

Are African Women rising? Assessing Women's Economic and Political Agency in Contemporary Africa

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Abstract:

Gender equality, and the political and economic advancement of women is a development goal in its own rights, and a necessary sustainable development strategy. This largely explains the increased global, regional, and country-specific efforts aimed at eliminating gender inequalities, particularly inequalities between women and men in access to economic and political resources and opportunities. Between 2000 and 2014, Africa was celebrated as the world's GDP miracle, and a period with seemingly more excellent openings for gender equality and women's economic and political advancement, captured within the African women rising narrative. Drawing mainly from Africa's performances on Global Gender Equality Indexes, the African Gender Equality Index, and the Social Institution and Gender Equality Index, this paper demonstrates that the observed euphoria ushered by the African rising narrative a decade ago does not reflect the real situations of gender equality and women's empowerment in contemporary Africa. Gender inequalities in access to economic opportunities and participation, and inequalities in political participation still constitute a significant barrier to realizing the full potential of African women, with varied implications for the region's sustainable development. Gender equality strategies, therefore, needs to go beyond advocacy for the numeric presence of women in the economic and political sphere (justified by global and regional numeric rankings) to critically address the root causes of oppression that limits the potentials of all women and not just women of the privileged elite class.

Key Word: Africa women rising, gender equality, economic and political empowerment, Africa

1. Introduction:

For over 50 years of independence, many Sub-Saharan African countries have been battling with the challenge of accelerating economic growth, reducing income poverty, and promoting social justice, rights, and equality for citizens, and sustainable development (Chabal, 2002; Herbst, 1990). Since independence, the development balance sheets of Sub-Saharan African countries have not been very encouraging. Alongside these challenges, corruption continues to be pervasive, with damaging consequences on the development of the region. For this reason, the May 2000 edition of 'The Economist' magazine declared Africa a hopeless continent, arguing that the new millennium has brought nothing but more disaster to the post-independent African nations. Many of these nations, notably from sub-Saharan Africa, were still battling with the late 1990s post-cold war economic crisis resulting from the fall of oil prices in the world market and the effects of the World Bank and IMF imposed structural adjustment policies (Yenshu, 2008). The causes of, and solutions to Africa's development crisis have generated heated debate among development scholars and practitioners on the appropriate strategies to promote good governance in Africa.

From the perspective of feminists and gender scholars, there seems to be a consensus on the necessity of interrogating the link between gender inequalities (absence of equal treatment and opportunities for men, women, boys, and girls to realize their full potential) and the development deficits of post-independent African nations (Cornwall & Goetz, 2005; Chattopadhyay & Duflo, 2004). The nexus between gender equality, women's empowerment, and sustainable development is too significant to be ignored. Evidence thus far points to the importance and urgency of tackling the twin challenge of accelerating gender equality and sustainable development in all societies.

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A World Bank report on *Engendering Development through Gender Equality in Rights, Resource, and Voice* highlights the pervasiveness of gender discrimination and inequality and the resulting gaps in access to, and control of resources, economic opportunities, power, and political voice between men and women mainly in South East Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa (World Bank, 2001). In response to the need of accelerating gender equality and women's empowerment in Africa, the African Union (AU), launched the Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment (GEWE) strategy 2018-2028, during the AU Summit of February 2019. The GEWE strategy informed by lessons learned from the AU gender policy launched in 2009, and the African women decade (2010-2020), and focuses on four main pillars: (i) maximizing opportunities outcomes and E-tech dividends; (ii) dignity, security and resilience; (iii) effective laws, policies and institutions; and, (iv) leadership, voice and visibility. Through the effective implementation of the four pillars, the GEWE strategy seeks to strengthen women's economic and political agency and promote women's voice in articulating their concerns.

Earlier, the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, adopted by UN Member States in 1995, called on states to adopt strategies that promote gender equality and the political and economic empowerment of men and women at all levels, in addition to the ten other critical areas of concern (United Nations, 1995). In a similar light, paragraphs 31 and 45 of the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) Resolution 66/288 of 27 July 2012 hinge on the importance of an inclusive approach to development that valorizes the roles and contributions of men, women, boys, and girls in achieving the three pillars of sustainable development; economic, social and environmental. In essence, achieving sustainable development requires the promotion of gender equality, women's rights, and the empowerment of women and youths to effectively participate in sustainable development programs, policies, and decision-making at all levels (General Assembly resolution 66/288 of 27 July, 2012, annex, paras. 31 and 45).

