Cultural Barriers to Gender Parity Politics and Socio-Economic Development in Africa: Need for a Pragmatic Approach

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Abstract

The need to promote gender parity has become a universally acknowledged concept. This is because, gender equality is critical to overall development; hence, the dynamic contribution of women, on the same level as men, in all facets of decision-making is vital to the realization of equality and sustainable development. However, present-day women are confronted with difficulties in their political participation across the globe, especially in Africa. Women across Africa, at every socio-political level, find themselves under-represented in leadership positions because of cultural barriers. Irrespective of different approaches employed to boost women's participation in politics, and advanced through conventions, protocols, and international agreements for gender mainstreaming, the number of women, particularly at the highest echelon of governance, is yet to improve. Given this situation, this paper argued that, at the heart of the problem of gender disparity in Africa, is the fact that, traditional beliefs, and cultural attitudes - especially as it concerns women's roles and status in society remain strong. Moreover, with the constant stereotyping of women as inferior beings, it becomes hard for them to pursue their political rights as active participants. This is desk research and qualitative. Data are obtained from secondary sources and analysed through content analysis. The paper concluded that the cultural trend that favours gender disparities in Africa has resulted in resistance to the role of gender equality in birthing development; hence, there is a need for a re-orientation of all and sundry, gender equality issues, in other to achieve the goals of socio economic development. This should translate into attitudinal change, which is germane to the efficacy of gender parity in Africa.

Introduction

Politics constitute an important aspect of human life, as it is essential for the existence of a state, and in settling disputes. It avails individuals the opportunity to take part in activities related to affairs of the state, and in the decision-making of their society to ensure the accomplishment of their needs (Ahmed, 2013). Similarly, women's leadership in political spheres is collectively beneficial to the nation and their livelihood and socio economic development (World Economic Forum, 2017), and is a matter of women's right to equal opportunity and access. A song by Robert Kelly titled "Heart of a woman" recognized a woman as a powerful force in the life of a man, and the backbone of every family; while Orville Richard Burrell popularly called Shaggy portrayed a woman as an astounding gift of life in his

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timeless piece 'Strength of a woman'. The late rapper, Tupac Shakur went on to appreciate his mother in a powerful song titled 'Dear Mama.' Unfortunately, despite these outstanding qualities which position a woman as a force to reckon with, on the political front, women have found it very difficult to navigate the challenging terrain of politics in Africa, and across the globe because of cultural barriers. A report by International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (2021) indicates that there are in existence, no less than eight international, three Commonwealth, two African, and four sub-regional instruments that mandate African countries to attain gender equality in political decision-making. Eight of the instruments give room for affirmative action, while nine contain specific targets. The rationale behind these instruments according to Nwankwor (2022) centers on arguments of the policy-responsiveness of political representatives towards those they represent. Specifically, they support the expectations that women's presence in political leadership will lead to inclusive decisions that reflect the needs and interests of a broader population, including women and girls, considering that, women's political leadership results in optimal governance outcomes for most of society.

Nonetheless, United Nations Women (2013) asserts that all over the world, women's leadership and political participation are restricted. Nearly in all sectors, including political offices, the civil service, the private sector, and academia, women have occupied lesser space than men, irrespective of their proven abilities as leaders and agents of change, as well as their rights to participate equally in democratic governance. This reiterates the strong argument that establishing frameworks and policies is not enough to facilitate women's political participation. There is a need, therefore, to put in place a mechanism for implementation, and continuous tracking. In the Beijing Platform for Action, proceedings from the Fourth World Conference on Women, held in 1995, outlined the importance of women's leadership in sections G.1 and G.2, including, 'ensuring women's equal access to power structures and decision-making' as well as 'increasing women's capacity to participate in decision-making and leadership.' Several years later, the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development has underscored the exigency to achieve gender parity in leadership through SDG Target 5.5, necessitating "women's full and effective participation and equal opportunities for leadership at all levels of decision-making in political, economic and public life" (Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific, 2019).

