

# Opinion

## Strides and Struggles: Women's political representation in Africa

By Ruby Ofori



**I**N Africa, the journey towards achieving gender parity in political representation remains an arduous one. Despite decades of advocacy and international commitments made by African governments since 1995 with the Beijing Platform for Action, the pace of progress is sluggish. According to UN Women, if current trends persist, gender parity in African legislative bodies won't materialise until 2063. This reality underscores a sobering truth: African men continue to dominate political spheres, with women occupying only 26 per cent of parliamentary seats across the continent.

"Large gaps still remain in women's representation at different levels of governance and leadership - women's voices still remain a whisper. The struggle of women to gain a fair share of political power remains a work in progress, but the

achievements should nevertheless not be ignored," writes Yolanda Sadie, Professor Emerita, University of Johannesburg.

Rwanda emerges as a beacon of hope, boasting over 60 per cent female representation in its Chamber of Deputies. However, such success stories are rare. Globally, the increase in women's parliamentary representation since 1995 has been marginal, with Latin America leading at 36 per cent, followed by Europe and Northern America at 32 per cent. These figures spotlight a universal struggle for gender equality in governance, but Africa often bears the brunt of Western criticism for its perceived lag in progress.

Critics, both within and outside Africa, often attribute entrenched patriarchal attitudes to colonial legacies and cultural biases. However, historical evidence suggests that African women have long fought for political agency, predating colonial occupation. For instance, the Iyede women in Nigeria's pre-colonial era

possessed organised voices, challenging patriarchal norms within their communities.

Yet, the road to gender parity remains fraught with obstacles. Many African nations have fallen short of their commitments to international frameworks promoting women's participation in politics. Despite protocols like the Beijing Declaration and the Maputo Declaration, only a handful of countries have achieved significant female representation in local governments.

On the global stage, Africa shines in some aspects, notably in the number of female speakers of Parliament. Currently, the continent boasts 16 female speakers out of 75 legislative bodies, surpassing both Asia and the Middle East. Moreover, with four female heads of state, including prime ministers and presidents, Africa demonstrates progress in breaking gender barriers at the highest levels of leadership.

However, such advancements are overshadowed by concerning trends of

violence against women in political spaces.

A 2021 study by the Inter-Parliamentary Union and the African Parliamentary Union revealed alarming rates of psychological, sexual and physical violence against female parliamentarians. This endemic issue not only threatens the safety of women but also undermines efforts to encourage young women to enter politics.

To address these challenges, African Parliaments must prioritise creating safe and inclusive spaces for women. Practical measures, such as internal policies combating sexism and harassment, are crucial steps forward. Positive examples, like Tunisia's recognition of political violence against women and South Africa's parliamentary sexual harassment policy, offer valuable lessons for reform.

In confronting the barriers to women's political representation, Africa stands at a critical juncture. By fostering gender-inclusive political environments, the continent can harness the full potential of its diverse population and pave the way for transformative development. Ultimately, achieving gender parity isn't just a moral imperative; it's essential for building a more equitable and prosperous Africa.

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