

## **New Trends in Women's Political Participation in Africa**

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In the 1990s, for the first time in the post-independence period greater numbers of African women began to aspire to political leadership at the national and local levels. Although their impact was still minimal and the obstacles daunting, new female faces and voices began to be seen and heard. The 1990s was a decade of beginnings for women in politics in Africa and all indications are that we will see even greater pressures for female political representation and participation in the decade ahead.

Until the 1990s it was unheard of for women to run for the presidency in Africa. Yet in the 1990s, Charity Ngilu and Wangari Maathai ran in the 1998 Kenyan presidential election and Ngilu has announced plans to run again in 2002. Rose Rugendo of Tanzania's party Chama Cha Mapinduzi sought her party's nomination in the 1995 presidential primaries as did Sarah Jibril in Nigeria in 1989. Although unsuccessful in these bids for power, these women set an important precedent in their respective countries.

The first head of an African state in this century was Zauditu, empress of Ethiopia, who ruled between 1917 and 1930. Other female heads of state have included Dzeliwe Shongwe, Queen-regent of Swaziland, who ruled in 1982-1983, followed by Ntombi Thwala, Queen-regent of Swaziland, 1983-1986. Elizabeth Domitien was Africa's first female prime minister, serving in the Central African Republic between 1975-1976. But it was not until the 1990s that women claimed national leadership visibility in greater numbers. Ruth Perry has been on the six-member collective presidency of Liberia, chairing this Council of State since September 1996. She is the first non-monarchical head of an African state. In 1994

Uganda's Wandera Specioza Kazibwe became the first female Vice President in Africa. Sylvie Kinigi served as prime minister of Burundi from 1993 to 1994, and during this same period, Agathe Uwilingiyimana was prime minister of Rwanda until she was assassinated in office. Senegal also claimed a woman vice president in 2001. By the end of the decade, the Ethiopian, Lesotho, and South African legislative bodies had female speakers of the house and Uganda, Zimbabwe and South Africa had female deputy speakers.

### Change in Representation of Women in Legislatures (Per cent)

Region						% change
	1960	1970	1980	1990	2000	1960-2000
Eastern Europe/Eurasia	23.11	25.37	31.10	9.10	11.44	-50
Eastern Asia	5.98	6.33	9.16	9.88	11.92	99
Pacific	2.50	1.86	1.31	3.41	5.98	139
Mid-East/North Africa	2.00	2.06	3.39	3.52	4.84	142
South Asia	1.94	2.98	4.47	5.07	5.56	186
Scandinavia	9.66	10.42	21.24	31.86	37.58	289
Western Europe	3.25	3.21	7.16	10.61	17.49	438
North America	2.90	1.35	4.35	9.85	16.40	465
Latin America	2.00	3.74	7.54	9.44	13.18	559
Sub-Saharan Africa	0.94	2.21	6.46	7.78	9.90	953
Overall	4.93	5.41	8.74	9.14	12.21	148

Data compiled from Inter-Parliamentary Union, *Women in Parliaments, 1945-1995: A World Statistical Survey*, Series "Reports and Documents," No. 23, Geneva, 1995; <http://www.ipu.org/wmn-e/world.htm> ("Women in National Parliaments: Situation as of 25 September 2000").

New pressures mounted in many African countries to increase the number of women in parliament. Africa, which had the lowest rates of female participation in politics in the 1960s (see Table) has since then seen the fastest rates of growth in female representation of any world region. Fourteen countries in Africa had over 12 percent female representation in parliament by the late 1990s. Some countries like South Africa had 30 percent female representation (up from 3 percent in 1991); Seychelles 23 percent (down from 46 percent prior to the 1993 elections) (Karl 1995, 91), Mozambique 30 percent (up from 16 percent in 1991) and Namibia had 25 percent (up from 7 percent in 1994). Compared with other parts of the world, a few African countries were doing relatively well, but none came close to proportionately representing women, who make up over half the population in most countries. By 1999, women held on the average 11.5 percent of the seats in parliaments in Africa compared with 6 percent a decade earlier (Inter-Parliamentary Union 1999, United Nations 1991). Thus, Africa had comparable rates with European women, who in 1999 held 13 percent of legislative seats (excluding the Nordic countries) but lagged behind the Nordic countries with 39 percent female legislative representation, and Asia and the Americas with 15 percent female held legislative seats. Only the Arab states trailed with a four percent showing for women legislators. Thus by world standards, most African countries were lagging behind in female representation.

African women were also demanding better representation at the ministerial level, especially where they had made gains in parliamentary representation. Zimbabwe, for example, had only two female cabinet ministers out of a 24 member cabinet and South Africa had only three out of 27.

Women's movements that had once been dominated by organizations engaged in "developmental" activities involving income-generation, welfare concerns, and home making skills, were now witnessing the emergence of organizations that lobbied for women's political leadership, pressed for legislative and constitutional

changes, and conducted civic education. The Tanzania Gender Networking Programme held a conference in 1999 on Gender and Political Empowerment, bringing together women activists and members of parliament from throughout Africa. These kinds of concerns would not have been raised in similar Africa-wide conferences in the 1980s although they had been briefly a concern around the time of independence when women were being introduced to concepts of citizenship and modern electoral politics.