According to Maccionis (2009), reports show that women were offered the chance to take part in a ballot for the first time in New Zealand in 1883. Finland offered the right to vote to women in 1906; Norway gave them the right in 1913, while Germany bestowed women the right to vote in 1918. Women never participated in election processes in the United States before the 1920s. In Jordan, women were excluded from the process until 1950. Several years later, the situation changed, and women were given the right to poll vote, still, they were deprived of contesting an election as a candidate, while the right of polling vote was only given to educated women (Ullah, 2018). Women in Greece got political rights in 1952. By 1980, women had only the right to merely cast vote. However, at the end of 1980, women came to participate in political activities and got the right to political decision-making (Ullah, 2018).

International IDEA (1998) states that the participation of women in decision-making often focuses on issues of justice, equity, and human rights. The representation of women and the inclusion of their perspectives and experience into the decision-making process will inevitably lead to solutions that are more viable and satisfy a broader range of society." This assertion holds that although women are not homogenous, they do have certain common life experiences and "interests" that need to be brought into and enrich political decision-making. Because of these different life experiences, the argument runs that, women are likely to shed different perspectives on all mainstream political issues, such as crime, transport, and the economy. This paper, therefore, evaluates the need for women to be given a fair space in politics across Africa.

Materials and methods

This is desk research. It is qualitative. Data are obtained from secondary sources and analysed through content analysis. The review of extant literature provides insight into addressing and discussing thematic issues raised in the objective of the study. The discussion provides the framework for the conclusion and recommendations.

Literature review and Theoretical Support

Conceptual Clarification of Gender Equality

Drawing from the study by Alexander and Welzel (2007), this paper conceptualized gender equality using four indicators. The first measure is the status of women's livelihood. This is evaluated using the Gender Development Index, which is an appraisal of gender equality for literacy figures, educational levels, the standard of living, and life expectancy. The second indicator is civic actions, which has to do with the proportion of the adult female population that has partaken in any kind of civic activity, ranging from petitions, demonstrations, and boycotts. Thirdly, gender equality is further assessed in positional empowerment, and this is reviewed using the Gender Empowerment Index. It is a record of the number of women occupying administrative and managerial positions. Lastly, gender equality as it concerns political representation is measured using the percentage of women in national parliaments.

Thus, Alexander and Welzel (2007) assert that observation of country positions according to the levels of gender equality for each of the four indicators revealed many shifts. Honduras, South Africa, and Mozambique for instance, scored below the 25th percentile on the Gender Development Index and the Gender Empowerment Index, but their percentages of women parliamentarians were above the 75th percentile. On the other hand, Great Britain and the United States position were in the 90th percentile in their scores for gender development and women's civic participation, and above the 75th percentile for gender empowerment, but scored a little below the 50th percentile in their percentages of women in parliament. Japan and France equally attained the 90th percentile on the Gender Development Index; but Japan remained in the 25th percentile for the proportion of women in parliament, while France scored a little above the 25th. Interestingly, nearly all the European and English-Speaking Democracies scored above the 75th percentile on all four measures of gender equality. Nonetheless, Nigeria, Mongolia, and India constantly scored below the 25th percentile on all measures of gender equality, while Croatia, Portugal, Estonia, Latvia, and Malta, among others, maintained average positions in all four subdivisions (Alexander and Welzel 2007).

Accordingly, a report by Apap, Claros, and Zamfir (2019) indicates that all over the globe, women are still under-represented in leadership positions. Female heads of state or government are still a minority, although the number has increased (from 12 to 21) over the past 20 years. Currently, only approximately one in four members of lower or single houses of parliament worldwide is a woman. Globally, women's membership in parliaments rose to 24.1 % at the end of 2018, representing an increase of 13 percentage points compared with two decades ago. In 2018, the number of women presiding over houses of national parliaments were 55 (of the 279 posts worldwide). Similarly, only 18% of appointed ministers are women, and they are usually assigned portfolios related to environment, natural resources, and energy, followed by social sectors.

This means that women are still largely excluded from the executive branches of government. They are also under-represented among senior-level civil servants and seldom represent their governments at the international level. Apap, et al (2019) contend that several factors appear to contribute to this under-representation, such as women are seldom leaders of major political parties, which are instrumental in

forming future political leaders. Secondly, gender norms and expectations also drastically reduce the pool of women putting themselves forward for selection as electoral candidates.