Building on the UNGA Resolution 66/288, the 2014 World Survey on Women in Development observed an interrelation between the key drivers of gender inequality and unsustainability. Consequently, addressing impediments to sustainable development must be concomitant with efforts at addressing gender inequality (United Nations, 2010). From a social justice and rights perspective, feminist and gender scholars affirm that sustainable development cannot occur at the expense of social justice, gender equality, and citizens' rights (Dollar et al., 1999; Danida, 2008; Brody, 2009). From an economic standpoint, addressing gender inequality is central to redressing the negative impact of economic, social, and environmental shocks and the challenges that undermines the rights, roles, and entitlements of women and girls (UN Women, 2014, World Bank, 2000). Finally, from the agency viewpoint, addressing gender inequality requires building women's agency and capabilities to chat a better synergy between gender equality and sustainable development (UN Women, 2014; Chattopadhyay & Duflo, 2004). This paper assesses women's political and economic agency in contemporary Africa as key imperatives to promoting gender equality and sustainable development. It revisits the African Rising, and African Women Rising Narratives championed mainly by The Economist Magazine, the Wall Street Journal, and the Forbes Magazine in 2011. The paper draws on secondary data from Global Gender Equality Indexes: the African Gender Equality Index, and the Social Institution and Gender Equality Index, to evaluate progress in gender parity in economic opportunities and political empowerment of women in Africa.

2. Gender and the Africa Rising Narrative

The declaration of the Africa rising narrative, as captioned on the cover page of the December 2011 edition of The Economist Magazine, soon became a new euphoria among many western and African media outlets and also featured prominently in strategic regional and international conferences. As a result, Africa soon became a strategic frontier for foreign investment while enjoying over 6% GDP, rising per capita income, growing middle class, expanding bourgeoisie class, and exponential growth in the mobile telecom sectors with sprawling mega-cities like Lagos, Nairobi, Johannesburg, Addis Ababa, and Kigali (AfDB, 2011). However, barely a decade after the May 2000 edition of The Economist magazine declared Africa a hopeless continent plagued by massive poverty, economic crisis, poverty, and under-development, Africa was once again celebrated as the world's GDP miracle, captured within the framework of 'Africa rising' narrative, painted by the Economist magazine.

A review of the literature on the 'Africa rising' narrative reveals mixed feelings amongst African and western scholars on whether the Africa rising narrative was a reality or a myth. On the one hand, the protagonists of the Africa rising narrative, championed by 'The Economist' magazine, were inspired by the economic buoyancy enjoyed by some African countries, notably at a period characterized by a global decline in economic growth. With over six of the world's fastest-growing economies located in Africa in the last decade coupled with the fact that Africa had grown faster than East Asia, including Japan, Africa was predicted to be at the take-off stage of development (The Economist, 2011).

Promoters of the 'Africa rising' discourse were quick to flag observed Africa's GDP miracles as the gateway to gender equality and the economic empowerment of African women. Probably inspired by the favorable gender climate observed in Africa at the dawn of the new millennium, promoters of the Africa rising narrative (notably *The Economist*, *The Wall Street Journal*, and *Forbes Magazine*) also championed the African women rising narrative. In addition to the GDP miracle seen as a gateway to gender equality, 3.7% of African nations had female heads of state. The emergence of the first women African presidents, Joyce Banda of Malawi and Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf of Liberia, the presence of Nkosazna Dlamini-Zuma at the helm of the African Union, three African women Nobel Peace prize laureates (Wangari Maathai, Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf and Leymah Gbowee), and Isabel dos Santos of Angola, identified as the first African woman billionaire, were frequently cited by global institutions, civil society organizations, the media, and local civil society organizations as African women rising (Davis-van Es, 2014).

