

Madam President: The Changing Gender Dynamics of African Politics

Today, at last, postcolonial Africa has got its first democratically elected female president, Ms Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf. She was inaugurated at a colourful and moving open-air ceremony to the pounding of drums instead of the traditional twenty-one gun salute in the war-torn capital of Monrovia vigorously spruced up for the historic occasion that was attended by several African leaders and foreign dignitaries and thousands of women from across the continent. This is an extraordinary moment for the troubled beacon of liberty, Liberia, Africa's oldest modern republic founded by African Americans in 1847, and for Africa at large, long ruled and ruined by men, as well as for women everywhere who are still largely invisible in the corridors and councils of power. Ms Johnson-Sirleaf triumphed in a fraught election that pitted her against twenty-one other candidates in the initial round of voting, then against a popular international soccer star in the final round, a race in which gender, generational, class, and rural-urban cleavages and interests jostled for primacy. She joins an exclusive masculine club of global political leaders as one of only six female presidents (the others are in Finland, Ireland, Latvia, the Philippines, and Chile whose first female president was elected in January 2006). Thus her inauguration is an occasion for celebration but also censure, reflection and reproach: it is a milestone memorable for its rarity, a testimony to the limited advances women have made in rising to the highest levels of national and international politics.

The global record of women's political representation among heads of state and government is dismal. During the twentieth century there were only forty-six female presidents and prime ministers worldwide, many of whom served for short periods, sometimes for less than a year. Three were from Africa: Elizabeth Domitien (1975-76) of the Central African Republic, Sylvie Kinigi of Burundi, and Agathe Uwilingiyimana of Rwanda. The last two served as prime ministers in 1993-94. The former was ousted in a coup and

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the latter murdered in the genocide of 1994. Currently, besides the five presidents including President Johnson-Sirleaf, there are five female prime ministers, two of whom are from Africa – Mozambique and Sao Tome and Principe (the others are in Bangladesh, Germany, and New Zealand). There are still countries that have never had women as cabinet ministers (for example, Saudi Arabia), or have had only one (for instance, Burma), or have only had deputy ministers (Laos). Many currently boast of one or two female ministers, such as Pakistan (one out of thirty-two), Italy (two out of twenty-seven), and Greece (two out of forty-four). Some African countries are in this miserable league, such as Kenya (two out of thirty-four) and Egypt (two out of thirty-one). In the United States there are only four women in the twenty-two-member cabinet, quite deplorable for the self-proclaimed champion of democracy.

But even in those countries with more than a handful of female ministers, the latter tend to serve in stereotypical 'social welfare' type departments, such as education, health, or women's and youth affairs, rather than in such prestigious and powerful ministries as finance, defence, and foreign affairs. In this regard, South Africa is one of the few admirable exceptions: its cabinet is one of the most representative in the world. There are thirteen female and fifteen male ministers and ten female and eleven male deputy ministers. Many of the female ministers are in crucial ministries including foreign affairs, agriculture, home affairs, minerals and energy, and public service and administration. Only Sweden can claim a better record in terms of gender parity: there are eleven ministers each for men and women.

Clearly, the record of women's political representation remains dreadful for much of the world nearly three decades after the adoption by the United Nations Gen-

eral Assembly of the Convention on the Elimination of All forms of Discrimination Against Women - the international bill of rights for women – and four UN-sponsored World Conferences on Women (Mexico in 1975, Copenhagen in 1980, Nairobi in 1985, and Beijing in 1995), not to mention the numerous regional and international conventions attended and commitments made by governments with great fanfare. While from a global perspective women's access to public office is very disappointing, we should not lose sight of the progress that has been made in some countries in recent years, largely in response to the growth of the women's movement and intensified struggles for democratisation. How do African countries fare and compare with the rest of the world? Is the resounding victory of Ms Johnson-Sirleaf (she won about three-fifths of the vote) and her election as President of Liberia an isolated phenomenon of little import or a harbinger of larger shifts in the gender dynamics and cultural economy of African politics?

It is of course dangerous to homogenise Africa, a continent of astonishing diversity but prone to simplistic generalisations by outsiders anxious to pathologise and dismiss it and insiders too eager for its integration and collective upliftment. It is prudent to argue that the patterns of women's participation in politics and public life among Africa's fifty-four countries have been characterised by uneven progress. It is also quite evident that the African region as a whole compares favourably with other world regions. This is amply borne out in a comprehensive research report, *Gender Equality: Striving for Justice in an Unequal World*, published in 2005 by the United Nations Research Institute for Social Development, assessing progress in gender equality globally since the Beijing Conference. In the interests of full disclosure, let me point out that I was one of the nine members of the Advisory Group for the project, which commissioned dozens of background papers by researchers all over the world. The report focuses on four major themes: first, macroeconomics, well-being and gender

equality; second, women, work and social policy; third, women in politics and public life; and fourth, gender, armed conflict and the search for peace. It needs to be read by all those interested in the question of women's rights and gender equality, one of humanity's most enduring dilemmas and, in my view, one of the central challenges of our age.

