

# The Role of Women in the Politics and Economy of Sub-Saharan Africa since Independence

**Ele Samson**

*Department of History,  
Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences,  
Gombe State University, Gombe, Nigeria.  
E-mail: elesamson@gmail.com*

## ABSTRACT

*The male dominated political and economic structures constituted by colonialism culminated in the relegation of women to the background and since independence, African women have also been subjected to carefully systematised gender discrimination and violence. But despite this, educated women have started questioning the status quo thus competing for political powers with men. Also, apart from agriculture and trade, women entrepreneurs are beginning to storm the private sector of the African economy. It is against this backdrop that this review seeks to evaluate the contributions of women in African politics and economy. It contends that gender inequality on the continent is yet to be holistically rectified. For, despite the entrenchment and recognition of gender parity in the constitution and other legal frameworks as necessitated by the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) for the bridging of the gender gap remarkably present in most nations of the world coupled with the Beijing Convention which advocated for 30% women representation in politics and ratified by most African nations, effective implementation has not been realized. The manifestation of this is women under representation in political offices, low access to jobs in the organized public sector and loans/credit facilities from the banks amongst others. Amongst other things, the work advocates attitudinal change and the upholding of women's fundamental and constitutional rights across Africa to tap albeit effectively their contribution to the development of the continent.*

**Keywords:** *Women, Patriarchal ideology, Gender Inequality, Gender based Violence, Political Participation, Economic Development*

## INTRODUCTION

Agitations for gender equality in Africa are components of the worldwide movement for the liberation of women from the clutches and shackles of oppression, marginalization, exploitation and violence hinged on gender categorization. This is critical because women have contributed to the political and economic development of the continent the recognition of which has been ignored paving way for the continuous entrenchment of male domination in the society. With historical and contemporary evidence, the work has drawn attention to women's role in the African economy especially in the area of facilitating food security, craft production, distributive trade and entrepreneurship. In politics, they are more focused on the attainment of social welfare and good governance, dislike conflicts/wars, and less susceptible to corruption than their male counter-parts. However, women are still

confronted with diverse challenges which require redress in order to increase their capacity to function and contribute effectively in the development of Africa in this era of globalization.

### **Women Political Involvement as a Tool for the Sustainability of Democracy**

For a very long time, men have dominated the political scene and viewed it as their exclusive reserve. They assumed the monopoly of power as if women lacked the capacity for effective leadership. Indeed, the highest political position occupied by women in pre-colonial Africa was associated with the opportunities that came with the demise of their influential/royal father or husband (Sen, 1999). Again, during the colonization of the continent and the struggle for the attainment of independence, African women participated actively. But, when the victory was eventually won, women were systematically under-represented and in some cases excluded from the operations of the national government. No wonder Geiger criticised the marginalization of Tanzanian women in historical writings on nationalism and political actions. Titi Mohammed who played an important role in the mobilization of women in the struggle against colonialism was not recognized nor rewarded when independence was achieved. However, some women like Funmilayo Ransome Kuti in Nigeria were recognized, but many women at the grassroots and national level were not remembered (Ikpe, 2007).

Since independence, women have continuously dared to challenge male dominance of the political scene. They also wrestled with men even at the Presidential polls in Kenya, Tanzania, Sierra Leone, Guinea, Cote D'Ivoire and Nigeria. Despite their defeats at the polls, they remained focused in their struggle for women political recognition (Sirleaf, 2010). Yet, women who managed to appear in the corridors of power have contributed significantly in the political history of the African continent since independence. For instance, Female Prime Ministers were produced in Burundi and Rwanda between 1993 – 1994. In Liberia, Ruth Perry led the Council of State between 1996-1997, Wandera Specioza Kazibwe was the Vice President of Uganda in 1994. Other African countries that witnessed the emergence of female Vice Presidents included Senegal in 2001, Gambia and Malawi. Female parliamentarian speakers featured in Ghana, Uganda, East and South African nations. (Sirleaf, 2010). Currently in Liberia and Malawi, Female Presidents have emerged, Her Excellencies Ellen Johnson Sirleaf and Joyce Banda respectively contributing to the development of their nations. Women equally occupied important ministries in Africa. In Nigeria, the Ministry of Finance, is headed by Hon. Dr Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala. Also, Linah Moholo served as the Central Governor of the Bank of Botswana (Mabor, 2013). The Beijing Convention specifically called for 30% women representation in the decision making political positions of their countries which was ratified by most governments in sub-Saharan Africa. The United Nations 2004 article indicated that some 30 countries globally have even adopted the female quota strategy for the enhancement of women participation in politics. And, in the case of Africa, this

