

Repositioning African women in politics: From critical mass to critical acts

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Abstract

Affirmative action has been implemented through the African Union's (AU) gender agenda to attain women's political empowerment and to achieve gender justice goals both within the AU and by member states. Accordingly, quotas are used as the fast track means to ensure the increase in representation and participation of women in politics to achieve agreed gender parity and mainstreaming policy goals. Literature, particularly in relation to Africa, has tended to focus on the increased 'quantity' of women in political institutions rather than turning critical attention to the quality of change experienced as a result of women's political participation and representation. The article asks what does it mean for African women to participate in the institutions of political decision-making? Drawing from interviews with gender policy makers and implementers at the AU, the article examines the ways in which political representation (critical acts) may have no more than symbolic value, instead of moving towards substantive representation in which women's political actions have consequences and weight. It questions the ways in which women are hindered from substantive participation, including through being subtly undermined and marginalised, for example, through body-shaming or bringing aspects of their private lives under scrutiny in ways their male counterparts rarely are. The article considers the importance of the AU's gender policy as a means to advance women's political participation on the continent and raises the problem of feminist advocacy which has the potential to tokenise women in politics. Within the AU, and outside of it, women continue to advocate for women's political empowerment in and through this influential regional body, whose gender policies inform those of the rest of the continent.

Keywords: substantive representation; gender mainstreaming; women's political empowerment; gender advocacy; African Union

Introduction

In the 21st century, the agenda to empower women has been a response to the challenges women face due to what is known as women's 'absent' autonomy (Bayeh Citation2016). Autonomy occurs when "the person feels that the actions emanate from the self and reflect who one really is, instead of being the result of external pressures" (Martela & Riecki Citation2018, n.p.; Lazo Citation1995). Thus, an absence of autonomy is the absence of one's ability to act based on a sense of authority for the self as an individual. The agenda for women's empowerment has been accelerated through academic research, conferences and policy frameworks spearheaded by feminist movements and international organisations (Coster Citation2014). Leading Black feminist theorist Kabeer (Citation1999) has connected the process of women's empowerment and feminist advocacy through agency. Kabeer explains how it is women's ability to make choices that empower them. The author raises the key importance of the conditions, consequences and significance of one's agency in the agenda to empower women.

Women's empowerment has been divided into three areas, namely economic, social, and political empowerment (United Nations Development Programme [UNDP] Citation1993). This article is interested in women's political empowerment and particularly in the African context, through the African Union's (AU) gender mainstreaming objectives. The 'Southern' discourse of knowledge creation highlights the need to think differently, as there has been a problematic universalising of women's experiences. The experiences of women politicians in Africa cannot be equated with the experiences of women politicians in the global North or Western democracies, considering that these experiences are both complex and diverse, and in the South, shaped by global power inequalities and histories of colonisation.

Feminist advocacy is "concerned with ending injustices throughout the world by advancing women's rights" (Evans Citation2005, p. 10). The objectives of feminist advocacy in the advancement of women's rights are achieved through a range of activities and processes – research, activism, collective decision-making and organisation – in adopting a position on a problem or issue, addressing women's social, political and economic inequality, on the one hand, and demanding gender-sensitive policy-making by governments and regional structures, to address gender inequality on the other. It is generally accepted that global and regional feminist advocacy has gained ground with the implementation by governments of the mainstreaming of policy on gender equality and women's empowerment, and the implementing of national gender plans and associated gender machineries/ structures for this purpose (Pikramenou & Mahajan Citation2019). In this article it is women's empowerment policies employed for the achievement of increased numbers of women in political representation – namely affirmative action quotas to reach gender parity with men – that are of interest.

The article argues for a shift in focus away from emphasis on the achievement of a critical mass of women represented in government to an emphasis on critical acts by women in government, which can reposition women, their political representation, and their identity in institutions of political decision-making. Critical mass requires quantification, a critical number, in order to effect change or transformation, whereas, critical acts and critical actors focus on the transformation achieved by changes as a result of the 'actions' of women in politics, despite their level of representation.