In the 1990s women began to form political parties on their own, partly because existing parties in the multiparty context had not adequately addressed women's concerns. In many cases women had a different political vision that was not accommodated in existing parties; and in some cases, the women wanted to build more broad-based multiethnic and multireligious constituencies than was possible with existing parties. Dr. Inonge Mbikusita-Lewanika started the National Party in Zambia in 1991; Margaret Dongo began the Zimbabwe Union of Democrats in 1999; while in Lesotho, Limakatso Ntakatsane formed the party, Kopanang Basotho. Likewise in the 1990s Charity Ngilu and Dr. Wangari Maathai headed parties in Kenya; Ruth Rolland-Jeanne-Marie led a party in Central African Republic and Amália de Vitoria Pereira led an Angolan party. In Zambia, Kenya and several other countries, the reluctance of political parties to take steps to increase women's representation has led to serious discussions of the need to form a party led by women with broad based male and female constituencies.<sup>1</sup>

Although rarely mentioned in studies of democratization in Africa, women's movements actively sought to participate in the political reform movements of the 1990s and in many cases found themselves the only group defying repression by the authorities. Like student, worker, human rights, and other such movements, they openly resisted corruption and repressive regimes through public demonstrations and other militant action. In Kenya, in the early 1990s women were at the forefront of

protests defending imprisoned human rights activists and found themselves in violent clashes with police. In Mali, thousands of demonstrating women and children were shot at by forces of President Moussa Traoré in a series of events that led to his downfall. Similarly, in Mauritania, police beat women protesters, injuring 40 in a human rights demonstration in August 1991. Over 150 women had staged a sit-down strike outside a paramilitary police base in Nouakchott, demanding an independent inquiry into the disappearance of hundreds of Hal-Pulaar black Mauritians who disappeared after being arrested following an alleged coup attempt 1990. Amnesty International reported that as many as 339 political prisoners were killed by Mauritanian authorities between November 1990 and March 1991.

In Sierra Leone, women were the only group that openly defied soldiers as they demonstrated to demand that free elections be held when rumors began to circulate that the military might postpone the February 1996 elections (Bangura 1996). In Conakry, Guinea, women organized a sit-in in front of the presidential palace in a support of a 1990 general strike of workers and student demonstrations, and to protest the economic crisis which they blamed on the country's leadership.<sup>2</sup>

And finally, in Niger, several thousand women demonstrated in protest of the exclusion of women representatives in the preparatory commission charged with organizing the national conference in 1991 (only one woman was included out of 68 delegates). The women marched from the national assembly to the prime minister's office, carrying banners that read: "Down with the national conference without women!" "Stop injustice!" and "Equal rights!"<sup>3</sup> In the end, five women were added to the delegate list of the national conference that was part of an ill-fated democratization process. The Association des Femmes du Niger (AFN), formed by the Kountché regime in 1975, had seized on an opportunity presented by the regime's lost credibility to assert themselves publicly and insist on political representation at the national level (Cooper 1995, 876; Dunbar and Djibo 1992). The

impact of many of these movements for democratization and human rights has been limited and some countries like Niger experienced military coups and reversals in the process of political reform. Even countries that successfully introduced multipartyism and electoral democracy, were often seriously lacking in political and civil liberties (Diamond 1996, Zakaria 1997, Huntington 1997). Nevertheless, it is important to acknowledge that in spite of the limitations of political liberalization, new players like women's movements were galvanized by the reform process to take advantage of political openings.

### **Reasons for Women's Increased Political Participation**

What accounts for women's new visibility in the political arena as independent actors? No single factor can account for these new trends. Rather, a combination of factors need to be considered. Some of the most important reasons include the following:

1) The move toward multipartyism in most African countries diminished the need for mass organizations linked and directed by the single ruling party. Thus, the demise of these mass women's organizations coincided with the rise of independent women's organizations that took advantage of the opening up of political space in the 1990s. These organizations had new leadership that began to push for a broader agenda, which included women's expanded political participation. This dynamic is explored in greater detail below.

2) With the increase in educational opportunities for girls and women there emerged a larger pool of capable women who were in a position to vie for political power.

3) Women in many countries frequently had longer experiences than men in creating and sustaining associations, having been involved in church related activities, savings clubs, income-generating groups, self-help associations, community

improvement groups and many other informal and local organizations and networks. Thus they often found it easier to take advantage of new political spaces afforded by liberalizing regimes. Women in Mali, for example, brought to NGOs their well-developed organizational skills, drawing on a long history of maintaining social and economic networks. As a result, women have a strong presence in the NGO movement both in terms of making sure development associations include programs that address women's issues, but also in their own organizations that range from legal to health, education, credit and enterprise development associations (Kante et al. 1994, 101). Similarly, in Tanzania, it is no accident that the main NGO networking body, Tanzania Association of Non-Governmental Organisations (TANGO), was started by women's organizations and has had strong female representation in its leadership. In fact, 80 percent of the registered NGOs are women's organizations in a country like Tanzania (Meena 1997). Thus, women's long experience working collectively in a number of different arenas has often made it easier for them to seize new organizational opportunities in a liberalizing context.

4) The new availability of donor funds, channeled through international and local NGOs, religious bodies, embassies, and international foundations has been another factor in spurring the growth of national level organizations that support women's political activities, generally on a non-partisan basis. They have supported efforts of women to participate in civic education, constitutional reform, legislative reform, leadership training, and programs for women parliamentarians.

