Rethinking Women's Political Power in West Africa

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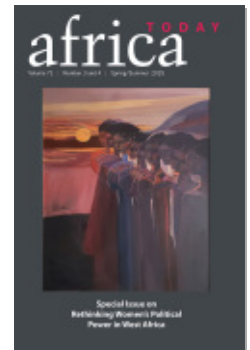
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Introduction

In early 2025, increasing numbers of women held positions of formal political power across West Africa. In Ghana, Professor Naana Jane Opoku-Agyemang had just been elected vice-president, and in Benin, Mariam Chabi Talata had been vice-president since 2021 (see Alber, this volume). Cabo Verde and Senegal had more than 40 percent women in their national parliaments, and in early 2024, Sierra Leone, Togo, and Cabo Verde had 30 percent or more women serving as cabinet ministers. While at least the tendency of growing numbers sounds promising, countries in East and southern Africa have experienced much higher rates of women in positions of political leadership for many years. Rwanda has led the world in women's representation in parliament, with more than 50 percent women for two decades, and South Africa and Mozambique have had gender-parity cabinets for many years.[1] Most West African countries are still far away from such high representation of women in parliaments, and yet formal political power in institutions such as parliaments and cabinets is only one of the ways in which women use political power to influence the world around them.

Women have for centuries used their everyday power, knowledge, and competencies to shape West African politics and society, in formal as well as informal positions and settings (Amoah-Boampong and Agyeiwaa 2021). They have acted as monarchs, merchant queens, pharaohs, queen mothers, and spiritual and religious leaders (Achebe 2020). In so doing, they have defended their interests and those of the people around them, all the while contributing to significant social and political change. Much more recently, after the end of conflicts and military rule in some countries in the region, transitions to democracy have enabled some women to exercise more political power informally. Democratization in Africa has opened up more axes of power by making the state more susceptible to pressure from civil society, as in the media and by traditional

authorities and religious and occupational associations (Waylen 2010).[2] Because democratization was accompanied by pressures from outside states and global actors to liberalize economies, some of those interests in civil society were powerful economic actors and enterprises. Thus, democratization opened new pathways and opportunities for women to exercise political power informally, through occupations like trading, or through their gendered roles as mothers and wives. Much of that activity has occurred under the leadership of mobilized local and national women's organizations and associations (Medie 2016).

This special issue, focusing on West Africa, aims to make visible these processes—of the exercise of formal and informal political power, especially by women—and to show how they are related. Combining scholarship on women in formal political office with that on women exercising power in other, more informal ways, we seek to demonstrate a broader understanding of women in West African societies and their multiple, sometimes intersecting, ways of holding and acting out political power. With that, we contribute to the still small literature on elite women on the African continent. We hope this special issue will offer glimpses into historical continuities and ruptures in the complexities of women's political engagement, inside and outside the formal sphere of politics, as well as indicate avenues for future research.

This collection of articles is drawn from presentations made at a workshop of the Merian Institute for Advanced Studies in Africa (MIASA) at the University of Ghana in May 2023. The workshop, which brought together invited scholars from West Africa, Europe, and North America, was organized by a MIASA interdisciplinary fellows' group, of which the three guest editors were members. The goal of the workshop was to reflect on women's presence in politics—understood broadly—across West Africa. This overarching theme unites the articles in this special issue, providing readers with a coherent focus but from a rich diversity of narratives.

The articles in this special issue represent original research, most of which has been conducted "in the field" using qualitative research methods. They thus record significant empirical information. Contributors have conducted semistructured in-depth interviews with former women cabinet ministers in The Gambia, Liberia, and Sierra Leone, with potential female aspirants to political office in Benin, and with the leaders of women's organizations in Cabo Verde. They have engaged in participant- and nonparticipant-observation with the wives of clergymen in Accra and with female return migrants involved in a new eldercare market in Accra. Taken together, the articles provide a highly interdisciplinary approach to women's formal and informal political power in West Africa, with the contributors trained in political science, anthropology, sociology, and African studies. The contributors are feminist scholars from Africa, Europe, and North America, taking different theoretical approaches in their work.

What Politics?

