

*Perspective*

# African Women Leaders in the 21st Century

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## Abstract

This paper provides insight into the various challenges women face, their roles in leadership and how they have advanced over the years in Africa against these odds. It is becoming more apparent than ever that female leadership in Africa is predetermined by the state of women's affairs in a country. More women seem to be breaking beyond society's expectations of their potential being limited to the home front. Reports have shown that when women are able to reach their full potential - equal participation in the economy as their male counterparts - global GDP can increase and in sub-Saharan Africa specifically, the GDP can increase by 27%, or \$0.7 trillion, when the gap is closed. According to a report by McKinsey, women make up over half the world's population, but only 37% of them are in the workforce. With that in mind, many initiatives and programs have been established to combat gender inequality, providing more opportunities for women to join the workforce. These initiatives often have a common theme which is to empower women and make them qualified leaders in different sectors through scholarships, skill acquisition, grants, competitions, mentorship, etc. Despite the gains that have been made by African female leaders, there is still more work to be done. Boosting the number of African women in leadership roles - that have power and influence - would require a culture shift in regard to societal expectations and norms.

**Keywords:** African women, women entrepreneurs, African business, female leaders, African entrepreneurship.

In the 21st century, the construct of leadership as it pertains to African women focuses on giving them more visibility, empowering within and outside their networks, and effectively allocating resources. Poltera (2019) suggests that women's leadership in the African context is taken for granted and applied in ways that are intuitively plausible at first glance, but on closer inspection requires more conceptual analysis and care (p. 1). The major obstacles that plague African women from being in positions of power are marginalization, gender bias, structural inequalities, and economic dependence. Individually, and when coupled together, these factors stifle women's growth and their ability to crack glass ceilings that society has placed on them. The new wave of cross-sector African women leaders is a testament to the fact that local and global stakeholders are realizing the need for an enabling environment that

allows women to lead. However, there is still more work that needs to be done. Specifically, there is a need for an inclusive society (both in theory and reality) that incorporates a gender-lens approach in all policies and institutions. This would inevitably facilitate the emergence and sustainability of women's leadership from both the top-down and bottom-up.

In Africa, women leaders in politics and governments are leading the charge for a more representative system of government; however, they have not been able to sustain the momentum. Rwanda is a prime example of women being part of the social fabric of decision-making (Abouzeid, 2019). The gradual integration of women since 1994, has led to women occupying the lion's share of legislative seats - 64% (Burnet, 2008). As a result, the country has witnessed a tremendous amount of economic and social benefits. According to World Bank

data, Rwanda has one of the highest rates of labor participation (84%). Furthermore, there have been more income-generating enterprises for women due to entrepreneurship. According to Essa (2018), women leaders across civil society are working in conjunction with government leaders to crack down on gender-based violence and discrimination. That said, there is still more work to be done since young women and single mothers often complain of being harassed by the police in their day-to-day endeavors. Thus, some microaggressions exist despite the macro policies that have been strategically and intentionally set up.

Marginalization has gradually become a subject to reckon with and advocates aim to achieve an inclusive political system for women. Despite the fact that many initiatives have taken steps in the past to promote this cause, it remains a major issue in most African countries. A 2009 Kenyan survey by the Ministry of Gender revealed that only 30.9% of those employed in the public service sector are women. Among those employed, women occupy 72% of the entry-level positions. Structural inequalities like these prevent women from being able to leverage the power of their voice collectively (Malovi, 2014).

In Rwanda, women who actively speak up against the government face grave consequences. For example, Victoire Igabire and Diane Rwigara, both sought out to challenge President Kagame in the 2012 elections. However, they were sentenced for treason/genocide and vague offenses against state security. Similarly, female journalists have also faced punishments for publishing material with the aim of inciting public disorder. The case of Rwanda is a very complex one because although everything seems good on paper, injustices against women leaders in their respective fields is very much still the order of the day (Inclusive Security, n.d).