5) A commitment to women's increased representation on the part of the leadership of the country is another critical factor in advancing women's political representation. The enhanced political representation of women is more a question of political will than of world economic standing or any other economic factor. In fact, some of the poorest nations in the world, like Mozambique, do better than many advanced industrialized countries in female legislative representation.

Temporary measures, like party quotas and reserved seats, account in large measure for the higher female representation in Uganda, Tanzania, Mozambique, South Africa, and several other African countries. In fact, most of the higher figures for female representation worldwide have been a result of a quota system of one kind or another.

Uganda set an important precedent for Africa by providing for one third female representation in local councils. In the Mozambican elections women won one quarter of the seats in the National Assembly, largely due to FRELIMO's 35 percent quota, which brought the percentage of women-held FRELIMO seats to 37 percent (Jacobson 1994, 40). These affirmative action strategies are as controversial in Africa as elsewhere, but what is indisputable is the fact that where they have been implemented, the popular political culture has gradually become more accepting of female politicians.

In South Africa, the large number of women in parliament and other key political appointments is, in part, a result of the efforts of the ruling African National Congress (ANC), which has stood for women's political advancement and affirmative action. Thus, 89 of the 117 women in the National Assembly and the Senate are from the ANC party. Today women make up 25 percent of the legislature, which represents a dramatic break from the previous apartheid regime, in which women made up less than 3 percent of the legislature. Other top appointments followed these changes in parliament. In addition, four out of 25 ministers and eight out of 14 deputy ministers are women. While these are low figures, they are still higher than under apartheid rule.

Throughout Africa, women's organizations have increasingly been calling for the adoption such affirmative action measures. For example, in Nigeria, leading women's NGOs have become particularly concerned about the low levels of female political representation and political appointments. Organizations like Gender and

Development Action, Women Empowerment Movement, the National Council for Women's Societies umbrella organization, Women Opinion Leaders Forum and other NGOs have sought reserved seats for women in parliament and demanded larger numbers of female appointees to public bodies (Denzer 1999, 3). Malawi women's groups petitioned the government in 1999 to ensure that women make up at least one third of all decision makers in political positions and key national institutions (Kanjaye 1999).

6) The international women's movement has played a significant role in encouraging women to seek political office and influence policy making. Although the driving forces for these changes have been internal, international pressures and norms have given added impetus to these new demands. To address the low rates of female representation, the issue was raised at the UN Beijing Conference on Women in 1995 by the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU), the world organization of national parliaments. The IPU adopted a Plan of Action to address the reality that men dominate political and parliamentary life in all countries. One of the proposals adopted by the IPU included affirmative action measures to be advocated on a strictly interim basis. Quota systems, the IPU proposal states, should promote a situation where neither sex occupies a disproportionate number of seats relative to their percentage in the population.

7) Much of formal politics in Africa is underwritten and controlled by informal patronage politics. Most women tend to operate on the margins of clientelistic networks. This means that women have often found opportunities to advance themselves where the clientelistic networks were weakened by economic crisis as has been the case in recent years in Senegal. Economic crisis has forced many women into formal and informal economic associations and into heightened entrepreneurial activity.

Having focused on several reasons that explain women's new-found political

muscle, I now shift to one of the most dramatic changes that affected women's political participation in the 1990s: the growth of independent women's organizations.

### **Growth of Independent Organizations**

The opening of political space that occurred in the early 1990s allowed for the formation of new non-partisan lobbying, civic education, and leadership training organizations, which in turn encouraged women to run for office. Several changes occurred in women's mobilization during this period. One was the demise of the influence of the mass organizations tied to the single party, for example, Umoja wa Wanawake wa Tanzania (UWT) that is linked to Chama cha Mapinduzi (CCM), the League of Malawi Women that is the women's wing of the Malawi Congress Party), and the Women's League of the United National Independence Party (UNIP) in Zambia. The simultaneous emergence of independent women's associations meant that for the first time many women's movements could now select their own leaders, set their own agendas, and were no longer tied to participation in the patronage network of the ruling party. This meant that women's organizations were adopting new agendas that included but also went beyond the old focus on religion, welfare concerns, and income-generation. Those countries like Uganda and South Africa that had the most independent women's movements seem to have gone the furthest in this regard. By the 1990s, new non-partisan organizations emerged to support women candidates and female political leadership.

These changes represent significant new trends that are not easily reversed. They also represent a new way of conceiving women's political participation, which will have potentially major implications for women if political reforms continue without retreat to a dominant single-party system or military rule. There is no question that the broader political environment facilitates or constrains women's

independent mobilization. In the past, all too often women's mobilization was channeled through a party wing, an affiliated mass organization or a coopted organization tied to the ruling party or regime. This relationship served to marginalize women's leadership and channeled women into mobilizing around a narrow set of issues, which in a country like Zambia under UNIP resulted in a focus on women's morality (Geisler 1987). As far as many women were concerned, these wings not only did little for women, often they acted *against* women and resisted women's empowerment (Geisler 1995, 553). Women's wings were often reduced to serving in celebratory functions. Former President Banda required women of the League of Malawi Women to be present at all official functions, dressed in party uniforms, singing and dancing in praise of him (Hirschmann 1991, 1683). By remaining officially linked to older incorporated structures, such women's organizations were tied to the party's dictates and its overriding interest in securing as many women's votes as possible. Often the women running these organizations were wives, sisters, and relatives of party or government leaders. Through such controlling mechanisms, the women's organizations were unable to cater to women with other political allegiances. Moreover, they were unable to forcefully fight for women's interests that might be at odds with the priorities and goals of the ruling party. For example, Maendeleo ya Wanawake in Kenya was purposefully kept apolitical and any attempts to assert itself politically were swiftly squelched. In Zambia, one woman member of parliament remarked that the wings should be abolished since "they are the biggest single obstacle to women's political participation" (Ferguson et. al. 1995, 22).

