

Women and Democracy

THE NEW POLITICAL ACTIVISM IN AFRICA

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Until the 1990s, it was unheard of for an African woman to run for the presidency of her country. To be sure, Africa had a few female rulers earlier in the twentieth century, but none had been elected. Empress Zauditu, for instance, ruled Ethiopia from 1917 to 1930; Queen-regents Dzeliwe Shongwe (1982–83) and Ntombi Thwala (1983–86) reigned over Swaziland; and Elizabeth Domitien of the Central African Republic was appointed as Africa's first female prime minister, serving in 1975–76. It was only in the 1990s, however, that significant numbers of African women began aspiring to positions of national leadership.

In the 1990s, women ran for president in Kenya and Liberia, while others sought party nominations for the presidency in Angola, Burkina Faso, the Central African Republic, Guinea-Bissau, Kenya, Nigeria, São Tomé and Príncipe, and Tanzania. Although all were unsuccessful in their bids for power, these women set important precedents in their respective countries.

The first woman to become an African head of state in a nonmonarchical regime was Liberia's Ruth Perry, who chaired her country's six-member collective presidency, the Council of State, in the mid-1990s. In 1994, Uganda's Wandera Specioza Kazibwe became Africa's first female vice-president. Rwanda and Burundi elected female prime ministers in the mid-1990s, and Senegal chose a woman prime minister in 2001. By the end of the 1990s, legislative bodies in Ethiopia, Lesotho, and South Africa had all appointed female house speakers, while those in Uganda, Zimbabwe, and South Africa had female deputy speakers.

The number of African women in parliament also increased markedly during the 1990s. Africa in 1960 had the lowest rate of female legislative participation in the world. Since then, however, African women have made striking gains. By 2001, women on average held 12 percent of parliamentary seats throughout Africa, compared with half this number a decade earlier. Female representation was as high as 31 percent in Mozambique (up from 16 percent in 1991); 30 percent in South Africa (up from 3 percent in 1991); and 25 percent in Namibia (up from 7 percent in 1994). Even these countries, however, did not come close to proportionately representing women, who make up over half the population in most countries. In April 2001, African women lagged behind their counterparts in the Nordic countries, where female legislative representation was 39 percent; in the rest of Europe (excluding the Nordic countries), where women held 14 percent of legislative seats; and in Asia and in the Americas, where women held roughly 15 percent of legislative seats (see the Table on the facing page). Only the Arab world fared worse than Africa, with a 4 percent showing for women legislators.¹ Yet, while Africa trailed most other regions of the world in its share of women legislators in 2000, over the past four decades it has exhibited the world's fastest rate of growth in female representation.

What accounts for African women's increased visibility as independent political actors? No single factor explains these new trends; rather, one must consider a combination of factors. In general, the shift from one-party to multiparty politics, and in some cases from military to civilian rule, created favorable conditions for greater participation by sectors of society long marginalized under authoritarianism. In semiauthoritarian states as well, women began finding greater room to maneuver and were able to capitalize on an improved political climate, even though serious constraints remained and progress remained precarious.

Political Openings

Rarely mentioned in studies of democratization in Africa is the role played by women's groups in the political reform process of the 1990s. Like student organizations, labor unions, and human rights activists, women's organizations openly opposed corrupt and repressive regimes through public demonstrations and other militant actions. In Kenya, the early 1990s saw women at the forefront of often violent protests in support of imprisoned human rights activists. In Mali, thousands of demonstrating women and children were fired on by the forces of President Moussa Traoré in a series of events that led to his downfall. In Sierra Leone, when rumors circulated that the military might postpone the February 1996 elections, women were the only group that openly defied soldiers and demonstrated for a free vote. In Guinea, women organized a sit-in in front of the presidential palace in Conakry, protesting

**TABLE—WOMEN IN NATIONAL PARLIAMENTS
(PERCENTAGES)**

REGION	SINGLE HOUSE OR LOWER HOUSE	UPPER HOUSE OR SENATE	BOTH HOUSES COMBINED
NORDIC COUNTRIES	38.8	—	38.8
AMERICAS	15.3	15.3	15.3
ASIA	14.8	15.7	14.9
EUROPE (OSCE COUNTRIES) <i>(excluding Nordic countries)</i>	13.9	13.4	13.8
SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA	12.0	13.2	12.1
PACIFIC	11.9	25.9	13.5
ARAB STATES	4.6	2.7	4.3
OVERALL	13.8	13.2	13.7

