Since the political transitions of the late 1980s and early 1990s, women's political leadership – in particular women's presence in political office – has grown markedly across the African continent. Indeed, women activists and their organizations were among those who helped to topple single-party rule and military regimes or bring an end to decades of conflict, leading to political transitions. As recently as 2019, African countries were among world leaders in terms of women's representation in parliament, including 13 African countries among the top 50 countries that have 30 percent women or more, with the tiny East African nation of Rwanda leading the world with 68 percent women in its Chamber of Deputies. Ethiopia, Rwanda, Seychelles, and South Africa are 4 of the 12 countries worldwide that have gender parity cabinets – 50 percent women and 50 percent men as ministers.

Women's political leadership before the transitions of the 1990s

Women's political leadership in Africa is not a new phenomenon. Sheldon (2017, xiii–xv) describes the long history of women leaders and women's leadership across the continent. Many of the following examples have already been explored in previous chapters of this volume. To name a few early women leaders, there were Amina, who ruled a wide swathe of West Africa in the sixteenth century, and Nzinga, who led the resistance against the Portuguese in southwestern Africa in the seventeenth century; market women who expanded trade networks and served as intermediaries between Europeans and Africans; and enslaved women who served as soldiers for the king of Dahomey in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries (Sheldon 2017, xiii–xv). In many places, women's societies existed alongside those for men, providing political and religious leadership. As Sheldon further notes (2017, xiii–xv), the expansion of Islam and Christianity in the nineteenth century offered some leadership opportunities as well as some access to formal education for women, among many other influences on women's lives. Women's political leadership in the twentieth century is better known and better documented; across the continent, women resisted the imposition of colonial rule from the turn of the twentieth century. In the then Gold Coast, Yaa Asantewaa led the last Asante war against the British in 1900, a war known in Ghana as the Yaa Asantewaa War, and she was not the only woman at
the time to exert political or religious leadership (Aidoo 1985, Boahen 2000, Brempong 2000). Sheldon (2017, xiii–xv) recounts the examples of women spiritual leaders such as Nyabingi in Uganda and Nehanda in Zimbabwe and the early twentieth-century women who protested the expansion of pass laws to women in South Africa or the imposition of taxes on women in Nigeria — what came to be known as the Women’s War in Aba, Nigeria.

Women were also integral to the overthrow of colonialism across the continent, playing important leadership roles in nationalist movements and liberation struggles – from Bibi Titi Mohammed in Tanzania, to Mabel Dove Danquah and Hannah Kudjoe in Ghana, to Funmilayo Ransome Kuti in Nigeria, to the women at the base of nationalist movements who mobilized the masses, as in Guinea, to the women combatants and freedom fighters from exile seeking independence and an end to apartheid in Namibia and South Africa, to mention a very few (Allman 2009, Becker 1995, Denzer 2005, Gadzepo 2005, Geiger 1987, 1996, Hassim 2005, Johnson-Odim 2009, Sackeyfio-Lenoch 2018, Schmidt 2002).

On the whole, however, some scholars argue that – relative to men – women in Africa experienced significant losses in both power and authority under colonialism (Berger and White 1999, Parpart 1988, Staudt 1987):

For most African women (with the exception of some urban women) the colonial period was characterized by significant losses in both power and authority … new opportunities eventually appeared for [men], while women’s economic and political rights often diminished. Colonial officials ignored potential female candidates for chiefships, scholarships and other benefits. Many female institutions were destroyed.

(Parpart 1988, 210)

One may also argue that political independence beginning in the 1960s did not necessarily restore women’s rights and institutions. Rather, in many African countries, there was a quick turn to single party or military rule (a return to the authoritarian rule of the colonial period), during which political power was highly centralized in the executive, if not an executive, and constitutions were abandoned, legislatures dissolved, judiciaries ignored, political parties proscribed, and independent organizing outlawed (Bauer 2011, 89).