The organizational structures of the women's wings paralleled those of the party and mimicked their rigid undemocratic structures and leadership, which rarely changed. As Kenyan women's rights activist Dr. Maria Nzomo (1995) explained in reference to Kenya: "The structures in the organizations are sometimes no different from government structures. They are authoritarian. You see a lot of authoritarian

women leaders who started in 1963 and don't want to give up." Even though the monopoly of these women's wings was broken as new independent women's organizations appeared on the scene, most wings or leagues persisted throughout the 1990s.

The proliferation of independent associations allowed women's organizations to expand their agendas to take on women's rights issues more forcefully and to fight for greater female political representation. The women's movement in Uganda, for example, has been able to publicly broach many different issues, ranging from women's representation in office, to domestic violence, rape, reproductive rights, sex education in the school curriculum, female genital surgeries, sexual harassment, disparaging representation of women in the media, corruption, and other concerns that have rarely been addressed by women's movements in countries where a ruling political party has dominated the movement. In Ghana, Jerry Rawlings' Provisional National Defence Council (PNDC) and his party, the National Democratic Congress (NDC), poses a stark contrast to the Ugandan case with its control of the 31st December Women's Movement (31DWM), the largest women's organization in Ghana. In spite of some gains for women, the PNDC control has suffocated the women's movement and constrained the scope of demands by keeping the organization's goals directed at furthering PNDC influence (Dei 1994, 140, Mikell 1984; Tsikata 1989).

In many African countries, the women's NGOs that emerged in the 1980s and 1990s presented a growing challenge to existing women's wings by promoting agendas that were much more far reaching in addressing institutional constraints on women's advancement. In countries where party-imposed structures had crowded out much of associational life, women's associations were among the first to take advantage of the new spaces to constitute a wide array of formal and informal, local and national associations. In one of the more extreme cases of Madagascar, where

there were no mass based national associations to organize women, farmers, youth and other groups, institutional development in general was exceptionally weak. Nevertheless, public interest NGOs began to emerge in the early 1990s, including women's associations like Femmes Entrepreneurs, Femmes Jurists, Femmes Artisans (Fox and Covell 1994, 53).

In other countries where party affiliated women's organizations had predominated, the associational terrain was also dramatically transformed. In Tanzania, women's organizations of every kind mushroomed after the introduction of political reforms, tackling issues as varied as the environment, women in the media, entrepreneurial interests, reproductive rights, and land rights. One indication of the numerical increase of these associations was the proliferation of networking organizations, which had not existed in the past in such large numbers. One of the earliest to form was the Tanzania Association of Non-Governmental Organizations (TANGO), which was formally constituted in 1988. Women attending the 1985 Nairobi conference marking the end of the UN Decade of Women returned to Tanzania inspired to create linkages between existing women's groups. Although started by women's groups, TANGO grew into an umbrella organization for all NGOs. Women's organizations have also networked through organizations like Tanzania Gender Networking Programme (TGNP), which has helped coordinate activities, develop joint strategies around legal reform, structural adjustment, and a proposed Equal Opportunities Act among other issues. The Kilimanjaro Women's Information and Education Corporation (KWIECO), is another regional networking association of professional women in Moshi that brings women's groups together to discuss women's legal rights, health issues and economic activities. Similar networking organizations emerged in other parts of the country on local, district, and regional bases. Ad hoc coalitions formed to protect citizens against unpopular government actions and to lobby for change. For example, women's organizations

worked with pastoralist organizations and legal rights groups in a coalition, the National Land Forum, to express reservations about a draft land bill, forcing the government to slow down its effort to hastily push through the bill.

### **Electoral Politics**

If women were going to make significant headway on economic and other fronts, they realized they needed to have a physical presence in legislatures and other political institutions. In the 1990s many countries saw an unprecedented degree of mobilization of independent women's organizations to support women electoral candidates; train women leaders; carry out civic education; press for legal changes in the status of women and in the constitution-making process; lobby parties to endorse more women candidates; and develop strategies to get more women into leadership. Although these activities were on the rise, women parliamentarians in many countries frequently found themselves lacking in such NGO support, making it difficult to push a women's rights agenda (Geisler 1995, 562).

In the past, male politicians were able to garner the women's vote through the women's wings or women's organizations tied to ruling parties. As those organizations faded in influence and independent women's organizations and movements emerged, women began to use these new organizations to enhance women's leadership skills and to build political support for candidates, both male and female, who represented their interests. In Uganda, organizations like Action for Development (ACFODE) are focusing on leadership training and civic education for women councillors, now that one third of local council positions are reserved for women. In other parts of Africa, many organizations are attempting to better link rural and urban women. Women leaders are also beginning to consider ways to draw younger women into politics, especially where they have been left on the sidelines, since the majority of women who are mobilized still tend to be middle aged or elderly

(Nzomo 1995).