The research entailed interviewing policymakers at the AU, which is the continental governmental institution of African states, whose gender policies inform those of the rest of the continent. The research examines the ways in which advocacy for critical acts has the potential to take political representation beyond the descriptive, towards the substantive. It looks at the ways in which empowerment policies can potentially hinder women from achieving substantive participation. The disempowerment includes women's autonomy, authority and confidence being subtly undermined leading to women's political representation being marginalised through sexism, for example, body-shaming or bringing aspects of their private lives under scrutiny in ways their male counterparts are rarely subjected. Within the AU, and outside of it, however, women, gender and feminist activists continue to advocate for women's political empowerment in and through this influential continental body.

Seven interviews were undertaken by the primary author with members of the African Union Commission (AUC), in Addis Ababa in December 2019, with purposively sampled respondents. The respondents were selected from the Women, Gender and Development Directorate and the Political Affairs department. The respondents have a direct influence on

the formulation of gender policies in the AU. In this article four interviews were selected for the relevance of the responses. Acronyms have been used to represent the interviewees from the AUC and are represented by the following: AN, RG, SND and TN.

The questions conveyed to respondents addressed the problematic context of increasing African women's representation through gender quotas, as a 'sufficient' means of ensuring the inclusivity of women or the engendering of political decision-making bodies in Africa: as increasing quotas may not always translate to women's political empowerment. The AU-adopted 2009 Gender Policy responded to the problem of African women's exclusion from political representation on the continent. African member states, since then, have introduced quota systems which have to a large extent resulted in an increase in the number of women in politics. However, assertions that quotas resulted in women having more political power, in the African context, elicit mixed interpretation. Politicians routinely use the 'numbers' of women in politics, citing how many women are in various political bodies, as sufficient evidence of how women now have political power, in reporting to the AU. In reality, it is questionable whether they have meaningful decision-making power as it has been argued that one cannot measure women's political empowerment solely through numbers (Beckwith & Cowell-Meyers Citation2007; Grey Citation2006). In effect, it can be argued politicians continue to use the numbers to maintain the status quo and justify the continued marginalisation of women. This is one of the reasons why the term dis/empowerment has been interrogated by critical feminist advocates (Mishra Citation2014). We frame the question: what does it mean for African women to participate in institutions of political decision-making?

The article begins with a discussion of the conceptual framework which brings gender and political representation together within the AU's gender agenda. This is followed by the findings from the interviews with AUC respondents on the women's political quota system and persistent gender inequality. The article makes the concluding argument that attaining a critical mass of women in the political sphere does not directly translate to the political empowerment of women in politics and questions the implications for feminist advocacy.

Conceptual framework: Gender and political representation

In answering the question, what does it mean for women to participate in political institutions in Africa, it needs to be stressed at the outset that political systems of representation are not gender neutral. We interpret the concept of gender as:

systems of social practices; these systems create and maintain gender distinctions and organise relations of inequality based on [these distinctions]. In this view, gender involves the creation of both differences and inequalities (Wharton Citation2012, p. 7).

The idea of gender is widely applied to explain the binary distinction of male and female, and the "patterns" of behaviour that the two exhibit. Thus, a gendered approach would involve analysing the expectations, perceptions, political culture, interpretation and institutionalisation of the binary of man and woman (Wharton Citation2012). This results in the exclusion and inclusion of either binary of male or female in addition to the hierarchies that these binaries create.

Moving onto political representation, we use the seminal work of political theorist Hannah Pitkin (Citation1967) to differentiate between substantive and descriptive representation. Pitkin (Citation1967, p. 221-222) defines political representation as:

primarily a public, institutionalised arrangement involving many people and groups, and operating in the complex ways of large-scale social arrangements. What makes it representation is not any single action by any one participant, but the over-all structure and functioning of the system, the patterns emerging from the multiple activities of many people.

