



# African women's long walk to equality

Some gains,  
but an uphill  
climb still looms

 **By L. Muthoni Wanyeki**

**A**frica's political independence was accompanied by a clarion call to eradicate poverty, illiteracy and disease. Fifty years after the end of colonialism, the question is: To what extent has the promise of that call been realized for African women? There is no doubt that African women's long walk to freedom has yielded some results, however painfully and slowly.

The African Union (AU) now has a legally binding protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights on the rights of women. The protocol spells out clearly women's rights to equality and non-discrimination in a number of areas. It has been ratified by a growing number of African states, can be used in civil law proceedings and is being codified into domestic common law. The AU has also issued a Declaration on Gender Equality in Africa, under which member states are supposed to regularly report on progress.

The protocol and declaration both reflect and reinforce developments at the national level. Many African states have moved to enhance

---

*L. Muthoni Wanyeki is the executive director of the Kenya Human Rights Commission. She was formerly executive director of the African Women's Development and Communication Network (FEMNET), a pan-African organization working towards women's development, equality and rights.*



constitutional protections for African women — particularly in the area of women's rights and equality. And the last two decades have seen the emergence of legislation to address violence against women, including sexual violence.

## Political representation

These developments have been accompanied by improvements in African women's political representation. The AU adopted, from its inception, a 50 per cent quota for women's representation, which is reflected in the composition of the AU Commission.

Again, this standard reflects and reinforces efforts to enhance women's representation at the national level. South Africa, Tanzania and Uganda have reached the 30 per cent benchmark for their legislatures. Rwanda has gone further — with 50 per cent representation, it has one of the best in the world. A few countries, including Nigeria, have seen women assume non-traditional ministerial portfolios, in defence and finance, for example. And Liberia has made

*Women in Madagascar benefit from a micro-finance programme: African women's movements are focusing not only on women's access to resources, but also on their control over resources.*

 UN Capital Development Fund / Adam Rogers

history ("herstory") by becoming the first African country to elect into office a female head of state, Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf.

Progress is evident, particularly in countries that have electoral systems based on or incorporating proportional representation. However, enhanced women's representation has been harder to achieve in first-past-the-post electoral systems.

Even where there has been progress, the question is whether increased representation of women is catalyzing action by the executives and legislatures in favour of gender equality. That question arises because the battle for women's representation is not only demographic (with political representation as an end) but also for gender equality (with political representation as a means).

Put another way, there has been a shift in the focus and strategy of the African women's movement over the last two decades, from emphasizing capacity-building to improve African women's *access* to resources to emphasizing decision making to enhance African women's *control* over resources. This shift was made possible by real gains resulting from the capacity-building approach.

### Education, poverty, health

These gains are most evident in African women's education. Girls and boys are now at par with respect to primary school enrolment. Efforts to get girls into school have been accompanied by efforts to keep them in school and to promote role models by developing gender-responsive curricula. Gender gaps are also narrowing in secondary education. The real challenge now lies at the university level, both in the enrolment figures and in curricula to benefit young women. So much for the "illiteracy" element of the African independence clarion call.

Gains for women are harder to see in that call's "poverty" element, however. It is true that since independence investments in micro-credit and micro-enterprises for women have improved their individual livelihoods — and therefore those of their families. Since African women have proved that they are good lending risks, micro-credit is now being offered not just by development and micro-finance institutions, but also by commercial financial institutions.

Yet there was a critique of such investments, especially in the decade of the 1980s when governments withdrew from social service delivery as a result of structural adjustment programmes. Under those circumstances, such investments essentially enabled redistribution among the impoverished, rather than at a larger level, from the rich to the poor.

The end of that era thus saw a new focus on gender budgeting: looking at where national budget allocations and expenditures could enhance women's status in the economy. Unsurprisingly, this approach has led African governments back towards public investments in social services.

It is now agreed, for example, that the benchmark for public investments in health in Africa is 15 per cent. The African women's movement has called in particular for more to be directed towards reproductive and sexual health and rights. These areas are of critical concern to women, given the impact of HIV/AIDS, maternal mortality and violence against women, particu-

“The upsurge of conservative identity politics constrains and dangerously limits women's human rights.”

larly in conflict areas. They are also of concern since African women's continued lack of autonomy and choice over reproduction and sexuality lie at the heart of so much suffering. So much for the "disease" element of the independence call.

### Where next?

Where to over the next 50 years, then? In light of the experience so far, the African women's movement will be focusing not just on political representation, but also on the meaning of that representation for advancing gender equality and women's human rights. And given recent retreats in Africa (such as the rise of the constitutional coup and "negotiated democracy"), the women's movement will also be focusing on democracy, peace and security more broadly — that is, on the nature of the political system itself and not just on the means of getting into that system.

Economically, women will continue to focus on the macro-level, but in a deeper sense. What has emerged from gender budgeting efforts is the need to actually track budgetary expenditures, not just getting information about allocations.

It is also necessary to concentrate on the macro-economic framework for fiscal and monetary policies, especially in the context of stabilization programmes in response to the recent economic shocks. Previously that framework was assumed to be gender-neutral, but it clearly can have gendered consequences. This problem must be addressed to ensure that Africa's growth will enhance women's livelihoods.

Finally, the women's movement will be focusing on reproductive and sexual health and rights. The battle over choice (including over gender identity and sexual orientation) is now an open one in many African countries. It is no longer couched politely in demographic or health terms.

The upsurge of conservative identity politics (in both ethnic and religious terms) is fuelling conflict on the continent. It constrains and dangerously limits women's human rights, including reproductive and sexual rights. Such notions are not harmless — they have grave consequences for women's autonomy, choice and bodily integrity. They therefore must be challenged.

African women's long walk to freedom has only just begun. 