In Zambia, women from NGOs, churches and political parties formed a National Women's Lobby Group (NWLG) in 1991 as a non-partisan organization with the goal of increasing the numbers of women in decision-making positions in government, parliament and political parties. The lobby encouraged women to stand for local government elections, worked to repeal discriminatory legislation, and conducted human rights training and civic education seminars for women. By 1995 the organization had grown to 2,000 dues paying members (Liatto-Katundu 1993, 80-81; Basadi et al. 1995, 12). There were numerous other such non-partisan groups in Zambia promoting women's political participation. In 1996 the Women's Lobby financially backed 44 independent women candidates running in the parliamentary elections. Although only one of these women won a seat, its efforts no doubt encouraged the parties to put up more women candidates and as a result, 15 party-backed women won seats, bringing the number of women in parliament from 7 percent to 11 percent, i.e., 16 out of 150.

Similarly, in Kenya, the National Committee on the Status of Women, a staunchly non-partisan organization provided assistance to women of all party affiliations in running for office in 1992 and 1998. They carried out civic education among women, giving them a better sense of their rights as citizens and the need to vote for candidates who would support women's interests. Their activities have included reform of laws that served as obstacles to the advancement of women and other activities that would strengthen women's presence in political life (Nzomo 1993, Nzomo and Kibwana 1993). Charity Ngilu had the backing of several of Kenya's women's organizations when she ran for the presidency. She has indicated that she plans to draw on the strength of women's organizations to an even greater extent in 2002 to capture a greater proportion of the votes of women, who make up 65 percent of Kenya's registered voters.

## **Obstacles to Women's Political Participation**

In spite of these efforts by women's organizations in many countries, women have yet to see enormous payoffs in terms of elected officials and political appointments. Women often lack the resources, political experience, education and political connections to run for office. Popular perceptions often suggest that women's "proper" place is still in the home rather than in politics. Prohibitive cultural attitudes against women's involvement persist among both men and women. These are reflected in voting patterns, media coverage of female politicians, and even in blatant attempts to suppress women's assertion of their political rights and views. In Uganda, for example, the 1996 presidential elections saw increasing incidents of intimidation and harassment of wives by husbands over differing political opinions. Throughout the country there were reports of women who were threatened with withdrawal of family support. Some were killed, beaten, thrown out of homes, and some had their voters' cards grabbed from them or destroyed. One of the consequences of this experience was that women did not turn out to vote in the parliamentary elections in such large numbers, partly because of harassment. As Christine Lalobo explained: "So some of them were saying, 'if I can't exercise my rights in my own way and freedom, then I shouldn't go there at all. Otherwise I am going to risk going out with a swollen eye.'"<sup>4</sup>

But women themselves are also reticent to run for office (both national and local government positions) for many reasons. Partly the reluctance stems from cultural prohibitions on women being seen and speaking in public in front of men. Where these prohibitions are strong, men do not listen to women who take the podium or are active in politics in other ways. Campaigning and being a leader often involves travel, spending nights away from home, going to bars to meet people, and meeting men, all of which put women politicians at risk of being thought of as "loose

women" or "unfit mothers." Not only may they find themselves and their families under attack or the subject of malicious gossip, but, husbands sometimes will forbid their wives from entering into politics. Some husbands are threatened by the possibility that their wives will interact with other men, others fear the social stigma directed against their wives, or they worry that their wife's political preoccupations will divert her attention away from the home. Ferguson and Katundu found in Zambia that most women who were active in politics claimed they experienced marital problems as a result of their involvement (1994, 18).

Even in parliamentary bodies, women have difficulty being taken seriously, being listened to, and are frequently subjected to humiliating stereotypes and derogatory remarks. One excellent and detailed study of women in parliamentary politics in Uganda found sexual harassment rampant, even in a parliament where women had been active and visible for over a decade (Tamale 1999).

Many of the stereotypes of women politicians are reflected in a comments made by men and women in Tanzania's Sukumaland in a rural area near Mwanza (Andersen 1992, 161, 260, 263). While one cannot generalize too much from these perceptions, they are heard enough in other parts of Africa to give some indication of what cultural constraints women are up against in entering into politics:

When I was elected as a village secretary some people told me that I would become a loose woman, a prostitute. I told them that I could never do such a thing and second, I asked them whether they had any proof of the misbehavior of other women leaders to which they referred? Their answer was "No, this is just what we have heard" (Young woman Chama cha Mapinduzi party leader).

There are women who are capable of being leaders, and good leaders too. But it is not easy. Men very often do not trust their wives and think that if they go for seminars, they will betray their husbands. A woman is like a child as far as the brain is concerned, she can easily be convinced by another man to give way for sex" (Young male Chama cha Mapinduzi party leader).

Normally husbands are the main causes for their wives not to be leaders . . . . Many of the women are very eager to be leaders. But your husband can ban you and then that is the end. We ask husbands to allow their wives to contest, but many of them dislike it . . . . Here there are many women who are able to

work, to lead, and who can build our nation. After all, some are properly educated, but because the husband is in a panic, his wife remains a house wife (Woman Chama cha Mapinduzi party official).