Source: Inter-Parliamentary Union, Women in National Parliaments, www.ipu.org/wmn-e/world.htm, April 2001.

democratization and human rights has been limited, and many countries have experienced reversals in the process of political reform. Even countries that have successfully introduced multiparty politics and electoral democracy often suffer a serious lack of political and civil liberties. Nevertheless, it is important to note that the democratization efforts of the 1990s, despite their limitations, gave women the impetus to make bolder strides in the political arena.

The move toward multipartism in most of Africa diminished the need for the mass women's organizations that had been linked to and directed by ruling parties in one-party states. The demise of these party-led women's associations, which had previously dominated the women's movement, coincided with the rise of independent women's organizations seeking to take advantage of the opening of new political space. The leaders of the new associations pushed for broader agendas, including women's expanded participation in politics. Once preoccupied with "developmental" activities (including income-generation, welfare concerns, and homemaking skills), women's organizations now also lobbied for a greater political role for women, pressed for legislative and constitutional changes, and conducted civic-education activities. These concerns would not have been raised in the 1980s, although they had briefly been topics of debate at the time of independence, when African women were first introduced to concepts of citizenship and modern electoral politics.

In the 1990s, African women began to form their own political parties, in part because existing parties were not adequately addressing women's concerns. In many cases, parties were reluctant to increase women's representation; sometimes, they refused to accommodate women's distinct political vision. In still other cases, women wanted to build more broad-based multiethnic and multireligious constituencies than established parties would allow. In Zambia, Inonge Mbikusita-Lewanika

an economic crisis that they blamed on the country's leadership. Finally, in Niger, several thousand women demonstrated against the exclusion of women representatives from a preparatory commission charged with organizing the country's National Conference in 1991.

The impact of many of these movements for

founded the National Party in 1991; in Zimbabwe, Margaret Dongo formed the Zimbabwe Union of Democrats in 1999; and in Lesotho, Limakatso Ntakatsane established the Kopanang Basotho party in 1992. Also in the 1990s, Charity Ngilu and Wangari Maathai headed parties in Kenya, Ruth Rolland-Jeanne-Marie led a party in the Central African Republic, and Amália de Vitoria Pereira led a party in Angola.

With increased educational opportunities for girls and women, there emerged a larger pool of women in a position to vie for political power. Moreover, women frequently had more experience than men in creating and sustaining associations, having participated in church-related activities, savings clubs, income-generating groups, self-help associations, community-improvement groups, and other informal organizations and networks. They thus often found it easier than men to take advantage of the new political openings in the 1990s. In Mali, for example, women were able to draw on a long history of maintaining social and economic networks, and thus to bring well-developed organizational skills to nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). As a result, women have a strong presence in the country's NGO movement, and have been able both to ensure that development associations address women's issues and to create their own organizations devoted to legal issues, health concerns, credit matters, education, and enterprise promotion. In Tanzania, 80 percent of registered NGOs are women's organizations. In short, women's long experience working collectively has often made it easier for them to seize the new organizational opportunities afforded by liberalization.

The recent availability of donor funds through international and local NGOs, religious bodies, embassies, and international foundations has been another factor spurring the growth of national organizations supporting women's political activities, generally on a nonpartisan basis. Donors have supported women's efforts to participate in civic education, constitutional and legislative reform, and leadership training, and they have funded programs for female parliamentarians.

The commitment of political leaders is another critical factor in increasing women's political representation. The enhanced representation of women is more a question of political will than of any economic factor. Temporary measures, like party quotas and reserved seats, account in large measure for higher female representation in Uganda, Tanzania, Mozambique, South Africa, and several other African countries. In fact, improvement in female representation worldwide has often been the result of some type of quota system. Uganda set an important precedent for Africa by mandating that women constitute one-third of the representatives in local councils. In the Mozambican elections of 1999, women won almost one-third of the seats in the National Assembly, largely due to a 35 percent quota for women established by the ruling party, FRELIMO. Strategies for affirmative action are as controversial

in Africa as elsewhere, but it is indisputable that, where they have been implemented, the political culture has become more accepting of female politicians.

