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# Advancing Women's Political Participation and Empowerment in Africa

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## **Advancing Women's Political Participation and Empowerment in Africa**

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**Editors:** Alessia Gonfroid, Raquel Bañón

**Authors:** Laura Lahner, Dr. Catheline N. Bosibori, Dr. Ludovic Garattini, Lauriane Kindji

**Illustrations:** Precious Narotso

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# GENDER EQUALITY AND DEVELOPMENT IN AFRICA:

Pathways for Effective EU Engagement



Laura Lahner

Hanns Seidel Foundation

Gender equality, recognised as a core objective of the United Nations (UN) Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 5 within the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, is widely acknowledged as both a fundamental human rights principle and a key driver of sustainable development. Despite these global commitments, significant gender disparities persist across many African countries, particularly in labour market participation, access to finance and productive resources, and political representation. The EU has committed to promoting gender equality through its external policies, notably through the EU Gender Action Plan III (GAP III) and alignment with the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. These frameworks aim to integrate gender equality across international cooperation and strengthen partnerships with local actors (UN, 2025).

Building on this, the introduction of this publication outlines the added value of gender equality for sustainable development, reviews progress and persistent gaps in Africa, and highlights the strategic importance of sustained EU engagement, including the key mechanisms of GAP III. Against this background, the publication brings together first-hand insights and reflections from Kenya, West Africa, and Madagascar. By highlighting local perspectives, the contributions illustrate how gender equality initiatives unfold in practice and interact with broader international frameworks, offering grounded insights into the opportunities and challenges of advancing gender equality across diverse African contexts.

## WHY GENDER MATTERS FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

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Gender equality is one of the 17 SDGs adopted in the 2030 Agenda. The UN's SDG 5: "Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls" seeks to eliminate discrimination and gender-based violence and ensure equal access to education, health care, economic resources, and political participation. It promotes women's leadership across all sectors of society, equal economic opportunities and property rights, access to reproductive health, and the use of technology ([UN, SDG5](#)).

Beyond being a standalone objective, gender equality serves as a catalyst for advancement across the broader sustainable development agenda. Greater female participation in workforce, equal access to education, and stronger representation in decision-making are linked to improved human capital, higher productivity, and more resilient institutions. From this perspective, gender equality is not only a social objective but also a vital contributor to long-term economic development and demographic sustainability ([OECD 2024](#)).

At the societal level, gender equality is positively related to poverty reduction, educational attainment and health outcomes. Equal access to quality education increases women's participation in

economic and household decision-making and strengthens their capacity to manage resources effectively. Empirical research further shows that higher levels of female education are associated with improved child nutrition, as well as lower maternal and child mortality, among others ([Global Gender Gap Report 2025; The Sustainable Development Goals Report 2025](#)).

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***Gender equality is not only a social objective but also a vital contributor to long-term economic development and demographic sustainability***

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From an economic perspective, reducing gender disparities is associated with gains in productivity and overall performance. Globally, women continue to face structural constraints, such as wage differentials, lower participation in formal employment, and concentration in informal or lower-paid sectors, limiting the full utilization of human capital. Addressing such inequalities is therefore critical not only for social inclusion but also for labour market efficiency and long-term growth. According to the International Monetary Fund (IMF), closing gender gaps in labour force participation could raise GDP by an estimated 23% on average in emerging markets and developing economies ([IMF, 2024](#)).

Beyond advancing SDG 5, reinforcing gender equality contributes positively to other development goals, including SDG 1 (No Poverty), SDG 4 (Quality Education), SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth), and SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities). Gender-responsive policies can therefore unlock broader social and economic potential (OECD, 2024; UN Women, 2022). Building on this global case for gender equality, the following section examines the regional perspective in Africa before analysing the EU's strategic framework in the African context.

## **GENDER EQUALITY IN AFRICA: PROGRESS AND GAPS**

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While global evidence highlights the developmental benefits of gender equality, significant disparities persist across regions. Africa provides a key context to examine the challenges and opportunities in advancing gender equality, as women continue to face structural barriers in labour markets and political representation. Progress has been uneven, and many gaps remain. Analyzing recent data helps to identify both the advances made and the areas where further efforts are urgently needed to unlock the social and economic potential of gender equality.

To capture these patterns systematically, the [Africa Gender Index \(AGI\) \(2023\)](#) offers a composite measure assessing gender parity across three dimensions: social well-being (education and health), economic participation, and leadership and political representation. A score of 100 % represents full equality, while 0 % indicates the greatest possible disparity. Africa's overall score of 50.3 % in 2023, a modest increase from 48.6 % in 2019, reflects slow progress, indicating that, on average, women in Africa have just over half the measured opportunities and outcomes of men.

Progress in Africa has been slow, but it has also been uneven. Gender equality in Africa shows substantial regional and country-level variations. At the national level, the highest AGI scores in 2023 are: Namibia: 88.3 %, Lesotho: 82.4 % and Rwanda: 79.5 %. By contrast, many countries affected by conflict or political instability score significantly lower. According to the AGI 2023, Guinea-Bissau and Libya both score 30.9 %, reflecting some of the lowest gender equality outcomes on the continent ([UNECA 2023](#)).