In spite of all these limitations on women's involvement in political leadership, women are not reluctant to participate in other aspects of politics. Women often vote in numbers very similar to or greater than those of men, as seen in electoral turnout figures of elections in Mozambique and Zambia in the 1990s (Jacobson 1995; Longwe and Clark 1991). As one Zambian member of parliament put it:

Women do all the campaigning and organize rallies for men. But now we have to switch to do the same for ourselves. Women are still in the mold of campaigning for men, not for women. Women are waiting to be invited to participate but no one will invite them (Mbikusita-Lewanika 1995).

### **What Difference Have Women Made in Politics?**

#### *Women's contributions to constitution-making*

In several countries, the 1990s saw women's increased involvement in the constitution making process. Women were very active in the process of drafting the new South African Constitution, which guarantees women rights to equality, freedom and security of the person, freedom from violence, the right to make decisions concerning reproduction, and the right to security and control over one's own body. The Women's National Coalition lobbied hard to have the Women's Charter passed. The independent Women's National Coalition (WNC) had been formed in 1991 after much deliberation to unite women of all parties and political persuasions. The Coalition brought together 81 organizational affiliates and 13 regional alliances of women's organizations including organizations affiliated with the ANC, the Inkatha Freedom Party, the National Party, Pan Africanist Congress, Azanian Peoples Organization, and the Democratic Party. WNC also brought together interests as diverse as the Rural Women's Movement, Union of Jewish Women, and the South African Domestic Workers Union (Kemp et al. 1995, 144-154). Over three million

women participated in focus groups organized by WNC to voice their opinions on women's concerns. Regional and national conferences were held and a Woman's Charter was drafted and endorsed by the national parliament and all nine regional parliaments in 1994. The charter addressed a broad range of concerns, including equality, legal rights, economic issues, education, health, politics, and violence against women (Kemp et al. 1995, 151). The constitution allows for the charter to be used a basis for reforming government policy.

In Zambia the National Women's Lobby Group (NWLG) along with six other NGOs succeeded in getting the Constitutional Commission to incorporate into the draft Constitution a section on women's rights, focusing on discrimination, affirmative action, violence against women and the implementation of the UN Convention on the Elimination of All forms of Discrimination Against Women (Basadi et al. 1995, 13). In spite of fierce opposition from some women parliamentarians, MMD leaders and leaders of civic organizations, women's groups continued to press for the inclusion in the constitution of reproductive rights and equal opportunities in education. Under the law, women need spousal consent to use contraception, while men are under no obligation to do the same. Similarly, many families prefer educating their sons over their daughters with the assumption that the son, unlike the daughter, is obligated to care for the family when the parents die. Because of such disadvantages, many women's organizations argued that women's rights need explicit protection in the constitution.<sup>5</sup>

Similar measures were adopted in Malawi, where women's organizations involved in the Constitution making process had to be constantly on the alert so that women's concerns were not dropped from the agenda or reprioritized. In Malawi, a 1994 conference preparing for the upcoming multiparty elections agreed, under pressure from women delegates, to endorse particular women's concerns and to incorporate some of them into the constitution. These included promoting girls'

education, equal access in politics and business, equal rights for women and HIV/AIDS prevention programs for men and women. Recommendations by the National Commission on Women in Development (NCWID) to include women's concerns in the bill of rights and equal representation of men and women in the Senate (upper house in parliament) were incorporated and withdrawn four times prior to the ratification of the constitution in May 1994. A core of women in the NCWID lobbied the the National Consultative Council every time they attempted to take out the recommendations.

Almost a year later there were growing pressures to get rid of the Senate, which was the only body with significant female representation. The Society for the Advancement of Women (SAW), which was formed to influence the Constitution making process, intervened to stop the process of dismantling the Senate and proposed that it be composed of women and chiefs (two from each area) to represent the rural areas and underrepresented sectors. SAW won the support of two of the three parties and the chiefs. Over 100 Malawian women representing government, NGOs, and chiefs were attending a workshop at the same time that the Parliament was debating the fate of the Senate. The women petitioned the Parliament on the eve of the vote and were able to exert sufficient pressure to keep the Senate and make sure the Constitution upheld gender equality (Funk 1995).

In Uganda, it was widely acknowledged that no other group was as organized and cohesive as women's organizations when it came to making a concerted effort to influence the Constitution writing process. Women's organizations wrote more memoranda submitted to the Constitutional Commission than any other sector of society. They also took part in a countrywide effort to educate women about the purpose of a Constitution and to gather views into memoranda. Two women were involved in the Constitutional Commission and a total of 51 women (out of a total of 284) held seats in the Constituent Assembly, which was formed to debate the new

constitution. Women delegates to the Assembly formed a non-partisan Women's Caucus that carried out workshops for women delegates on speech making, constituency building, coalition building, parliamentary procedures and other related topics. The Caucus developed strategies to make sure that women's concerns were brought to the floor in the Assembly and publicized their views in a weekly radio program dealing with ongoing debates in the Constituent Assembly. The Caucus worked with Uganda Women Lawyers (FIDA), which gave them assistance on specific Constitutional matters. They also worked closely with a leading women's rights group, Action for Development, and other NGOs to promote civic education publications and seminars for women around constitutional issues. The fruits of all these efforts were borne out in the final draft of the constitution, which included the recognition of gender equality under the law; the provision that gender equity must be written into all laws passed by the Parliament; the prohibition of laws, customs and traditions that undermine the position of women; a provision to establish an Equal Opportunities commission to see that the Constitutional principles are enforced; and an expansion of the numbers of women representatives.