Across Africa, women's organizations have increasingly begun calling for the adoption of such affirmative action policies. In Nigeria, organizations like Gender and Development Action, Women Empowerment Movement, the National Council for Women's Societies, 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. In Malawi, women's groups petitioned their government in 1999 to guarantee that women would make up at least a third of the decision makers in key national institutions.

The international women's movement has also played a significant role in encouraging African women to seek political office and to attempt to influence policy making. Although the driving force behind these changes has been internal, international pressures and norms have aided the efforts of African women. At the UN's Beijing Conference on Women in 1995, the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU), the world organization of national parliaments, adopted a Plan of Action aimed at addressing men's domination of political and parliamentary life in all countries. One of the IPU's proposals included affirmative action measures on a strictly interim basis. Quota systems, the IPU proposal stated, should promote a situation where neither sex occupies a disproportionate number of seats in parliament.

Finally, formal politics in Africa is to a large extent underwritten and controlled by informal patronage arrangements, and this has circumscribed the political opportunities for women. Most (although certainly not all) women tend to operate on the margins of clientelistic networks. Where such networks have been weakened by economic crisis, women have found opportunities to advance, as has been the case in recent years in Senegal. Economic crises have forced women into expanded entrepreneurial activity, and in many countries they now appear to have greater personal resources at their disposal to use in running for office.

The Rise of Independent Women's Organizations

One of the most dramatic changes affecting women's political participation in the 1990s has been the growth of independent women's organizations. As noted above, prior to the 1990s women were typically mobilized through a party wing, a mass organization of women directly affiliated with or coopted by the ruling party. This relationship marginalized women, channeling them into mobilizing around a narrow set of issues. Not only did these party wings do little for women; they often acted against women, resisting their empowerment. Women's branches of ruling parties were sometimes reduced to serving in

celebratory functions. Former dictator Hastings Banda of Malawi required members of the League of Malawi Women to be present at all official functions, dressed in party uniforms, singing and dancing in praise of him. Such women's organizations were tied to the party's

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dictates and its overriding interest in securing women's votes. Often these organizations were run by wives, sisters, or other female relatives of party or government leaders; they had no interest in helping women with other political allegiances. Similarly, the women's leagues were unable to fight forcefully for women's interests if these were at odds with the priorities and goals of the ruling party. For example, the Kenyan women's organization Maendeleo ya Wanawake was purposely kept apolitical, and any

attempts it made to assert itself politically were swiftly squelched. In Zambia, one female politician remarked that the women's branches of ruling parties ought to be abolished since "they are the biggest single obstacle to women's political participation."² Even though their monopoly over the women's movement ended with the political liberalization of the 1990s, party-affiliated women's leagues persisted throughout the decade.

The political openings of the early 1990s changed the face of the women's movement in Africa, making possible the formation of new nonpartisan organizations geared toward lobbying, civic education, and leadership training, and emboldening women to run for office. No longer tied to the patronage networks of the ruling party, women's groups could select their own leaders and set their own agendas for the first time. The emergence of independent women's associations led to the decline of the party-affiliated women's organizations in the 1990s like the League of Malawi Women (the women's wing of the Malawi Congress Party) and the Women's League of the United National Independence Party in Zambia.

The proliferation of independent associations allowed women to champion their rights more forcefully and to fight for greater political representation in a way that would have been impossible in earlier times, when women's mobilization had been tied to the dominant political party or administration. For example, since Yoweri Museveni came to power in Uganda in 1986, the Ugandan women's movement has been able to press many issues publicly, 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 rarely addressed by women's movements in countries where a ruling party has dominated women's politics. In Ghana during the 1980s and 1990s, Jerry Rawlings's Provisional National Defence Council (PNDC) and his party, the National Democratic Congress, posed a stark contrast to the Ugandan case with their control of the 31st December Women's Movement, the largest women's organization in Ghana. Although it produced a few modest gains for women, the PNDC suffocated the women's movement and limited its demands, keeping it focused on furthering PNDC influence.