Elections were seldom held, so no women or men were being elected to political office. But this is not to say that military regimes eschewed the participation of women; on the contrary, when they were not scapegoating and abusing market and other successful women, authoritarian military regimes such as those in Nigeria in the 1980s and 1990s, according to Mama (1998, 4), improvised a banal game of gender politics, which became a key mechanism through which militarism was extended, legitimized, and consolidated. Mama (1995, 41) referred to this as femocracy: an anti-democratic female power structure, which claims to exist for the advancement of ordinary women but is unable to do so because it is dominated by a small clique of women whose authority derives from being married to powerful men … the small clique of women being primarily First Ladies.

Especially in some settler colonies in southern Africa, armed liberation struggles lasted into the late twentieth century, while in other countries across the continent, enduring civil conflicts eclipsed the early gains of independence (Becker 1995, Hassim 2005, Mashanini 1991, Namhila 1997, Turshen and Twagiramariya 1998). Women were freedom fighters, combatants, victims, survivors, leaders of peace movements, negotiators of peace agreements, and participants in peace and reconstruction processes. In some cases, women in exile had opportunities for education and training that they might otherwise not have had. As later research would show (Hughes and Tripp 2015), the greatest gains in women’s political representation in twenty-first-century
Africa would be attained in those countries just emerging from years of conflict. Indeed, many scholars have noted how gender relations may be altered during periods of conflict and war. Conflict and war may help to weaken patriarchal structures and shift gender roles, while post-conflict transitional governments draft new constitutions and establish new laws and institutions, often with input from mobilized national women’s movements (Adams 2008, 479, Bauer and Britton 2006, Pankhurst 2002, 127). For Liberia, Fuest (2008, 202) suggested that female gains, not only female losses, could follow from the devastating conflict in that country – though only with the leadership of women’s organizations or mobilized women’s movements.

**Women’s political leadership since the transitions of the 1990s**

Beginning in the late 1980s and continuing into the 1990s, regime change swept across Africa as people took to the streets to protest years of economic decline, political corruption, and state decay. Women played an important role in the unfolding political transitions, as Tripp pointed out (2001, 142–4): “Like student organizations, labor unions and human rights activists, women’s organizations openly opposed corrupt and repressive regimes through public demonstrations and other military actions.” Moreover, once change was underway, women and their organizations took advantage of the initial political openings to push for even greater gains. Women consolidated independent women’s organizations, demanded women’s expanded participation in politics, including through affirmative action policies, and even formed their own political parties in countries as diverse as Zambia, Zimbabwe, Lesotho, and Kenya (Tripp 2001). Women like 2004 Nobel Peace Prize winner Wangari Maathai (2006) initially led civil society or community-based organizations like the Greenbelt Movement, which planted trees across a deforested Kenya, and then added mounting political demands, in her case eventually becoming a member of parliament, but not before being beaten and imprisoned by a resistant untransformed state. In a number of countries, once old regimes had been toppled and political transitions were underway, women (thanks to mobilized national women’s movements) gained seats at the table and participated in the drafting of new constitutions and electoral laws resulting, in several cases, in the adoption of electoral gender quotas for parliaments and/or affirmative action policies more widely for governments – a trend that has hardly abated well into the twenty-first century as a second wave of quota adoption washes over the continent (Bauer and Britton 2006, Bauer 2016). A brief focus on three African countries reveals some early accomplishments and remaining challenges to women’s political leadership across the continent in the 2020s and beyond.

**Liberia: women’s peace movement and first elected woman president**

Liberia illustrates the ways in which African women have contributed to ending conflict and securing peace and also to gaining access to political office. In 2011, then president of Liberia, Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, and leader of the Women of Liberia Mass Action for Peace women’s non-violent peace movement, Leymah Gbowee, shared the Nobel Peace Prize (along with Yemeni human rights activist Tawakul Karman) for their “non-violent struggle for the safety of women and for women’s rights to full participation in peace-building work.” More specifically, the prize recognized the contributions that Liberian women had made to ending two decades of intermittent civil conflict and gruesome war (culminating in the second Liberian civil war) and helping to elect Africa’s first democratically elected woman president. Women’s organizations in Liberia had come together and “raised awareness about the conflict and its effect on civilians, pressured ruling factions to participate in peace talks, advocated for the inclusion of women in peace negotiations and provided support to those displaced by the conflict” (Adams 2008, 481,
Gretchen Bauer

Gbowee 2011). Once the war was over and an election was underway, they provided support to the woman candidate, Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, a Harvard-trained economist, among many other accomplishments, who would go on to win the presidency in the second round of voting.