ranges from constitutional quotas as in Burkina Faso, Uganda and others where seats are constitutionally reserved in the national parliament for women; election law quotas as found in Sudan; and political parties quotas whereby at the parties' discretion, some percentage of political offices are earmarked for women as observed in South Africa and Mozambique (Women in African Politics, Wiki-gender, 2011). But the question here is, has 30% women representation in politics been realized? Indeed, some countries have exceeded it as in Rwanda where 49% of the women are in the national parliament. In the case of South Africa, women representation in the National Assembly rose from 27.75% in 1994 to 30% in 1999 and a further increase to 32.75% in 2004 and 43% in 2009. (Women in African Politics, Wiki-gender, 2011). In Nigeria, the Goodluck Jonathan Administration has paved way for greater women participation in politics currently with 35% women representation. However, some nations are yet to attain this feat. Botswana, Democratic Republic of Congo, Madagascar, Liberia, Zambia and Zimbabwe are few examples of such countries. While the first three nations had below 10% women representation in parliament, the last two had between 10 to 14% (Women in African Politics, Wiki-gender, 2011).

It is instructive to note that women political prowess and contributions to the development of Sub-Saharan Africa could be deduced from the fact that they are less corrupt. Indeed, since independence, the diverse military and democratic governments that flourished in Africa were male dominated and largely contributed to the problem of corruption and its implication for national development of their respective countries. On the contrary, women have not been identified with major cases of corruption (McLaughin, 2005). Indeed, political corruption was partly responsible for the revolution that swept across most parts of the Middle East and North African countries such as Algeria, Egypt, Libya leading to the ousting of Hosni Mubarak, the fall of Mummah Gadafi and others. In the case of Nigeria, Ifamose (2007) has given a profile of the preponderance of corruption amongst top government officials mostly men which involved the fraudulent looting of the treasury and money laundering. Women are therefore prudent in resource management hence the avoidance of looting and/or waste in the allocation and utilization of national wealth/resources under their leadership.

Women are critical to the attainment of good governance in Africa. This is anchored on the fact that their leadership style predominantly tilted in favour of the provision of welfare services ensuring social security for the citizenry. Women led governments have given primacy to this rather than military budgets, border questions, (Ifamose, 2007) and legal issues. The reason for this stance is not unconnected with their motherly heart and compassion for the people. They consciously sought for the promotion of social justice and the re-dress of inequalities in the society. Women are opposed to violent conflicts thus have been playing significant roles in peace building process in Africa. Most of the wars in the world and Africa in particular were caused by men's lust for power, wealth and prestige. For, no mother likes war nor was it part of the African tradition for a woman to be obsessed with the desire to go to war! On

this issue, Ikpe (2007) argues that going to battle even in the pre-colonial times was an exceptional thing and not the rule. It was so exceptional in the history of Benin Empire that Iyoba Idia, the Mother of Oba Esigie went down the Benin history and in the folklores as the only woman who went to war against the tradition. In the Ashanti Empire, four Queen mothers who were warriors were noted. Though these women performed important duties to their states, going to war was not a regular way of life for African women in pre-colonial times. Be that as it may, most countries in sub-Saharan Africa have experienced widespread internal conflicts that have disturbed national development. This was the case in Ethiopia, Sudan, Liberia, Rwanda, Angola, Sierra Leone, Nigeria, Cote D'Ivoire, Uganda and the Democratic Republic of Congo with varied consequences for women. This ranges from rape as was the case in Rwanda, kidnapping of women and their coercion into sex slavery as exhibited in Mozambique and Angola, economic hardship arising from the lost of their husbands in war, sexual abuse and violence as military strategy to weaken and demoralize enemy soldiers (Maimuna, 2007).

Although women have not been fully represented in peace-building processes in Africa as advocated by the United Nations Charter, yet, their contributions to conflict resolution have been critical to the consolidation and sustainability of democracy on the continent. Indeed, all over the world, the impact of violent conflicts on men and women are different thus the views of the latter on conflict resolution and peace building cannot be under-estimated. They have been vital in this since the pre-colonial era and in contemporary times actively involved in the protection of families and communities in war zones, grass-root conflict resolution including inter-community exchanges. For, women are more efficient in the mobilization of themselves for co-operation and partnership towards peace process. Despite threats to their lives, women in Somalia, Burundi, Sudan, etc have demonstrated their efficacy in conflict management and peace building (Maimuna, 2007).