A closer look at the three dimensions measured by the AGI reveals nuanced progress in the social, economic, and political spheres. Gaps in education and health are small, with girls often outnumbering boys in primary and secondary school and social indicators at 98 % parity. However, these figures might mask persistent structural barriers. High domestic responsibilities, early marriage and teenage pregnancy continue to restrict opportunities. Inadequate

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***Africa's overall score of 50.3 % in 2023 reflects slow progress, indicating that, on average, women in Africa have just over half the measured opportunities and outcomes of men***

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menstrual hygiene facilities, along with incidents of sexual harassment and gender-based violence in schools, further undermine girls' educational experiences. These dynamics suggest that parity in access to education may coexist with deeply embedded inequalities, reinforcing the argument that strong quantitative outcomes alone do not necessarily translate into substantive gender equality (Africa Gender Index Analytical Report 2023).

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***Parity in access to education may coexist with deeply embedded inequalities***

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Despite progress in education and health, women remain underrepresented in economic participation, with parity declining from 61 % to 58 % between 2019 and 2023. This worrisome decrease is reflected, for instance, in women's continued overrepresentation in informal and vulnerable employment, lower salaries, and limited access to finance and agricultural resources. Unsurprisingly, country-specific disparities are notable: Southern Africa approaches parity at 72.7 %, whereas nations such as Egypt and Ethiopia score below 40 % (ECA 2024), (Africa Gender Index Analytical Report 2023).

In the political leadership category, women in Africa have achieved only about 24.4 % of parity with men. Relatively few women hold executive roles, ministerial positions, or parliamentary leadership, and only a small number have been directly elected as heads of state or government. Historically, women's participation in national parliaments has increased steadily, from approximately 9.8 % in 1995 to around 27 % in 2025 (CSIS, 2025), yet political empowerment remains one of the continent's largest gender gaps across the continent. About one-third of African countries have had at least one female head of state or government, and in countries such as South Africa, Mozambique, and Burundi, women occupy significant shares of parliamentary seats. Another positive surprise is offered by Namibia: in 2025, the World Economic Forum ranked it as Africa's most gender-equal country and eighth globally (Global Gender Gap Report, 2025).

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***Political empowerment remains one of the continent's largest gender gaps***

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A closer look at the different dimensions of the African Gender Equality has set the groundwork for examining international frameworks like the EU's Gender Action Plan III (GAP III) and their role in supporting Africa's gender equality objectives. This will be done in the following section.

## **THE EU'S STRATEGIC FRAMEWORK: GENDER ACTION PLAN III (GAP III) IN THE AFRICAN CONTEXT**

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Persistent gaps in women's economic participation, political representation, and access to decision-making reflect enduring structural barriers to gender equality across African countries. In this context, international policy frameworks such as the European Union's Gender Action Plan III (GAP III) provide a reference point for

understanding how external strategies contribute to gender equality objectives, while raising questions about alignment with local priorities. Key considerations include: How are GAP III objectives operationalized in African countries? To what extent can EU interventions complement domestic initiatives? And how can support translate into measurable and locally grounded outcomes?

Adopted in 2020 as *A Gender Equal World 2021–2025* and later extended to 2027, GAP III represents the EU's commitment to integrating gender equality across all external actions. The plan sets clear objectives: preventing gender-based violence, promoting women's health and rights, expanding economic opportunities, increasing women's leadership, and embedding gender perspectives in peace, security, environmental, and digital policies. Operational guidance encourages EU delegations to work with national governments, civil society, and other partners, aiming to translate strategic commitments into tangible outcomes on the ground.

## OPERATIONALIZATION OF GAP III IN AFRICA

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In operational terms, GAP III is implemented through key instruments that translate policy into action. NDICI-GE (Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument – Global Europe) operationalizes the GAP III commitment that at least 85% of EU external actions should integrate gender equality objectives. Through this financing instrument, EU delegations design and implement gender-sensitive programmes. At the country level, EU delegations operationalize these commitments through Country-Level Implementation Plans (CLIPs), which are based on gender analyses and guide context-specific actions in cooperation with national governments and civil society. The Global Gateway initiative offers another pathway to advance gender equality globally. By integrating gender considerations into infrastructure and connectivity projects from urban transport to green energy, it promotes women’s participation across different sectors. Finally, private sector engagement and investment tools operationalize GAP III on a broader scale. For example, it mobilizes gender-responsive financing across the continent by partnering with local financial institutions in order to improve access to capital for women-led enterprises. Initiatives such as The European Investment Bank’s ShelInvest initiative, mobilise gender-responsive financing, particularly supporting women-led businesses in Africa. Together, these instruments illustrate a

broad EU portfolio that combines policy coherence, financial support, and sectoral inclusion, demonstrating how EU gender policies are translated into practice across diverse contexts.

