
Women in Postcolonial Africa

Selina Makana, Columbia University - Institute for Research on Women, Gender, and Sexuality

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Summary

As scholars of Africa continue to challenge the place and role of Africa in world history, shedding light on women as valid historical actors in postcolonial Africa within the last three decades remains an ongoing and much-needed endeavor. African women in the past and the present have used their position as breadwinners, mothers, and community leaders to influence their social, economic, and political worlds and to assert their power. In the 21st century, they have become known especially for their success as formidable politicians and peace activists. Even in the age of cyberactivism, women in postcolonial Africa have demonstrated their ability to mobilize across ethno-linguistic lines to effect change in their societies. It is important to move beyond the male-centric perspectives on Africa by highlighting not only the diverse experiences of women in the post-independence era but to also underscore the fundamental roles they continue to play in defining and redefining the postcolonial political economies, and their place in them.

Keywords: women, postcolonial Africa, power, electoral politics, activism, economy, gender

Postcolonialism and the “African Woman”

In her 2009 memoir, Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf, the 24th president of Liberia and the first elected female head of state in Africa, aptly notes:

No one really expected me to become president. Among most political observers and operatives, both within Liberia and without, my chances hovered somewhere between slim and none. Conventional wisdom had it that my negatives were too many for me to achieve success: first, I was a woman in a society that insisted on male leadership. I was too closely associated with the settler class. I didn't have enough money. I had been around too long and carried too much political baggage. I was too light-skinned, too educated, and, not insignificantly, too mature to win in a nation so recently and painfully dominated by its youths.¹

While her presidency was entangled with accusations of corruption and nepotism, Sirleaf's story of her ability to break the glass ceiling is not only inspirational to many women and girls across Africa, but it also underscores the opportunities, barriers, and challenges faced by women as they negotiate the highly masculinist nature of national politics in postcolonial

Africa. Given that the vast majority of political leaders in different parts of Africa have been men, Sirleaf's observation that she was not expected to win in a "society that insisted on male leadership" is therefore not surprising.

During the last decades of the 20th century and at the beginning of the 21st century, the continent has witnessed violence, social and political movements, and economic and democratization projects, of which women have been both agents and the principal victims. Over four decades after many African nations gained independence from European colonial rule, African people, especially women, are confronted with the reality of the broken promises of the decolonization era and the need to craft new social and political systems that will meet their needs.

This article examines the place of women in postcolonial Africa, in particular women's roles and their quest to address issues of war and peace, politics, economy, environmental justice, and power. It discusses efforts by African women to reconstruct and redefine African womanhood from the late 20th to the 21st centuries. This article is divided in five sections, with relevant case studies and literature discussed throughout. The first section addresses women's presence and their role in democratization processes, in particular their participation in formal electoral politics at the national level. The second section offers an overview of the paradox of gender quotas as a solution to the gender gap in women's political participation. The third section examines the relationship between gender and militarism and the ways women have negotiated and challenged their highly militarized societies. The fact that women are the backbone of most economies, both formal and informal, cannot be emphasized enough. The fourth section, therefore, examines the relationship between women and the political economy after many countries declared their independence. The last section focuses on women's cyberactivism in the first ten decades of the 21st century by examining the centrality and the role of social media as a strategy for women's mobilization.

It is worth emphasizing that women in postcolonial Africa are linked to a history of imperial power; colonialism; racial domination; and their ongoing effects, including neoliberalism. It is against this background that feminist scholars of Africa have cautioned against the reduction of gender to the universalism of female subordination and oppression.² Gender is dependent on varying social contexts and social relations rather than reducible to biology alone. African women are not a homogenous and unified group, and they hardly constitute a monolithic group with similar problems as their experiences vary according to socio-economic status, ethno-linguistic background, religion, and geopolitics.

