



Breaking Barriers: Advancing Women's Participation in Politics in Africa

Co-creation HUB, March 2025

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Executive Summary

Women's inclusion in politics is essential for achieving gender equality and strengthening democratic governance in Africa. Despite making up over 50% of the population, women remain underrepresented in political leadership. As of 2024, women hold only 25% of parliamentary seats, a marginal 1% increase since 2021, and 25% of local governance roles, a 3% rise. However, regional disparities persist, with Eastern Africa experiencing an 11% decline in female local governance representation between 2021 and 2024.

At the current pace of progress, gender parity in African parliamentary representation may not be achieved until 2100¹. Urgent systemic reforms are needed to accelerate progress and address persistent barriers. Women's political inclusion is vital for equality and governance, but achieving it requires targeted policies, regional commitments, and sustained efforts to dismantle cultural, structural, and economic barriers.

Rwanda leads globally with women holding 61% of parliamentary seats, followed by Senegal at 46% in West Africa and South Africa at 46.5% in Southern Africa. South Africa and Mozambique have achieved 50% women in their cabinets. Eastern and Southern African regions outpace other areas in women holding key ministerial positions.

Women's political advancement faces specific obstacles including campaign financing disadvantages, discriminatory political practices, and persistent patriarchal norms that actively discourage women from seeking leadership. Gender-based violence specifically targets female politicians, while unequal educational access creates qualification gaps.

Quota systems have delivered measurable results: Rwanda's reserved seats, Senegal's legislated quotas, and South Africa's voluntary party quotas. Proportional representation electoral systems have demonstrably reduced barriers compared to first-past-the-post models.

Effective advancement requires enforcing existing quota legislation, reforming electoral systems, creating legal protections against political violence, providing targeted leadership training, recruiting male political leaders as visible advocates, and developing digital platforms that enhance women's outreach while protecting them from online harassment. These specific interventions, applied consistently, will accelerate the path to gender parity in African governance.

¹ Afrobarometer, 2024



Image source: www.freepik.com

Overview

Women's inclusion in politics is essential for gender equality and strengthening of democratic governance. Despite obvious gains from increasing women's political activity, evidence points to either negligible change, plateauing or even a rapid drop, in some countries and within specific leadership strands, in the stock of women political leaders across Africa.

Despite constituting over half of Africa's population, 50.14%, women are significantly underrepresented in politics. Women held just 25% of all parliamentary seats in 2024, a negligible 1% increase from 2021. Representation at the local governance also remains constrained, standing at 25% although having improved by 3% overall. Regional gaps exist with female leadership at the local levels in Eastern Africa plummeting by 11% between 2021 and 2024.

²Ibid

African Women in Political Leadership

The first woman to assume political leadership in Africa was Elisabeth Domitien, who was appointed prime minister of the Central African Republic in 1975. Only 4 African countries are currently under the leadership of a woman either as head of state or government, 12 have previously been led by a woman while 38 have never had a female political leader.

Similarly, overall women's representation also varies across Africa. In many countries, structural inequalities and discriminatory practices such as gender-based political violence, unequal access to campaign financing, and disproportionate domestic responsibilities continue to limit women's participation in politics, reinforcing broader social disparities.

An analysis of women's participation in politics and governance across key political institutions in Africa reveals suboptimum engagement across the five African regions, with women still underrepresented overall.