Another approach that has proven effective, according to the Intermediate Evaluation of the EU Gender Action Plan III (2021–2027), is partnership with the United Nations. A key example of success is the collaboration with UN Women through the ACT–Africa programme (“ACT to End Violence Against Women” – Advocacy, Coalition Building and Transformative Feminist Action to End Violence Against Women). The programme supported 16 organisations and 16 UN Trust Fund grantees across 15 countries. More than 200 women activists, including women with disabilities and women living with HIV contributed to policy influence on ending violence against women and advancing Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) objectives.

A success story from Kenya and Tanzania, highlighted in the Intermediate Evaluation of the Implementation of the EU Gender Action Plan III (2021–2027), was achieved through close cooperation with civil society and local stakeholders. Sub-granting via intermediaries such as Amkeni Wakenya and the Foundation for Civil Society enabled smaller civil society organisations (CSOs) and women’s rights organisations (WROs) to participate in law reform and governance initiatives. Flexible funding mechanisms proved vital in integrating less formal groups into multi-stakeholder platforms, balancing grassroots advocacy and engagement with government bodies.

Finally, the European Fund for Sustainable Development Plus (EFSD+) Africa Connected programme illustrates how GAP III's objectives can be implemented through targeted, sector-specific, and gender-responsive guarantees. The programme combines a guarantee agreement with a Development Finance Institution (DFI), complemented by technical assistance and capacity-building measures, with investments in digital infrastructure and platforms across Sub-Saharan Africa. Importantly, it integrates a gender perspective by explicitly targeting women, who remain less likely to access and use digital services, thereby aiming to reduce the gender digital divide. In doing so, Africa Connected demonstrates how sector-specific interventions can expand women's access to digital networks and promote their participation in the digital economy.

Despite these achievements, the transformative potential of GAP III in Africa is constrained by structural, political, and socio-cultural factors. Civic space remains limited in several African countries, including Somalia and Nigeria, where restrictive legislation and political resistance impede sustained engagement. Social norms, such as clan structures in Somalia and male-dominated political institutions in Nigeria, continue to challenge gender mainstreaming, raising questions about the extent to which external frameworks can influence deeply embedded local contexts (Intermediate Evaluation of the Implementation of the Gender Action Plan III (2021-2027)).

Funding distribution presents another challenge. While small-grant schemes and feminist funds have successfully enabled grassroots WROs to engage in advocacy and governance processes, as seen in Kenya and Tanzania, the majority of EU gender equality aid still flows through partner governments or large international organisations. This can create tension between achieving broad reach and fostering local ownership, with smaller organisations often reliant on intermediaries to access resources.

Mechanisms to systematically assess whether GAP III objectives are being achieved remain limited. The Research Report From GAP III to GAP IV notes that some EU delegations struggle to distinguish between projects that genuinely advance gender equality and those primarily labelled as gender-focused for reporting purposes. While political actions such as dialogues and declarations are included under GAP III, they are broadly defined, making their impact difficult to assess. Although GAP III introduced a Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning (MEL) framework to strengthen accountability, data collection often emphasizes sex-disaggregated indicators without adequately capturing intersectional vulnerabilities such as disability, displacement, or socio-economic marginalisation. In the absence of robust evaluation and accountability mechanisms, interventions risk remaining output-driven, focusing on activities rather than fostering long-term social transformation.

Building on the operational experience of GAP III in Africa, it becomes clear that sustained EU engagement must be not only continued but strategically targeted and effective. The following section examines the importance of sustained EU engagement on gender equality across Africa, emphasizing how it can reinforce policy coherence, support local priorities, and complement African-led initiatives to advance meaningful gender equality outcomes.

## THE STRATEGIC IMPORTANCE OF SUSTAINED EU ENGAGEMENT ON GENDER EQUALITY

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Effective and targeted engagement through GAP III underscores the broader strategic role of the EU in promoting gender equality across Africa. Beyond project-level interventions, achieving gender parity is both a human rights imperative and a driver of sustainable, resilient societies. At the same time, the EU's support for gender equality is operating in an increasingly complex political and financial environment. Shifting priorities, a stronger emphasis on economic competitiveness, security and defence, and growing budgetary pressures on development cooperation have contributed to a more constrained landscape for international engagement. In parallel, a global

pushback against democracy and human rights has made the advancement of gender equality more contested. Changes in international partners' priorities, including the retreat of some actors from multilateral commitments, have further added to these challenges.

That said, sustained support for gender equality initiatives is not necessarily about expanding commitments, but about ensuring effective implementation, maintaining policy coherence and delivering on existing commitments. Neglecting the gender equality dimension risks undermining broader investments, which is why continued engagement should be seen as strategic, reinforcing the EU's credibility as a values-based, reliable, and long-term partner for Africa. Such engagement builds on and complements the efforts of African partners: The [African Union](#) has actively promoted the rights of women and girls, linking gender equality with development, peace, and security. Its [Agenda 2063](#) emphasizes that achieving a prosperous and peaceful Africa depends on the full and equitable participation of women. In this context, EU engagement on gender equality is not a unilateral effort but a partnership that reinforces shared objectives.