The economic policies of neo-liberalism and the political pressures of democratisation have influenced the complex and sometimes contradictory changes in the position and participation of women in various spheres of social life since the 1990s. Combined, quite unevenly and unequally in various countries and regions, one may add, these forces have affected, for better or for worse, the constitution and institutions of state power, economic management, and social protection, all of which affect the processes and prospects of governance and development, and the quality of democracy, citizenship, and gender equality. The data show that in the ten years since Beijing there have been notable increases in female participation rates in primary and to a smaller extent in secondary and tertiary education, in the paid labour force and migration flows, and in public institutions including elected assemblies. Also, fertility rates have fallen and awareness of women's sexual and reproductive rights has risen.

But statistical increases have not necessarily been translated into social improvements, nor has awareness entailed redress. In many parts of the world, including Africa, female enrolments have risen as public funding for, and the quality of, education have declined, the 'feminisation' of the labour force has been accompanied by deteriorating terms and conditions of work including casualisation and informalisation, and advances in fertility and reproductive health have spawned sex ratio imbalances through 'son preference' that have led to millions of 'missing women' – estimated in 2000 at 101,3 million or 5.7 per cent of the women's population worldwide (80 per cent of the 'missing women' are accounted for by China and India; Africa accounts for an estimated 7 per cent). There is overwhelming evidence that the costs of the privatisation of services engendered by economic liberalisation and deregulation have been disproportionately borne by women. The case for addressing the gender implica-

tions of macroeconomic policy and incorporating gender in any national project of sustainable development is imperative indeed.

The needs and interests of women will remain peripheral until there is a critical mass of women in leadership positions and decision-making processes. African women have a long and proud history of involvement in politics and public life. There are numerous examples of powerful women and illustrious leaders going back to Pharaonic times. Historians have conclusively established that during colonial times women were centrally involved in anti-colonial struggles from demonstrations and riots to armed combat as protestors, agitators, organisers, and guerrillas. In fact, in the societies that waged protracted armed liberation struggles and adopted radical programmes of socialist transformation there were great expectations for gender equality and women's emancipation and empowerment after independence. The extent to which attempts were made by the post-independence states to realise these expectations of course varied. However, the record was, on the whole, quite unsatisfactory.

But the dream was not forgotten. In the 1970s and 1980s African women's movements crystallised around the rather confined ideological parameters of the women-in-development project (later renamed women-and-development and gender-and-development) and what some have called state feminism – state sponsored women's organisations including the notorious 'First Ladies' shenanigans. As the struggles for democracy – the second independence – gathered momentum from the late 1980s and early 1990s, women's movements redirected their energies and sought to recapture their autonomy and attract new adherents and allies and adopt new activities and agendas. They became integral to Africa's reinvigorated civil society, central to the social movements spearheading the pro-democracy struggles that shook Africa's 'big men' from their delusions of grandeur. Through their own activities and strategic alliances with other social movements, both old and new, women activists pushed for constitutional and electoral changes (such as the '50/50' campaign). These movements were part of a growing transnational feminist networking and activism, bolstered by globalisation and the new information

and communication technologies, which helped establish a new global normative and discursive architecture for women's rights and human rights.

President Johnson-Sirleaf is a product of this historic wave. It cannot be coincidental that whereas in the first four decades after independence Africa only had one acting head of state in Guinea-Bissau and an appointed president in Liberia itself (appointed by the Economic Community of West African States), three female prime ministers and one vice-president in Senegal, in the last five years women have been appointed as prime ministers in Senegal, Mozambique and Sao Tome and Principe, and as vice-presidents in Zimbabwe, South Africa, and Burundi. By 2005, there were only sixteen countries worldwide whose proportion of women in their national assemblies had reached 30 per cent, often regarded as the benchmark for 'critical mass'. The world average was 16 per cent, up from 9 per cent in 1995. Three of the sixteen countries were from Africa, led by Rwanda (48.8 per cent), Mozambique (30 per cent), and South Africa (30 per cent). Rwanda boasted the highest level of women's national assembly representation in the world, followed by Sweden (45.3 per cent). No single Asian country made it onto the list.

The differences in women's presence in elected assemblies do not seem to correlate with levels of economic or educational development or national income as shown by the fact that female representation is quite low in the wealthy and 'western' United States, in fact much lower than in many poor and 'traditional' African countries.