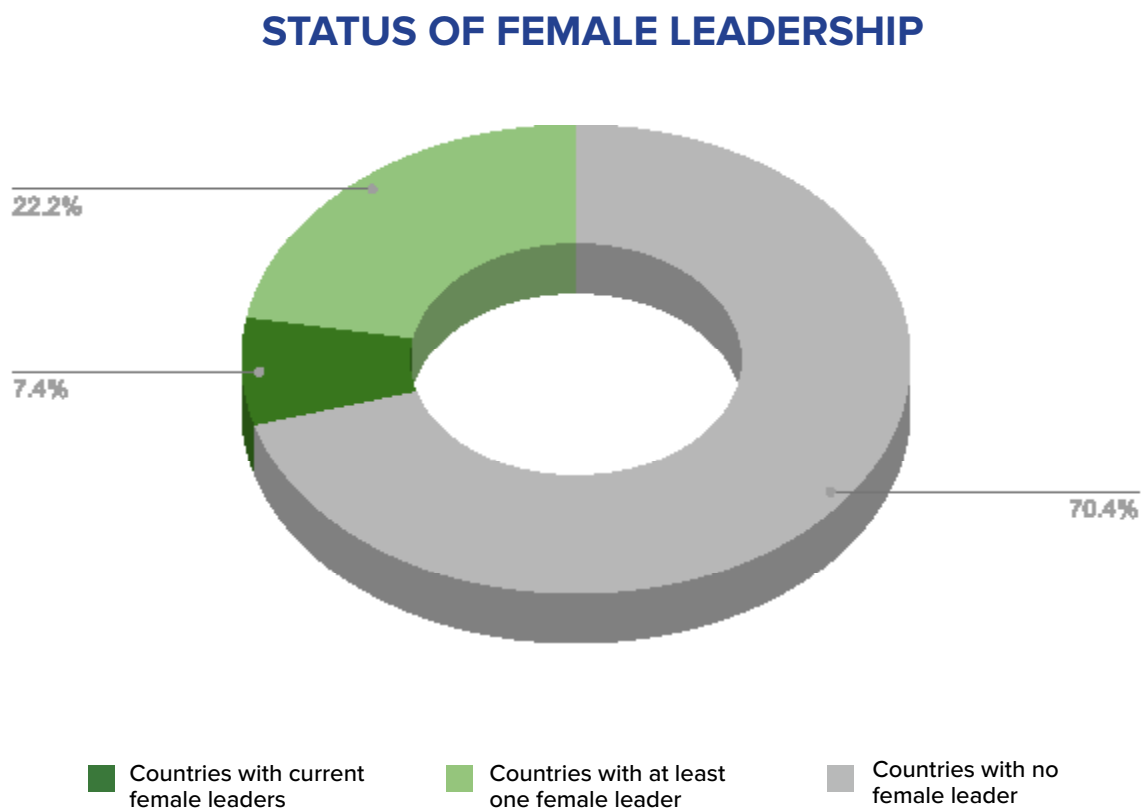


Figure 1: Status of Women Political Leadership in Africa
Source: CcHUB Analysis 2025

■ Executive

Women's involvement at the executive level is more pronounced in the Southern and Eastern Africa regions. At least 10 countries across the two regions had upwards of 30% female representation in their cabinets. South Africa and Mozambique lead the pack with 50% female ministers. Malawi (38%), Ethiopia (36%), Kenya (32%) and Rwanda (30%) also have substantial women representation in cabinet.

The involvement of women in cabinet within the North and West Africa regions is limited, with Tunisia being the only North African country to surpass 30% female representation (36%). Similarly, in West Africa, only Togo (32%) and Cabo Verde (31%) reached the 30% gender parity threshold out of 14 states. Burkina Faso, notably, had a paltry 10% female representation in its cabinet. Despite most countries in the Eastern Africa region having greater women engagement in cabinet, Sudan stands out as an outlier, with the lowest women representation in African cabinet with only 7.7% female representation.