It is also imperative to point out some of the difficulties that arise with the use of the term "postcolonial," both in terms of temporality and the view of history as progress.³ Given the realities of European imperialism and colonial invasion at different periods in history, using the independence era of the 1950s–1970s as a marker for postcoloniality poses its own problems. For instance, the unstable and obfuscatory nature of the term is evident in the case studies of South Africa, which gained its independence from Britain in 1910, even though the majority of South Africans did not achieve liberation until 1994; and Ethiopia, which did not go through the "formal" European colonial rule of the 1880s signaled by the 1884/1885 Berlin conference like other regions on the continent. Despite this tension, postcolonialism as used in this article is a useful concept that sheds light on relations of power and agency.

Anne McClintock reminds us that colonialism and its legacy ensured male domination became more strategic in power relationships mostly because colonialism was based on a mobilization of notions of masculinity and femininity.⁴ Thus, postcolonialism, just like colonialism, is gendered in the sense that women experience the realities of the postcolonial condition differently than men. Given this gendered nature of the postcolonial condition and also the fact that women “by and large, are a casualty of history,” there remains an urgent and greater need for scholarship that focuses on women’s lived realities, their struggles, and their agency in crafting spaces for challenging power in the societies in which they live.⁵ There is a lot to be learned by examining relations of power through a gendered lens, both the more oppressive top-down aspects of power and the more subtle micro-politics of power. A gendered lens also allows us to explore the various ways women in postcolonial states are at times complicit in perpetuating hierarchies and inequalities, as well as the multifaceted ways they speak truth to power.

Paradoxes of Postcolonial Politics on Women

Although the status of women in precolonial Africa varied greatly, the impact of European colonialism was mainly to reverse and further diminish women’s position in society. In societies where women occasionally held ceremonial and important political positions as chiefs and traditional leaders, colonial administrators undermined the power and influence of these women. In some West African societies, women’s political influence declined, because colonial administrators perceived politics as “a man’s sphere.”⁶ Throughout the colonial era, African women experienced multiple forms of oppression as new laws and heavy taxation restricted their control over markets and agricultural work and disrupted family life. Different colonial regimes reconfigured men and women’s roles by changing their participation in political life, labor patterns, forced migrations, and redefined land ownership. In Angola, for example, forced labor limited women’s economic independence in the household and the disrupted their fertility patterns, both agricultural and biological.

One of the greatest contributions of African women’s history, therefore, has been its critiques of the colonial framing of African womanhood. These feminist critiques highlight not only the adverse effects of colonialism on women and gender roles but also challenge dominant stereotypes that construct African women as lacking political agency and as simply victims of colonial power structures. But what are the promises and results of the postcolonial dispensation for ordinary women throughout Africa?

As nationalist leaders envisioned the future of their soon-to-be-independent nations, many activists found themselves debating the role of women in the nation. Eager to cast off the colonial legacy, male nationalists realized that minimizing women’s role in the process of decolonization was comparable to them behaving like the colonial regimes against which they were fighting. Hence, there was a push to recognize women’s sections of the movements. In Eritrea and Mozambique, nationalist movements appealed to women to join and support the liberation struggle by emphasizing the idea that a nation could not be liberated without the liberation of women. Nationalist movements opened up spaces for women to join and participate in national politics and contribute to the liberation struggles. Because colonial

administration policies had shut the doors of public participation on women, with many relegated to the domestic sphere, nationalist movements became spaces where women felt validated as political subjects.

However, upon the declaration of independence it became clear to most women that their active involvement in nationalist movements during the anticolonial era did not guarantee them the gender equality many of them had hoped for. According to Takyiwaa Manuh, women in postcolonial Ghana emerged as the greatest losers of both the political and economic transformations that took place after independence.⁷ The political and socioeconomic systems bequeathed to African nations at independence came with a male face. Political leaders in the newly independent nations did not give priority to issues such as health, education, low wages, land tenure, and conditions of workers in rural areas and the informal sector. These issues continue to disproportionately affect women. It is important to note that the problems women face in the postcolonial moment are a continuation of policies and ideas established during the colonial era.

Although colonialism altered gender relations to further European economic and political exploitation of the continent, African governments continue to justify and reinforce these unfair policies. Despite women's contributions to the struggle for political independence in favor of equality for all, postcolonial African states became Africanized replicas of colonial predecessors. Advantages men had gained through their access to education, jobs, and property helped them to amass wealth, control political power, and occupy other leadership positions. In Guinea Bissau, the regime of Luís Almeida Cabral was not interested in changing the social dynamics of the country, despite the existing laws that advocated for gender equality and the protection of women.⁸ On the contrary, the regime developed new economic policies that favored former guerillas and military officers.