## **WOMEN'S CONTRIBUTIONS TO THE ECONOMY**

Sub-Saharan African women have contributed significantly to the economic development of the continent. This has a historical antecedent stretching back to the pre-colonial era. In contemporary times, due to women's low access to employment opportunities in the organized public sector; they have heavily stormed the informal sector of the African economy not only in agriculture, but crafts production, trading and entrepreneurship. Research has indicated that the African continent could only boast of 8.5% women employment in the formal sector of the economy (African Bulletin, 2010). These are discussed in turn below:

**Agriculture:** Women have played important role in the agricultural sector. Using the advantage of the communal land ownership that prevailed in most parts of Africa during the pre-colonial era, they were able to produce food and raw materials which served as inputs to cottage industries (Levi and Havinden, 1982). With the advent of colonialism and the commercialization and privatization of land that followed, women

were disadvantaged affecting their contributions to increased agricultural productivity. This is because the colonialists recognized household heads (men) as legitimate land owners. Again, the administrative structures constituted in the colonial era favoured the men which enabled them to acquire more land through purchase or government grants (Imam et al, 1992). Yet, it is instructive to point out that, land commercialization and privatization disrupts its utilization for common purpose. In a systematic way, this culminated into the development of landlord class acquiring wealth, prestige and domination over landless peasants (Whetham, 1972) including women.

In addition, the modern agricultural technology such as organic fertilizer, farming machines, improved seedlings, Pioneer Oil Mills, Nut cracking Machines and agro-allied chemicals introduced by the colonialists to boost export crop production was male operated and dominated. This situation was the case in most African countries that experienced colonialism. Thus, it promoted the productivity of male labour but at the same time, colonialism created a situation whereby women's economic/agricultural labour was increasingly being tapped for the expansion of export crop production by their husbands and/or male relations, with little or no reward! Indeed, since independence, the situation has not changed. Although, African women constitute 70% of the agricultural labour-force and produced an estimated 90% of the agricultural produce that have aided the attempt at facilitating food security on the continent, yet their incomes are being controlled by their husbands.

***Crafts Production/Entrepreneurship:*** The contributions of women to the economic development of Africa could also be located in their noticeable presence in crafts production. These include soap making, pottery, weaving, salt manufacturing, pomade, oil palm production, brewing of local beer and others through the application of African indigenous technology. Delving into such economic ventures became a necessity for the women in order to raise their income generating capacity and in fact supplement the revenue obtained from the sales of agricultural produce. Currently, however, some African women in Nigeria, Togo, Senegal, Democratic Republic of Congo, Cameroon, Tanzania, Uganda and others are challenging the status quo making their presence and economic potentials felt as entrepreneurs of many private companies which was hitherto male dominated. These women are not only planning and directing but innovating new ideas that would facilitate their companies' effective competitiveness with the male ran corporations in the African economy. Again, this stance is anchored on the view of profit maximization and sustainability in business (African Bulletin, 2010, December 8).

***Petty Trading:*** Many African women engaged in petty trading have been noted to be effective in the distribution of basic commodities of trade. This is because such commercial activities are conducted at home, the street, local markets even the hawking of articles of trade to the domain of prospective consumers/customers. Available evidence indicates that in Ghana for instance, women constitute 80% of

the trade labour-force. Similarly, in Eastern and Western Nigeria, women are notable traders and consist half of the trade labour-force (Women's Role in Economic Development, Ester Boserup). It is instructive to note however, that despite women's role in the economy and politics of sub-Saharan Africa, there are multiplicities of obstacles impeding their quest to comprehensively advance the course of African development since independence.

### **CHALLENGES CONFRONTING SUB-SAHARAN AFRICAN WOMEN**

For the liberation of women across the African continent, the problems they needed to surmount include the issues of financial autonomy, poverty, low accessibility to credit facilities, landed assets, education, health facilities, political under-representation, and the patriarchal ideology.

***Lack of Financial Independence:*** In spite of women labour in production, domestic industry and trade, the income from such economic ventures are appropriated by their husbands and in some cases virtually utilized to feed the family, carter for dependents and so on. In other words, most African women have no control over their income despite the quest for financial autonomy.