Literature on women in formal and informal politics in West Africa is growing, much of it in the form of country case studies.[3] It is both historical and contemporary and comes from a range of disciplines. This special issue takes on questions of political power and how it is and has been exercised across the region by individual women and groups of women from both the usual places and unexpected ones. But what is politics? In an early discussion analyzing women in "third-world" politics, Georgina Waylen suggests the "need to find ways of examining, first, the role played by different groups of women in conventional politics, and the part played by different groups of women in political activity outside of conventional politics" (1996, 11). At the time she was writing, women's representation in conventional politics, or formal political office such as in legislatures or executives, was still low. Three of the articles in this issue relate the experiences of women in conventional or formal politics. Gretchen Bauer recounts how women politicians in The Gambia, Liberia, and Sierra Leone have fared as cabinet ministers—how they ascended to those offices, their attitudes toward gender parity in cabinets, perceptions of their impacts, and how they were removed from office. Erdmute Alber outlines how women engaged in politics in Benin reflect on their life trajectories, specific phases in the life course, and the related changes, and constraints, in being politicians—and the circumstances under which they do or do not enter formal politics. Aldeida Borges investigates women members and leaders of community associations in Cabo Verde, a country whose government espouses a commitment to gender equality. The remaining two articles, by contrast, present cases of women navigating more informal politics. Abena Kyere interrogates how women acquire, retain, and use power, but through the lens of the wives of clergymen in Ghana; far from being passive, the clergy wives are found to be adept at creating and remaking new avenues for acquiring power. Cati Coe narrates the ways in which the efforts of female return migrants to Ghana in the home healthcare sector were stymied in their efforts to create a specialized care market in Accra. Our cases demonstrate a stunning range of ways in which women in West Africa have played political roles inside and outside of conventional practices.

African Women as Leaders

Each of the five articles in this special issue focuses on women leaders in formal or informal spaces. We asked each author to address one way in which women exerted political power and invariably ended up with chapters on women's leadership in various spaces. The exact definition of a leader is not easy. As Ezra Chitando (2023, 25) puts it, the concept of leadership "is like the concept of time: many people have an idea of what it is but struggle to articulate what it is in reality." Many scholars have attempted a definition of the term (see, for example, Akpa et al. 2021;

Bindlish, Nandram, and Gupta 2019; Winston and Patterson 2006). Prevailing definitions have some themes in common. These include the idea that leaders differ from followers, whom they believe they can influence so that together, leaders and followers can achieve common goals. The women studied in this article share these characteristics. Those in formal leadership roles that Alber, Bauer, and Borges study have ascended to leadership positions because of their ability to articulate a vision directly or indirectly—in campaign messages, as in the case of the members of parliament that Alber studies, through their efforts in appointed office, as in the case with the cabinet ministers that Bauer investigates, and in the performance of leadership roles in organizations, as in the case of the Cabo Verdean women that Borges looks at. Similarly, the healthcare professionals that Coe studies are determined to improve eldercare-service provision in Ghana and are working toward achieving that vision. Kyere focuses on clergy wives seeking to develop a followership of their own.

Studies of leadership in Africa are relatively few. Over a sixty-year period (1950–2010), only 114 articles available in respected online academic databases, such as EbscoHost, Proquest, and JSTOR, cover this topic substantively (Fourie et al. 2017, 223, 224). Research on women in leadership on the African continent is even rarer: only twelve of the 114 articles focus on leadership and gender (Fourie et al. 2017, 224). Indeed, the first and only available review of the literature on African women and leadership was written only fifteen years ago (Fourie et al. 2015, 237) by Stella M. Nkomo and Hellicy Ngambi (2009), who point out that the most frequent topic in the literature on African women and leadership is the obstacles and barriers to women's advancement (2009, 54). Topics dominant in more mainstream literature receive less attention. For example, while sixteen articles speak to the theme of obstacles and barriers to women's advancement, only four speak to the issue of leadership styles. This special issue seeks to expand the contextualized understanding of African women and leadership by focusing on themes that are not central in the mainstream literature on African women and leadership. Two themes are of importance here: how leaders come to be and what their impact is. These themes have been identified as two of the five major areas of focus in the study of leadership (Alvesson and Spicer 2014, 41).

From Where Do Leaders Come?