Ordinary women, especially those living in rural areas, were locked out of these spheres of power and influence. In most countries, illiteracy levels remain high despite campaigns aimed at schooling for girls.⁹ Women in rural areas and informal settlements face serious problems in the areas of polygyny, forced marriages, sex work, inheritance, and widowhood. In societies where women do not have the right to own land many of them live in precarious conditions, as cases emerge about the families of deceased husbands arriving to claim the household property as their own rather than belonging to the widow and her children.

Starting in the 1980s, African women began to involve themselves in new organizations to implement policies that directly affected them as women. Although some were associated with politics and legal issues, others were related to community concerns and women's economic situation as a result of neoliberal policies.¹⁰ From the League of Kenyan Women Voters, whose goal is to enhance civic participation of women in the electoral process through voter education, to Namibia's Domestic and Allied Workers' Union, established in 2013 to protect and restore the human dignity of domestic workers, women continue to mobilize themselves in groups to advocate for equal rights and opportunities for women in economic, social, and political spheres.

Women and Electoral Politics

Democratic transitions are characteristic of postcolonial Africa. Formally and informally, African women occupy a central place in this process, especially in the political realm, whether serving as public servants, voters, or politicians. The questions thus become: how do women fully participate in political processes, and what is the nature of their participation? Women's active participation in electoral politics has been used as an indicator of a vibrant and progressive democracy.¹¹ In Africa, as with many other regions worldwide, the opening up of civic spaces to women within the democratic framework of electoral politics can be attributed to the active women's movements and transnational feminist networks of the 1980s and 1990s.

The 1985 Third UN World Conference on Women held in Nairobi and the 1995 Beijing conference, in particular, led to an emergence of direct action, grassroots organizing, and coalition building within and across various feminist networks that were crucial to women's political activism. In the late 20th century, as women-led organizations pushed for governments to make constitutional changes and to enact legislation and policies at local and national levels that addressed issues of justice and equality for all citizens, African women began to take on new roles in civil society, and many took up higher positions of political and economic power.

Scholars from various disciplines argue that the masculinized political culture in different societies continues to be an obstacle to women's full participation in electoral politics. A quick glance over electoral process in the last three decades from Nigeria to Kenya to Angola reveals not only the male-dominated nature of politics, but more importantly the fact that politics in these regions is based on "clientelism/patronage." Clientelism is a system where political power is often displayed through an intricate system of social relations linking leaders/patrons with close associates and supporters who are part of the political structure. And so, rather than offer resources to the public through formal institutions, clientelist/patronage politics ensures that the political elite distribute resources to their clients in exchange for their allegiance.¹² A central feature of clientelist politics is that it serves as a regulatory tool in which rivalry across political parties is closely monitored by the "big man" who wields the power to use state resources for rewarding or punishing rivals.

It is, therefore, easy to see how clientelist politics does great disservice to women who desire to enter competitive politics, and especially female politicians who do not own the financial resources needed to run a successful political campaign. The few who join competitive politics do so through women's wings, which are beholden to the leadership of the main parties because these women's organizations serve as mouth pieces of the political parties.

Given that the boundaries between the political and social life in many African societies are porous, elastic, and constantly shifting, the political participation of women tends to be informal, unpredictable, and organized around men with whom they are connected in familial and socially legitimate ways. Amina Mama describes this system as a femocracy, that is "an anti-democratic female power structure which claims to exist for the advancement of ordinary women, but is unable to do so because it is 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."¹³ Femocratic institutions are largely spearheaded by first ladies. For

instance, in places such as Kenya, Nigeria, Cameroon, Zimbabwe, Ghana, and Nigeria, first ladies became well known not only for their lavish lifestyles and the personal wealth they amassed during their period as first ladies but also for their proclivity to create their own organizations.¹⁴ Femocracy and the reliance on patronage to run political and economic institutions ultimately leads to the weakening of democratic processes.