Women have been a formidable force in establishing order following conflict. In Liberia, a group of women adaptive leaders helped create "The Women of Liberia Mass Action for Peace". This was a movement that permeated the national space by creating a movement that spanned religion and social classes. As leaders, these women exemplified the power of their collective strengths. Kuwonu (2018) notes that "dressed in white, the women blocked every entry and exit point, including windows, stopping negotiators from leaving the talks without a resolution. Their actions, as well as the pressures mounted by leaders from the Economic Commission of West African States (ECOWAS), led to the signing of the 2003 Comprehensive Peace Agreement" (para. 10). Women were crucial in bringing peace to Liberia. With help from the United Nations Institute of Peace and the Initiative for Inclusive Security, women organized to discuss how they could work with rebel leaders in moving the disarmament process forward. Leymah Gbowee was one of the women leaders who was awarded a Nobel Peace Prize for her work that helped to bring an end to the Second Liberia Civil War. In

the women's effort to bring peace to Liberia, these civil sector leaders noted that training abilities have proven not to be enough. Rather, ameliorating education and survival skills will improve women's ability to influence policy and create change in the long-term.

African women leaders in science and technology also grapple with an industry that has a high barrier to entry. Those that do lead are often a pariah and struggle to secure venture funding. Despite the challenges, a handful of African women have managed to excel. However, one of the systemic challenges faced is a weak pipeline or the lack thereof when it comes to STEM fields. Statistics from the Moroccan government reveal that 56% of the first-year science students are women. That said, female representation significantly declines during the course of their study (Bassioni, Onyige, Aoudjehane, Afonso, & Mahomoodally, 2016).

The advancement of science, technology, education, and mathematics (STEM) opportunities for aspiring African women leaders is a means to achieving larger sustainable development goals. This is because women in the tech sector are leading the charge to come up with some of the most innovative solutions to problems facing the African society. An expert opinion piece by The Gambia Women in Science Group suggests that "the lack of female researchers in sub-Saharan Africa reduces the diversity of scientific perspectives on gender dimensions of health, and curtails the ability of the society to advocate for maternal and reproductive health research agendas" (Roca et al, 2018). Thus, there is a social return from investing in African women leaders since the ripple effect permeates all levels of society and spans industries.

Research has also shown that female-led technology firms have a 35% higher return on their investment (Kapin, 2019). That said, African-women-led startups are scarce. Current estimates show that only 9% of African-startups have women leaders which is even lower than the 27% of women entrepreneurs in sub-Saharan Africa (Toesland, 2018). Eunice Baguma Ball, founder of the London-based Africa Technology Business Network (ATBN) argues that there is a need for a more gender-inclusive society that allows women to enter the technology sector. As a female-focused tech entrepreneurship accelerator, she notes that African women are facing challenges when it comes to sourcing for funds. Odunayo Eweniyi, co-founder and chief operating officer of Piggybank.ng, points out that women are often drawn to pursuing least-risky ventures due to "cultural implications" that are associated with women aiming higher (Toesland, 2019).

Currently, more women seem to be breaking beyond society's expectations of their potential being limited to the homefront. The MasterCard Index of Women Entrepreneurs 2017 listed two African countries, Uganda (34.8%) and Botswana (34.6%), as the countries with the highest percentage of women entrepreneurs globally. But

more research has revealed that a large number of these female-managed enterprises are small businesses with little or no opportunity for expansion. This leads to women not being able to climb up the social ladder. To worsen matters, it also leads to women being dependent on their male counterparts as being a source of debt relief for the purposes of sustaining their businesses. A report by McKinsey & Co. shows that women make up half of the population, yet only 37% of them are in the workforce. Societal norms hold a lot of women back from achieving their potential. Estimates show that if women are able to reach their full potential in many sectors, global GDP can increase by 27%, or \$0.7 trillion.