In practical terms, the impact of EU engagement depends on an interplay of local political, social, and institutional factors. Effectiveness is shaped by the alignment of national policies, the capacity of local institutions, and the engagement of civil society actors. External frameworks, such as GAP III, are most likely to contribute meaningfully when

they complement existing strategies and priorities. In contexts where local policies are underdeveloped or misaligned, international support can play a facilitating role; through capacity-building, collaboration with civil society, and the promotion of inclusive institutional practices; while recognizing that change is often gradual and contingent. Efforts must remain flexible and attentive to local perspectives, emphasizing partnership over prescription.

## CONCLUSION

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The evidence presented in this article underscores both the progress achieved and the persistent challenges in advancing gender equality across Africa. International commitments and policy frameworks like the EU Gender Action Plan III (GAP III) provide an essential foundation, yet structural, sociocultural, and political factors continue to shape women's participation across different sectors.

Effective engagement therefore requires strategies that go beyond formal frameworks. How can international initiatives complement domestic priorities to foster genuine ownership of gender equality policies? In contexts where social norms and informal power structures remain restrictive, what approaches most effectively enable women to exercise agency? And how can monitoring and accountability mechanisms capture long-term transformation?

To gain a better understanding of this context, this publication presents first-hand contributions from local contexts across Africa, including Kenya, West Africa, and Madagascar:

**1. From Marginalisation to Political Contestation: Women Governors and the Gendered Politics of Impeachment in Kenya (2013–2024)** – Examines how procedures of impeachment have disproportionately targeted women governors in Kenya following the introduction of devolution in the Kenyan constitution in 2010.

**2. Somatic Politics: Beyond Capacity Building Traps – Lessons from the Gender Reversed Bootcamp in Madagascar** – Analyses the experimental approach of a Gender Reversed Bootcamp in Madagascar, which aims to going beyond conventional capacity-building and draws some lessons learned from gendered power relations.

**3. Beyond Laws, What Role Do Non-Legislative Factors Play in the Low Level of Women's Participation in Political Life in Africa?** – Explores structural, economic, and cultural factors that shape women's (non-)engagement in political life across the continent.

Together, these contributions highlight that formal inclusion alone does not guarantee substantive power. Across contexts, women face intersecting barriers, sociocultural norms, economic dependence, political gatekeeping, and informal power structures, that limit their agency

and leadership. Lasting change requires strategies that combine structural reform with cultural transformation, economic empowerment, mentorship, and experiential approaches that build confidence, empathy, and collective action. By addressing both visible and hidden obstacles, these studies show how context-sensitive, locally grounded approaches can foster durable gender equality in Africa.

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***Neglecting the gender  
equality dimension risks  
undermining broader  
investments***

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## **LAURA LAHNER**

### **Development Policy Dialogue Hanns Seidel Foundation, Brussels**

Laura Lahner has been a Policy Officer at the Brussels Office of the Hanns Seidel Foundation since 2023. Before this, she was a Trainee at the European Committee of the Regions. She holds a master's degree in International Cultural and Business Studies from the University of Passau and a Bachelor of Honours in Intercultural Management with European Languages and Society from the University of Stirling.