On the other hand, judging from the concerns expressed by skeptics of the 'Africa rising' narrative, and feminists in particular, the following questions are pertinent to understanding the celebrated Africa rising narrative: is Africa indeed rising? What constitutes being a woman on the rise in Africa? Does the present status quo enable African nations to chart meaningful and sustainable development? While increased GDP and per capita income are worth celebrating as justifications for the 'Africa rising' narrative, the achievements have been marked by widespread inequalities between men and women. The celebrated African GDP miracle masks the internal struggles many African women, including those widely celebrated, have dealt with daily (Davis-van Es, 2014). Countries that were celebrated as African GDP miracles by the *Economist* magazine, such as Angola, Chad, DR Congo, Burkina Faso, Ethiopia, Sierra Leone, Libya, Niger, Ghana, and Ivory Coast, also ranked very low in the human development and gender equality indexes and reflected high rates of maternal mortality (UNDP, 2018). The sub-Saharan African region is also amongst the regions that rank low on the global Gender Equality Index (UNDP, 2018).

3. Gender and the African Development Agenda

Beginning from the new millennium, the promotion of gender equality has been one of the goals of the African Union (AU). The Constitutive Act of the African Union (AU), signed on July 11, 2000 in Lome, Togo, highlight the importance of gender equality as a key requirement for the attainment of the goals of the African Union (Article 4). A special unit is established in the office of the Chairperson of the African Union to coordinate all activities and programs of the Commission related to gender issues. More recently, the new vision of the African continent articulated in the African Union Agenda 2063, "the Africa We Want," adopted by Heads of state and governments of the AU in 2015, takes gender equality concerns into cognizance in one of its seven aspirations. Aspiration 6 of the African Union Agenda 2063 calls for 'An Africa whose development is people-driven, relying on the potential of African people, especially its women and youth, and caring for children. In essence, gender equity can only take place when men and women enjoy equal economic, social, cultural, and political rights (African Union, 2019). Consequently, the Gender Unit of the AU has developed a 10-year strategy (2018-2028) for Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment (GEWE) to provide the necessary framework for the realization of Aspiration 6 of the AU Agenda 2063 (African Union, 2019).

The African Union has equally adopted a series of regional gender equality instruments such as the AU Gender Policy, the Solemn Declaration of Gender Equality in Africa (2004), and the Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples Right on the Rights of African Women (2003). In addition, most African states have ratified and adopted international gender equality instruments like the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, and the United Nations Agenda 2030 on sustainable development goals. Given the gender friendly policy environment provided by the African Union, Africa can be said to be at the take-off stage of promoting gender equality as a necessary precondition for accelerating economic growth and the sustainable development of the continent.

3.1. Gender Inequalities and Africa's Development

Generally speaking, gender is a socio-cultural construct that shapes the roles, attitudes, responsibilities, opportunities and expectations of men and women in a given society. The concept was popularized in the early 1960 to distinguish sex (biological differences between males and females) from gender, meaning the amount of femininity and masculinity a person exhibits (Stoller, 1968). In line with Psychologist Robert Stoller, this distinction is important given that many differences between men and women, notably concerning political, economic, and social rights and entitlements, are socially produced and, therefore, changeable. In the same light, French feminist Simone de Beauvoir, in her classical 1949 publication, *The Second Sex*, notes that one is not born a woman but becomes a woman. (p.18). Social discrimination, resulting from asymmetrical gender hierarchies, in most cases, translates to a different outcome for women and men with varied implications for society.

Consequently, the differences between men and women is not a product of nature but how social institutions are organized and reconstituted (Kabeer, 1996). The consensus in the gender and development literature is that the vast spread of inequalities, particularly gendered inequalities, significantly explains Africa's dismal growth and economic performance (World Bank, 2001, UNDP, 2016). A review of Africa's growth pattern reveals pervasive gender, class, and ethnic-based inequalities in rights, resources, and voice, with enormous implications for development.

The 2016 UNDP Africa Human Development Report estimated the annual cost of social and economic discrimination against women to Africa's growth at approximately one hundred billion US dollars (UNDP, 2016). Compared to other regions, Sub-Saharan Africa ranks higher in loss of human potential due to inequality, particularly gender inequality (UNDP, 2019). The outcome of gender inequalities is evident in the constant increase of income poverty, over-exploitation of natural resources, and declining well-being and human development. While extreme global poverty has declined since the early 2000s, the decline rate is slowest in sub-Saharan Africa, with more than half of the world's extremely poor people residing in sub-Saharan Africa in 2015 (World Bank, 2016). The proportion of Africans living below the international poverty line (\$1.90) declined from 57% to 43% between 1990 and 2012. At the current pace of decline, Africa is likely to fall short of achieving the Sustainable Development Goals 1 (eradicating extreme poverty) by 2030 (World Bank, 2019). These statistics were recorded at a time when six of the world's growing economies (Ethiopia, Rwanda, DR Congo, Ivory Coast, Mozambique, and Tanzania) were located on the African continent.