Since patronage relationships exist primarily between men, with women largely excluded from these networks, most of the women who wish to enter formal politics find it hard to raise the finances and resources needed to run for elections. In Angola, for example, where patronage networks are important both to being selected by political parties as a candidate and to getting elected, female politicians who have a different vision for the country and who want to run as independent candidates do not stand a chance. In fact, it is an openly acknowledged fact in Angola that in order to get selected to run for office or succeed politically it is important to be from “*o grande família do MPLA*/the big family of MPLA.”¹⁵

Whether in Kenya, the Democratic Republic of Congo, or Mozambique, patronage-based politics tends to empower a few women politically as elections provide an opportunity for women in certain circles to auction their voice to the highest bidder. While female politicians’ level of involvement in politics is sanctioned by the political parties they belong to, women use their presence within these parties to fashion their own political subjectivities. Writing about South African women’s engagement in politics, Shireen Hassim rightfully observes that electoral participation, for women especially, is an important measure of the extent to which individuals can exercise their citizenship rights.¹⁶

The Politics of Gender Quotas

Gender gaps in political participation exist across Africa, however, the size of the disparity varies widely across countries. To remedy this problem, countries in East and Southern Africa adopted gender quotas as a strategy to increase the number of women elected to parliament and to demonstrate the commitment of various governments to issues of equality and democracy.¹⁷ Gender quotas as a strategy to fast-track women’s entry into the legislature highlight the symbolic roles quotas play increasing a country’s democratic legitimacy. Currently, African countries have some of the world’s highest rates of representation in the legislative arms of government. For example, in Rwanda, South Africa, Ethiopia, and Mozambique, women hold 61, 42, 39, and 38 percent of the legislative seats, respectively. Although these figures show an impressive “success” story of the progress African women have continued to make when it comes to politics, they remain exceptions to the general rule, and they are a reminder that men still dominate political power and influence on the continent.

Case studies from Rwanda and Uganda, for example, show that women’s increased presence in electoral politics helps reshape attitudes, values, and ideas toward women’s roles in politics, and they can be a powerful symbol for democracy.¹⁸ When voters, especially women, change attitudes about politics and government, quotas could lead to a female electorate that is more politically active. The presence of women in the legislature can be seen as a turning

point in gender politics in Rwanda. The visibility of women in parliament, the judiciary, and other arms of government helps subvert the sexist mentality of what a woman can and cannot do.

It is true that quotas may only be empty gestures made by politicians so that they can rally behind a woman-friendly policy that they have initiated as a way to attract female voters. In reality, however, these quotas tend to have little impact on the overall structure of the political party except for making women in society think positively about their political system. In her work on Ugandan politics, Josephine Ahikire notes that “affirmative action seats for women generally tend to be viewed as politically inferior.”¹⁹

In countries like Kenya, where women currently constitute only 19 percent of members of parliament, falling below the 30 percent constitutional requirement, or Angola, where women’s representation dropped 30 percent after the August 2017 election, gender quotas present an interesting case of both the opportunities and challenges in strengthening women’s political participation in context of post-conflict national reconstruction. These case studies demonstrate that even though the adoption of gender quotas does not fully address the issue of the underrepresentation of women in politics in the short term, the strides being made by governments and political parties in ensuring more women join positions of governance are promising for women in the long term.

From Sahle-Work Zewde, Ethiopia’s first female president, to Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka, the executive director of UN Women, African women are gradually making their presence felt in various positions of power and authority nationally and internationally. Zewde is an example of how women are pushing the limits of their involvement in the political sphere. Zewde was appointed as the first female president of Ethiopia in 2018. Although this role is ceremonial, since the prime minister holds most power, Zewde’s position is testament to the importance of having women in positions of influence. Prior to her appointment as the president, Zewde was actively involved in restoring peace in the Horn of Africa region. During her time at the United Nations and the African Union Zewde spearheaded peace-building initiatives. Thus, in a context where women are generally marginalized in the democratic process, an increase in women’s levels of participation in formal politics, however minimal, transforms the ways that women view themselves, their political and economic abilities, and their subjectivities.