Quite intriguing is the fact that most of the African countries with relatively high levels of women's participation in national politics from Rwanda to Mozambique, and even South Africa and now Liberia, have emerged from protracted wars of liberation or civil wars or both. The explanation might lie in the propensity of war to destroy not only physical assets but also pre-existing social relations including patriarchal structures, even if only for the duration of the conflict, as well as in the mobilising and conscientising effects that conflict may have on the women themselves as perpetrators and victims of violence and as peacemakers. Moreover, many conflagrations, such as the Rwanda genocide, decimate a disproportionate number of men, thereby reinforcing the

transformations in gender relations engendered by the conflict in the first place. As is well known, the horrendous destruction of the Second World War including the removal of millions of men from the civilian economy into the military machine that pulverised them played a major role in transforming women's roles in society and galvanizing the women's movement in North America and Western Europe.

More difficult to decipher is the role of culture, especially ethnicity and religion, both of which have acquired a new political salience since the 1990s. Ethnic and faith-based movements have demonstrated a powerful ability to challenge authoritarian states and misguided modernisation, thereby helping to open up political space. Often armed with ample material and moral resources they have been able to mobilise women, to provide them with the comforts of cultural respect and belonging and the possibilities of security, support and even leadership. But more often than not these movements promote chauvinisms and fundamentalisms that militate against the advancement of women's rights. Not surprisingly, in much of the world, including Africa, women's representation in politics and public life has been relatively low in countries or regions engulfed by radical religious movements, such as political Islam, Christian fundamentalism, or Hindu nationalism.

Less contentious is the role played by the nature of the electoral system and the commitment of the political class, which in turn, reflects the social weight of the

women's movement. Countries with electoral systems based on proportional representation rather than plurality/majority systems, often combined with affirmative action based on quotas or reserved seats and constituencies for women candidates, tend to enjoy the highest levels of women's representation. South Africa boasts some of the world's most vibrant women's movements and civil societies. At the continental level, the African Union appears determined to advance gender equality through affirmative action: two out of five members from national parliaments seconded to the Pan-African Parliament have to be women, and half of the members of the ten-person African Union Commission are women. This is the first regional organisation in the world to undertake such gender affirmative action policies as part of a comprehensive programme to promote the practices and cultures of democracy, good governance, and human rights.

There is no guarantee of course that high levels of women's representation directly lead to legislative policies favourable to women's concerns, for female politicians are no less susceptible to the divisive pressures of party affiliation, class, ethnicity, religion, and ideology as their male counterparts, but without it the possibilities are considerably diminished. Nevertheless, evidence from countries with a critical mass of women's representation indicates that women legislators do indeed tend to promote bills and policies favourable to women's rights and interests. The prospects for this are heightened if the ideological climate and the in-

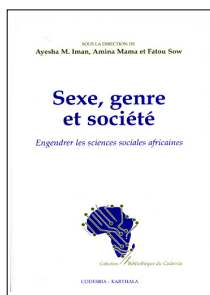
stitutional capacity for introducing and implementing gender equity legislation are conducive and where women politicians and their political parties enjoy close links with the women's movements, and especially if feminist groups within these movements are strong.

Above all, narrowing the gender gap in political representation is, in itself, fundamental to expanding democracy. In this regard, the world's two 'largest democracies', India and the United States, exhibit serious democratic deficits insofar as both have some of the lowest levels of women's representation in national public office. The same can be said of Africa's most populous country, Nigeria, where women comprise less than 6 per cent of the national assembly. On this account, President Johnson-Sirleaf's election represents a limited victory for women in Liberia only eight of whom (12.5 per cent) were elected to the sixty-four member House of Representatives and five (16.7 per cent) to the Senate.

From a gender perspective, then, in terms of women's presence and performance in national politics and public office, the road to democracy in Africa and much of the world has a long way to go. The fact that President Johnson-Sirleaf will be the lone woman among her fellow presidents at African summits of heads of state is not a cause for great celebration even as we salute her achievement as the trail blazer. For the sake of African democracy and development we can only hope 'Mama Ellen', as Liberians fondly call her, will not remain the sole elected woman president for too long.

Sexe, genre et société. Engendrer les sciences sociales africaines

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Cet ouvrage représente la traduction du livre intitulé *Engendering African Social Sciences* (1997), issu des travaux d'un atelier organisé par le CODESRIA en 1991. Son ambition est de jeter les bases d'une analyse pertinente des rapports sociaux entre les sexes. Il propose une critique et des orientations neuves dans les sciences sociales en Afrique. Il fournit en particulier des orientations méthodologiques pour intégrer la perspective relative au genre. Les contributions réunies dans ce volume ont été rédigées selon des approches disciplinaires différentes, mais leur point commun réside dans une volonté affirmée d'opérer une véritable rupture épistémologique dans les sciences sociales africaines. The CODESRIA Gender Series acknowledges the need to challenge the masculinities underpinning the structures of repression that target women. The series aims to keep alive and nourish African social science research with insightful research and debates that challenge conventional wisdom, structures and ideologies that are narrowly informed by caricatures of gender realities. It strives to showcase the best in African gender research and provide a platform for the emergence of new talents to flower.