A perusal of Africa's gender equality situation reveals similar trends. According to the 2018 Global Gender Gap Report, Africa has witnessed some gains in promoting gender equality and women's economic and political empowerment. Two sub-Saharan countries, Rwanda and Namibia, rank among the top 10 countries regarding gender equality and women's advancement (see Table 1). Despite this achievement, sub-Saharan Africa generally ranks low in gender quality (66.3%), though higher than South East Asia (65.8%) and the Middle East and North Africa, 60.2% (Global Gender Gap Report, 2022). The Global Gender Gap Report further highlights that at the current rate of progress, the overall gender gap between men and women in Sub-Saharan Africa is estimated to close in 135 years, and 153 years in North Africa. These trends are disturbing given decades of a global campaign in favor of gender equality and over 19 years since Africa as a continent recognized the necessity of gender equality in accelerating Africa's growth and development agenda.

4. Women's economic and political agency in contemporary Africa: Are African women on the rise?

The Africa rising narrative inspired by the solid economic performance observed across the continent between 2000 and 2014 resulted in increased optimism for the acceleration of gender equality and women's empowerment. During this period, 3.7% of African countries had female heads of state. A woman headed the African Union Commission. Three African women were Nobel Peace Prize Laureates. Africa also recorded its first female billionaire. However, the gender equality situation in Africa left skeptics, particularly African feminist thinkers questioning the 'African rising' narrative. On September 25, 2012, the BBC Africa Debate titled 'Are African women on the rise?'. In response to the question Jessie Kabwila, a Malawian women's rights campaigner, remarked:

It is easy to believe that [African] women are on the rise. [For example], Ellen Johnson Sirleaf is the president of Liberia and Joyce Banda that of Malawi. In July 2012, South Africa's Nkosazana Dlamini-Zuma took over the leadership of the African Union. However, a few questions need to be asked: What is Africa's primary source of oppression? Can African women rise from it by becoming presidents? What constitutes being a woman on the rise in Africa? Are the women who are rising representative of African women? (BBC Africa, September 25, 2012).

Much earlier, Amina Mama's (1995) article on "Feminism or Femocracy? State Feminism and Democratisation in Nigeria" echoed similar views. Using the experiences of African first ladies, Mama (1995) argued that most African women in leadership positions are not necessarily representative of African women. She further notes that femocracy - feminist autocracy existing parallel to a patriarchal oligarchy from which it derives benefit - is typical of the democratization process in Africa. Women's representation in African leadership does not significantly contribute to addressing the underlying factors associated with women's oppression in Africa. Mama's and Kabwila's remarks, offer an excellent narrative of the strategic challenges involved in accelerating gender equality in Africa.

Inspired by the above understandings, this section assesses the gender parity performance of sub-Saharan African countries drawing on statistics generated from the 2006, 2018, 2021, and 2022 global Gender Equality Indexes; the 2021 African Gender Equality Index as well as the Social Institutions and Gender Index (SIGI).

The Global and African Gender Equality Indexes provide statistics on the gender parity rate of African countries based on equality between men and women in society's economic, political, health, and educational sectors. Furthermore, the section focuses on two key indicators, economic opportunity, participation, and political empowerment, for two reasons.

Firstly, equality between men and women in economic opportunities, participation, and political empowerment are strategic areas with significant potentials for promoting gender equality, social transformation, and sustainable development. Secondly, efforts at addressing gender inequality in economic opportunities and political participation tend to face more resistance than in other sectors like education and health (Global Gender Gap Report, 2022). The Social Institutions and Gender Index, on its part, provides statistics on the institutions that perpetuate inequality between men and women at respective country levels.