Image source: www.freepik.com

Table 1: Representation of women in cabinet in 2024 across Africa

| Region | Country | Proportion | Region | Country | Proportion |
|---------|--------------------------|------------|---------|------------------------------|------------|
| North | Algeria | 14.3 | East | Djibouti | 21.7 |
| | Egypt | 18.8 | | Eritrea | 25 |
| | Libya | 15.4 | | Ethiopia | 36.4 |
| | Morocco | 26.3 | | Kenya | 31.8 |
| | Tunisia | 36.4 | | Mauritius | 17.4 |
| West | | | | Rwanda | 30 |
| | Benin | 23.8 | | South Sudan | 25.8 |
| | Burkina Faso | 10 | | Sudan | 7.7 |
| | Cabo Verde | 31.3 | | Uganda | 25 |
| | Côte d'Ivoire | 19.4 | | United Republic of Tanzania | 26.1 |
| | Gambia | 15 | | | |
| | Ghana | 17.2 | South | Angola | 39.1 |
| | Guinea | 25.9 | | Botswana | 16.7 |
| | Guinea-Bissau | 16.7 | | Eswatini | 26.3 |
| | Liberia | 29.4 | | Lesotho | 11.8 |
| | Mali | 17.9 | | Malawi | 38.1 |
| | Niger | 21.1 | | Mozambique | 50 |
| | Nigeria | 17.6 | | Namibia | 31.6 |
| | Senegal | 17.6 | | Seychelles | 33.3 |
| | Togo | 32.1 | | Sierra Leone | 33.3 |
| Central | | | | South Africa | 50 |
| | Burundi | 33.3 | | Zimbabwe | 24 |
| | Cameroon | 14.7 | | | |
| | Central African Republic | 16.1 | Central | Congo | 22.2 |
| | Chad | 17.2 | | Democratic Rep. of the Congo | 20.5 |
| | Comoros | 7.7 | | Equatorial Guinea | 8.3 |
| | | | | Gabon | 22.7 |

Key: ■ Indicates a quota below 30. ■ Green indicates a quota greater than 30.

Adopted from UN Women (2024)

■ Parliament

The Eastern and Southern Africa Regions have higher representation of women in parliament. For instance, women occupied 34% and 29% of all parliamentary seats in the lower houses across the two regions respectively. West Africa lags behind, with a 20% overall women representation in parliament.³

■ Local Government

Representation of women at the local government levels across the five regions also presents diverse scenarios. For instance, women's composition of local governance structure in West and North Africa experienced dramatic growth from 2% to 28% and 3% to 26% respectively between 2021 and 2024. However, women's representation at local politics across the Eastern, Southern and Central Africa regions declined with the largest drop being in Eastern Africa where representation dipped by 11% from 35% to 24%.⁴

■ Political Party Leadership

Women's participation in political party leadership across Africa is suppressed, with only 12% of such leadership positions held by women. Southern Africa demonstrates the highest level of female engagement, with 19% of all major political parties across the region led by women. Eastern Africa has a modest 11% of major political party leadership positions held by women, while North, Central, and West Africa have no woman leading any major political party.⁵

³Ibid

⁴Ibid

⁵Ibid

⁶Ibid

■ Executive Leadership

Women's involvement in business executive leadership is also acutely limited, with only 7% representation overall. Representation is particularly scarce in North and Central Africa. In North Africa, there were no women in executive head positions at major companies in 2024. In Central Africa, only 7% of executive positions were held by women. Eastern Africa boasts the highest level of engagement by women at the business executive level, with 28% of all top business executives being women. 21% of executive positions in Southern Africa are also women.⁶



Image source: www.freepik.com

Table 2: Change in Women's Participation in Politics across Africa.

| Category | Africa | | West | | North | | Central | | East | | South | |
|----------------------------|--------|------|------|------|-------|------|---------|------|------|------|-------|------|
| | 2021 | 2024 | 2021 | 2024 | 2021 | 2024 | 2021 | 2024 | 2021 | 2024 | 2021 | 2024 |
| Lower houses of parliament | 25% | 26% | 16% | 20% | 24% | 22% | 19% | 22% | 33% | 34% | 28% | 29% |
| Upper houses of parliament | 20% | 21% | 12% | 7% | 11% | 10% | 20% | 28% | 29% | 34% | 29% | 31% |
| Parliament overall | 24% | 25% | 16% | 19% | 21% | 10% | 19% | 23% | 32% | 34% | 28% | 29% |
| Political party leadership | 12% | 9% | 11% | 0% | 0% | 0% | 7% | 0% | 15% | 11% | 14% | 19% |
| Election management bodies | 28% | 29% | 24% | 27% | 25% | 15% | 20% | 23% | 45% | 45% | 40% | 39% |
| Local government | 21% | 25% | 2% | 28% | 3% | 26% | 27% | 24% | 35% | 24% | 20% | 25% |
| Speakers | 21% | 25% | 16% | 16% | 0% | 0% | 18% | 27% | 33% | 44% | 35% | 43% |
| Mayors of capital cities | 19% | 29% | 20% | 43% | 0% | 17% | 43% | 29% | 0% | 0% | 19% | 20% |
| Top executive positions | 7% | 13% | 7% | 11% | 0% | 0% | 7% | 11% | 12% | 28% | 9% | 21% |
| Cabinet | 22% | 24% | 19% | 21% | 13% | 21% | 20% | 18% | 32% | 36% | 26% | 30% |

Key: ■ Represents negative changes ■ Represents no changes ■ Green represents positive changes

Adopted from AfroBarometer (2024).