In many African countries in the 1980s and 1990s, women's NGOs presented a growing challenge to party-led women's branches by offering far more sweeping proposals to address institutional barriers to women's advancement. In countries where party-imposed structures had crowded out most other associational life, independent women's groups were among the first to take advantage of new openings to establish a wide array of formal and informal associations at both the local and national levels. In the case of Madagascar, where there were no mass-based national associations to organize women, farmers, youth, or other groups, institutional development was exceptionally weak, but public-interest women's NGOs began to emerge in the early 1990s, including associations like Femmes Entrepreneurs, Femmes Juristes, and Femmes Artisanes. In countries where party-affiliated women's organizations had predominated, the associational terrain was also dramatically transformed. After the introduction of political reforms in Tanzania, women's groups of every kind mushroomed, tackling issues as varied as the environment, women in the media, entrepreneurial interests, reproductive rights, and land rights. One indication of the steep increase in the number of these associations was the proliferation of networking organizations, women's coalitions, and issue-focused alliances. Examples include the Tanzania Association of Nongovernmental Organizations, the Tanzania Greater Networking Programme, the National Land Forum, and regional networks like the Kilimanjaro Women's Information and Education Corporation.

Autonomous women's associations advanced bold new programs that included, but also went beyond, the old emphases on religion, welfare concerns, and income-generation. Countries like Uganda and South Africa, which had the most independent women's movements, seemed to go the furthest in this regard. By the 1990s, nonpartisan organizations had emerged to support women candidates and political leaders. These organizations trained women leaders, carried out civic-education programs, lobbied parties to endorse more women candidates, and developed elaborate strategies to propel more women into positions of leadership. Many organizations attempted to improve links between rural

and urban women. The majority of women who are active tend to be middle-aged and elderly, and new strategies are being considered to draw younger women into politics, especially where they have been left on the sidelines.

In Zambia, women from NGOs, churches, and political parties formed a nonpartisan National Women's Lobby Group (NWLG) in 1991, with the goal of increasing the representation of women in decision-making positions in government and the political parties. The NWLG encouraged women to compete in local elections, worked to repeal discriminatory legislation, and conducted human rights training and civic-education seminars. By 1995, the organization had grown to 2,000 dues-paying members. Numerous other nonpartisan groups in Zambia promoted women's involvement in politics. In 1996, the Women's Lobby financially backed 44 independent women as parliamentary candidates. Although only one of them won a seat, the group's efforts encouraged parties to nominate more female candidates and, as a result, 15 party-backed women won seats, bringing to 16 the number of women in Zambia's 150-member parliament.

In Kenya, the National Committee on the Status of Women (NCSW), a staunchly nonpartisan organization, provided assistance to women of all party affiliations running for office in 1992 and 1997. The NCSW carried out civic-education programs for women, giving them a better sense of their rights as citizens and of the need to vote for candidates who support women's causes. The committee sought to reform laws deemed obstacles to the advancement of women, as well as undertaking other activities aimed at strengthening women's political presence. Charity Ngilu had the backing of several Kenyan women's organizations when she ran for the presidency in 1997. She has indicated that she plans to rely on women's groups to an even greater extent in 2002, seeking a larger share of the votes of women, who make up the majority of the electorate.

This activism reflects a trend that will not easily be reversed. It represents a new way of conceiving of women's political participation and has the potential of enhancing women's role in politics—provided that there is no retreat to single-party systems or military rule, and no further erosion of civil and political liberties.

Women's Contributions

Constitution making. In several African countries during the 1990s, women were significantly involved in the process of creating constitutions. In South Africa, women were very active in drafting a new constitution that guarantees women equality, freedom and security of the person, freedom from violence, the right to make decisions concerning reproduction, and the right to control one's own body. The

independent Women's National Coalition (WNC) lobbied hard to have a Women's Charter passed in South Africa. Formed in 1991 to unite women of all parties and political persuasions, the WNC brought together 81 organizations and 13 regional alliances, including affiliates of the African National Congress, the Inkatha Freedom Party, the National Party, the Pan Africanist Congress, the Azanian Peoples Organization, and the Democratic Party. The WNC also included such diverse groups as the Rural Women's Movement, the Union of Jewish Women, and the South African Domestic Workers Union. More than three million women—the broadest coalition ever formed in South Africa—participated in focus groups and regional and national conferences organized by the WNC to voice women's concerns. In 1994, the Women's Charter was drafted and endorsed by the national parliament and all nine regional parliaments. The Charter addresses a broad range of issues, including equality, legal rights, economic issues, education, health, politics, and violence against women. The constitution allows the Charter to become a guideline for priorities in reforming government gender policy.