Theoretical support: Liberal Feminism

Mary Wolsten Craft is regarded as the proponent of liberal feminism, also known as equalitarian or mainstream feminism. Nonetheless, most of the work on liberalism is connected to John Locke, David Hume, Jeremy Bentham, and John Stuart Mill. The theory proposes that women's subordination can be questioned. It calls for the equal access of women to various public domains while frowning at unequal treatment based on gender (Ullah, 2018). Friedan (1981) cited in Ullah (2018) supported the idea that society should make a constant effort to reduce the gender gap and to develop more human social systems. Hence, to reduce gender inequality, liberal feminism suggests planned actions like mobilizing existing political change channels, for change and developing equal economic opportunities. It further demands the elimination of sexism that leads to and causes gender inequality. Liberal feminism accepts the existing setup of society but prefers a larger extension of the rights of women. While the theory wants the implementation of gender balance law, it stresses that women should have an equal chance of access to these laws.

Cultural Barriers to Gender Parity and Socio-Economic Development in Africa

Traditional beliefs and cultural attitudes - especially as regards women's roles and status in society, remain strong, particularly in rural areas (Sadie, 2005, cited in Mlambo & Kapingura, 2019). According to George (2019), women's ability to engage politically both within, and beyond the voting booth - particularly as community organisers and elected officials - is often shaped by norms that drive wider social structures. Fundamental to the constraints that women face is an entrenched patriarchal system in which family control and decision-making powers are in the hands of males; hence, traditional roles and the division of labour are still clearly gendered (Kangas et al., 2015).

Gender Links (2019) states that Ethiopia for instance is a patriarchal society with strong cultural and religious influences. The worth of a woman in Ethiopia is measured based on the role she plays as a wife and mother. There are many proverbs that society uses to discourage women's public appearance in decision-making. Examples in Amharic include *set wode majet wond wode segenet* meaning 'let women to be in their kitchen but men to the offices"; *set btawk bewond yalk* meaning 'no matter what a woman knows, it is by a man a thing is finished"; and *ye set eras wond* meaning "a man is the head of a woman." Such deeply ingrained views cast doubts on women's ability to be in politics and make critical decisions (International IDEA, 2021).

Traditional attitudes toward gender equality influence women's advancement in political participation. The burden of household chores and inequitable access to higher education also limit women's ability to enjoy the opportunities and benefits of citizenship as men on an equal footing in the political sphere. As a result, in Botswana, politics is still viewed as a male domain (Somolekae, 2005 cited in International IDEA, 2021). The Setswana proverb *ga di nke ke etelelwa ke manamagadi pele, di ka wela selomo - Banna ke baeteledipele ka tho¬lego* literally translates to "a team of ox is never led by females, otherwise the oxen will fall into a ditch - men are perceived to be born leaders.' Proverbs like these, result in women being submissive and weaken their self-esteem and confidence.

Culture plays a major role in the way in which people behave and respond to anything. Most women do not see leaders in themselves as society has socialised them to view men as leaders and them as helpers. As a result, politics in Botswana is perceived to be a male space, and women participating in politics are often deemed as less feminine and face scrutiny from society (Nitza, Chilisa, and Makwinja-Morara, 2010). Taoyang (2019) also reports that the reaction against women winning office can discourage other

women from standing for office, as it is the case in some parts of Cameroon with high levels of gender inequality and discrimination. According to him, women who are actively participating in politics are seen and treated as free women (prostitutes/wayward) of easy virtues, stubborn people, whores, too domineering, cultural rebellions, etc. It is further observed that during the campaign, the political opponents (mostly men) use the alleged loose moral standing of these women against them and often insult them directly in public. Thus, they are often subjected to public ridicule and are socially stigmatized by both men and women. In the Republic of Benin, Amzath Abdoulaye, a political scientist and director of a unit specializing in communication and political strategy, notes that "there is often a domination of customary laws and moral principles that decree that a woman's place is at home, being submissive to her family or her husband" (Gender Links, 2019).

Although the 1990 Constitution in Benin enshrines parity, the customary law of Dahomey, the former name of Bénin, states in Article 27 that "a woman has no legal power. She has a home to run, and this gives her some importance. She can earn some money by selling objects that she has made. She is part and parcel of a man's assets and legacy". In a similar vein, cultural practices and perceptions in South Sudan represent major obstacles to women's participation in politics and public affairs. Practices such as child marriage or arranged marriages lead to many girls dropping out of school. This limits women's chances of continuing education, which is key to their pursuing careers in politics and other professions. According to UNESCO, the literacy level among women aged 15 to 64 in South Sudan is 20.6% (Gender Links, 2019). Under customary law, women are valued and respected as mothers and daughters because they are expected to bring wealth to the family upon marriage. Women are seen as guardians of culture and traditions and are charged with imparting cultural values to the younger generation.