4.1. Gender Equality in Africa: Contemporary trends

Table 1: Global Gender Equality Index for best performing African Countries - 2006, 2018, 2021 & 2022 rankings

Country	2022		2021		2020		2018		2006	
	Gender gap index (0-1)	Global rank	Gender gap index (0-1)	Global rank	Gender gap index (0-1)	Global rank	Gender gap index (0-1)	Global rank	Gender gap index (0-1)	Global rank
Rwanda	0.811	6 th	0.805	7 th	0.791	9 th	0.804	6 th	n/a	n/a
Namibia	0.807	8 th	0.809	6 th	0.784	12 th	0.789	10 th	0.986	38 th
South Africa	0.782	20 th	0.781	18 th	0.780	17 th	0.755	19 th	0.713	18 th
Burundi	0.777	24 th	0.769	26 th	0.745	32 nd	0.741	31 st	n/a	n/a
Mozambique	0.752	34 th	0.758	32 nd	0.723	56 th	0.721	49 th	n/a	n/a
Zimbabwe	0.734	50 th	0.732	47 th	0.730	47 th	0.721	47 th	0.646	76 th
Kenya	0.729	57 th	0.692	95 th	0.671	109 th	0.700	76 th	0.649	73 rd
Uganda	0.724	61 th	0.717	66 th	0.717	65 th	0.724	43 rd	0.680	47 th
Zambia	0.723	62 th	0.726	56 th	0.731	45 th	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a
Tanzania	0.719	64 th	0.707	64 th	0.713	68 th	0.704	71 st	0.704	24 th
Botswana	0.719	66 th	0.716	71 st	0.709	73 rd	0.715	55 th	0.690	34 th
Cameroon	0.692	97 th	0.692	96 th	0.686	96 th	0.714	57 th	0.587	103 rd

Source: Global Gender Inequality Index 2006, 2018, 2020, 2021 & 2022

An assessment of the gender equality index of sub-Saharan African countries between 2006 and 2022 leaves one with both positive and negative impressions of the gender equality situation in Africa. The former could be explained based on the observed progress in gender equality in countries like Rwanda, Namibia, South Africa, and Burundi. These countries also feature among the top ten gender equal African countries on the African Gender Equality Index (African Development Bank [AfDB], 2015). For instance, Rwanda has maintained the highest gender equality rate in Africa and has featured among the top ten gender-equal countries worldwide since 2018 (Table 1). The Namibian experience also marks a significant milestone in promoting gender equality. The country progressed from 38th globally in 2006 to feature among the top fifteen countries in the 2018, 2020, 2021, and 2022 global gender equality indexes. A similar promising situation is the case of Burundi and Kenya (Table 1).

On a negative note, countries that performed better in the past decade, such as Uganda, Cameroon, and Botswana, recently recorded negative performance in the global gender equality index. Cameroon, for instance, dropped from 57th position in 2018 to 96th and 97th on the 2021 and 2022 global gender equality index, respectively. The case is also valid for Botswana and Uganda, which have witnessed a drop in gender equality rates over the same period, as demonstrated in Table 2. At the current pace of progress in gender equality, it would likely take approximately 99 years to close the gender gap between men and women globally and 127 years in Africa (Global Gender Gap Report, 2022). This situation is particularly worrisome when we consider the situation of gender equality in economic opportunities and participation and political empowerment in Africa.

4.1.1. Women and Political Empowerment in Contemporary Africa

The global gender and political empowerment gap is closing, though very slowly. The snail-speed pace of promoting gender equality in African political representation accounts for persistent gender inequality in political representation despite increased global, regional, and country-level activism and advocacy in favor of gender equality. The gender inequality gap in political empowerment stands at 78% globally, while that of sub-Saharan Africa is at 21.3% parity in women's and men's participation in political decision-making and policy formulation based on the 2022 global gender equality index. Rwanda is the first and only country in the world with more than 50% women representation in the national parliament.

The country has also continuously featured among the top ten countries globally, promoting gender equality in political representation since 2018. South Africa, Mozambique, Namibia, and Burundi have slightly progressed (Table 2). Conversely, the gender gap in political empowerment is still wide in the rest of the sub-Saharan African Countries.