In Zambia, the National Women's Lobby Group and 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. Despite fierce opposition from some female parliamentarians, leaders of the Movement for Multiparty Democracy, and officers of civic organizations, women's groups successfully pressed for the inclusion in the constitution of reproductive rights and equal opportunities in education. Under existing law, women needed spousal consent to use contraception, whereas men were under no such obligation. Similarly, many families chose to educate their sons but not their daughters, in the belief that a son, unlike a daughter, was obliged to care for the family when the parents died. It was because of such discriminatory customs that many women's organizations fought to give women's rights explicit protection in the constitution.

Similar developments took place in Malawi, where women's organizations involved in the constitutional process had to be constantly on the alert to ensure that women's concerns were not downgraded or dropped from the agenda. A 1994 conference, held to prepare for Malawi's multiparty elections, agreed under pressure from women delegates to endorse specific women's concerns and incorporate some of them into the constitution. These included education for girls, equal rights and equal access for women in politics and business, and HIV/AIDS prevention programs for men and women alike. Recommendations by the National Commission on Women in Development (NCWID) that women's concerns should be included in the bill of rights and that the Senate should have equal representation of men and women were

incorporated into the constitution and then withdrawn four times prior to ratification in May 1994. A group of women in the NCWID lobbied the National Consultative Council against each successive attempt to remove the recommendations and were partially successful.

In Uganda, no group was as well-organized or as united as women in influencing the drafting of the constitution. Embarking on a countrywide effort to educate women about the constitution and to gather their views, women's groups submitted more memoranda to the Constitutional Commission than any other sector of society. Female members of the Constituent Assembly formed a nonpartisan Women's Caucus that organized workshops for women delegates on speech making, constituency-building, coalition-building, parliamentary procedures, and related topics. Of 284 delegates elected to Uganda's Constituent Assembly, 51 were women. The Women's Caucus worked with women's organizations to make sure that their concerns were raised in the Constituent Assembly and publicized their views in a weekly radio program on the Constituent Assembly debates. The fruits of these efforts were seen in the final draft of the constitution, which included a provision requiring that gender equity be written into all laws passed by parliament; a prohibition of laws, customs, and traditions that undermine the position of women; the establishment of an equal opportunity commission to enforce constitutional principles; and a call for expanding the number of women in parliament.

Legislative battles. The increased mobilization of women in Africa has also been visible in the effort to pass or amend laws to improve the legal status of women, mainly in the areas of property rights, land rights, inheritance laws, citizenship laws, domestic violence, rape, and defilement (that is, rape of girls under the age of consent). In South Africa, women established a Commission on Gender Equality to ensure that the country's laws would be fully implemented. Women fought to be included in the budget process so that state expenditures would better reflect women's interests, and to see to it 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 requiring employers to hire without discrimination based on race, gender, or disability. And they even won the "right to choose" with a Termination of Pregnancy Bill.

In Malawi, the National Commission on Women and Development and nonpartisan organizations like Women's Voices have worked to increase the number of women representatives in both parliament and local legislative councils. They have sought better implementation of laws against domestic violence and have educated women about their inheritance rights. In 1999, they successfully pressed for passage of an act making it a criminal offense to seize the estate of someone who has

died intestate. The law, which restores misappropriated property to the person lawfully entitled to it, protects widows who find their deceased husbands' properties claimed by in-laws.

In Mali, women's NGOs worked to reform property laws, marital laws, and the tax code. In other countries, the focus has been on conducting workshops and using the media to educate women about their rights. All these challenges to the unequal legal status of women reflect the heightened level of mobilization that has accompanied the political opening of the 1990s.