How leaders come to be is a question that has interested leadership theorists since the nineteenth century. Shelley A. Kirkpatick and Edwin A. Locke (1991) argue that the earliest theory of leadership was developed to address this question. Known as the great-man theory, it first emerged in the work of Thomas Carlyle, who argued that history was defined by the impact of great men: "As I take it, Universal History, the history of what man has

accomplished in this world, is at bottom the History of the Great Men who have worked here" (1840, 1).

Francis Galton (1869) built on Carlyle's ideas to argue that the men whose lives served as the basis of history inherited a set of traits that made them uniquely able to lead. More recent perspectives move away from this understanding, highlighting instead the ways in which nurturing environments can create leaders. Indeed, leadership courses are premised on the fact that leaders can be made, not just born. Gender-studies scholars interrogate the set of social factors that are characteristic of women leaders (Joshi and Och 2021; Nazneen 2023; Tadros 2014b). A key social factor that has been identified is that of political apprenticeship, women's experiences that build their political skills and constituencies (Cornwall and Goetz 2005). Among the women in formal politics, Bauer points out that this included watching female relatives in positions of power, as in The Gambia, a mother who campaigned for the country's first president, and in Sierra Leone, a mother who was a local activist. Fathers, too, were important here; they affirmed the young girls' desires to dream outside the limiting boxes that traditional societies set up for them and in so doing helped them imagine themselves as leaders. As has been documented in other Global South spaces (Nazneen et al. 2014; Tadros 2014a), education, particularly tertiary education, was an important pathway for leadership in formal politics, as both Bauer and Alber note for women cabinet ministers and members of parliament, respectively. In addition, Alber finds that a solid middle-class upbringing is an important characteristic of Beninois women in politics.

Among the women engaged in informal politics, Kyere's work speaks to the ways in which clergy wives become leaders thanks to femocracy, which Amina Mama describes as a "power structure . . . dominated by a small clique of women [,] whose authority derives from their being married to powerful men, rather than from any actions or ideas of their own" (1995, 42). Similarly, clergy wives derive their power from being married to men of God, pastors who set up churches of their own. As it was for the women in formal political spaces, education was an important resource for accessing leadership opportunities in informal spaces, as Coe illustrates in the case of the women at the forefront of eldercare-service provision in Ghana.

Of What Benefit Are Women Leaders?

A second area of interest in gender and leadership studies is questions about the difference that women's leadership, particularly in formal spaces, makes. Across the African continent, studies show that women in formal political spaces transform their communities in tangible and intangible ways; their leadership thus leads to substantive and symbolic representation impacts, respectively (Burnet 2011; Quamruzzaman and Lange 2016).

Similarly, we find that across the five cases, the women leaders were successful to various degrees in tangible ways. Among the women in informal

5

leadership positions, Kyere notes that clergywives' views on pastors' partner choices are held in high regard and that these women can start religious organizations of their own, drawing on their status as clergywives. Coe describes how her women interlocutors had changed the landscape of eldercare in Ghana by introducing privatized forms of it. Similar patterns were evident among women in formal positions of power. For example, Bauer discusses the case of a Sierra Leonean minister who had worked to increase the number of women in leadership positions in the ministry in which she worked and a Sierra Leonean minister who appointed more women ambassadors than ever before. And Alber argues that women´s presence in politics increases awareness for gender themes in the political realm.

How women leaders ensure substantive representation while keeping the peace with male colleagues is a theme worthy of discussion here. In this respect, Kyere's piece is particularly instructive. She discusses, for example, how clergy wives set up religious organizations of their own without their husbands feeling threatened, and she argues that to make that possible, they bargain with patriarchy (Kandiyoti 1988) and negotiate with power. Their strategies include acknowledging the husband as a source of power by letting him lead the opening prayer session in any of the programs the women organize, putting his name and picture alongside hers on any advertising material that goes out to the general public, and feigning ignorance about matters of church administration. All the while, they are setting up and leading their own organizations.

Women leaders are not always successful in achieving the goals they set for themselves in their positions of power, and the women presented in these articles are quite reflective about the factors that can lead to failure. Coe notes, for example, that the healthcare providers in Ghana had worked tirelessly without success to get the national parliament to pass a law regulating eldercare. They are mindful of the lack of cohesion among the owners of the facilities providing eldercare and its effects on their failed goal. Without a business association of their own, they lacked a unified voice with which to make claims on the state. In Cabo Verde as well, Borges points to the fact that broad societal acceptance of gender inequality existed, despite the passage of a 2019 gender-parity law. She argues that this was because the Cabo Verdean government was not genuinely interested in gender equality, but was simply courting international acceptance. Thus, the law was not translated into actionable items that would ensure true gender equality.