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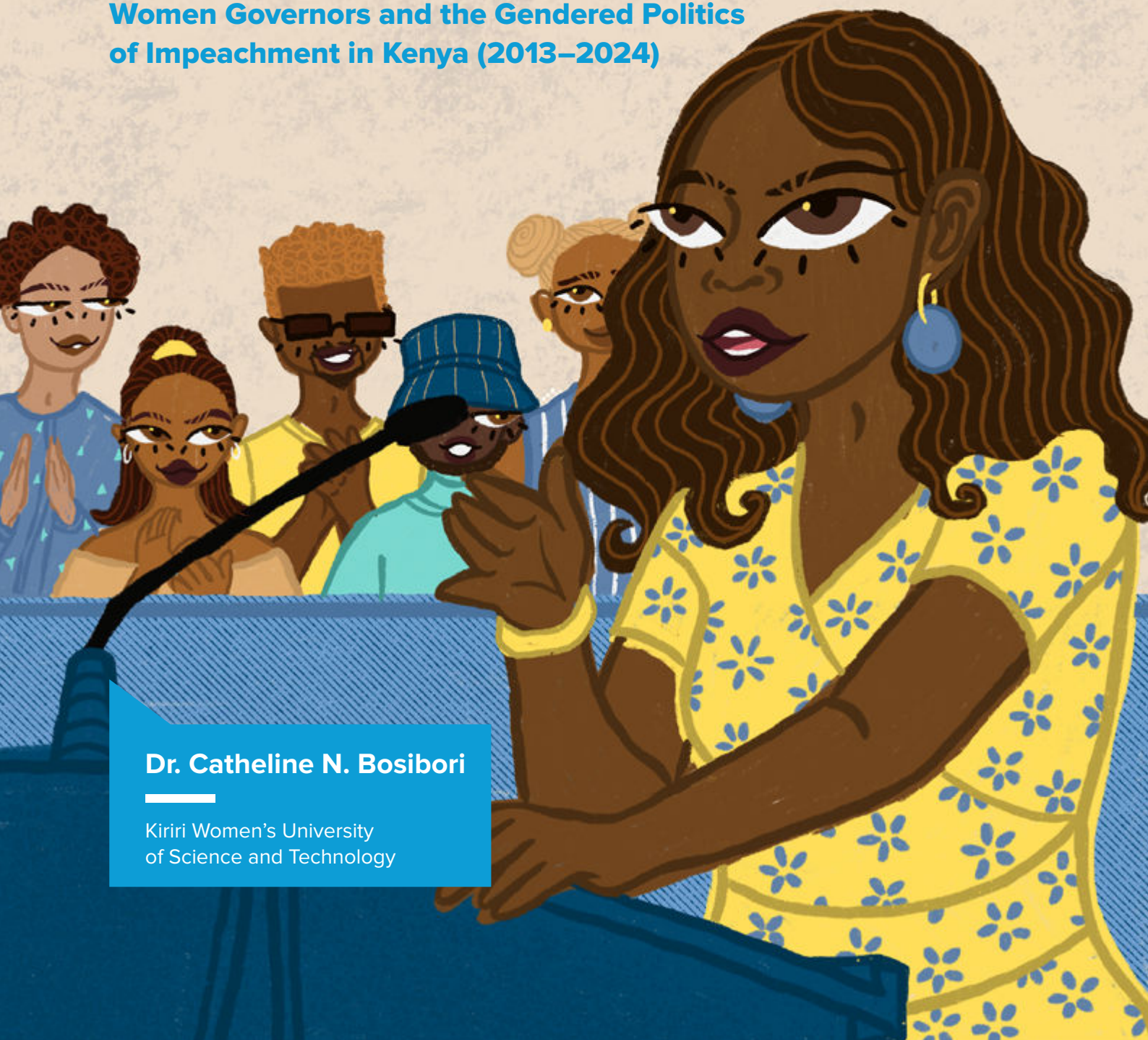
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# FROM MARGINALISATION TO POLITICAL CONTESTATION:

Women Governors and the Gendered Politics  
of Impeachment in Kenya (2013–2024)



**Dr. Catheline N. Bosibori**

Kiriri Women's University  
of Science and Technology

Kenya's 2010 Constitution was widely celebrated for its commitment to democratic reform, inclusion, and decentralisation. Government devolution,<sup>1</sup> in particular, was intended to bring government closer to citizens, improve accountability, and open political space for historically marginalised groups, including women. Since 2013, these reforms have contributed to a visible increase in women's participation in politics, especially through constitutionally guaranteed positions such as Women Representatives and nominated seats.

Yet more than a decade into devolution, women's access to executive political power remains fragile and contested. The office of county governor, one of the most powerful positions within Kenya's political system remains overwhelmingly male. Out of the 47 governors in Kenya, only six are female, following the impeachment of Governor Kawira Mwangaza in 2025.<sup>2</sup> Women who have succeeded in winning gubernatorial elections have often encountered intense political resistance, most visibly through impeachment proceedings or repeated threats of removal from office.<sup>3</sup>

This paper examines impeachment as a gendered political practice within Kenya's devolved governance system between 2013 and 2024. Instead of regarding

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**1.** Devolution in Kenya is the constitutional transfer of powers, functions, and resources from the national government to county governments to promote local governance, citizen participation, and equitable development.

**2.** This is as per the Independent Electoral and Boundaries Commission (IEBC)'s official 2022 election outcomes; Al Jazeera. 2022. Kenya gets historic number of female governors from August 9 vote. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/8/13/women-blaze-the-trail-in-governorship-elections-in-kenya>

**3.** Ochieng, J. & Kamau, M. (2025) Why the G7 women county governors are under siege. Daily Nation. Available [here](#) (Accessed: 7 February 2026).

impeachment exclusively as a legal and constitutional process, the paper analyses how it operates in practice, as a tool of political contestation, regulation, and, in some cases, gendered discipline. Using Governor Kawira Mwangaza's impeachment case and other women governors who have formally or informally faced impeachment threats, such as Governor Anne Waiguru and Governor Charity Ngilu, the paper highlights how impeachment threats shape leadership behaviour, constrain political authority, and expose the limits of women's political inclusion under devolution.

The analysis speaks directly to debates central to democratic accountability, political party reform, inclusive governance, and gender-responsive leadership. While grounded in the Kenyan experience, the findings hold broader relevance for African democracies grappling with the gap between constitutional inclusion and substantive political equality.