Anticorruption struggles. Long excluded from formal political and economic life on the basis of their gender, women often have little stake in maintaining the old order and much to gain from 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 in their countries. This is not to say that women politicians are necessarily less prone to corruption than their male counterparts, but rather that many women politicians and the organizations that back them have little to gain from state-related corruption and therefore less to lose by opposing it. There are sometimes serious costs to opposing corruption, however. Maathai and Dongo have had their lives threatened; Byanyima lost a top position in Uganda's National Resistance Movement in 1999 because of her attacks on corruption at the highest levels, and she was charged with sedition in April 2001 for criticizing the Ugandan involvement in the Congolese conflict (which has proven highly lucrative for key personnel in the Ugandan army).

Antisectarianism. Women politicians often have strongly opposed sectarianism, in contrast with other political leaders who have exploited ethnicity, race, or religion. In the course of her campaign to win a seat in Ghana's 1992 parliamentary elections, Hawa Yakubu became frustrated with manifestations of "tribalism" within her party. When her peacemaking efforts failed, she decided to run as an independent candidate and campaign against ethnic polarization. Yakubu attributed her overwhelming electoral victory to the women's vote—an indication of the extent to which women are willing to resist appeals to ethnicity.

Efforts to build civic organizations around nonsectarian concerns represent an important break with the longstanding tendency in Africa to rally voters along ethnic lines. One of the reasons why many female politicians seek nonsectarian support is related to their bases of support, which typically draw heavily from women's movements. At the national level, the common cause of women's rights unites women from diverse backgrounds. Women have found it impossible to conduct effective

struggles for political and economic emancipation without building broad-based movements that transcend racial, religious, and ethnic divisions. Winnie Byanyima, former chair of the Women's Caucus in Uganda's Constituent Assembly and a prominent figure in a women's organization devoted to promoting leadership skills, explained to the Constituent Assembly why she and many other women challenge the political exploitation 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.³

Other women politicians have also distinguished themselves by their strong opposition to the political exploitation of ethnic differences. Agathe Uwilingiyimana, Rwanda's prime minister in 1992–94, was a staunch advocate of women's rights and ethnic tolerance. Her espousal of ethnic tolerance was, in fact, one of the reasons why she was killed by the presidential guard on 6 April 1994 at the outset of the genocide that would devastate Rwanda in the following four months.

Charity Ngilu, who ran for president in Kenya in 1997, challenged clientelistic vote-buying based on playing the ethnicity card. Ngilu decided to run in part because opposition efforts to mobilize voters against the ruling party were so divided by blatant ethnic appeals, and she pledged to build a government of national unity if elected. Wangari Maathai, a world-renowned environmentalist and leader of the Green Belt Movement (which is composed largely of women), jumped into the same presidential race at the last minute. Long an outspoken critic of tribalism, Maathai shared with Ngilu a strong distaste for the divisiveness of ethnic politics. Ngilu and Maathai were among the few presidential candidates in Kenya's 1997 election who did not appeal to ethnic particularism in their campaigns.

A Decade of Progress

African women began to make their mark in politics in the 1990s to a degree never before witnessed in the postindependence era. Despite their efforts, however, women have yet to see major payoffs in the number of women elected or appointed to public office. Women often lack the resources, political experience, education, and connections to run for office. Popular perceptions still often hold that a woman's "proper" place

is in the home rather than in politics. Cultural attitudes hostile to women's political involvement persist among both men and women. These are reflected in voting patterns, media coverage of female politicians, and

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even in blatant attempts to suppress the political rights and views of women. In Uganda, for example, the 1996 presidential election was marred by numerous incidents of intimidation and harassment of women at the hands of husbands who had differing political opinions. Throughout the country, there were reports of politically active women voters who were threatened with the withdrawal of family support or had their voters' cards stolen or destroyed. Some were beaten, thrown out of their homes, or even killed.