Table 2: Gender and Political Empowerment Index for African countries – 2006, 2018, 2020, 2021 & 2022 Rankings

Country	2022		2021		2020		2018		2006	
	Index	Global Rank	Index	Global Rank	Index	Global Rank	Index	Global Rank	Index	Global Rank
Rwanda	0.563	7 th	0.563	6 th	0.563	4 th	0.539	4 th	n/a	n/a
South Africa	0.502	12 th	0.493	14 th	0.497	10 th	0.404	17 th	0.326	8 th
Mozambique	0.493	14 th	0.494	13 rd	0.362	26 th	0.340	26 th	n/a	n/a
Namibia	0.463	19 th	0.463	19 th	0.172	29 th	0.375	20 th	0.172	29 th
Ethiopia	0.416	26 th	0.382	28 th	0.427	16 th	0.223	52 nd	0.102	61 st
Burundi	0.345	37 th	0.345	36 th	0.269	43 rd	0.255	40 th	n/a	n/a
Senegal	0.324	39 th	0.327	38 th	0.320	32 nd	0.308	30 th	n/a	n/a
Uganda	0.294	46 th	0.296	46 th	0.309	35 th	0.305	32 nd	0.207	22 nd
Liberia	0.255	52 nd	0.255	55 th	0.218	63 rd	0.236	47 th	n/a	n/a
Angola	0.246	59 th	0.245	59 th	0.262	46 th	0.206	58 th	0.07	81 st
Guinea	0.225	65 th	0.157	96 th	0.125	108 th	0.162	80 th	n/a	n/a
Cameroon	0.202	76 th	0.202	74 th	0.196	70 th	0.191	61 st	0.061	85 th
Zimbabwe	0.202	77 th	0.21	71 st	0.238	54 th	0.190	63 rd	0.102	62 nd
Togo	0.195	80 th	0.185	81 st	0.111	116 th	0.128	95 th	n/a	n/a
Kenya	0.192	81 st	0.193	79 th	0.169	85 th	0.159	82 nd	0.053	93 rd
Zambia	0.173	85 th	0.18	84 th	0.174	80 th	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a
Eswatini	0.157	94 th	0.147	102 nd	0.138	101 st	0.112	104 th	n/a	n/a
Ghana	0.135	105 th	0.135	110 th	0.129	107 th	0.097	117 th	0.071	80 th
Benin	0.09	126 th	0.093	131 st	0.079	134 th	0.065	134 th	0.082	76 th
Botswana	0.085	129 th	0.084	135 th	0.079	135 th	0.079	126 th	0.129	47 th

Source: Global Gender Gap Report, 2006, 2018, 2020, 2021 & 2022

An analysis of past and current situations of gender and political empowerment in Africa evokes both optimism and pessimism about the Africa rising narrative. From the viewpoint of optimism, Africa, just like other regions of the world, celebrates an increase in women's representation in national parliaments, from 9.8% in 1995 to 24.7% in 2020 (Sadie, 2020), with Rwanda currently leading the world with 61.3% women representation in parliament, followed by South Africa (46.58%), Namibia (43.27%), Senegal (43.03%) and Mozambique with 41.2% women representation in parliament (Inter-Parliamentary Union IPU, 2020). Sub-Saharan Africa also records many gender equality and women-centered policies at regional and national levels, increased gender quotas, and the establishment of women policy agencies in many countries (Squires, 2007; Krook, 2004). On the negative side, the persistence of gender inequality in the substantive representation of women and gender interest in political decision-making and policy formulation is worth mentioning.

The observed numeric increase in women's representation (captured in the global gender equality indexes) and the proliferation of gender equality and women centered policies do not adequately translate to the integration of the concerns of all categories of men and women in deliberative discussions.

Growing literature on women's political representation has associated challenges in women's substantive participation in decision-making with factors such as limited education, limited political skills, inadequacies of electoral systems, lack of support for women leadership by political parties, weak national systems that do not promote accountability to gender equality, traditional and cultural norms that negate women's leadership and position in society, lack of support from spouses and family members, and limited time to participate in politics due to women's triple roles (Beall, 2005; Cornwall & Goetz, 2005; Evertzen, 2001; Claibourn & Sapiro, 2002; Garikipati, 2008).

More recently, Celis and Lovenduski (2018) believe that the tenuous link between numeric women's representation and the substantive representation of women's interest in politics cannot be attributed solely to the limitation in feminist struggles for gender parity in politics or educational, cultural, and familial factors, but also to the setting in which political representation for women takes place. Gender inequality in political representation should be understood as resistance to gender equality. At the same time, women's substantive participation must be interrogated in the context of power struggles between male and female political actors. (Celis & Lovenduski, 2018). Women continuously suffer discrimination from male party elites and are equally disadvantaged by the masculine nature of political institutions, which, in line with (Medeiros et al., 2019), prioritizes the interest of the incumbent (mainly men).