Country Highlights

The proportion of women in parliament varies across countries, as shown by data from selected countries in all five regions. This demonstrates the diverse range of targets and achievements in achieving equitable representation of women in parliament.⁷ Rwanda has the highest percentage of women in parliament globally, with 61% of parliamentary seats held by women. South Africa leads Southern Africa with 46.5% representation, while Senegal leads in West Africa with 46%. In Central Africa, Cameroon has the highest percentage at 33.9%. Egypt leads Northern Africa with 28% representation. Nigeria has one of the lowest percentages on the continent, with only 4% representation, far below its 35% quota target. The selected highlights are as follows:

| Country | Quota Target (%) | Women in Parliament (%) | Status |
|-------------------|------------------|-------------------------|------------------|
| Chad | 30 | 26 | Below Target |
| Republic of Congo | 30 | 15 | Below Target |
| Egypt | 25 | 28 | Above Target |
| Nigeria | 35 | 4 | Far Below Target |
| Rwanda | 30 | 61 | Above Target |
| Senegal | 46 | 50 | Above Target |
| Togo | 50 | 19 | Below Target |

Key Features of Quota Success

- Use of reserved seats for women in post-conflict or transitioning nations (e.g., Rwanda, Uganda).
- Legislated candidate quotas with placement mandates ensuring women are listed prominently on party ballots (e.g., Senegal, Mozambique).
- Voluntary party quotas adopted by dominant political parties (e.g., South Africa, Namibia).
- These quota systems have proven effective in boosting women's political participation across Africa, with innovative designs tailored to specific electoral systems and political contexts.



Image source: www.freepik.com

⁷ UN Gender Quota Portal, 2024

Case Studies of Improved Women Representation via Quotas

African countries that have significantly improved women's political representation through the implementation of gender quota systems:

| Country | Quote Type | Assessment |
|---------------------|--|---|
| Rwanda | Reserved seats and legislated quotas. | Rwanda leads globally, with women holding 61% of the seats in the lower house of parliament. This success is attributed to constitutional and legal mandates for gender quotas. |
| Senegal | Legislated candidate quotas with a parity law. | Women make up 44% of the National Assembly due to a law mandating equal representation on party lists. |
| South Africa | Voluntary party quotas | The African National Congress (ANC) adopted a 50% quota, leading to 46.5% representation of women in parliament. |
| Uganda | Reserved seats | Women's representation increased from 12% in 1989 to 40% by 2018 , with one woman representative mandated per district. |
| Tanzania | Reserved seats | Special seats for women have steadily increased their parliamentary representation, currently at 36% . |
| Namibia | Voluntary party quotas | The ruling SWAPO party's " zebra system " (alternating male and female candidates) has boosted women's representation to over 40% . |
| Mozambique | Legislated candidate quotas | Women hold over 39% of parliamentary seats due to proportional representation and quota laws |
| Morocco | Reserved seats | A national list system reserves seats for women, increasing their representation to over 24% . |
| Egypt | Legislated candidate quotas | Recent constitutional amendments have raised women's parliamentary representation to 27.4% . |

Despite slight increases in some regions, achieving gender parity remains a long-term goal, projected to take until 2100 to achieve at current rates. ⁸

⁸ Afrobarometer, 2024

Challenges

Key challenges to the underrepresentation of women in politics across different regions in Africa include:

| Socio-cultural | Structural |
|---------------------------------------|--|
| Patriarchy and Cultural Norms. | Political parties and other political institutions are inaccessible. |
| Domestic roles and responsibilities | Negative media coverage |
| Socialisation, attitudes, stereotypes | Limited finances and resources for political mobilisation |
| Socialisation, attitudes, stereotypes | Limited finances and resources for political mobilisation |
| Violence Against Women in Politics | Mismanagement of Electoral Systems |
| | Prevalence of electoral-related conflicts and civil wars in some countries |

A few examples in Western and Central Africa highlight key challenges affecting women's participation in politics.

