio-cultural norms that shape women's political engagement behaviour (Kelly, 2019). The last three elections, in 2015, 2019 and 2023, have featured a female presidential candidate, and Nigeria's President appointed the first female finance minister in 2021, but a woman has yet to secure a seat in the Senate.

Southern Africa

The engagement of women in political and governance spheres in Southern Africa has become increasingly prominent compared to other sub-regions within the continent. Following the transition from colonial rule, founding leaders such as Eritrea's Isaias Afewerki, Zimbabwe's Robert Mugabe, and South Africa's Nelson Mandela recognised the importance of fostering female representation and governance structures. These leaders aimed to build a formidable constituency base, which would subsequently enhance national outreach and ensure credible follow-up on political initiatives (SADC, 2021). Furthermore, Malawi's Bingu wa Mutharika exemplified support for the multiparty process and promoted female political engagement, while Botswana's governmental restructuring facilitated the creation of a youth-led coalition. This coalition, established in 1999 and officially launched in 2003, garnered robust political backing from women leaders across the sub-region (Matlosa & Smit, 2017). The emergence of numerous women's associations within Southern Africa highlights a growing commitment to participatory governance. For instance, the International SADC Parliamentary Forum, which includes a significant female coalition from the SADC national legislatures, exemplifies the dedication to active governance by women (SADC Parliamentary Forum, 2020). The women involved in these governance structures increasingly perceive their contributions not merely as a quest for gender equality, but rather as essential to driving development and societal transformation within their respective nations and across the sub-region (Ramatswi, 2025). This paradigm shift reflects an enhanced recognition of women's

agency in governance processes and their roles as catalysts for substantive change. The Southern African Development Community (SADC) Secretariat has produced guidelines aimed at promoting gender equity amongst member countries, highlighting the necessity of strong political will (SADC, 2021). This initiative is further bolstered by the proliferation of civil society organisations across many Southern African nations, which serve as a vital foundation for consolidating democratic governance and promoting women's active involvement in politics (Matlosa & Smit, 2017). The combined efforts of governmental policy and civil society activism reflect a significant movement towards greater female representation in political arenas, thereby fostering an environment conducive to sustained democratic engagement and social progress.

North Africa

Participation of women in governance in the North Africa region currently ranks amongst the lowest on the continent (Meintjes, 2010). This observation is consistent with the region's cultural and religious systems, which generally provide a limited role for women in society. For instance, participation in national parliaments follows a south-to-north decline across the continent: 23.5% in sub-Saharan Africa, 15.7% in North Africa, 15.4% in East Africa, and 11.9% in West Africa. Similarly, female ministers represent 19.6% of sub-Saharan cabinets, compared to 6.6% for North African countries. Regional differences also distinguish areas of participation, with Northern Africa registering the lowest levels of gender budgeting or auditing. A strong interplay exists amongst religion, culture, and political regimes in the MENA (Middle East and North Africa) region, influencing the performance of most Arab countries on the Gender Inequality Index (GII) (IDRC, 2010). Cultural attitudes strongly favour men as better political leaders (measuring 5.0 on a scale from 1 to 6) and prioritise men's right to jobs over women's (measuring 5.2), reflecting the region's persistence of strong religious and cultural conservatism.

Policy Recommendations

Recommendations to strengthen women's participation in governance emphasise key enablers and barriers. Governments, development organisations, and civil society hold critical responsibilities in expanding sustained ICT (information and communications technology) use by female parliamentarians to enhance usefulness, usability, and transformative innovation. Targeted support in policymaking, proposal preparation, and stakeholder dialogue should be reinforced by multi-stakeholder partnerships and cross-border collaboration. Delivering programmes at a woman's pace – with strong emphasis on accessibility, peer support, and trust – is essential to foster long-term engagement. Policy priorities must adopt inclusive, multidimensional, and intersectoral approaches to mainstreaming, incorporating poverty reduction, gender empowerment, education, entrepreneurship, innovation, and youth participation (Kelly, 2019).

A central challenge lies in ensuring that greater participation of women does not inadvertently result in the marginalisation of men, which may exacerbate social inequalities and provoke resistance that undermines public commitments to gender equality and development goals. Evidence highlights the need to conceptualise gender equality in governance as a dynamic system that empowers women and men. This approach mitigates male resistance, addresses women's fears of losing economic security, and fosters positive synergies that generate collective societal benefit. Advocacy should therefore emphasise inclusivity, shared responsibilities, and mutual empowerment (Chaminuka et al., 2015).

Persistent barriers, however, remain. These include sexist and patronage-based political cultures as well as entrenched gendered economic and household inequalities. Addressing these requirements involves quotas, empowerment programmes, electoral monitoring, and proactive enforcement of gender equality frameworks. Sustained commitment to these interventions is critical for building inclusive governance

structures that facilitate greater female participation across Africa (Kelly, 2019).

Policy recommendations for African member states should focus on enacting and monitoring the African Union Gender Policy. Laws, and policies must reflect the realities of women's representation, participation, and civic engagement while ensuring that women are not confined to limited or stereotypical roles. Clear stakeholder responsibilities and coordinated mechanisms for collaboration must be established. Stakeholders should be proactively engaged in dialogue to address capacity gaps, implementation challenges, and opportunities for policy innovation (Chaminuka et al., 2015).

Furthermore, research is needed to evaluate the implementation and effectiveness of existing laws and policies in closing gender gaps in governance. Findings should be widely disseminated, with women actively involved in the cycle of research, monitoring, and advocacy, given that they are most directly affected by policy shortcomings. Capacity development initiatives must be designed to equip stakeholders, particularly women, with the skills required to monitor implementation and engage decision-makers effectively. Finally, political will must be cultivated at all levels of leadership to prioritise and accelerate the realisation of laws and policies that advance gender equality and women's empowerment.

Conclusion

This chapter examined the policies and challenges that affect African women's full participation in governance. Despite numerous policies and commitments to increase women's participation in decision-making processes, progress has been slow or non-existent in many African countries. The absence of a political will to implement gender policies is a significant challenge. There is a need for a comprehensive review of the existing policies to identify gaps and ensure that women's participation in governance is prioritised.

Although many African leaders have recognised the importance of policies in addressing the challenges faced by

women, policies alone cannot bring about change. Therefore, there is a need for multi-stakeholder participation in women's policy advocacy at all levels. Women in national and local government decision-making positions should mentor and encourage women in community-based organisations to mobilise women at grassroots level to advocate for policy implementation. It is also crucial for African women to establish networks in and outside their countries to share experiences and provide mutual support in policy advocacy. Policy research is vital in generating information on the impact of policies on women's lives, which can be used to hold policymakers accountable.

African women activists played a key role in shaping the African platform for action, which led to the establishment of the African Union. Women's networks and alliances are essential in ensuring that the needs and concerns of women are integrated into national laws and policies. However, sisterhood and solidarity amongst women are often undermined by individual and organisational competition for limited resources. Networking and coalition-building require time, commitment, skill, and resources, but they can be effective in bringing about change.

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