Drawing from this definition which emphasises public participation by citizens in institutionalised structures of the political system, this article focuses on two such forms of representation in the implementation of policies to increase women's political representation in decision-making, namely descriptive and substantive.

Descriptive representation is a form of representation that focuses on the number of representatives. The argument is embedded in proportional representation in which there is a need to be reflective of all groups in society in the pursuit of inclusive political representation. This concept supports the notion of 'one of us' is representing us where decisions are being made. However, this partial view, places its focus mostly on numbers (Pitkin Citation1967). Substantive representation is achieved when choices made by the representative are not just about their individual choices, but the actualisation of the 'interests' of the individuals/ groups that they represent. It is concerned with what representatives 'actually do' as opposed to simply being in a position of leadership or decision-making: what women are able to achieve, whether it is contributing to political meetings, policy formulation, advancing political goals, new laws and their ability to exercise agency and act independently (Pitkin Citation1967).

Women's capacity to use the political power afforded by affirmative action to advance gender equality is mediated by the weight of numbers of women elected or nominated and their ability to win support, as a minority. While the emphasis on numbers, descriptive representation, speaks to the critical mass of women in politics, substantive representation pays attention to the potential of and critical acts of women in politics.

The concept of critical mass in women's political participation was introduced by Dahlerup in 1988 who raised the composition of a decision-making institution as crucial in determining agenda setting and policy formulation (Dahlerup Citation1988). Dahlerup's work built on that of Kanter's (Citation1977) theorisation of the effects of group dynamics on organisational culture. In the context of women's political participation through affirmative action, critical mass explains how:

the nature of group interactions depends upon size. When a group remains a distinct minority within a larger society, its members will seek to adapt to their surroundings, conforming to the predominant rules of the game. But once the group reaches a certain size, critical mass theory suggests that there will be a qualitative change in the nature of group interactions, as the minority starts to assert itself and thereby transform the institutional culture, norms and values (Norris & Lovenduski Citation2001, p. 2-3).

Whether the point of critical mass presents opportunities for women to change the patriarchal culture of male-dominated political institutions, or to effect change through their representational mandate is an important question for women in political office.

By definition, in the context of women's political representation, critical actors in politics are those who act individually or collectively towards influencing women friendly policy change (Krook & Childs Citation2008). Critical actors as an umbrella term, in this context, encapsulates multiple actors with agency towards securing the substantive representation of women (Chaney Citation2011).

In the process of enacting representation, empowerment is ostensibly sought and attained by women in politics. Resultantly, the political component of empowerment is the capacity to organise society in a manner that results in social change, leading to agency and collective efforts. In this, the process of empowerment is seen as a "method" to attain access and control of means, awareness and most importantly *empowerment* (Stromquist Citation1995; Lazo Citation1995). In light of this, women's political empowerment has further been described as the measures used to increase the potential of women candidates to perform the expected roles of representation and create the opportunities for women to make informed choices, thereby increasing the potential for the representation of women's issues and access to resources to do so (Matland Citation2005). Or, as Sundström et al. (Citation2015, p. 4) describe it, "a process of increasing capacity for women, leading to greater choice, agency, and participation in societal decision-making".

The African Union gender agenda

On 7 November 2000, the AU adopted its Constitutive Act, a document signed by all heads of state in Africa. This was an act adopted to guide African countries concerning social, economic, and political issues to provide a continental approach to tackling problems and challenges that might arise (African Union Citation2004). Article 4 of the act highlights the fundamental principles of the AU and section 4(L) calls attention to the importance of the promotion of gender equality (African Union Citation2004). The 2004 Solemn Declaration on Gender Equality in Africa (SDGEA) is a strategic reporting instrument and a tool to create ownership of gender issues by African states at all political levels (African Union Citation2004). The SDGEA importantly requires the rotating AU Chair and heads of African states commit to annual reporting concerning gender equality and gender policy targets.¹

AU gender initiatives are aligned with global gender conventions, treaties and agreements. These have helped to provide a driving force for Africa through the AU, to establish policies and structures to mainstream gender equality in policy and to monitor gender equality issues on the African continent. Gender mainstreaming or the integration of gender into policy² was actualised after the transition from the Organisation of the African Union (OAU) to the AU when the decision was made to include a Gender Directorate within the AUC. The Directorate warrants the operationalisation of the gender policy within African Union Organisation as well as by the AU members through means of initiatives, the introduction of policies and agendas adopted by the AU.