In more than a century of settler or “Americo-Liberian” rule in Liberia, highly educated elite women had occupied leadership roles—in politics, including as cabinet ministers, in academia as university lecturers and even presidents, and in the professions, among others. By contrast, Liberia’s early twenty-first-century women’s movements were more grassroots in nature and importantly, relied upon Muslim and Christian women joining forces. In her inaugural address as president of Liberia in 2006, Ellen Johnson Sirleaf acknowledged the women of Liberia and their organizations that had mobilized to end the war and had propelled her into power. In her memoir, Johnson Sirleaf (2009, 264) recalled the women of Liberia as her “secret weapon” in the 2005 election.

Unlike in many other post-conflict African countries, however, women in Liberia were not able to secure an electoral gender quota for the national legislature; instead, political parties made vague promises about more women candidates. But using her power as the executive, President Johnson Sirleaf appointed many women to her first cabinet a decade before gender parity cabinets became more common in Africa and the world. She also appointed women as county superintendents, sought to recruit more women into the military and the police, and promoted national programs that supported school girls, market women, and women farmers. An early symbolic act was to change the inscription on the Supreme Court building from “Let Justice Be Done to All Men” to “Let Justice Be Done to All” (Bauer 2011, 100–1). President Johnson Sirleaf served two six-year terms as Liberia’s leader, acting on behalf of women in many ways; it is not yet clear how enduring her legacy of gains for women and girls will be.

Rwanda: women’s feminist leadership in an authoritarian polity

Across the continent from Liberia, women and their organizations also contributed to securing a post-conflict peace and reconstruction from the mid-1990s onward in Rwanda. Since 2003, Rwanda, site of a horrific genocide in the early 1990s, has led the world in women’s representation in a single or lower house of parliament, and since 2008, Rwanda has had more women than men in its Chamber of Deputies. Currently, Rwanda is one of four African countries with a gender parity cabinet. Historically, women had not held significant positions in government in Rwanda; but already in the post-genocide transitional government (1994 to 2003), 10 women were appointed to cabinet posts, and the first post-genocide election in 2003 brought 49 percent women to the Chamber of Deputies (Bauer 2011, 93–4).

Women’s organizations had existed in the pre-genocide period in Rwanda and had formed, in part, in order to participate in the political reform process of the early 1990s. Their organization led to women’s increased political participation in the post-genocide period (Longman 2006, Issifu 2015). In addition, Rwanda’s 2003 constitution created government-wide gender quotas reaching all branches of government (sometimes two quotas, as in the case of parliament) as well as all levels of government (from the cell to the national level). Devlin and Elgie (2008, 251) attributed striking changes in parliamentary culture (in the social climate – greater confidence and greater solidarity among women MPs and a better working relationship between women and men MPs), as well as more prominent cabinet appointments for women, to women’s increased presence in parliament. In addition, women MPs suggested to Devlin and Elgie that a gender agenda was “guaranteed” by the presence of more women in government. Furthermore, some Rwandan women MPs expressed a commitment to an international feminism and to seeing their accomplishments replicated in other countries—a potential South–North diffusion of...
ideas. These accomplishments are a result of constitutional requirements and the agency of political leaders (Devlin and Elgie 2008, 251).

Rwanda’s government is becoming increasingly authoritarian – presidential term limits have been abandoned, and no political opposition is tolerated. Many observers insist that the gender parity in government serves as window dressing to the international community and/or as a way of deflecting closer examination and criticism of the never-ending Kagame regime and its dictates. In an optimistic reading, Burnet (2008, 361) suggested some years ago that in the longer term, women’s increased presence in government could help to undo authoritarian trends and that even gender initiatives handed down from above and implemented by authoritarian regimes could lead to transformation. She further opined that women’s increased representation in even an authoritarian government could lead to their more meaningful participation in a genuine democracy – one day – as a result of such transformations.