### *Improving women's legal status*

In the late 1980s and 1990s another feature of women's increased mobilization was the push to pass or amend laws to improve women's legal status. The main issues that emerged had to do with property rights, land rights, inheritance laws, citizenship laws, domestic violence, rape and defilement (rape of girls under the age of consent).

After the 1995 Beijing conference, many countries adopted women's budgets. In South Africa this initiative was coordinated by the Department of Finance and involved collaboration among NGOs and the parliament. It involved analysis of existing budgets to determine the differential gender impact on women, men, girls

and boys, with the intention of making recommendations for future budgets to improve the way in which funds are allocated. Such budget initiatives have thus far been adopted in countries like Uganda, Mozambique, Botswana, Zimbabwe, Malawi Namibia, and Tanzania (Budlender 2000).

In South Africa, women were able to put in place a Commission on Gender Equality to ensure that the laws were fully implemented. Women fought to be part of the budget process so that the budget might better reflect women's interests. They ensured that the Labour Relations Act recognized maternity rights and women's rights against sexual harassment in the workplace. They also lobbied for an Employment Equity bill that requires employers to employ fairly across race, gender and disability. In addition, they won the right to choose with the Termination of Pregnancy Bill.

In Malawi, the National Commission on Women and Development, along with non-partisan organizations like Women's Voices, have worked to increase the number of women representatives in parliament as well as at the local level. In addition they have sought to implement laws regarding domestic violence and educate women about their inheritance rights. In 1999 they successfully pressed for the passage of an act that makes it a criminal offense for anyone to seize the estate of someone who has died without entitlement. Grabbed property can be restored to the person who is lawfully entitled to it. This law protects widows who often find their marital properties claimed by in-laws after the death of their spouse (Kajanye 1999).

In Mali, women's NGOs worked to change property laws, marital laws and the tax code to eliminate discrimination against women. In other countries, the focus has been on conducting workshops and using the media to educate women about their rights. Both the Ghana branch of the International Federation of Women Lawyers (FIDA) and the Women in Law and Development in Africa (WILDAF) sought to educate people about the 1985 Intestate Succession and Property Laws that require all

customary marriages and family property to be registered to facilitate a widow's acquisition of property should her spouse die. Under these laws, widows and children are entitled to three quarters of the immediate family's property (Dei 1994, 132; West et al. 1994, 8, 73-77). Similarly, the Tanzania Media Women's Association (TAMWA) has educated women about their rights in mass media and in their paper, *Sauti ya Siti*. In Tanzania, the public discussion of issues like violence against women had been virtually taboo prior to the 1990s and had not been taken up by the Women's Union of the ruling party.

Women's organizations also become bolder in challenging other societal actors and institutions over issues that affect women's rights. For example, in Mali, women's rights organizations like COFEM and l'Association Pour le Progrès et la Défense des Droits de la Femme (APDDF) challenged senior Islamic leaders in the media on whether female circumcision was condoned by Islam (Kante et al. 1994, 103).

These kinds of challenges to the legal status of women represent a new level of mobilization that was not as apparent prior to the opening up of political spaces in the 1990s.

### *Struggles against corruption*

Because of past gender based exclusions from formal political and economic life, women, like other politically marginalized groups, have often have less at stake in maintaining the old order and subsequently have the potential for greater openness to adopting new incentive structures. It is no accident that women like Margaret Dongo in Zimbabwe, Charity Ngilu and Wangari Maathai in Kenya, and Winnie Byanyima in Uganda have emerged among the fiercest opponents of corruption and patronage politics in their respective countries. This is not to say that there aren't corrupt women politicians. However, many women politicians and the organizations that

back them have little to gain from allying themselves with state related corruption, and therefore have less to lose materially and politically by opposing it, although it is not insignificant that Maathai and Dongo live in fear for their lives. Byanyima lost a top position in the National Resistance Movement 1999 as a result of her attacks on corruption at the highest levels and was charged with sedition in April 2001 for attacking the president's involvement in the Congo conflict.

### *Women politicians and anti-sectarianism*

Along with the anti-corruption stance, it is striking how often one finds women politicians adopting an anti-sectarian position where others have politicized ethnicity, race, or religion. Hawa Yakubu, was one of two women who ran and won parliamentary seats as independent candidates in the 1992 Ghanaian elections. She started campaigning for office when she realized there were no women standing for parliament in the entire Northern part of the country. In the course of her campaign she became frustrated with manifestations of "tribalism" in the party campaigns in her constituency of Bakwu Central, Upper East Region. When her peacemaking efforts failed, she opted to run as an independent candidate concerned about the consequences of such ethnic polarization. The fact that she attributes her overwhelming electoral victory to the women's vote is one indication of the extent to which women in her constituency align themselves with political interests that are not based on ethnicity.

