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*Do more women in politics lead to better governance in African countries?*

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#### Abstract

An increasing number of women members of parliament has not changed politicals in Africa. A majority of women MPs are elected through quotas and voting patterns suggest that voters still think that men make better politicians than men. The increase has not resulted in issues that are of concern to women given grater space or in better governance. It has not resulted in greater gender equality or empowerment of women and patriarchal attitudes continue to dominate parliaments and political space, and African societies more generally.

#### Introduction

African legislatures now boast some of the highest levels of women's representation in the world, however, in this article I argue that there is little evidence to support the position that more women in politics has led to better governance in African Countries. Between 1995 and 2019 the average proportion of parliamentary seats (single/lower house) held by women increased from eight per cent to 23% (World Bank, 2021). However, this masks considerable differences between countries ranging from an increase of 56 percentage points in Rwanda to no change in Benin. Rwanda is the only country to have achieved the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) 50% target for women MPs with 61% of MPs being women. Apart from Rwanda only 12 African countries out of 55 have the 30% or more female MPs generally considered to be the critical number necessary to bring about change in governance. Furthermore, the increase in seats is mainly due to reserved seats, legislative political party quotas or voluntary quotas that political parties have observed. Women's representation rarely exceeds the quota and there has been little increase in women's representation in countries without quotas suggesting that there has been little change in voters' perception that men make better politicians than women.

African governments have shown a commitment to achieving gender equality and the empowerment of women. All African countries with the notable exception of Sudan have acceded to/ratified the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, albeit some have entered reservations to certain clauses, most notably Muslim majority countries to clauses that conflict with Shari'a Family Law which makes women second class citizens (Teti et al., 2020). They have also signed up to the Millennium Development Goals and the 2030 targets. However, women across Africa continue to face structural, institutional, and cultural barriers to enjoying full citizenship rights with social practices and lived experience generally being in conflict with more progressive laws and policies where they have been introduced. Patriarchy continues to dominate women's lives in the private and public spheres with little sign of a transformation in gender relations (Abbott and Malunda, 2016). Only one country, Namibia has achieved the targets for SDG 5 with three others, Lesotho, South Africa and Zimbabwe, looking as if they could be on track to achieve them (United Nations Development Programme, 2020).

#### Women and Governance

Women's underrepresentation in politics has become a global issue in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. Women's claim to equal citizenship was recognised in international law with the passing by

the United Nations (UN) in 1948 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, yet women remain underrepresented in government. Gender justice requires that women are recognised as full citizens, that there is a change in cultural values so that women are fully accepted as equal citizens and that their concerns and interests are taken into consideration alongside those of men (Fraser, 2007). Good governance is not just about democratically elected governments that are answerable to the electorate, that fight corruption, that respect civil and political rights and the rule of law and ensure the welfare of citizens. It is also about gender justice and the transformation of gender relations ensuring not just that there is a legal and policy framework for gender equality and the empowerment of women, but that women are able to claim and exercise these rights.

However, too often the increase in descriptive representation does not result in substantive representation – the presence of more women MPs does not lead to a change in the agenda nor to better governance (Dimitrova-Grajzl and Obasanjo, 2019). Women’s descriptive representation has increased mainly due to quotas but there is little evidence that it has had a positive impact on better governance or substantive representation (Edgell, 2018; Okedele, 2020; Ramtohul, 2019). The proportion of women elected rarely exceeds the quota threshold, quotas in effect set a glass ceiling (Abdelgawad and Hassan, 2019; Edgell, 2018; Fraccolli, 2020) and women elected to reserved seats have a second class status (Dimitrova-Grajzl and Obasanjo, 2019). Furthermore, an increase in women’s entry into politics does not necessarily mean women can challenge patriarchal ideology or that they become empowered in their personal lives (Uvuza, 2014).