Across Africa, those countries with the greatest presence of women in parliament have adopted one or another type of electoral gender quota for parliament and have likely set and met targets for other branches of government as well, as has Rwanda. In the second wave of quota adoption in Africa, countries are implementing stronger legislated (as opposed to voluntary) quotas that may require gender parity (rather than a mere 20 or 30 percent of seats or positions), as Tunisia, Senegal, and Zimbabwe have done in recent years. Those countries with the lowest representations of women in Africa, like Ghana and Nigeria, have no electoral gender quota and use the difficult single member district (SMD) electoral system for elections to parliament, among other challenges.

Ghana: women’s ongoing struggles for political office

Ghana is often heralded as one of the most successful emerging democracies on the African continent, with an economy that has been growing steadily since its transition from decades of military rule to multiparty politics in the early 1990s. In Ghana, women made up nearly half of business owners in 2018, according to the Mastercard Foundation; indeed, powerful and wealthy market women from Makola Market in Accra and Central Market in Kumasi, among others, have been objects of scrutiny and abuse as far back as the colonial period, when European administrators sought to undermine the prominent position of women traders (Asare 2018). They helped to fund the Convention People’s Party and the struggle for independence and then were violently scapegoated and had their markets burned under the military rule of Flight Lt Jerry Rawlings in the 1980s. And yet despite this economic and political might, women in Ghana lag far behind their peers in many countries across the continent in their representation in government. The Ghana case illustrates some of the remaining challenges for women’s political leadership in Africa.

First and foremost, Ghana is like many of the countries in Africa that have fewer women in parliament in that it uses the “woman-unfriendly” SMD electoral system and no electoral gender quota. In a system in which candidates stand in individual constituencies, women candidates are disadvantaged, discouraged, and disincentivized by the exorbitant cost of politics, a debilitating politics of insult, and a national legislature that is the weakest branch of government (Bauer and Darkwah 2019). In general elections, women win in proportion to their candidacies, but there is little evidence that political parties have made recruiting more women candidates a priority. Yet, Ghana’s 13 percent women in parliament is still higher than in neighboring Nigeria, the country that ranks lowest in Africa with only 6 percent women in its parliament. Nigeria’s post-independence trajectory was similar to Ghana’s, with alternating periods of military and civil rule, though Nigeria’s military rule extended into the late 1990s, resulting in a delayed political transition.
Civil society activist and author Ayisha Osori (2017) was a candidate in the 2015 party primaries in Nigeria, deciding to stand, among other reasons, because she wanted to see more people who looked like her in government. She has documented well the challenges facing women aspirants for parliament in the country that ranks lowest in Africa – despite its status as the continent’s most populous nation and largest economy. She describes the costs of running (the impossibility of running without lots of money), the power and lack of accountability of party leaders and office holders, the need to win the endorsement of First Ladies, the incessant middle of the night meetings and other opportunities to criticize women candidates’ morals, the need for constitutional and electoral system changes, the lack of good governance, and more. In Nigeria too, a failure to recognize that the playing field is not level keeps women candidates low in numbers and on the fringes.

In both countries, there might be a higher percentage of women in the executive branch – as cabinet ministers. Indeed, cabinet ministers are appointed rather than elected, and so individual presidents may easily appoint more women to cabinet; they may even construct “gender parity” cabinets! The argument that there are not enough “qualified” women for political office has been thoroughly discredited in Africa, as in the rest of the world. Across the continent, there are “binders full” of potential outstanding women candidates or political appointees, as in the rest of the world. For example, Adams et al. (2016, 158) report that following the 2012 election in Ghana, one non-governmental organization, WILDAF, presented a petition to the newly elected president that included the names of 65 women who could be considered for government posts and called on the parliament appointment committee to reject any list of appointments that did not include 40 percent women – though that did not transpire.