For a number of reasons, women themselves are sometimes reluctant to run for office. This hesitation stems in part from cultural prohibitions on women speaking in public in front of men. Where these prohibitions are strong, men do not listen to women who take the podium or who are politically active in other ways. Campaigning and serving in office often involve travel, spending nights away from home, going to bars, and meeting men—all of which put female politicians at risk of being considered "loose women" or "unfit mothers." Politically active women sometimes find themselves and their families either under physical attack or the subject of malicious gossip. Some husbands, threatened by the possibility that their wives will interact with other men, forbid them from entering politics. Others fear social stigmatization or worry that their wives' political preoccupations will divert their attention away from the home. According to one study, most politically active women in Zambia claimed that they had experienced marital problems as a result of their involvement.⁴

Even in parliament, women have had difficulty being taken seriously and have frequently been subjected to humiliating stereotypes and derogatory remarks. An excellent and detailed study of women in parliamentary politics in Uganda found sexual harassment rampant, even in a parliament where significant numbers of women had been active for more than a decade.⁵ According to another study, over half of the women elected to South Africa's parliament in 1994 did not plan to return when their terms expired, believing that there was no opportunity for them to be heard and that they could contribute more through community work.⁶

Nevertheless, after 1990 women in Africa set their political sights higher than ever before in postcolonial history. A growing number of them aspired to become presidential candidates, and nonpartisan

women's organizations made concerted efforts to increase female parliamentary representation. Even though the results of these efforts were often disappointing, new trends were set in motion. In Zambia, for instance, the 1991 multiparty parliamentary elections saw new faces among women contenders, many of them businesswomen and professionals. Most of the women who won parliamentary and local seats had not been previously involved in politics. In Uganda, more women have run for office in each election since 1986, and the number of women winning open seats (those not reserved for women) has actually increased since the introduction of affirmative action.⁷

In addition to placing new emphasis on female leadership, women in the 1990s began to lobby actively for constitutional and legislative reforms to improve their status. On the electoral front, they began questioning the political exploitation of ethnicity. Women's political lobbies sought to create links across ethnic lines and challenged political parties that used ethnicity to build constituencies.

A number of factors account for this new political energy. Political reform movements in the 1990s encouraged the establishment of new, independent women's organizations and coincided with the sharp decline of the mass women's organizations that had been tied to single-party regimes. Unlike the old party-led women's associations, the new autonomous women's organizations selected their own leaders and set bold new objectives for themselves. Many groups moved beyond the developmental focus of the older organizations and adopted a more political agenda. Some sought to promote women's political leadership and awareness of their political rights through civic education, while others pursued legislative and constitutional changes.

The growing numbers of educated women, as well as women's long-standing experience with mobilization in informal and local forums, contributed to the new trends in female political participation. So did shifting donor strategies, the commitment of several African states to affirmative action, encouragement from the international women's movement, and the adoption of targets for female representation by international bodies like the Inter-Parliamentary Union. Finally, in some instances, the decline of state resources led to the withering away of established patronage networks, often the bedrock of formal politics. This may have opened up opportunities for women of independent means to enter the political arena. By pursuing autonomous modes of organization and rejecting party-led women's leagues, independent women's associations and female politicians challenged the politics of clientelism, patronage, and corruption.

In the past ten years, African women have made unprecedented political progress. Although daunting obstacles to their advancement remain, if the 1990s are any indication, the decade ahead is certain to see even greater political involvement on the part of women.

NOTES

1. Inter-Parliamentary Union, www.ipu.org/wmn-e/world.htm, 2001; United Nations, *World's Women: Trends and Statistics, 1970–1990* (New York: United Nations, 1991).
2. Anne E. Ferguson, Kimberly Ludwig, Beatrice Liatto Katundu, and Irene Manda, *Zambian Women in Politics: An Assessment of Changes Resulting from the 1991 Political Transition* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1995), 22.
3. Proceedings of the Constituent Assembly, Official Report, 3 August 1994, 1490.
4. Anne E. Ferguson with Beatrice Liatto Katundu, "Women in Politics in Zambia: What Difference has Democracy Made?" *African Rural and Urban Studies* 1 (1994): 18.
5. Sylvia Tamale, *When Hens Begin to Crow: Gender and Parliamentary Politics in Uganda* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview, 1999).
6. Hannah Britton, "From Resistance to Governance: South African Women's Transformation of Parliament," Ph.D. diss., Syracuse University, 1999.
7. Aili Mari Tripp, *Women and Politics in Uganda* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2000).