The AU Gender Policy (AUGP), through its Women, Gender and Development Directorate department (WGDD) is responsible for gender policy internally and externally. The AUGP was established to provide African solutions for gender challenges on the African continent, towards a pan-Africanist agenda for sustainable development:

with this Gender Policy and its Action Plan in place, the Commission, other AU Organs, RECs [Regional Executive Committees] and Member States will be able to ensure gender equality, human dignity and peace for all and thereby fulfil the vision of AU (African Union Gender Policy Citation2009, p. iii).

The AU Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment (GEWE) strategy ratified in 2019 has four pillars:

1. maximising opportunities, outcomes, and E-TECH dividends;
2. dignity, security, and resilience;
3. effective laws, policies and institutions; and
4. leadership, voice and visibility (AU WGDD 2019).

Pillar four advocates for the equal representation of women in institutions of political decision-making, agency in both the private and public spheres and women as contributors towards societal development (AU WGDD 2019).

The AU employs tools and frameworks to monitor progress. The African Union Gender Scorecard (AUGS) is a 'quick instrument' to assess progress across seven sectors: sector two being "women in parliament and decision-making" (African Union Commission Citation2015, p. 11). This sector focuses on the "increase in proportion of women in politics and decision-making", through evaluating ratios between men and women in parliaments (African Union Commission Citation2015, p. 11). It is based on the proportion (percentages) of seats held by women relative to men. The indicators are thus numbers, which is descriptive representation. Consequently, the AU framework measures, and therefore prioritises, descriptive rather than substantive representation. The AUGP uses and encourages the use of quotas to increase women's political participation and the use of percentages (numbers) to assess women's political empowerment. The instruments of measurement focus on evaluating women's participation (numbers) and neglect to assess women's choice, agency, and capacity within institutions of political decision-making (substantive representation).

In Africa, the representation of women in politics has been largely achieved through gender quotas (UN Women Citation2017). Respectively, in North and Central Africa there are six countries, in West Africa there are nine countries, in southern African there are also nine countries and in East Africa there are ten countries that have affirmative action quota systems in place which set a floor for women's political representation, implemented by government or by political parties (Pikramenou & Mahajan Citation2019).

It can be argued that various commendable gender strategies have been put in place in Africa through the AU. However, there is also a strong counter narrative which holds that the mainstreaming of gender – including affirmative action policies and others – and the gender strategies and machineries put in place by African governments to increase women's political representation to effect this policy – have not achieved their goal of eliminating gender inequality in Africa. Enaifoghe (Citation2018, p. 1), for example, asserts in her article on the effects of gender socialisation on African political systems and "participation impacts of women on African politics" that:

despite global recognition of the importance of national gender machineries, the consensus from policymakers and scholars is that they have been largely ineffectual in Africa (Enaifoghe Citation2018, p. 273).

The remainder of the article discusses the findings structured around two key themes that emerged in the interviews with members of the AUC: the inadequacy of the quota system and examples of disempowerment and inequalities experienced by women in political contexts.

The inadequacy of the quota system

TN, a respondent from the Women, Gender and Development Directorate of the AUC, speaking to the inadequacy of the quota system as a mechanism to bring about gender equality, said:

Is it an issue of just filling the numbers or is it the quality part? That's the aspect which is always missing with this quota representation because you bring whichever category that you want to bring on board. You just throw them out there without even preparing, even supporting them, even building their capacity to have quality representation. It's not just the numbers, but it's the quality (Interview, Addis Ababa, 12 December 2019).

TN raises the concern of the inadequacy of focusing on numbers and percentages without giving consideration as to whether the women filling the posts are prepared, supported, or capacitated for the post they are officially placed in.