The Articles

As mentioned, this issue comprises five articles, of which three analyze, in unique ways, women´s leadership in the formal political realm, albeit embedding it in their life beyond politics. The others focus on women in leadership positions outside political institutions, though in important and often formalized positions.

Bauer´s contribution, "'We See What Men Don't See': Reflections of Women Cabinet Ministers from The Gambia, Liberia, and Sierra Leone," looks at former cabinet ministers in the three West African countries by reconstructing their perspectives on early postwar and post-autocracy governments in situations in which women, though largely underrepresented, were promoting gender issues and those of peace-making and peacekeeping. The article, based among others on semistructured interviews with former women cabinet ministers from across political parties and post-transition administrations, presents the experiences of trailblazing women cabinet ministers. With this perspective on cabinet ministers, who are, as she argues, "less well researched than members of parliament, and women cabinet ministers are less well researched than men cabinet ministers," Bauer helps nuance the global literature on women cabinet ministers and suggests significant areas of future research. She demonstrates that women cabinet ministers share a conviction for gender politics and a strong compassion to ameliorate the situation of women and children, though in nuanced ways. For instance, goals like achieving gender parity in the cabinets were less important for them than placing more women in their ministries and rebuilding their societies after the wars in the two countries where wars had occurred.

Another important theme in this article is the ambivalent but often decisive moments of cabinet reshuffles and how female cabinet ministers profited from them or were excluded in significant political moments. It looks at women´s experiences of hailing from or belonging to a political family. Only a few women cabinet ministers had a familiar background of political families, but they served at the same time as role models for others. Bauer shows how women cabinet ministers' perceptions of their representation affects society in "nonlegislative ways." Somehow, surprisingly, and a bit contradictory to the fact that many of the former cabinet ministers describe, in retrospective, politics as a dirty and corrupt field, all the women Bauer talked with loved their jobs as cabinet ministers, and most wanted to see more women in cabinets in the future because they saw women as being able to improve the political arena.

In "Women's Political Presence in Cabo Verde: Are We Closing the Leadership Gap?" Borges takes up Bauer´s and others' concerns about politics as a dirty space and looks at mechanisms of inclusion and mostly exclusion of women in grassroot organizations in Cabo Verde. Despite notable efforts to eliminate gender inequalities, which led to rank Cabo Verde sixth in Africa on the 2023 Global Gender Gap Index, and despite a parity law in 2019 that led to an increase in a significant way the representation of women in political positions, a gap in the social experience of women in political organizations in Cabo Verde persists. Borges convincingly argues that the mentioned efforts to increase the official numbers of women and to position the country on a decisive track to gender parity are part of a strategy of international recognition, but do not mirror a broad common understanding of gender equality. Male political elites, predominantly controlling access

to power, often make rational, self-interested calculations about whether to promote gender equality and women's representation. These decisions are driven not necessarily by a commitment to equality, but by the institutional, political, or personal gains to be made from them. Men continue to act as gatekeepers in political spaces, maintaining control over who gains access to leadership roles. Women have historically participated in politics and community mobilization, yet they still face barriers and are disproportionately affected by poverty. Gains in their political participation have occurred, but it is premature to view them as indicating broad acceptance of women's leadership. Borges looks at how a male-dominated political establishment instrumentalizes women's inclusion. Analyzing Afrobarometer data and fieldwork conducted before and after the 2019 Parity Law, she shows that, despite important advancements, women's political presence and leadership remains limited, reflecting the centrality of "inclusion calculations" in Cabo Verde's political landscape.