Western Africa



■ Violence and Systemic Barriers

A study by the National Democratic Institute (NDI) on Violence Against Women in Political Parties (VCF-P) highlights the widespread nature of violence against women in politics in **Côte d'Ivoire**.⁹ This violence takes various forms, including verbal abuse, psychological attacks, harassment, threats, and pressure. It cuts across the political spectrum, affecting women from all parties and levels of political engagement.

This issue is not unique to Côte d'Ivoire but reflects a broader trend across West Africa. In countries such as **Nigeria, Ghana, and Senegal**, women in politics face similar forms of violence, often used as tools to intimidate and exclude them from political participation. For example, a 2018 statement by the UN Special Rapporteur exposed systemic barriers to Nigerian women's political participation, including institutional exclusion and intimidation tactics. Party officials deliberately removed women from candidate lists, withheld crucial electoral information, and manipulated primary schedules to disadvantage female candidates.

The UN condemned these actions, calling for investigations and remedies. This situation highlights a stark gap between Nigeria's formal commitments to gender equality and the entrenched practices that continue to undermine women's substantive political representation.



Image source: www.freepik.com

⁹ ibid

Central Africa

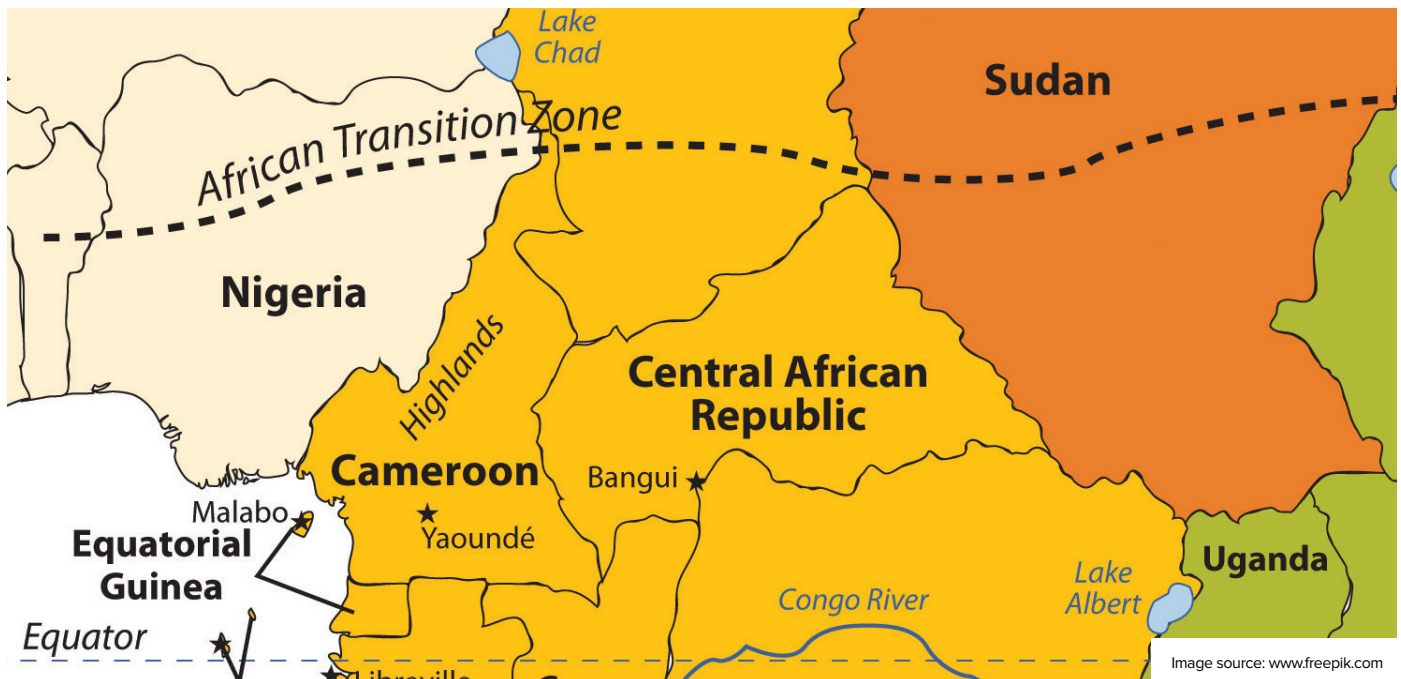


Image source: www.freepik.com

■ Educational Barriers and Conflict Limit

Women's lower educational attainment in Central Africa significantly hinders their political aspirations. In countries like the **Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC)** and **Chad**, girls face numerous barriers to education, including early marriage, poverty, and cultural biases that prioritize