## WOMEN, POWER, AND THE LONG HISTORY OF POLITICAL EXCLUSION

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Women's political marginalisation in Kenya is not accidental; it is historically produced. During the colonial period, formal political institutions systematically excluded women, despite their active participation in anti-colonial resistance and community mobilisation. Most of the Kenyan women who took part in the struggle for Kenyan independence are regarded and recorded as passive actors or helpers of the movement.<sup>4</sup> This takes away, their central role in the struggle for independence while men take the credit and recognition for independence in Kenya. Independence did little to change these patterns. Post-colonial political power became entrenched within male-dominated networks built around ethnicity, patronage, and access to economic resources.<sup>5</sup>

For decades, women were largely confined to auxiliary political roles or symbolic positions with limited authority. Many a time they were selected into nominated positions, where they would not express their personal political stand, but that of the political party which granted them the nomination.<sup>6</sup> Failure to conform with the par-

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4. Bosibori, C.N., 2023. A History of Women Anti-state Fighters in Kenya; 1945-2019 (Doctoral dissertation, Univeristy of Bayreuth, Germany).

5. Chemutai, S.J., 2021. Women And Political Leadership Among the Abagusii in the Post-Colonial Era, Kenya; Mworio, S.K., 2024. Participation of Women in Politics in Meru, C. 1880-2013 (Doctoral dissertation, Kenyatta University).

6. In the Kenyan constitution, a nominated politician is chosen by the party to represent a certain category of people, for example, people with a disability, women groups etc. However, many times these positions have been reduced to political rewards and tools where a party nominates the person who works for the party interest not the said group's interest.

ty's stand would definitely lead to expulsion and loss of the position. Leadership was socially constructed as masculine, while women in public life were expected to conform to norms of respectability, obedience, and supportiveness. These norms shaped voter behaviour, party structures, and state institutions alike and organisations like Maendeleo Ya Wanawake (MYW), which was the largest women's organisation in the country at the time.

Constitutional reform efforts in the 1990s and 2000s driven in part by women's movements challenged this exclusion. The 2010 Constitution marked a turning point by embedding gender equality principles and introducing the two-thirds gender rule.<sup>7</sup> Devolution further expanded political opportunities by creating new elective offices at the county level thus theoretically lowering barriers to entry.<sup>8</sup> However, historical patterns of exclusion did not disappear with constitutional change. Instead, they adapted. Informal norms, party practices, and political cultures continued to privilege male authority. As a result, women's inclusion under devolution has been uneven, in the sense that they are stronger in legislative spaces but far weaker in executive leadership.

## DEVOLUTION, EXECUTIVE POWER, AND GENDERED RESISTANCE

Among the key positions created under the 2010 Kenyan constitution is the position of the county governor. County governors wield significant authority over budgets, appointments, development priorities, and local political networks.<sup>9</sup> This concentration of power makes the office politically attractive and deeply contested. While male governors often face political rivalry, women governors experience an additional layer of resistance rooted in gendered expectations about leadership.

Political parties remain central gatekeepers. Despite public commitments to gender inclusion, party nomination processes frequently disadvantage women through opaque rules, financial barriers, and informal patronage arrangements.<sup>10</sup> Women who win gubernatorial seats often do so without strong party protection, leaving them politically exposed once in office. Such was the case of Kawira Mwangaza, the former governor of Meru County. She was elected governor of Meru County in 2022 as an

<sup>7</sup> Kenyan constitution 2010-chapter 4 article 27(8) and chapter 8, article 81(b) states that not more than two-thirds of the members of elective or appointive bodies shall be of the same gender.

<sup>8</sup> Kenyan constitution 2010 articles 174 and 175.

<sup>9</sup> County Governments Act, 2012, section 30.

<sup>10</sup> Singh, S., 2024. Women in Politics: Barriers to Participation and Strategies for Inclusion. *International Journal of Social Science Research (IJSSR)*, 1(2), pp.19-28.

independent candidate.<sup>11</sup> This implies that she did not have any political party support at the time of elections and thus very little support in the county assembly after the elections.

County assemblies, largely, male-dominated, play a decisive role in this dynamic. Conflicts between governors and assemblies are common across counties. However, when women governors assert executive authority by enforcing procurement rules, restructuring administrations, or limiting patronage they are more likely to be labelled uncooperative, arrogant, or disrespectful. It is within this environment that impeachment emerges as a powerful political instrument.