The potential that African women possess is one that numerous organizations are seeking to unleash. In Kenya, the Leadership Wisdom Initiative (LWI) at Search for Common Ground (SFCG) and its partners – Nairobi Peace Initiative-Africa (NPI-Africa), Femmes Afrique Solidarité (FAS), the Academy for Educational Development (AED), and Bridges in Organization – have partnered together to look into strengthening women's leadership (Andela et al., n.d). They base their research on the existing gap that is at hand when it comes to the skills, resources, and self-confidence that women need to move on to the next leadership positions. According to them, one of the most effective ways of increasing the pipeline of African women leaders is thus by doing the following:

- i. Providing leadership forums and social networking opportunities: women would get the chance to hear from one another and share wisdom with each other
- ii. Coaching: African women need one-on-one sessions which are uniquely tailored to strengthen and expand their network of professional support
- iii. Skills training: Skills training cannot be a one-size-fits-all approach but should rather factor in their leadership needs across industries
- iv. Mentorship: Women in positions of power/authority should reach down to give those behind a hand up. This would be very useful when it comes to developing the next wave of leaders in Africa.

Female leaders in Africa's agricultural sector can address some of the health and nutrition issues plaguing the continent through civil sector and government partnerships. Primarily, women are an asset in Africa's agricultural sector since they produce 80% of the food. However, "African women farmers are excluded from conversations that determine agricultural policies, while discriminatory laws and practices deprive them of their land, their rights, and their livelihoods" (Global Fund for Women, 2017, para. 1). Programs such as the Value4HerConnect have been launched to give women a platform for sharing their experiences with one another. Similarly, other virtual communities have been created, such as Women2Women Forum - provides information about financing and training opportunities for female agricultural entrepreneurs. The World Economic Forum

posits the notion that "women farmers often reap a meager harvest, not because of inclement weather or poor soil quality, but because of their gender – or, more specifically, because of a dense web of laws, policies, programs, and customs that put them at a significant disadvantage" (Dick, 2019, para. 2).

In the effort to boost African female leaders, a recent phenomenon has become seemingly pervasive throughout the region. Non-governmental actors are beginning to work in silos whereby government backing is not sought after. A few examples of this are: the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation utilizing a gender perspective when it comes to providing agronomy training whereby women can acquire essential skills. Likewise, One Acre Fund provides support to smallholder female farmers by financing farm inputs, training on agricultural techniques, and enabling them to access markets. One of the major challenges has been that the lack of rigidity with involvement from the government makes sustainability a challenge for these initiatives. Winrock, an international development organization aimed at tackling some of the world's most pressing agricultural problems launched an AWLAE program in Uganda that was aimed at providing transferable skills to female farmers. As part of their assessment, they made emphasis on the need to involve men in efforts to increase the number of female leaders in the agricultural sector as well as generating greater in-country support (Winrock, 2008).

In a Stanford Social Innovation Review podcast, Towera Jalakasi, a Malawian entrepreneur and consultant speaks on the benefits and struggles of being a female leader in a developing economy. Through her work, she is able to farmers access fair prices for their products and materials. She does this by creating links between them and outside markets. Having made a name for herself, she still faces an uphill battle getting access to credit (Jalakasi & Breslin, 2014). These systemic issues affect the ability of so many female leaders to maintain sustainable businesses. Hence, government support can be a panacea for the challenges in the enabling environment that women leaders are often subject to. Government involvement and backing should mean that country actors know what the root causes are as to why female farmers are not able to scale up and create policies/structures to tackle them. This can either be through rural institutions, removing credit constraints as well as improving women's education, access to markets, etc. (Jacobsen, 2013).

Strides have been made in advancing the course of leadership for African women. That said, there is still more work to be done when it comes to ensuring that there is inclusion and diversity for women across sectors. Structural barriers and preconceived notions have to be tackled in order for African women to achieve their highest potential (Banda, 2017). In order to prepare for Africa's population boom, young girls and women will play a crucial role in championing economic and social

development and progress across multiple levels: household, community, and national, etc.

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