boys' education. A 2022 World Bank report revealed that the literacy rate for women in Central Africa is 23% lower than for men¹⁰, limiting their ability to engage in political processes or run for office. In rural areas of the DRC, for instance, women with limited education are often excluded from political discussions and decision-making roles, reinforcing gender inequality in governance.

Conflict and instability further restrict women's political participation in the region. Countries such as the **DRC** and the **Central African Republic (CAR)**

have experienced prolonged conflicts that disproportionately affect women, limiting their access to resources, safety, and political opportunities. Although the DRC's constitution enshrines gender equality, implementation remains a challenge. Data reveals that 42.8% of Congolese women have experienced domestic violence, 39% have faced threats or physical harm, and 27% are subjected to harmful traditional practices¹¹. These systemic barriers extend beyond entry into politics; even within political parties, women continue to face deep-seated gender biases that hinder their influence and leadership.

These challenges highlight the need for systemic changes, including legal reforms, cultural shifts, and economic support to enhance women's political representation across Africa.

¹⁰ World Bank (2020). Central African Republic Gender Landscape. <https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/099831206302230894/pdf/IDU1f8e805b11d047140401b25e11ae8150f0dd8.pdf>

¹¹ UN Women (2022). Brief Female Political Participation. https://africa.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/2023-03/BRIEF_FEMALE%20POLITICAL%20PARTICIPATION%20FINAL.pdf

Policy Documents And Protocols

Some key regional policy documents and protocols that address gender equality and investing in women across Africa:

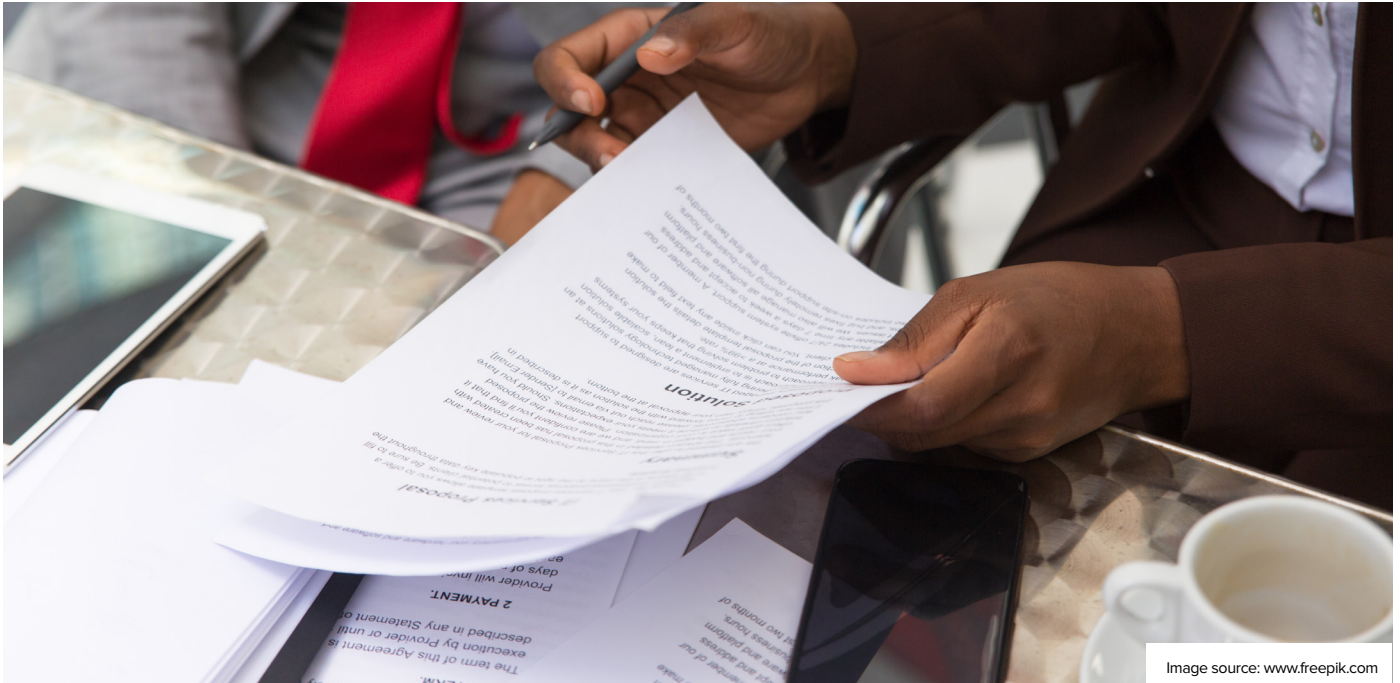


Image source: www.freepik.com

■ African Union Gender Policy (2009)

The African Union Gender Policy (AUGP) (2009) is a core component of the African Union Gender Architecture (AUGA), which encompasses policies and legal instruments dedicated to women's rights, peace, and security. It provides a comprehensive framework for operationalizing gender equality commitments across AU institutions and member states, institutionalizing gender mainstreaming in governance, policymaking, and development planning.

As a pioneering policy, the AUGP has paved the way for:

- An increase in women's representation in senior leadership positions within the AU Commission.

- The nomination of women as Special Representatives in conflict and post-conflict countries, reinforcing women's role in peacebuilding.
- The appointment of female mediators and Special Envoys, ensuring gender-inclusive conflict resolution and diplomacy.

The AU recognizes gender equality as a fundamental human right and an integral driver of regional integration, economic growth, and social development.

■ Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa (2003)

The Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa (Maputo Protocol) is one of the most progressive and comprehensive legal instruments for women's rights globally. Adopted in 2003 by the African Union (AU) and enforced in 2005, the protocol serves as a legally binding framework to advance gender equality, protect women's rights, and promote their full participation in all spheres of life across Africa.

Recognized as a key pillar of the AU's gender agenda, the protocol addresses the unique sociocultural, political, and economic barriers that hinder women's empowerment on the continent. It establishes clear obligations for AU member states to eliminate discrimination and gender-based violence, guarantee reproductive health rights, and promote women's leadership in governance, peace, and security.

■ Solemn Declaration on Gender Equality in Africa (2004)

Adopted in 2004 by the African Union (AU) Heads of State and Government, the Solemn Declaration on Gender Equality in Africa (SDGEA) represents a political commitment to accelerating gender equality and women's empowerment across the continent. Unlike previous gender-related frameworks, the SDGEA holds AU member states directly accountable for advancing women's rights through legal, policy, and institutional reforms.

The declaration recognizes the critical role of gender equality in sustainable development, governance, peace, and economic transformation, urging African leaders to integrate gender-responsive strategies into national and regional policies.

■ African Union Strategy for Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment (GEWE)

The African Union Strategy for Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment (GEWE) serves as a continent-wide framework designed to strengthen women's agency, amplify their voices in decision-making, and institutionalize gender-responsive policies. Rooted in the principles of the Maputo Protocol, the African Union's Agenda 2063, and the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), GEWE provides a structured roadmap for African nations to accelerate gender equality through effective legislation, targeted financing, and cross-sectoral partnerships.