## IMPEACHMENT CASES

Since the establishment of devolved county governments in Kenya, women governors have been disproportionately subjected to impeachment motions, revealing the contested nature of executive authority within sub-national governance. In Kirinyaga County, Governor Anne Wai-guru was impeached by the county assembly in

2020, prompting Senate proceedings conducted through a special committee pursuant to Article 181 of the Constitution and section 33 of the County Governments Act. Following investigation and plenary debate, the Senate declined to uphold the charges, thereby acquitting her and allowing her to remain in office.<sup>12</sup>

In Kitui County, Governor Charity Kaluki Ngilu faced impeachment attempts during the same period, which were challenged in court on procedural and constitutional grounds. In *Charity Kaluki Ngilu v County Assembly of Kitui & 2 Others*, the High Court affirmed the justiciability of impeachment processes while emphasising the necessity of strict adherence to constitutional and statutory requirements.<sup>13</sup>

The most sustained impeachment trajectory involved Meru County Governor Kawira Mwangaza, who endured multiple impeachment motions between 2022 and 2024, culminating in a successful resolution upheld by the Senate in August 2024. Her subsequent constitutional challenge was dismissed, with the High Court affirming the legality of the Senate's determination and the validity of her removal from office.<sup>14</sup> During her impeachment, Meru County Governor Kawira Mwangaza faced charges including misappropriation of county resources, nepotism, illegal

**11.** An independent candidate in Kenya is a person who contests for an elective public office without being formally sponsored or nominated by a registered political party. Such a candidate campaigns and seeks election solely on their personal credentials, manifesto, and public support, rather than relying on a party structure.

**12.** Senate of Kenya. 2020. Senate Hansard: Special Sitting on the proposed removal from office of the Governor of Kirinyaga County, 26 June 2020. Parliament of Kenya. Available [here](#)

**13.** High Court of Kenya (2020) *Charity Kaluki Ngilu v County Assembly of Kitui & 2 Others* [2020] eKLR. Available [here](#)

**14.** High Court of Kenya. (2025). *Mwangaza v Speaker of the Senate of Kenya & Others* [2025] KEHC 3069 (KLR).

appointments, and contempt of the assembly and courts.<sup>15</sup> While framed as breaches of constitutional duties, the process featured gendered language and stereotypes, with critics using culturally loaded and derogatory remarks to question her conduct, reflecting underlying patriarchal bias in both the County Assembly and Senate.<sup>16</sup> Mwangaza herself argued that her impeachment was fuelled by male chauvinism and resistance to women in leadership in Meru County.<sup>17</sup> For a woman hailing from a county where the first women Member of Parliament in 1978 was fought and removed from office, Kawira's claim is not far from the truth. Additionally, the mockery and tagging her family statuses to her political abilities by her deputy (a man) and opponents, reflected a process that was gendered rather than constitutionally orchestrated. Collectively, these cases demonstrate how impeachment has become a recurrent feature of devolved governance for women executives, operating at the intersection of constitutional accountability, political contestation, and judicial oversight.

## IMPEACHMENT BEYOND ACCOUNTABILITY: A GENDERED TOOL OF CONTESTATION

Impeachment is constitutionally intended to safeguard public interest by holding executive leaders accountable. In practice, however, impeachment within Kenya's counties has often reflected broader political struggles over power, resources, and control. For women governors, impeachment frequently goes beyond questions of legality or performance. It becomes a test of legitimacy checking whether or not a woman can exercise authority without provoking destabilising backlash. Allegations raised during impeachment debates often blend administrative issues with personal and moral judgments, reinforcing gender stereotypes.

Even when impeachment does not succeed, the process itself carries political costs; damaging public credibility, disrupting governance and signalling limits to acceptable leadership behaviour. Feminist institutionalist scholarship emphasises that political institutions are not gender neutral but are structured by both formal rules and informal norms that privilege masculinised forms of author-

<sup>15</sup>. Senate of Kenya (2020) Senate Hansard: Special Sitting on the proposed removal from office of the Governor of Kirinyaga County, 26 June 2020. Parliament of Kenya. Available [here](#)

<sup>16</sup>. NTV Kenya (2023) Meru women professionals call for Senate to uphold Mwangaza's impeachment. Available [here](#)

<sup>17</sup>. Citizen Digital (2023) "Because I'm a woman": Mwangaza blames her impeachment on gender. Available [here](#) (Accessed: 7 February 2026).

ity.<sup>18</sup> Within Kenya's devolved governance framework, impeachment processes illustrate how informal gendered expectations intersect with formal accountability mechanisms to constrain women's executive power. The experiences of Anne Waiguru, Charity Ngilu, and Kawira Mwangaza demonstrate how impeachment operates less as a corrective tool for governance failure and more as an instrument through which political authority is negotiated, contested, and gendered.

Across Kirinyaga, Kitui, and Meru counties, impeachment threats emerged in contexts of conflict over control of county resources, budgetary authority, and political loyalty, which are core arenas of executive power. Rather than focusing narrowly on performance or legality, impeachment debates surrounding Waiguru, Ngilu, and Mwangaza were infused with assessments of leadership style and comportment. This reflects what feminist governance scholars identify as the double bind of women's leadership, where behaviours associated with effective authority are reinterpreted negatively when enacted by women.<sup>19</sup> Assertiveness and decisiveness,

which are central features to executive governance, were reframed as arrogance, disorder, or failure to consult, legitimising sustained institutional resistance.