Feminist advocates have demanded the introduction of policy and law to address women's under-representation in decision-making over many decades. The Fourth World Conference on Women in 1995 had a ground breaking effect when it called for at least 30% representation of women in institutions of political decision-making (Mutume Citation2004; UN Citation1996). Nonetheless feminist advocacy has needed to and must continue to perform a critical role in supporting and guiding women's political representation, and through organisation, caucuses and lobbying, or building women's voice as political actors with collective voice in parliament. The growing resistance by scholars and gender practitioners concerning the adequacy and "sufficiency" of affirmative action quotas as the widely adopted measure to address women's low levels of participation in decision-making and the persisting systemic gender inequalities experienced by women is cause for concern (Paxton & Hughes Citation2014).

There are three types of quota systems that have been used to increase women's representation: constitutional quotas, election law quotas and political party quotas (Bush Citation2011; Mutume Citation2004). As an easy and popular addition to policy frameworks to encourage gender parity, the quota system gained traction, its primary objective to "reduce gender gaps in representation in electoral lists and in the targeted representative institutions" (Campa & Hauser Citation2020, n.p.). African nations have used quotas as a means of creating social and legal change and the number of women in legislatures in African countries is among the highest in the world, yet it is not clear whether political conditions advance women's substantive political power to any meaningful degree (Arendt Citation2018). One of the greatest challenges for gender quota women is that when they assume their positions of leadership through affirmative action quotas, negative perceptions of their participation in politics emerge related to whether they are as capable compared to some of their elected male counterparts (Franceschet & Piscopo Citation2008).

Regionally, the first wave of quotas occurred in East and southern Africa, while the second wave of quotas mostly occurred in West Africa (with the exception of Ghana) (Bauer

Citation2019). Quotas have unquestionably changed the gender composition of many political institutions; globally, over 100 countries have implemented or adopted quotas (Clayton Citation2014). The superficial numerical snapshot which projects a positive picture is nonetheless mute about critical actors and women's substantive representation and its impact on women's participation on politics.

Speaking to the inadequacy of the quota system, respondent SND held that participation by women as a result of gender quotas was not likely to bring the required shift in power relations or behaviour change:

I think, it's not adequate, that would be my conclusion. Then why I say it's not adequate... not to say that it's not a good thing... I think it's a very good thing to have the quota system, because it then allows women to be able to participate, to be able to be politically empowered. However, it's got its limitations. For example, I think it may just be something that has been announced or put into a law or into a policy of the certain government or a certain country, but it doesn't necessarily change people's thoughts, people's behaviours, people's culture. For example, if men don't believe that women should be politically empowered, introducing a quota system will not necessarily mean that the women of a certain political party, or a certain tribe, or certain gender, will necessarily be politically empowered (Interview, Addis Ababa, 12 December 2019).

The problem identified by SND that politics is a male-dominated sphere, extends beyond numerical dominance to organisational culture. Consequently, as she states, on their own “[gender quotas don’t] necessarily change people’s thoughts, people’s behaviours, people’s culture”. If the lack of informational and emotional support and professional competencies continue to pose an obstacle to women’s ability to become effective leaders, the experience of patriarchal culture by a minority can result in further disempowerment (Wallace & Kay Citation2012).

The counterintuitive effect of quotas is that “while the quota system and other measures can increase the number of women in parliament, they might not be a panacea to the deep rooted socio-economic and political factors leading to the marginalisation of women in electoral politics” (Hamandishe Citation2018, n.p). This means that, at times, women introduced to political institutions through electoral quotas are often marginalised as they bear the stigma of being less qualified than women who are elected to political positions (Holzer & Neumark Citation2000). Thus, equality (descriptive representation) may be achieved at the expense of “quality” (critical acts) and the *quota woman* leader’s ability (substantive representation) is scrutinised more, compared to their elected women counterparts (Baltrunaite et al. Citation2014). The system of quotas can place women on what is perceived as a less credible political platform.