■ African Union Convention on Ending Violence Against Women and Girls (AUCEVAWG)

The African Union Convention on Ending Violence Against Women and Girls (AUCEVAWG) is a groundbreaking legal framework aimed at eliminating all forms of gender-based violence (GBV) across Africa. It serves as a binding instrument for AU member states, reinforcing commitments made under the Maputo Protocol, the Solemn Declaration on Gender Equality in Africa (SDGEA), and the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights.

This convention recognizes that violence against women and girls (VAWG) is a fundamental human rights violation and a major barrier to gender equality, social justice, and economic development. It calls for comprehensive legal, institutional, and policy reforms to prevent, address, and eradicate GBV at all levels.

■ Regional Gender Action Plans (RGAPs)

Regional Gender Action Plans (RGAPs) serve as comprehensive frameworks designed to address gender disparities and promote women's empowerment across Africa. These plans, developed by regional organizations such as the African Union (AU), the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), and the Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS), establish targeted interventions aligned with global commitments like the Beijing Declaration, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), and the African Union's Agenda 2063.

These documents and protocols highlight the commitment of African regional organizations to promoting gender equality and investing in women's empowerment.



Image source: www.freepik.com

Policy Recommendations

Efforts to address the underrepresentation of women in African politics should focus on key policy areas, among which are:



1 Implement and Enforce Gender Quotas

- **Legislated Quotas:** Mandate gender quotas in electoral laws to ensure a minimum percentage of women candidates on party lists, fostering inclusive democracy.
- **Reserved Seats:** Designate specific parliamentary seats for women to guarantee their representation and amplify their voices in decision-making.

2 Reform Electoral Frameworks

- **Proportional Representation Systems:** Advocate for electoral systems that promote proportional representation, which historically results in higher female participation.
- **Barrier Reduction:** Eliminate restrictive candidate registration processes, such as excessive fees and onerous signature requirements, which disproportionately hinder women's participation.

3 Strengthen Political Party Commitments

- **Internal Party Quotas:** Encourage political parties to set voluntary gender quotas for leadership roles and electoral lists to institutionalize gender inclusion.
- **Accountability Mechanisms:** Introduce sanctions or incentives to ensure political parties comply with gender representation commitments.

4 Empower Women through Capacity Building

- **Leadership Development Programs:** Expand training, mentorship, and networking opportunities to equip women with the skills and confidence to engage in politics.
- **Civic Awareness Campaigns:** Promote awareness of women's political rights and the broader benefits of gender-balanced governance.

5 Combat Violence Against Women in Politics

- **Legal Protections:** Strengthen laws criminalizing political violence and harassment against women, ensuring strict enforcement.
- **Support Systems:** Establish reporting mechanisms, legal aid, and psychosocial support for women facing political violence, safeguarding their right to participate freely.

6 Promote Gender-Responsive

- **Equitable Resource Allocation:** Advocate for the integration of gender-responsive budgeting (GRB) in parliamentary processes to ensure policies and resource distribution address the distinct needs of women.
- **Budget Oversight Mechanisms:** Establish monitoring frameworks to track and evaluate government expenditures on gender-focused initiatives, ensuring transparency and accountability.
- **Capacity Building for Policymakers:** Provide training for legislators, public officials, and civil society actors on implementing GRB effectively.

7 Engage Male Allies

- **Male Champions for Gender Equality:** Encourage male parliamentarians, political leaders, and opinion-shapers to actively support policies promoting women's political and economic empowerment.
- **Transformative Leadership Initiatives:** Develop programs that engage men as partners in dismantling gender biases and fostering inclusive leadership.
- **Cross-Gender Collaboration:** Facilitate dialogues and partnerships between male and female policymakers to co-create gender-inclusive legislation.

8 Leverage Technology for Women's Political Empowerment

- **Digital Tools for Participation:** Promote the use of mobile applications, online platforms, and virtual networks to enhance women's access to political information, training, and advocacy resources.
- **Cybersecurity Protections:** Implement measures to combat online harassment and cyberbullying targeting women in politics, ensuring a safe digital space for engagement.
- **E-Governance for Inclusion:** Encourage governments to adopt digital governance solutions that enhance women's involvement in decision-making and policy discourse.



Image source: www.freepik.com

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