Challenging Militarism

Wars and conflicts have been consistent features in Africa. However, it is important to note that postcolonial conflicts are deeply rooted in the colonial wars of the 19th and 20th centuries. From Uganda to Burundi, from Congo to Angola and Mozambique, from the US-led “war on terror” to Somalia and Niger, violent conflicts witnessed in the postcolonial era are not exceptional, and they are most certainly linked to the Euro-American imperial project and the global political economy project. Mahmood Mamdani, for instance, makes a compelling argument that the United States used Africa in its proxy war to roll back and contain radical states.²⁰ The United States’ political, financial, and sometimes military backing of groups such as the Mozambican National Resistance Movement (RENAMO) and the National Union for the Total Independence of Angola (UNITA) in the 1980s and 1990s is an example of how African conflicts are linked to international politics.

What then are the gendered implications of these violent conflicts? Feminist scholars of militarism posit that gender and militarism are inextricably linked.²¹ Since state power in many African nations is almost exclusively in the hands of male leaders, Patricia McFadden points out the existence of a link “between the maintenance and expansion of state power and the growth and use of militarism as an expression of that state power.”²² For example, in the wake of Boko Haram’s insurgency in Nigeria and Cameroon, the regime of Paul Biya continued to derail international efforts to put an end to the violence. Since 2017 President Biya has used state forces to attack and kill southern Cameroonians whom he described as “terrorists” and “separatists.”²³ Elsewhere, Amina Mama, in her work on the Nigerian military regimes of the 1980s and 1990s, delineates the ways that the military state used gender politics for its own end.²⁴ It is not surprising that political elites in postcolonial Africa have continued to use the militarized state as a vehicle of repression, exclusion, and maintaining masculine power.

Historian Alicia Decker, for example, shows not only how some Ugandan women actively supported and were implicated in the brutal regime of Idi Amin in the 1970s, but also how many survivors of the violence courageously resisted and spoke against the atrocities of Amin’s rule.²⁵ Indeed, women are disproportionately affected by wars, yet many find ways to mobilize from the grassroots to the national and international level against senseless violence. The Uganda case helps to demonstrate the resilience of women living in militarized societies. African women are more than just hapless victims of war. Since the colonial period, women have found ways to carve out spaces where they mobilize and protest unjust and violent regimes.

Just like women in Uganda who used gendered rhetoric in their appeals to the state, Liberian women used the same tactic to mobilize themselves in demanding for the end of the civil war. Fed up with the endless cycles of war (1989–1996 and 1999–2003), Liberian women mobilized across religious and ethnic affiliations calling for peace. As a mobilizing strategy, women activists organized a sex strike, arguing that they would not have sex with their men until the warring factions signed a peace agreement. Using gender and sexual politics as a method of peaceful protest gave the antiwar activism added potency, international media attention, and persuaded many men to support the women activists. Leymah Gbowee and her Women of Liberia Mass Action for Peace campaign is a perfect example of African women’s agency in challenging militarism.²⁶ A peace activist, women’s rights advocate, and a Nobel Peace Prize laureate, Leymah is best known for leading a nonviolent movement that brought together women from different religious groups to play a pivotal role in ending Liberia’s civil war in 2003. The historic achievement of this antiwar mobilization not only paved the way for the election of Africa’s first female head of state but also marked the emergence of a new wave of women committed to holding postcolonial military regimes accountable. The Liberian women-led peace movements provide lessons in how grassroots solidarity and coalition movements can lead to change.

Women and Political Economy

Despite women’s contributions to the struggle for independence, many postcolonial states reproduced the gender hierarchies and economic inequities of colonial regimes.²⁷ The promises made by various nationalist movements in the first half of the 20th century

regarding women's access to political rights and the opening up of labor markets are yet to be realized for most women, especially those in rural areas. Rather than promote political equality and improve women's livelihoods, nationalist leaders made little effort to guarantee women's economic independence.

