

Women in Political Leadership: Progress and Barriers in West and East Africa

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<p>Corresponding Author Dr. Pippie Hugues</p> <p>Policy Analyst with Nkafu policy Institute and a Research Coordinator with Conflict Lab</p> <p>Article History</p> <p>Received: 26/04/2025</p> <p>Accepted: 10/05/2025</p> <p>Published: 13/05/2025</p>	<p>Abstract: Women in political leadership in West and East Africa have made progress, but still face significant barriers. The average representation of women in parliaments in Africa is around 27%, with some countries like Rwanda and Senegal leading the way with over 40% representation. West African Countries like Senegal and Liberia have made significant progress in promoting women's participation in politics, while in East Africa, Countries like Rwanda and Ethiopia have implemented policies and programs to increase women's representation in politics. Overall, while there has been progress, much work remains to be done to address the barriers and promote women's participation in politics in West and East Africa. It is for this reason that the researchers will attempt to examine the progress made so far with concrete examples and equally discuss some of the barriers facing a complete implementation of the required quota for women in politics. The paper shall end with policy recommendations.</p> <p>Keywords: Women, Political Leadership, West and East Africa.</p>
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Introduction

A notable positive outcome of the political transitions in the Great Lakes region of Africa over the past decade to fifteen years has been the enhanced representation and participation of women in both politics and the public domain. This significant advancement for women has largely been facilitated by the implementation of quota systems and cooperation strategies. Many African nations, including Uganda, Burundi, Rwanda, and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), have incorporated provisions in their post-conflict constitutions that mandate a minimum of 30 percent female representation in decision-making bodies. The DRC's constitution, which was ratified by referendum in December 2005, took an even bolder step by establishing the principle of equal representation. Additionally, the reconstruction efforts in northern Uganda, following a devastating two-decade conflict, have created avenues for women to take on vital roles in the region's economic revitalization.

Women's political leadership in Africa has evolved significantly, yet persistent barriers continue to hinder full gender inclusivity in governance. Traditionally, West and East African societies have been patriarchal, limiting women to domestic roles and community-level participation while excluding them from formal political power. However, in recent decades, legal reforms, advocacy efforts, and improved access to education have driven gradual progress in women's political representation. Despite these advancements, gender disparities in leadership remain a challenge, necessitating further structural and policy interventions to ensure sustainable change.

Progress in Women's Political Representation

The journey toward gender parity in African politics has seen remarkable milestones. In 2006, Liberia made history by electing Ellen Johnson Sirleaf as Africa's first female head of state. A decade later, Ethiopia appointed Sahle-Work Zewde as its first female president, most recently, Namibia elects its first female president, signifying a growing acceptance of women in top leadership roles (Afrobarometer, 2022).

However, while such progress is commendable, statistical analysis reveals a mixed reality. According to the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU, 2023), women's representation in African parliaments varies widely:

West Africa:

- Senegal – 44.2% of parliamentary seats held by women
- Burkina Faso – 9.4% of parliamentary seats
- Ghana – 14.5% of parliamentary seats
- Liberia – 12.3% of parliamentary seats
- Nigeria – 6.2% of parliamentary seats (one of the lowest in the region)
- Sierra Leone – 14.5% of parliamentary seats
- Ivory Coast – 12.5% of parliamentary seats

East Africa:

- Rwanda – 61.3% of parliamentary seats (highest in the world)
- Tanzania – 36.7% of parliamentary seats
- Uganda – 34.9% of parliamentary seats
- Kenya – 23.6% of parliamentary seats
- Ethiopia – 37.2% of parliamentary seats

- Burundi – 38.2% of parliamentary seats
- South Sudan – 32% of parliamentary seats

These figures highlight both progress and ongoing disparities. While Rwanda and Ethiopia have exceeded the 30% minimum quota recommended by the African Union's Gender Policy, other nations still lag behind.

Although conflicts have caused significant devastation across much of the continent, they have also disrupted the traditional social order, creating opportunities for expression and political engagement that women have, to some extent, been able to leverage. These conflicts have acted as a catalyst for the development of a women's movement that, during critical times, has managed to transcend ethnic and political divides to unite and advocate for essential issues related to women's political, economic, and social rights. As a result, avenues for women's expression and political involvement have been broadened and reinforced. Furthermore, women's active roles in political transitions and post-conflict reconstruction have played a crucial part in expanding access to political and economic opportunities for a larger number of women.

While these advancements are undeniably significant and deserve recognition, women continue to encounter considerable obstacles. Many prominent women's organizations in the region express concerns that the political, economic, and cultural landscape often does not support meaningful and effective participation of women or the addressing of issues that impact them. The implementation of gender quotas has not consistently led to the establishment of gender-responsive policies, nor has it significantly altered the socio-economic status of women across various levels of society.