One of the reasons many women politicians seek non-sectarian support has to do with their bases of support. At the national level, the common cause of women's rights has united many women of diverse backgrounds. Women have found that it is impossible to mount an effective struggle around legislation affecting women without building a broad based movement. Winnie Byanyima, former Chair of the Women's Caucus in Uganda's Constituent Assembly and also a leader of a women's

organization promoting leadership skills, explained to the Assembly why women's groups along with other interest groups serve as a challenge to the politicization of ethnicity:

. . . what I observe is that ethnicity is being used to provide platforms from which the amenities of modernity can be competed for. In fact, ethnicity is beginning to play a perverse role in our political development. Groups like women, youths, farmers, traders, workers, interest groups and lobbies are organizing themselves and trying to articulate and to protect their interests. The current political atmosphere, I must say, is encouraging society to grow . . . but it is threatened by the growth of ethnicity which we politicians are sometimes promoting for narrow self-interest.<sup>6</sup>

Thus, the efforts to build societal organizations around new bases of commonly shared interests represent an important break with past bases of mobilization.

Such women's organizations have also influenced women politicians, many of whom have stood out from other politicians because of their strong opposition to the politicization of difference. Rwanda's Prime Minister from 1992-1994, Agathe Uwilingiyimana, was a dynamic and wise woman who had been a staunch advocate of women's rights and ethnic tolerance. Her position on tolerance was one of the reasons she was killed by the presidential guard on April 6, 1994, in the genocide that swept the country in the following four months."<sup>7</sup>

Charity Ngilu, who ran for president in Kenya's 1998 race, challenged clientelistic electoral practices of vote buying by playing the ethnicity card. One of the reasons Ngilu ran was because the opposition was so divided by its blatant appeals to ethnic difference as a basis for mobilization against the ruling party. She had pledged to build a government of national unity if elected.<sup>8</sup> Wangari Maathai, world renowned environmentalist and leader of the Green Belt Movement that is made up largely of women, jumped into the same Kenyan presidential race at the last minute. She too shares with Ngilu a strong distaste for the divisiveness of ethnically based politics and has long been outspoken on the issue. Both Ngilu and Maathai

were two of the only candidates in Kenya's 1998 elections who did not appeal to ethnicity in their campaigns.

### **Conclusions**

Women have started to make their mark in politics in the 1990s to a degree not seen before in post-independence history. As women have begun to assert themselves, it is clear that enormous cultural, economic, political and social obstacles are going to make the expansion of women's political roles an uphill struggle. One difference that distinguished elections in the 1990s from earlier ones was that women were setting their sights higher than ever before in post-colonial history. An increasing number of women aspired to be presidential candidates in countries like Kenya, the Central African Republic, Nigeria and Tanzania and this promises to be a trend in other countries as well.

Non-partisan women's organizations made concerted efforts to increase female representation in parliaments. Even though the results of most of these efforts were often disappointing, new trends were being set. For example, in Zambia, the 1991 multiparty parliamentary elections saw new faces among women contenders, many of whom were businesswomen and professionals by occupation. Most of the women who won parliamentary and local government seats in the 1991 elections had not been involved in politics prior to this election (Ferguson et. al. 1995, 26). In Uganda, with each election, significantly larger numbers of women were running for office and the numbers of women running for open seats (i.e., non-reserved seats) had increased with the introduction of affirmative action measures (Tripp 1999).

In addition to the new emphasis on female leadership, women politicians and organizations began in the 1990s to actively lobby for constitutional and legislative reforms to improve the status of women. On the electoral front, women's

associations and women politicians were beginning to question the political manipulations of ethnicity. Women's political lobbies were especially concerned with building linkages across ethnicity and mounted challenges to political parties that drew on ethnicity to build their constituencies.

This newfound political energy can be attributed to a number of factors. Political reform movements opened up political space for new independent women's organizations. This was accompanied by the simultaneous demise of mass women's organizations that were tied to the single ruling party/ regime through patronage networks. Unlike the old party led women's wings, the new autonomous organizations selected their own leadership and set bold new agendas. Many organizations as a result moved beyond the developmental (welfare, income-generating) focus of the older organizations and adopted a more political agenda. Some sought to promote women's political leadership, women's awareness of their political rights through civic education while others pursued legislative and constitutional changes.

Other factors that explain the rise in women's visibility on the political stage have to do with the greater numbers of educated women; women's longstanding experience with mobilization in a number of informal and localized fora; the commitment of several African states to a policy of affirmative action that would enhance women's political representation; and encouragement from the international women's movement through the setting of targets for female representation by international bodies like the Inter Parliamentary Union. Finally, in some instances, the drying up of established patronage networks undergirding formal politics opened up spaces for women of independent means to enter the political process.

By pursuing autonomous modes of organization and by rejecting women's wings tied to dominant parties, many independent women's associations and women politicians have implicitly challenged the politics of clientelism, patronage and

corruption more generally. At the same time they have often had to challenge government policies that seek to restrict freedoms of association and speech through harassment of women's activities, attempts to control NGOs through regulatory councils and other such obstacles.

Internal debates in women's organizations are pushing the boundaries of inclusiveness to find ways to bring in women of all ethnicities and religious affiliations, to interest younger women in political activities, to build bridges between rural and urban women, and to mobilize less educated women. Other emerging debates have to do, for example, with how women's organizations could better support women parliamentarians or the utility of quotas for women in parliament and local government. Many daunting obstacles lay in the way of women's full political participation. However, if the 1990s are any indication, the decade ahead is certain to see even greater political involvement on the part of women.

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