With the advent of neoliberalism, in particular with the introduction of structural adjustment programs (SAPs) in the 1980s, not only do women in rural areas contend with the economic structures in their societies that perpetuate existing gender inequality but also with the foreign multinational institutions, including the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank, that African states depend on for financial assistance.²⁸ The policies put forth by these financial institutions are often imbued with many of the same biases against women.²⁹

Capitalism significantly altered local economies leading to private ownership, nonagricultural employment, waged labor, and replacement of subsistence farming with a cash-crop economy. The shifts in the economies also meant that land and capital were concentrated in the hands of a few. All of these changes reinforced not only the division of labor between men and women but also put a significant burden on women whose labor was crucial for the survival of the family in the face of declining wages earned by men.

Nonetheless, African women have not given up fighting for the betterment of their lives nor passively accepted the economic challenges they face. Over the past fifty years both formal and informal women's organizations aimed at boosting women's economic productivity and financial stability have flourished. From Southern Africa to West Africa, women have been proactive by forming grassroots self-help groups and demanding their governments and development agencies provide micro-financial services. These grassroots organizations provide much-needed economic assistance to members, such as credit for farming or small business ventures or other forms of mutual assistance. For many women, joining women's groups is a way for them to not only access and achieve economic power. Women's groups also offer an avenue for building women's self-confidence and empowerment.

In the 21st century, mobile banking information and communication technologies (ICTs) have been useful in allowing poor communities, women in particular, to access banking services that were initially difficult to access. Kenya provides a good example of the ways that mobile banking through M-Pesa services has brought significant changes to women, especially those in rural areas and those living in urban informal settlements. Women now have the ability to access funds and save money, which enables them to help their families; open and expand small businesses; and more importantly, send their children to school.

Women and Social Media Activism

While the relationship between social movements and the use of technology is not new, the decade from 2010–2020 has witnessed an increase in how activists use new technology to mobilize both nationally and transnationally. The widespread use of mobile phones in Africa has enabled African societies to “leapfrog” over the landline stage of telecommunication. More importantly, social networks such as Twitter and Facebook, as well as messaging platforms such as Whatsapp, have become crucial sites for protesting, mobilizing activists, and influencing mainstream media agendas.

Some recent examples linking social media and women's activism include the 2011 political uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt, known popularly as the Arab Spring. In Egypt, women activists used their blogs to demand a better future for their children. The idea of "activist mothering," in physical space as well as on blogs, Facebook, YouTube, and other social networking sites, resonated with many women surfing the net, with the effect of creating a protest movement that took on a transnational outlook.³⁰ In Nigeria, the #BringBackOurGirls campaign in 2014 was created by parents and activists who were frustrated by the seeming inaction of the Nigerian government following the abductions, to complement protests in cities across the country.³¹ This campaign, which saw celebrities around the world appealing for the release of the girls, reveals the power of social media in attracting global attention.

In other places including Zimbabwe, Kenya, Angola, South Africa, and the Ivory Coast, new media technologies have not only given women and members of the LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered, and queer) communities a voice but have helped alter the traditional understandings of activist spaces while also creating a community of empowered and agential citizens.³²

The Unfinished Business of Postcolonialism

It has been over fifty years now since most African nations gained their independence with the promise of economic prosperity, political freedom, social justice, and women's rights. What African women had hoped for since independence was the opportunity to craft their own futures and to define their own destinies. Yet, as many of the case studies across Africa have shown, the fight for independence came at a price. The price for women who participated in nationalist movements was that of marginalization from institutions of power as well as economic structures as soon as new leaders came to power. In most cases, their access to power was only through women's wings that were appendages of the political parties. Moreover, the postcolonial governments' collusion with multinational corporations since the 1970s left women in various regions economically marginalized and vulnerable to unfair policies of these financial institutions.

Since the emergence of autonomous women's organizations in the late 1990s, women have found ways to mobilize and demand for women-friendly policies. Solidarity-building from the grassroots to the national and even transnational levels has facilitated the opening up of civic societies in various countries. The 21st century has been particularly promising in terms of women's economic independence and political participation, as many women continue to bid for political power. While there still exist countries with higher maternal mortality rates and illiteracy levels among women and girls, the spread of technology has been crucial in creating awareness and calling for solutions to these issues on a transnational level. Women in postcolonial Africa have come a long way, and they are taking over their own narratives and rewriting their own history.