East Africa: Leading the Way in Gender Quotas

Rwanda stands out as a global leader in gender representation, with women occupying over 60% of parliamentary seats—the highest in the world (**Government of Rwanda, 2022**). This success is largely due to constitutional mandates requiring a minimum of **30%** of legislative seats to be reserved for women. Similarly, Uganda, Tanzania, and Kenya have implemented gender quotas, significantly increasing female participation in politics (**United Nations Women, 2022**).

West Africa: A Gradual Shift Towards Inclusion

West African countries are making strides, albeit at a slower pace. Senegal's 2010 Gender Parity Law, which mandates **50%** of elected positions be filled by women, has notably improved female representation in government. Cape Verde, Burkina Faso, and Ghana have also introduced gender quotas, showing a strong commitment to inclusivity (**United Nations Women, 2021**). However, other West African nations, such as Nigeria and Mali, have yet to implement effective legislative measures to increase women's representation. Without legal mandates, women continue to face challenges in securing political seats.

Education and Advocacy: Building a Pipeline for Women Leaders

Education has been a transformative tool for women's empowerment in political leadership. Countries like Kenya, Ghana, Ethiopia, and Senegal have made strides in closing the gender education gap, leading to a more politically aware female population (**Tripp, 2020**).

Civil society organizations (CSOs) and international bodies have also played a crucial role. Organizations like the **African Women's Development Fund (AWDF)** provide financial and technical support for female candidates, while networks like **Women in Politics (WIP)** offer mentorship and leadership training (**United Nations Development Programme, 2021**).

Additionally, grassroots movements and media campaigns have helped reshape public perceptions of female leadership, fostering greater societal acceptance.

Barriers to Women's Political Leadership

Despite significant progress, women in West and East Africa continue to face major barriers to political participation. These include structural, cultural, economic, and security-related challenges.

Socio-Cultural Norms and Gender Stereotypes

Cultural beliefs remain a major obstacle to women's political participation. According to **Afrobarometer (2022)**, more than **40%** of respondents in West Africa believe that "men make better political leaders than women," compared to **32% in East Africa**.

In many societies, women who enter politics are often stigmatized and labeled as "rebellious" or "unsuitable for leadership roles." In Nigeria, where only **3.6%** of national parliamentary seats are held by women, deep-rooted patriarchal structures discourage female participation in governance (**United Nations Women, 2022**).

Economic Constraints and Limited Access to Funding

The cost of running for political office remains a significant barrier for women. A **2021 UNDP** study found that the average cost of running for parliamentary elections in Nigeria is \$120,000, a financial burden that many women cannot afford.

Male candidates often have access to political donor networks, while women struggle to secure campaign financing due to their lower economic status (**United Nations Development Programme, 2021**).

Political Violence and Harassment

Women in politics frequently face gender-based violence, intimidation, and harassment, both online and offline. During election periods, reports of physical attacks, sexual violence, and public threats against female candidates are widespread.

For example, in Kenya's 2017 elections, several female candidates were physically attacked and threatened, discouraging many women from contesting for office (**United Nations Women, 2018**).

Lack of Political Networks and Party Support

Political parties in Africa remain male-dominated, often excluding women from leadership positions. A **2022 UN Women Africa report** found that only **16%** of political parties in West and East Africa have internal gender quotas, limiting opportunities for women to rise in politics.

Bridging the Gender Gap: The Way Forward

The WPP (Women Political Participation) Africa Barometer 2024 aligns with discussions surrounding CEDAW General Resolution 40, which sets a groundbreaking target of 50% as the aspirational standard for WPP, rather than the previous 30%.

This resolution also significantly expands the conversation by urging governments to implement strategies that foster diversity, inclusion, climate justice, artificial intelligence, and authentic participation. In Africa, the future is youthful and female! While progress has been made, achieving gender parity in African politics requires deliberate actions and policy reforms. The following measures can help bridge the gap:

- **Legislative Reforms** – Governments must enforce mandatory gender quotas, ensuring women hold at least 50% of legislative seats.
- **Financial Support for Women Candidates** – Governments and NGOs should establish women-focused campaign funds to address financial barriers.
- **Public Awareness and Education** – Societal perceptions must change through education, advocacy campaigns, and leadership training programs.
- **Stronger Legal Protections** – Governments should implement laws to prevent electoral violence and harassment against female candidates.
- **Political Party Reforms** – Parties must adopt internal gender quotas and prioritize women's inclusion in leadership structures.

Africa has made commendable strides in advancing women's political leadership, but gender parity remains an unfulfilled promise in many countries. Addressing the barriers that hinder women's political participation requires policy changes, cultural shifts, and financial support systems to empower women in leadership.

If Africa is truly committed to inclusive governance, women must not only be seen in politics—they must be heard, empowered, and given equal opportunities to lead.

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