**Impacts of women’s political leadership: substantive and symbolic representation**

In seeking to assess the impact of women’s political leadership around the world, scholars have deployed two concepts: the substantive representation of women’s interests and the symbolic representation of women’s interests. Substantive representation refers to advancing women’s interests through the policy making process, whether publicly or behind the scenes; this may be measured, for example, in terms of promoting or accomplishing certain policy agendas or legislative items. Of course, passing laws is only the first step in a long process of implementation and enforcement. Symbolic representation refers to altering gendered ideas about the roles of women and men in politics, raising awareness of what women can achieve, legitimating women as political actors, and encouraging women to become more involved in politics themselves as voters, activists, candidates, and leaders (Franceschet et al. 2012, 15–18). In many ways, symbolic representation effects may be the most transformative, taking place as they do outside national legislatures, and yet in educating people about women’s leadership capabilities, they may also help to bring more women into parliaments. Moreover, it is through symbolic representation effects that cultural changes are most likely to occur.

A review of the scholarship on the substantive representation impacts of more women in parliament suggests that many such impacts may be identified (Bauer 2019). For example, Medie (2013) has described how the women’s movement in Liberia has been successful in training the police to enforce the new rape law, resulting in a lower rate of withdrawal of cases. She argues that women’s groups have been bolstered in doing this by a favorable political context. Across the continent, scholars have shown that in those countries with more women in parliament for longer periods of time – like Rwanda, South Africa, Tanzania, and Uganda – new laws have been passed in the areas of gender-based violence, family law, and land rights that address women’s interests (Bauer 2019).
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Examples of symbolic representation effects of more women in parliament exist as well. So, for example, Bauer (2016) found in Botswana that early role models – women ministers and women members of parliament – inspired other women in Botswana to believe that they too, like men, could be chiefs – positions that had traditionally never been available to women (except as regents). Burnet (2011, 320–1) found in Rwanda that with the dramatic increases in women’s presence in government, women had “won respect” in their families and communities. Burnet (2011, 317–19) observes that quotas had a widespread impact in changing ordinary Rwandans’ perceptions of women as political leaders, increasing the political and social agency of women (for example, women speaking out more at meetings), and leading to increased autonomy for women as “economic subjects” and vis-a-vis domestic resources.

Conclusion: African women leading the way

In twenty-first-century Africa, it appears that centuries-old traditions of women’s leadership, women’s large and varied contributions to independence and liberation, women’s participation and leadership at United Nations conferences and other international venues, and women’s roles in securing peace and designing post-conflict dispensations, including new constitutions and electoral laws, have paved the way for a new women’s political leadership across the continent. In countries as varied as Senegal, Tunisia, and Zimbabwe, gender parity laws for parliament have been adopted, and in Ethiopia, Rwanda, Seychelles, and South Africa, leaders have exercised their agency to appoint gender parity cabinets.

Of course, there are other sides to herstory in Africa. Overall, women and girls still lag behind men and boys in most socioeconomic indicators. Women and girls in rural areas remain particularly disadvantaged. Violence, including sexual abuse, against women and girls, not just in elections but in everyday life and especially in conflict, remains an ongoing physical threat. Patriarchy endures across Africa, as it does across the world, with a new externally generated but internally embraced (Christian and Muslim) religious fundamentalism bringing a suffocating conservatism.

African women’s political leadership in the twenty-first century may not always be labeled as feminist, but often it is. Loose coalitions of younger women, especially vocal on social media, like Pepperdem Ministries in Ghana or Feminist Collective in Kenya, or longer-standing publications like Feminist Africa in South Africa or the Africa-wide, 30-year-old advocacy organization Femnet, are pushing generations of women and men to embrace the feminist goal of gender equality. They seek to provide platforms for the feminist agenda, to support women’s aspirations in politics and decision making, and to work toward ending practices such as child, early, and forced marriage, female genital cutting, persecuting “witches,” and more (Prah 2007). Going forward, Africa’s women political leaders will be more numerous and effective when working in concert with women activists and their organizations, across political divides, and in more conducive political contexts.

Notes
1 Jibrin (2004) describes this as the First Lady Syndrome as applied to Ghana and Nigeria in particular.
3 The proportional representation (PR) electoral system is considered much more “woman-friendly” – voters vote for the party rather than individual candidates – and it is also more amenable to adding an electoral gender quota – simply add and distribute women candidates on party lists.
4 See also Tamale (1999) for similar stories of standing for parliament in Uganda.
References