Conversely, a socialisation version of the argument is that women have been brought up to regard politics as alien. Their lives and activities have always directed them away from activities of power. It is also argued that: "Women often face a double day, balancing career and family responsibilities, thus limiting their opportunities for career advancement"(Beckman and Amico, 1994, cited in International IDEA, 2021) According to this view, it is not simply the case that women lack the will and attributes to participate in decision-making, but they are systematically discriminated against by men in authority who refuse to promote them; and by legislation, which limits their opportunities. Consequently, aside from the patriarchal setups and norms that differentially position men and women, stereotypes affect female leadership significantly. Huddy and Terkildsen (1993) cited in Liu (2019) aver, that voters have limited time and energy to devote to political matters; hence, they rely on stereotypes to help them evaluate political leaders. Stereotyping is largely gender-based in that, female politicians are seen as kind, warm, and compassionate, whereas male politicians are typically viewed as assertive, tough, and competent. Although the extent to which these stereotypes assist or damage female candidates electorally is debatable, they indicate that women are often not considered 'leadership material'. Particularly, voters tend to show a preference for stereotypically masculine traits over feminine characteristics when determining who should hold high office. Thus, these gender-based assumptions about political leaders raise two important implications. The number one is that women are less likely to be considered leaders, which has long-term consequences on the likelihood of women entering politics. Accordingly, when girls are made to believe that women are less suited to being leaders, they are less likely to see public service as a career option.

Additionally, even when women are brave enough to enter politics, female politicians face a paradoxical challenge. Time and again, women must possess and perform masculine characteristics associated with leadership to gain acceptance but in doing so, women can be seen as aggressive and cold and risk driving voters away (Liu, 2019). However, if women do not exert masculinity, they are seen as too feminine to be competent leaders. Consequently, female politicians become faced with the double-bind of how best to act. Besides personality traits, gender also plays a role in voters' evaluations of politicians' ideologies

and capabilities in representing their interests. As such, gendered biases entail that female political leaders are also expected to be more capable of dealing with 'feminine' issues – such as welfare, healthcare, education, and family – whereas men are expected to be better equipped to handle the economy, defence, military and foreign policy. These gender biases marginalize women and impede their political careers (Liu, 2019).

A patriarchal society accords men the dominant role and decision makers' status in both the private sphere (home) and the public sphere (society). It banishes women from the private sphere of home keeping and limits them to reproductive services in the public sphere. As a result, a society can be called democratic and be completely patriarchal (Molyneux, 1984, cited in International IDEA, 2021) Aïcha Aït Alla, a Moroccan councilor is quoted as saying: "I was often rejected by electors but mostly by the members of my political party and by men who had been elected. They did not allow me to speak in public. They organised meetings at odd hours or in places where women are not allowed to go. In Burundi (Gender Links, 2019) reports that, for a woman to get into a political party, with all her other family responsibilities, she must be supported by her husband or partner. In a patriarchal society like the one in Burundi, women shoulder most of the household chores and responsibilities. Getting into politics means spending time organising meetings, meeting people, and trying to convince other women to join the party. During the electoral period in Burundi, candidates spend weeks out of the household campaigning. Without the support and backing of her husband, a woman will not dare get into politics and if she does, the campaign might be a source of great stress for her. This explains why some women, who are interested in getting into politics, refuse to do so to keep peace at home and not jeopardise their families. Even if political parties encourage women's political participation, and the Constitution has adopted a minimum quota for women in Parliament, social pressures remain an important barrier. In Zimbabwe, women are portrayed as weak and incapable of making smart decisions. They have been depicted across generations to be only capable of trivial matters, engaged in gossip and hearsay, incompetent, and less intelligent. This has been projected and reinforced through the years through male-dominated institutions and patriarchal societies which internalize the idea that woman is inferior. With the constant reinforcement of the notion that women are inferior in every aspect, it becomes hard for women to pursue their political rights as active participants. For a woman to enter politics, such patriarchal attitudes make it even harder. Unfortunately, such attitudes toward women still exist in societies all over the world today - in both developed and developing countries (International Knowledge Network of Women in Politics, 2014). Nabila Smail, a member of the Socialist Forces Front, an opposition party in Algeria says "it happened sometimes that I was the only woman during the visits and the meetings. Each time a woman asked a question, the men were making fun of her. There is a huge hypocrisy behind the adoption of the laws and there is a very paternalistic attitude in the political parties. They are constantly blocking our efforts to keep us on a leash."