Discussion of the Literature

The much-needed literature on the role and place of women in postcolonial Africa has offered insights into the gendering of the postcolonial nation. It is worth noting, however, that much of this work on African women's contemporary history has not been written by historians,

mostly due to the politics of knowledge production, particularly who gets to write history and what “counts” as history. As more interdisciplinary scholars continue to research on and around women, there continues to be a re-emphasis on the critiques of the marginalization of women in the canonical texts of African history.³³ For instance, exciting scholarship since the mid-1980s by African feminist scholars such as Dzodzi Tsikata, Filomena Steady, Amina Mama, Sylvia Tamale, Shireen Hassim, and many others has provided comprehensive analysis on women’s involvement in the various male-dominated institutions, from politics to the military.³⁴ These studies challenge and move beyond the African women’s victimhood narrative—which is common in Western scholarship—and instead examine the dynamic ways women in contemporary Africa navigate their patriarchal societies and find ways to thrive. On militarism, there exists vibrant literature by scholars from a wide range of disciplines. This scholarship highlights not only the impact of wars and conflicts on women but also underscores the contradictory ways that women support national wars and militarism.³⁵ Studies that emerged in the last quarter of the 20th century and the 2000s explored the rise of autonomous women’s movements across the continent. These works focused on women’s collective action on issues of democracy and the politics of survival.³⁶

Literary works of fiction by older and younger generations of African women writers have become increasingly useful in shedding light on the gendered political, economic, socio-cultural, and ideological issues in postcolonial Africa.³⁷ On the issue of gender gaps in politics several works by feminist scholars illuminate the difference women make once they enter competitive politics. These studies and others examine how some African countries have adopted affirmative action in electoral politics to influence legislative representation of women.³⁸

Primary Sources

A myriad of primary sources on women and the postcolonial state in Africa are found in national newspapers of various countries; United Nations websites, especially UN Women <http://www.unwomen.org/>; and secondary sources. Many newspapers are now available online. The Standard Media group, for example, offers online access to articles on East Africa that go as far back as the 1970s. South African History Online <http://www.sahistory.org.za/> also offers excellent primary sources on different events and notable women anti-apartheid activists of the 20th century.

Memoirs remain crucial to the study of women’s lives after independence. Some of the most notable memoirs include those by women politicians and social and environmental activists, such as first elected female president in Africa, Ellen Johnson Sirleaf of Liberia; Leymah Gbowee; and Wangari Maathai of Kenya. All the three were Nobel laureates.³⁹

Data on women’s representation in legislatures since 1997 can be found in the online database of the Inter-Parliamentary Union <http://www.ipu.org/>. Additionally, data on the economy and labor is available from the World Economic Forum Global Gender Gap <http://www.weforum.org/agenda/gender-gap>. Another excellent source on notable African women throughout history is Kathleen Sheldon’s **Historical Dictionary of Women in Sub-Saharan Africa**.⁴⁰

Links to Digital Materials

Feminist Africa <http://www.agi.ac.za/agi/feminist-africa>

Ondjango Feminista <<https://www.ondjangofeminista.com/>>

Make Every Woman Count <<http://www.makeeverywomancount.org/>>

Pray the Devil Back to Hell <<http://www.forkfilms.com/pray-the-devil-back-to-hell>>

Taking Root Wangari Maathai <<http://www.takingrootfilm.com/>>

You Have Struck a Rock <<http://www.newsreel.org/video/you-have-struck-a-rock>>

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Notes

1. Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, *This Child Will Be Great* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2010), 245.

2. See Oyeronke Oyewumi, ed., *African Women and Feminism: Reflecting on the Politics of Sisterhood* (Trenton: Africa World Press, 2003).

3. For a similar critique of postcoloniality see also Alicia Decker, "African Women and the Postcolonial State," in *The Palgrave Handbook of African Colonial and Postcolonial History*, ed. Martin Shanguhya and Toyin Folola (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2018), 1137–1154.

4. Anne McClintock, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in the Colonial Context* (New York: Routledge, 1995).
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