Related to this inadequacy problem is tokenism, which occurs when there is “hiring, placement and tolerance of specific people in your organisation, strictly to prove you are not discriminatory” (Byarugaba Citation2021, n.p.). The main argument is that once the number of members of a discriminated group is increased, their work conditions or challenges will change/ improve, which is not always the case. Tokenism as a term was first introduced in 1977 by Kanter, who argued that as women’s numbers increased, their work conditions in male-dominated industries would improve (Kanter Citation1977).

In 1988, Zimmer critiqued the argument by Kanter, stating that there was no causality between the increase in the number of women in male-dominated industries and their improved work conditions. Instead, there was a need to evaluate the change in attitudes of men when women are introduced to those industries (Zimmer Citation1988). Yoder (Citation1991) added that tokenism advocates for achieving gender equality through increasing the number of women; however, focus on numbers (tokenism) fails to recognise other issues in the workplace that could hinder women's progress, such as sexism, sexual harassment, social isolation, and performance pressure. Moreover, tokenism is inspired by the agenda for attaining a critical mass of women without taking into consideration other issues mentioned above which inhibit the potential critical acts of women.

The reality is that “indeed, gender quotas increased the percentage of women in the parliament in most African countries regardless of their political system” (Asiedu et al. Citation2018, p. 33). However, evidence from many studies that the presence of women is not just a quantitative concern but qualitative as well, needs to be weighed against this increase (Celis Citation2008; Ruedin Citation2012; Konte & Kwadwo Citation2019). When the focus relies heavily on simply increasing the number of women in institutions of political decision-making, the inadequacy of the quota system can become very apparent.

When women are introduced into political institutions of decision-making, the aim is to diversify political institutions and ensure a gender-sensitive/ neutral environment (Hughes Citation2011). SND, points out how the quota system, to meet goals or targets, may just be announced or put into policy or law to increase women's numbers without ensuring it is accompanied by gender sensitisation or education. There is a danger that if diversification is done without women being prepared for the issues they will face when they are female participants in male-dominated political institutional spaces, they will face disempowerment: this also speaks to tokenism.

Gender inequalities embedded in quota systems

What became starkly apparent from the discussions with respondents is that women in political positions, far from being treated equally by men, confront direct and indirect prejudice from them. Even where women are present as representatives, they are hindered from substantially participating through gender bias, including stereotyping, essentialising and outright sexism by their male counterparts, the media and members of the public. TN stated:

From where I come from, there's a lot of sexism that goes along with 'look at how she's dressed'. You're judged by your appearance first even before you open your mouth. They say 'look at her dressing, look at her makeup, look at whatever it is, so there's a lot of sexism that goes on in it. You'd want to just be by yourself and do your own things and not to come out into the public and be judged harshly just because you're a woman (Interview, Addis Ababa, 12 December 2019).

Haraldsson and Wängnerud (Citation2018, n.p.) writing on the effects of media sexism on women's political aspirations state that sexism can undermine women in positions of political leadership and they argue, it consequently thus “strengthens the glass ceiling for female politicians”. A woman may have the qualities – be intelligent, educated, and confident enough – to be in politics, but she also needs to have the will and stamina to ignore demeaning comments, for example, about her appearance. In contrast, men in politics regard

the way men dress as an irrelevant trivial issue, rather they focus on their ability to either deliver or not deliver:

sexism in particular is institutionalized in parliamentary spaces and the increased numbers of women in legislatures have served to draw more attention to this reality (Collier & Raney Citation2018, p. 435).

The connection of gender politics to femininity and women's rights on the one hand and masculinity and male privilege, on the other, is complex and shifting in Africa where gender expectations frequently dictate who is a "proper" man or "proper" woman (Wyrod Citation2008). As Starck and Sauer (Citation2014, p.3) stress:

political institutions, norms and practices such as the state, citizenship and nationality, the vote, the military, policymaking, and the implementation of laws and many others have traditionally been treated as if they were un-gendered and guided exclusively by objective reasoning and rationality.