4.1.2. Women and Economic Empowerment in Contemporary Africa

Gender equality and women's economic empowerment is necessary to promote economic growth and sustainable development in Africa. Aspiration six of the African Union Agenda 2063 advocates for a people-driven development that relies heavily on the potential of African women and youths (African Union, 2015). In this light, therefore, the active involvement of women and youths is vital to attaining a prosperous Africa based on inclusive growth and sustainable development (African Union, 2015, p. 13).

An analysis of current trends in gender and economic empowerment in Africa indicates that only 5 (9.3%) of the 54 countries in Africa have attained at least an 80% gender parity rate in economic opportunities and participation. These countries (Burundi, Kenya, Botswana, Liberia, and Zambia) feature among the top ten countries worldwide with significant progress in gender equality in access to economic resources and opportunities (2022 Global Gender Gap Report). Burundi ranks second globally, followed by Kenya, Botswana, and Liberia, ranking sixth, seventh, and eighth, globally (ibid). Contrariwise, countries such as Benin, Cameroon, and Guinea have witnessed a significantly decline in gender equality in economic opportunities in Africa and worldwide. For instance, Benin, the world's leading country in gender and economic equality in 2020 and ninth in 2021, dropped to the 114th position in the economic opportunities and participation sub-index of the 2022 Global Gender Equality Index. Similarly, Guinea and Cameroon, which occupied the seventh and eighth positions in the 2018 rankings on global gender equality in economic empowerment, are currently ranked sixtieth and sixty-first in the 2022 Global Gender Equality Index for the economic opportunities and participation sub-index (Table 3).

Gender and economic empowerment index for African Countries: 2006, 2018, 2020, 2021 & 2022 Rankings

Country	2022		2021		2020		2018		2006	
	Index	Global Rank	Index	Global Rank	Index	Global Rank	Index	Global Rank	Index	Global Rank
Burundi	0.855	2 nd	0.855	3 rd	0.837	6 th	0.839	31 st	n/a	n/a
Kenya	0.811	6 th	0.672	84 th	0.598	114 th	0.734	37 th	0.657	40
Botswana	0.810	7 th	0.799	16 th	0.779	21 st	0.802	13 th	0.693	23
Liberia	0.804	8 th	0.717	53 rd	0.714	53 rd	0.729	41 st	n/a	n/a
Zambia	0.803	10 th	0.804	14 th	0.174	80 th	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a
Togo	0.798	13 th	0.787	21 st	0.111	116 th	0.610	108 th	n/a	n/a
Eswatini	0.789	19 th	0.797	17 th	0.703	59 th	0.694	58 th	n/a	n/a
Namibia	0.785	20 th	0.794	19 th	0.789	17 th	0.804	12 th	0.614	57
Zimbabwe	0.766	24 th	0.763	28 th	0.728	45 th	0.730	40 th	0.606	62
Rwanda	0.747	33 rd	0.726	48 th	0.672	79 th	0.743	30 th	n/a	n/a
Guinea	0.712	60 th	0.839	6 th	0.803	10 th	0.820	7 th	n/a	n/a
Cameroon	0.706	66 th	0.704	26 th	0.689	66 th	0.816	8 th	0.495	94
Uganda	0.696	73 rd	0.692	74 th	0.663	82 nd	0.700	55 th	0.677	28
Mozambique	0.654	90 th	0.655	95 th	0.648	93 rd	0.675	74 th	n/a	n/a
South Africa	0.649	92 nd	0.658	92 nd	0.649	92 nd	0.645	91 st	0.556	79
Angola	0.637	99 th	0.646	102 nd	0.640	96 th	0.602	113 rd	0.587	69
Ghana	0.608	108 th	0.598	119 th	0.642	94 th	0.753	25 th	0.753	5
Ethiopia	0.600	112 th	0.560	128 th	0.568	125 th	0.606	111 th	0.568	74
Benin	0.596	114 th	0.814	9 th	0.847	1 st	0.850	4 th	0.618	55
Senegal	0.483	136 th	0.554	131 st	0.552	128 th	0.308	30 th	n/a	n/a