Consequently, the Beijing Platform for Action (BPFA) argues that "women's equal participation in decision making is not only a demand for simple justice, or democracy, but can also be seen as a necessary condition for women's interests to be taken into account. Achieving the goal of equal participation of women and men in decision-making will provide a balance that more accurately reflects the composition of society and is needed to strengthen democracy and promote its proper functioning" (United Nations, paragraph 181, 1995, cited in International IDEA, 2021).

The Need for a Pragmatic Approach

The Role of Political Parties Women's empowerment in politics calls for a multidimensional approach. Thus, Mlango and Kapingura (2019) opine that it is essential for governments to engage political parties to ensure that they include more women on their candidate list. This means that political parties should

become the institutional vehicle through which women's participation in politics is enhanced especially in facilitating their participation within party structures and over election periods. Liu (2019) further posits that before effective changes can be made, it is imperative to recognise how power is structured in electoral institutions, political parties, the media, and in everyday lives. This entails that gender stereotypes of female politicians are derived from the unequal power distributions in the family, in the community, and society.

1. Provision of Funds to Female Politicians/Parties

Following closely is the need for governments to provide more funds to independent female politicians as well as political parties that have a considerable and accepted number of female political candidates (Mlango & Kapingura, 2019). In the opinion of Wright (2019), the idea of inducing party reform has been receiving traction globally as a way to encourage parties to nominate women and eventually get them elected. With political parties being major influencers (UNDP, 2014), governments could consider funding incentivized party quotas. In Georgia, for instance, political parties receive 30 percent more funding if they have at least 30 percent of each gender in the first 10 names on their party list. Additionally, parties that successfully nominate and get a woman candidate elected receive additional funding (IDEA, 2018).

2. Awareness Creation

Another critical measure is to engage women through awareness campaigns. Women need to be educated and informed that political participation is not limited to election campaigns and mobilisation. They also need to know that for political participation to be inclusive, there should be equal participation by both women and men. Although female children grow up believing that politics is a men's domain, Fox and Lawless (2010) demonstrate that young women are as likely as men to consider public office as a profession if they are encouraged. This further illustrates the importance of transforming public attitudes toward gender norms by recruiting women and helping them envision themselves as equal to their male counterparts.

3. Equal Contribution to Domestic Labour

Family responsibilities are a major barrier for women to engage in public affairs. For instance, since the 2015 general election, Fox and Lawless (2010) report that 45 percent of the women in the House of Commons have no children whereas only 28 percent of men are childless. Underlying this striking difference is the fact that women with familial responsibilities are less likely to enter politics. As such, one way to combat this would be to ensure the equal contribution of domestic labour between men and women. Moreover, this difference also suggests that women have a harder time balancing family and political work, possibly forcing women to choose between family and a political career. In the same vein, allowing breastfeeding, providing childcare, and offering paid family leave will further enhance gender parity in politics.

4. Perception Change

Importantly also, changing the perception of women in politics, and providing female politicians with better opportunities to balance family and political life will significantly reduce the discrimination against women in politics. Moreover, it could break down the sexism that suggests that in politics – or any other walk of life – women's and men's abilities are innately different. Furthermore, preventing violence and harassment against women in elections, for example, should be a priority. Essentially, more efforts should be channeled toward bringing more and particularly young women, into political parties, to train women leaders, and boost women's skills to participate actively in elections as candidates and voters.

Conclusion/Recommendation

The pervasive cultural trend that favours and encourages gender disparities in Africa has created a climate of conservatism and resistance to the centrality of the role of gender equality in attaining development on a sustainable basis across the continent. There is, therefore, the need for a re-orientation by individuals, groups, institutions, and agencies (both governmental and non-governmental) on gender equality issues that will translate into attitudinal change and response, which is germane for the efficacy of gender parity and women empowerment in Africa.

Acknowledgment

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