#### **Impact of Increased Numbers of Women in Parliament on Governance in Africa**

Africa suffers from bad governance, corruption and gender imbalances in decision making and the reason for increased representation of women is almost exclusively due to quotas and not related to an increase in democracy, socioeconomic development or a reduction in patriarchal attitudes. Authoritarian rulers gain legitimacy by introducing parliamentary quotas and gender equality laws from development partners and the international community more generally. Despite virtually all African countries having seen an increase in the proportion of women MPs between 1996 and 2019, 46 countries (85%) remained either hybrid (20) or authoritarian (26) in 2019 (The Economist Intelligence Unit, 2020). Eight of the authoritarian regimes had 30% or more female members of parliament and three of the hybrid ones (International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, 2020). Furthermore, the two countries that were democracies in 2019 (Mauritius and Cape Verde) already had good governance in 1996 as did three of the flawed democracies, Botswana, Namibia and South Africa (Karatnycky, 1998). Tunisia’s democratisation is an outcome of the Arab Uprisings and governance indicators in Lesotho and Sao Tome and Principe two other flawed democracies deteriorated between 1996 and 2019 although there had been an increase in the proportion of women MPs in both countries.

#### **Women’s Parliamentary Representation and Empowerment for Women**

It has been argued that having an increased representation of women in politics will change the culture and priorities of parliaments so that women’s interests come onto the political agenda however, increased representation does not mean that this is inevitable (Dodson, 1997). A key barrier to the feminisation of politics is the dominance of patriarchal ideology which not only results in resistance to reforms to advance women’s issues but structures the way that parliaments operate (Galligan, 2007; Lovenduski, 2005). In Africa where women’s political representation has mainly been increased by gender quotas, women have struggled

to change the political agenda with parliaments remaining aggressively masculine and providing little political space for women (Wangnerud, 2009).

In most African countries the vast majority of legislation originates in the executive branch drafted by technocrats working in the ministries or international consultants (Burnet, 2019). Women MPs continue to encounter exclusionary masculinised environments (Wylie and Kristin, 2020), are expected to behave like men (Uvuza, 2014), lack confidence and lack social capital and face institutional barriers. Women MPs are also subject to sexual harassment and gender stereotyping. Africa countries generally score low on gender equality measures, and while some gains have been made in education, and there is high participation of women in the labour force, women have made few gains in getting decent employment, ownership and control of land or in voice (Ruiz, 2020). Furthermore, there is a growing gap between urban elite women and the rest.

Even in democratic countries women can struggle to make a difference (Devlin and Elgie, 2008). While in South Africa women have had an influence on legislation and the parliamentary calendar in Namibia, they have not managed to make parliament more women friendly and have had difficulty implementing reforms. In more authoritarian regimes like Mozambique, Uganda and Rwanda there is little evidence of women MPs having had any impact.

Rwanda has been portrayed as a success story, but its large proportion of women MPs comes from a combination of 30% reserved seats and a 30% quota on party lists. Many of the most significant gains for women came before the adoption of gender quotas in 2003 (Burnet, 2019). Having more women in parliament has not noticeably increased the influence of women in policy making, has not resulted in changes in private patriarchy or improved the lives of most Rwandan women (Abbott and Malunda, 2016; Uvuza, 2014). The law may give women equal ownership of land, but both men and women think that husbands are the 'real' owners and men have benefitted far more than women from the increase in non-farm employment. As the numbers of women in parliament increased the country became more authoritarian and the space for women's advocacy both in and outside parliament more restricted. Women parliamentarians have supported the ruling party and helped it build nationwide dominance (Burnet, 2019). The Rwandan parliament, with a majority of women MPs, voted to reduce paid maternity leave in the 2009 Labour Law and increased the working week from 40 to 45 hours (Burnet, 2019). Women's organisations did quietly lobby after the law came into force for the restoration of maternity benefits, but it was the President they lobbied not the women in parliament.

### **Conclusions**

An increase in the number of women MPs does not inevitably lead to better governance or legislative changes that improve the lives of women generally. Women elected to reserved seats are often seen as being second class MPs. In authoritarian and hybrid regimes little power lies with parliament, with political power and control lying with the executive branch of government. Even when progressive laws and policies are passed, implementation remains a challenge and patriarchal ideology continues to dominate in both the public and private sphere. Governments are more concerned with meeting gender equality targets than transformative change in gender relations

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#### Bio

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