SND said that navigating the hegemonic masculinity of political institutions takes skill:

If you're a woman in the office and you fight for your beliefs or your rights, sometimes you are even called a man, you know and so, indeed, I think the agenda to empower women politically has been perceived as a threat to men, because it is even the men who use some women to fight against other women in politics who want to elevate themselves (Interview, Addis Ababa, 11 December 2019).

The long-term effects of colonialism together with existing socio-cultural practices have intersected to create a double disadvantage for women. Postcolonial African gender norms, founded on colonial gender norms, continue to influence the development and structure of gender in the global South (Harcourt Citation2009). During the colonial period, "women's formal political activity was generally ignored and denigrated by colonial authorities, and they lost ground with colonial legal systems" (Sheldon Citation2018, n.p.). The postcolonial political order bears the effects of colonial gender norms, which has seen the rise of women's movements and advocacy for gender equality. As Akanle (Citation2011, n.p.) describes,

any gender that goes beyond bounds could be sanctioned in many ways – the most common being ostracism and labelling. Regardless of many discussions and advocacies across time and domains, gender inequality and its negative outcomes persists, with implications for capacities to benefit from global/ national trade and development policies.

Enaifoghe argues that "the commonness of customary and socio-cultural practices in most African nations have regularly been referred to as an extensive boundary or limitation for women in governmental issues" (2018, p. 21). As a survival tactic within political institutions, women have had to emphasise masculine traits because this was the role prescribed to the typical character of man politicians, inadvertently expected of women who then enter politics (Fine Citation2008). Women in politics, due to these biased gender expectations, have faced multiple stereotypes and have been labelled as ineffective political leaders because they are perceived as not masculine enough (O'Neil & Domingo Citation2016). Due to the gender stereotyping of men and women politicians, founded on

culture, those who break free from this “box” stand out and face criticism or risk being ostracised by society (Aalberg & Jenssen Citation2007). SND added:

In as much as we talk about men and women, socialisation then translates my sex into the certain roles that society expects me to play ... into certain behaviour, that society expects me to portray (Interview, Addis Ababa, 11 December 2019).

The portrayal of gender specific roles affects women politicians, and they may not be able to garner sufficient support within their political positions (Norris & Inglehart Citation2001) due to traditional social expectations of them. When a woman is willing to run for office, she may not always garner support, even from other women (Micheal Citation2019). Women who do not support women politicians tend to perceive that men should be the politicians, they want to retain these gender norms and are unwilling to support women with political aspirations (Micheal Citation2019). TN reiterates this objectification of women in politics:

They will even analyse if you're married, whether your marriage is functioning, what kind of a husband you have, whatever (Interview, Addis Ababa, 12 December 2019).

TN highlights that it is seldom the political issues a woman raises that draw attention. Most often, women politicians’ personal lives become a matter for discussion whereas this is seldom the case for their male counterparts. Van der Pas and Aaldering corroborate that “women politicians are more often discussed in terms of their gender, their family life, and their physical appearance, but not in terms of their personality” (2020, p. 132). Stereotypically, women tend to be associated with the ‘private’ sphere while men are associated with the ‘public’ sphere (O’Niel et al. Citation2016).

As a result women in politics must face the micro-aggression of “gender differences in political media coverage” embedded in the hegemonic masculinity of politics.

As a result of masculine dominated cultures of institutions of power, women politicians have already ‘failed’ according to these stereotypes: women politicians will either ‘fail’ to conform to the prescribed masculine nature of leadership or ‘fail’ to be what is expected of a woman (Van der Pas & Aaldering Citation2020). The hegemonic masculinity of politics means that women have to negotiate expectations of their identities as “women, politicians, and professionals” (Ruppanner & Carson Citation2020).