***Poverty:*** The less developed economies of the world including Africa experiences high level of poverty. The World Bank (1999) reports that in the mid 1980s, about 180 million people constituting 47% of the population of Sub-Saharan Africa were poor out of which 120 million were plagued with acute poverty with a food-energy deficiency rate of 38% coupled with widespread malnutrition. It is significant to note that, the incidence of poverty is especially rife amongst sub-Saharan African women and girls constituting 70% of the 1.3 billion people living below 1 dollar daily due to the deprivations they suffer socially, economically and politically. For this group, poverty goes beyond the persistent quest for basic necessities of life (food, clothing and shelter) to the feeling of powerlessness to change unwanted situations (Kwaghe, 2007). Anti-poverty measures by African governments have not adequately addressed the poverty question amongst women even in the 21st century. The implications of poverty for women are many involving malnutrition, squalor, prostitution and the proliferation of the HIV/AIDS virus on the continent. Indeed, Kofi Annan (Former UN Secretary General) states with dismay that, "Today, we can safely say that the face of the epidemic is an African woman" (Kwaghe, 2007).

***Low Access to Credit Facilities:*** Due to lack of collateral, African women are confronted with challenges in the bid to secure loans from commercial banks and other lending institutions at low interest rates to boost their economic activities either in agriculture, entrepreneurship or trade. Valuable assets or landed properties are often required as collaterals from the prospective borrower by the lending financial institutions. This is a far cry for most African women as there is an overwhelming male ownership of land and assets while female landowners are relatively few. Yet, as Sen (1999) argues, greater women ownership of valuable assets, properties, capital

including land can have a tremendous impact on the socio-political and economic power relations between men and women. The peculiar problem faced by women entrepreneurs is that of discrimination from the banks in favour of male entrepreneurs. The World Bank Report (1999) on Ghana Women's Role in Improved Economic Performance reveals that women entrepreneurs in Ghana have been handicapped by not only poor access to credit, lack of savings, inadequate business knowledge, the burden of household responsibilities but the cultural norms that women's businesses should not be larger or more successful than those of the men. (World Bank Report, 1999).

***Inadequate Education:*** Women have low access to western education especially at the university level. Much more than primary and secondary education, professionalism and leadership opportunities in politics and the economy are mainly obtained through tertiary education especially university education. Though with the attendant low access to this level of education, women capacity to occupy key political positions, to participate in decision making and influence change to the advantage of the generality of their fellow women is limited; yet, greater women access to western education is crucial especially in the contemporary competitive world for the enhancement of technological development and industrialization in Africa. And, rather than the concentration of the fortunate females who had access to university education in the liberal courses as if the science courses are the exclusive reserve for men, African women should delve more into fields such as for the production of more female senior technicians, doctors, engineers, agriculturalists, scientists and so on. For, scientific knowledge is critical to the qualitative transformation of man's life. It was responsible for man's capacity to relate with, master and exploit his environment for survival. It was also at the heart of medical revolution and information technology, energy, electronics and computers that have impacted tremendously on human societies so much so that the 21st century is undoubtedly tagged "the computer age" hence the reduction of the world to a global village (Vision of a Lady nd).

Again, the merit of the acquisition of technological skills to the African female entrepreneurs include rise in output and productivity, facilitation of easy business transactions and cosy environment for the entrepreneur and staff, paves way for increased income, savings and foreign exchange earnings, enhances the quality of goods produced and consumer utility, facilitates income redistribution hence addresses social inequalities in the society (Igben, 2001). Thus, greater women accessibility to university education for professionalism and the acquisition of technological knowledge holds the key to African Development in the 21st century.

***Poor Access to Health Facilities:*** Maternal mortality rate in Africa is high. Available evidence from the OECD (1984) indicates that it is below international standard as it stood at 866 per 100,000 live births. The explanation given for this development was inadequate medical services as only 50.9% of all births could be attended to by

professional medical personnel. Thus, most African rural women give birth at home where the services of traditional birth attendants were sought. In the event of complications and/or prolonged labour these birth attendants are handicapped in tackling the situation. Little wonder the increasing rate of maternal mortality in the African sub-region.

***Low Political Representation:*** Given the lack of resources, political experience, education, viable lobbying connections during political campaigns, the patriarchal factor, the fear of marital infidelity by their spouses and the diversion of wives' attention from home management to the pursuit of political careers including the fact that political campaigns and leadership involves frequent travelling, these have in a significant way affected greater women participation in the political spheres of African nations (Sirleaf, 2010). Yet, it is only when African women are adequately situated in key political positions that they can effectively influence decisions and changes concerning them.