Source: Global Gender Gap Report, 2006, 2018, 2020, 2021 & 2022

The current trends in gender and economic equality in Africa are not concomitant with the rate of men's and women's involvement in economic activities on the continent. Based on statistics from the African gender equality index, African women constitute over 60% of stakeholders in the economic sector. They perform most agricultural activities, own one-third of firms, and make up 70% of employees (AfDB, 2015). Unfortunately, gender inequalities in access to economic resources and opportunities greatly limit women's abilities to realize their full potential as economic agents. Gender inequalities in access to economic opportunities and resources are rooted in restrictive cultural practices, discriminatory legislation, and labor market segmentation (AfDB, 2015).

4.1.3. Gendered institutions and women's political and economic agency in Africa

In addressing the root causes of gender inequality in Africa, like elsewhere, feminist scholars have paid greater attention to the role of social, economic, and political institutions in perpetuating gender inequality. Gender analysis of political and economic institutions is necessary to: (i) fully understand the nexus between the numeric and substantive involvement of women in the economic and political sector and (ii) interrogate how economic and political institution creates or reinforces inequalities between women as a group and the implications of such discrimination on the economic and political empowerment of differing categories of women. This section analyzes the role of African institutions in promoting gender inequalities, particularly inequalities relating to the economic and political empowerment of men and women. According to the 2021 Social Institutions and Gender Index (SIGI) Report, Africa has a high level of discriminatory institutions that act against women's economic and political agency compared to other regions. Gender discrimination at the family level constitutes the highest challenge to African women's political and economic empowerment (AfDB, 2021). Discrimination between men and women at the family level significantly affects women's agency in household and extra-household decision-making. It also limits women's access to and control of economic resources at the household level (Kabeer, 1996).

In addition to familial institutions, women's challenges in accessing and controlling economic resources are considered a medium-level discriminatory challenge currently facing the African continent. The 2021 SIDI report underscores the significant role of customary and statutory norms in limiting women's access to and control of economic resources, particularly land, which is a crucial factor of production. Discrimination in access to productive resources limits women's access to labor markets and essential productive economic resources. It continues to widen the gender gaps in economic opportunities and participation between men and women in Africa.

Besides gender inequality between men and women, feminists are equally concerned about inequalities between women. Western and African feminist scholars have interrogated the role of class, ethnic, and racially-based inequalities in influencing the economic and political empowerment of different categories of women. As Celis and Lovenduski (2018) argued, the substantive representation of women's interests must emphasize strategies that consider all women's needs, concerns, and interests, not just that of privileged elite women. From the African perspective, Mama (1995) underscored the influence of femocracy in shaping African women's economic and political agenda. Mama further argues that sustainable transformations in the economic and political status of African women would likely occur only when gender equality efforts are inclusive of the experience of all categories of African women regardless of class, ethnicity, and geographical location. Unfortunately, most approaches to gender equality and women's empowerment in Africa mainly reflect the interest of women of the elite class (Mama, 1995).

5. Conclusion

This paper analyzes recent trends in African women's economic and political status and agency in the context of the 'African women rising' narrative popularized in the early 2000s. Drawing from statistics documented by five Global Gender Equality Indexes (2006, 2018, 2020, 2021 & 2022), the African Gender Equality Index, and the Social Intuitions and Gender Equality Index, this paper has demonstrated that persistent gender inequalities in access to productive economic resources and political participation and representation in decision-making processes still pose challenges to the sustainable development of the sub-region, regardless of the notable increase in women's numeric representation in the economic and political spheres.

Furthermore, the paper confirms in line with critics of the African women rising narrative that the observed timid progress in gender equality celebrated across Africa does not necessarily guarantee equality in access to economic and political opportunities to all categories of women in Africa. That latter is more likely to occur when gender equality strategies go beyond advocacy for women's numeric participation in Africa's economic and political life to address the root causes of gender inequality and oppression that limits the potentials of all women and not just women of the privileged elite class. While it is evident that much progress has been at continental level to promote GEWE, with the putting in place of important policy and normative frameworks, the desired results on GEWE have been scattered and oftentimes sustained. This paper therefore critiques the celebratory, peace-meal and limping approaches used at continental and Member States level in ensuring and sustaining the effective economic and political empowerment of African women.

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