As a global trend, “women’s participation in politics is increasing; however, the quality and quantity of such increasing trends varies” and these variations are predetermined by cultural value systems (Khelghat-Doost & Sibly Citation2020, p. 397). Gendered value systems have also tended to circumscribe the efficacy of women’s political empowerment by channelling them into issues largely around social services/ affairs and development, and rarely into critical political issues around defence/ peacekeeping and the economy in which women have an important stake (Khelghat-Doost & Sibly Citation2020).

In many African societies, as in other regions, it is still uncommon for women to be in top leadership positions (Mwale & Dodo Citation2017). As men and women in society are socialised into their gender roles, social and institutional efforts to train both men and women to understand the crucial role of women’s presence in institutions of decision-making is needed. The re-socialisation of both men and women politicians is needed to change political

cultures to be receptive to substantive representation and not just the descriptive representation of women in decision-making in political institutions.

Feminist advocacy positions, both in policy-making and on the ground in women's movements, need to be responsive to the political conditions in which the inadequacies in quota systems thrive. Platforms for renewed advocacy and organisation are needed so that younger generations of women find their political agency is more fully supported and that empowerment is not a slogan or a debased term with a token value.

Conclusion

Christensen and Muhr (Citation2019, p. 93) argue that “quotas and competencies are considered each other's opposites”, because quotas, when perceived as a means to address unequal representation (which is descriptive), fail to address competencies (which is substantive representation). On the one hand, the knowledge, skills, duty, and responsibility of women in politics are tied to their feminine gender identity, as “different life experiences result in uneven capabilities, unequal resources, different experiences of violence, conflict, exclusion or discrimination and varying exposure to enabling resources (such as education and health)” (Domingo et al. Citation2015, p. 89). The life experiences of women in Africa, such as how they are socialised into their gender roles, affects their worldview and ultimately their leadership perceptions and decision-making objectives.

On the other hand, entering political spaces without an informed or changed worldview must place a limitation on women's substantive representation, and another challenge that then affects women as they enter political spaces, is that they have to deal with masculine resistance and the sexism embedded in institutions of political power.

Deconstructing hegemonic masculinities in African politics will establish a better understanding of how to attain women's political empowerment in Africa, as the institutions and norms are not un-gendered. Conceptions of masculinity and femininity play a role in the reproduction of gender inequalities and “there appears to be consensus in acknowledging political masculinities as thoroughly involved in the reproduction of power” (Löffler, Luyt & Stark Citation2020, p. 5).

Placing women in political institutions of decision-making does not mean sexism within those institutions has been resolved, or gender equality achieved, even though the goal of gender parity has implied as much. Sexism affects women's willingness to pursue political careers, whether it is direct or indirect sexism, as well as the willingness of women political leaders to be vocal or 'noticed'. Women's political empowerment, the ability to be critical actors and to perform critical acts for the purpose of actualising substantive representation, requires stronger feminist advocacy by feminist organisations, women's non-partisan parliamentary caucuses, women's political structures and others. A critique of policies that do not work to support women's effective political participation and representation is needed. The article suggests that feminist advocacy in Africa needs to speak back to and actively review policy formulations that do not go beyond a descriptive understanding of women's political empowerment.

Notes on contributors



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Notes

¹ Refer to the Solemn Declaration on Gender Equality in Africa, <https://au.int/en/documents/20200708/solemn-declaration-gender-equality-africa>. The Declaration is aligned to the “implementation of the Dakar and Beijing Platforms for Action

for the Advancement of Women (1999); the Outcome Document of the Twenty-third Special Session of the United Nations General Assembly Special Session on the Implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action (2000); UN Resolution 1325 (2000) on Women, Peace and Security; and the Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa (2003)" (African Union Citation2004, p. 1).

² Gender mainstreaming is a key term in feminist and gender policy advocacy. It is the formulation of policies to address gender-related issues, generically. See Booth & Bennett (Citation2002) and Squires (Citation2005). Debates concerning gender mainstreaming have resulted in the need to apply intersectional analysis across gender, race and class and other axis of difference, and the creation of a 'needs-specific' approach, so that policies are transformational and not just gender-sensitive (Hancock Citation2007; Weldon Citation2006).

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