***Patriarchal Ideology:*** According to the 6th Edition of the Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary, a patriarchal society is that which is "ruled or controlled by men" or "giving power and importance only to men." The patriarchal ideology permeates every aspect of the African society causing diverse deprivations experienced by women in the political, economic and social domains. In fact, patriarchy is at the heart of landlessness, inadequate education, poverty, political under-representation amongst women. This was what Schaefer (2008) had in mind when he argued that, women suffer from sexism in most societies around the world in which one sex is considered superior to the other which stems from male prejudice and discrimination against them. He stresses that the manifestations of this ranges from individual to institutional acts of sexism involving the denial of opportunities and equal rights to certain individuals/group on the basis of their gender categorization.

Patriarchy is indeed, the key challenge to the African woman as all other problems are anchored and stemmed from it. It is also responsible for most of the violence perpetrated against women including genital mutilation. The OECD has demonstrated that this cultural practice is particularly rampant in African countries such as Guinea, Mali, Egypt, Somalia and Eritrea where over 95% of the women's rights have been violated. Again, this has received wide criticisms and condemnation especially from the medical practitioners. And yet, there have been in a systematic and subtle way, the perpetration of medical violence against women in the area of the control of social reproduction. In a study conducted by Hellandendu (1983), it was indicated that medical violence against women is the institutionalized harmful medical practices directed at females by virtues of their sex while less harmful alternatives exist for or can be applied to their male counterparts to achieve the same results. The purpose for this according to him was to control female reproductive function. He further shows that the modern artificial contraceptive methods are many and varied consisting of hormonal control contraceptive, intrauterine devices, surgery, barrier method, menstrual regulations and abortion. Of all these he argues, women



are the highest users and face the consequences of the health hazards associated with them. Again, depending on the method adopted these ranges from the risk of ectopic pregnancy, headaches, cardio-vascular diseases, depression, fever, vomiting, heavy bleeding and the risk of death as a result of complications. He maintains that this was the handiwork of medical researchers and practitioners, a profession mostly male-dominated, who embark on researches, and invent for use, medical devices harmful to women without a corresponding invention of alternative devices for men due to gender bias. He thus concludes that the modern artificial contraceptives are “deliberate medical violence against women since male’s reproductive system are in fact much easier to; and more conveniently manipulated than the female’s for the control of reproduction”. This was not done as a result of gender bias and the economic interest behind it. The preceding, however, is not to advocate excessive child bearing. For constant child bearing limits women’s liberty, power and health condition (Sen, 1999). In addition, without a corresponding expansion in resources (material and natural), population increase is undesirable. However, women should not be treated unfairly due to the social need of population control because they do not reproduce without the aid of their male counterparts. If child birth is to be controlled, it should be focused on the men because the men are desirous of women than women are desirous of men.

### CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This work has in a systematic way, assessed women’s contributions to the development of continental Africa. It establishes that in politics, women are vital to the sustainability of democracy as opposed to the crisis of democracy that has pervaded the continent arising from men’s domination, manipulations and projection of their interest in the supposedly democratic dispensation. Again, women’s role in the economy especially in the agricultural sector have aided in preventing the scenario of full blown food insecurity in the sub-region. However, it was demonstrated that despite their prowess, women are being weakened by series of challenges.

On the basis of the preceding therefore, the work recommends the recognition and implementation of women’s fundamental and constitutional rights across Africa. In addition to this, fuel-wood are often utilized by poor rural women for cooking. The proliferation of this has in a disastrous way impacted on the environment contributing to deforestation and the rapidity of climate change. Thus, women’s economic empowerment can ignite a positive change towards environmental preservation and development (Sen, 1999). To facilitate birth control and the sustainability of women’s health, medical researches should be re-directed into the development of modern artificial contraceptives methods that will attract widespread utilization by men. Of fundamental significance is the fact that, gender parity could be achieved in Africa when men begin to view women as partners in progress and de-emphasize the *patriarchal ideology* skilfully crafted by them which has a powerful influence on societal consciousness, gender relations and the operations of the society.

This singular action will pave way for greater women economic empowerment, access to western education, employment in the organized public sector, political participation/responsibilities and so on. Given the numerical strength of women population in the continent, there is the preponderance of huge potentials that need to be tapped politically and socio-economically. Undoubtedly, the attainment of this will facilitate the transformation, industrialization and rapid development of Africa in the 21st century.

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