By looking at women in the republic of Benin who work as politicians or have experiences with politics but have decided not to enter the political arena, Alber takes up the theme of politics as a dirty space in her article "Situating Political Engagement in Their Life Courses and Class Positionalities: Women in Politics in the Republic of Benin." Methodologically based on long-term relationships with the women represented in the article, Alber´s approach is an anthropological perspective on women´s life courses. Understanding women's involvement in relations that change over time, Alber argues that every life trajectory is deeply entangled with the life courses of others and that women´s decisions to act as politicians or not have to be understood with a view to this embeddedness. These relations seem to be more important for women than for men, when talking about politics, and as conversations with women politicians demonstrate, it seems that especially women´s responsibilities as wives are significant for their actions as politicians. Their roles as mothers are much less thematized as obstacles or chances in politics—which might be because middle-class women have already resolved the dilemma of combining formal labor with mothering. Alber demonstrates that women follow different paths to play their roles as politicians as well as wives by taking public opinion into account, but they can change how they are seen in public. Another notable finding is the importance of middle-class backgrounds for all women engaged in politics; thus, Alber understands doing politics of women as a way of doing middle-classness.

Coe takes up the theme of changing middle classes in her article, "The Politics of the Entrepreneurial Middle Class: An Examination of Female Entrepreneurs in Eldercare in Accra." She looks at businesswomen in the changing middle classes in Ghana, which are deeply affected by patterns of transnational migration. In this context, responsibilities, understood mainly as family tasks (for instance, the care of elderly people), became a new challenge in the absence of family members. At the same time, they provided new opportunities for businesses. In the market niche of eldercare, female return migrants with experience in the care sector entered as businesswomen.

Providing service to seniors in need of care, they attend and negotiate often absent state regulations. In fact, the absence of clear regulations and the women's political weakness led the private-care sector to flounder. This unpacks, as the article uses anthropological research and participation to argue, contradictions of the Ghanaian state, in which the rise of a new bourgeoisie through the middle classes did not lead to rule of law, democratization, and investment in public goods. Though the government of Ghana has become friendlier to business, spurred by neoliberal reforms, it remains essentially uncaptured by indigenous capitalists and unresponsive to their political pressure.

With this article, Coe not only contributes to a better understanding of businesswomen and their political actions, but overcomes blind spots in the literature on transnational migration by demonstrating the importance of the role of return migrants in economic development and larger transformation, like, for instance, the introduction of new forms of care.

Kyere´s article, "Getting Power, Keeping Power: Perspectives on Clergywives and Power," adds another perspective on power formations in middle-class Ghana by looking at clergywives in Pentecostal churches in Accra, where she found complex sites to study how women acquire, retain, and use power in a general frame of patriarchy. This power, different from that studied in the other articles in this volume, is deeply related to their husbands' roles as religious leaders. Pentecostal churches are highly shaped by patriarchal ideas of leadership, where formal power is attributed to men; however, their wives are expected to support their husbands by taking over organizational and religious roles in the churches. The resulting tensions between subverting male dominance by influencing and managing community life in the churches and formally subordinating themselves under their husbands' leadership are contributing to these women's specific power. One variant of these power plays is the so-called first-lady syndrome. Kyere argues that clergywives are not passive conductors of power, but play power out in meaningful ways. In fact, clergywives in Accra demonstrate that where women access power from men, through channels such as marriage, they play the patriarchal game by bargaining to preserve and keep it, even when it outgrows its source.

To keep this power, women must consciously act within the limits of patriarchal boundaries and negotiate with the patriarchal system. They may defer to their husbands, make extreme shows of submissiveness, and employ devices such as silence.

Conclusion

The five articles underline that power and leadership in West Africa— and maybe elsewhere—are more stable when political leadership, informal power, and economic wealth come together. They portray women as active individuals, seeking new paths and niches, such as new businesses, or taking over important roles in churches meant to be dominated by their husbands.

ERDMUTE ALBER, GRETCHEN BAUER, AND AKOSUA DARKWAH

Women are presented as playing multiple roles, which are sometimes in conflict, but often reinforce each other, like, for instance, the role of clergy-women as wives and leaders. To understand women´s roles in politics, we must take into consideration their other roles—as mothers, wives, in-laws, or business partners, to name but a few. The issue shows that the achievement of gender equity is far from complete, even as women in West Africa are working in many ways to make it possible, in formal and informal spaces.

NOTES

1. https://data.ipu.org/women-ranking/; https://www.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/2024-06/Poster-Women-political-leaders-2024-en.pdf.
2. Civil-society organizations were at the forefront of the struggles for democracy across Africa in the late 1980s and early 1990s (Bratton and Van de Walle 1997; Tripp 2001).
3. Examples include Amadiume 2015; Ammann 2020; Kang 2015; Medie 2020; Steady 2011.

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