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***Political institutions are not gender neutral but are structured by both formal rules and informal norms that privilege masculinised forms of authority***

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Impeachment threats further functioned as informal disciplining mechanisms, shaping how women governors adapted their leadership strategies. Following impeachment pressure, Waiguru adopted a more conciliatory political posture,<sup>20</sup> Ngilu increasingly emphasised calm and unity,<sup>21</sup> and Mwangaza publicly foregrounded humility and reconciliation.<sup>22</sup> These patterns align with feminist institutionalist arguments that women leaders are

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**18.** Mackay, F., Kenny, M. and Chappell, L., 2010. New institutionalism through a gender lens: Towards a feminist institutionalism?. *International political science review*, 31(5), pp.573-588; Waylen, G., 2014. Informal institutions, institutional change, and gender equality. *Political Research Quarterly*, 67(1), pp.212-223.

**19.** Jamieson, K.H., 1995. The binds that tie. *Beyond the double bind: Women and leadership*, (715), pp.3-21.; Krook, M.L. and O'Brien, D.Z., 2012. All the president's men? The appointment of female cabinet ministers worldwide. *The Journal of Politics*, 74(3), pp.840-855.

**20.** Governor Anne Waiguru publicly appealed for peace and called on leaders and residents in Kirinyaga to set aside divisive politics and focus on unity and lawful engagement.

**21.** Kenya News Agency (2026) Impeachment fever, an affront to devolution, says Governor Ngilu. Available [here](#)

**22.** During her Senate impeachment hearing, Mwangaza apologised and sought forgiveness from Members of the County Assembly (MCAs), MPs and others in a bid to mend political divides, saying she had travelled across Meru to apologise to those she may have wronged as part of efforts to reconcile for the sake of county progress. Earlier in 2023, she also participated in reconciliatory talks with MCAs, warmly embracing them and expressing gratitude for choosing peace, indicating a public foregrounding of unity and cooperation.

often compelled to conform to norms of accommodation to survive in hostile political environments.<sup>23</sup> While such recalibration may reduce immediate conflict, it simultaneously narrows the scope for assertive policy-making, illustrating how gendered institutional pressures redirect leadership away from transformative governance.

The cumulative impact of repeated impeachment attempts is particularly significant. Even in cases where formal removal did not initially occur, as with Waiguru and Ngilu, sustained impeachment threats eroded executive authority and normalised instability. Over time, this form of political attrition can result in withdrawal from competitive politics altogether. Ngilu's retreat from the national political arena despite her historical role as a pioneering opposition figure and early female presidential contender<sup>24</sup> highlights how prolonged institutional hostility can silence women's political voices. Mwangaza's eventual removal from office after multiple impeachment attempts represents the most explicit manifestation of this process, demonstrating how persistence rather than legal merit can determine political outcomes.

Moreover, the impeachment trajectories of Waiguru, Ngilu, and Mwangaza underscore how gendered and moralised narratives are mobilised to legitimise exclusion. Feminist scholars note that

women in power are frequently subjected to scrutiny of personal morality and respectability in ways that male leaders are not.<sup>25</sup> In these cases, impeachment debates extended beyond governance concerns to encompass judgments about temperament, character, and, in Mwangaza's case, explicitly sexualised stereotypes. Such narratives shift accountability away from institutional performance and toward the regulation of women's bodies and behaviour, reinforcing patriarchal norms within ostensibly democratic structures.

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***Impeachment operates  
as an instrument through  
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gendered.***

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Taken together, these cases demonstrate that devolution has not dismantled gendered power hierarchies but has instead created new institutional arenas in which they are reproduced. Impeachment, while formally framed as a governance safeguard, operates in practice as a

<sup>23</sup> Mackay, F. and Murtagh, C., 2019. New institutions, new gender rules? A feminist institutionalist lens on women and power-sharing. *feminists@ law*, 9(1).

<sup>24</sup> Charity Ngilu and Wangari Maathai were the first women to vie for the Presidency against President Moi in 1997.

<sup>25</sup> Sapiro, V., 1981. Research frontier essay: When are interests interesting? The problem of political representation of women. *American Political Science Review*, 75(3), pp.701-716; Krook, M. L. (2017). Violence against women in politics. *Journal of Democracy*, 28(1), 74-88.

gendered political tool that constrains women's authority, disciplines leadership behaviour, and, in some cases, facilitates political erasure.

## INCLUSION WITHOUT POWER

Across these experiences, a consistent pattern emerges: women governors are formally included but substantively constrained. Impeachment threats shape behaviour, leadership style, and policy ambition. This reveals a deeper structural problem where numerical representation has outpaced institutional and cultural change.

For democratic governance, this has serious implications. Accountability mechanisms risk being politicised and selectively applied. Additionally, many women leaders govern under constant threat, reducing policy effectiveness. These women have to conform to the norm to keep their position, either by singing to the tune of the government of the day, whether it is abusive or not, in exchange for support from the government to consolidate power. Citizens receive weaker governance outcomes due to political instability. This was evident in Meru County during Kawira Mwangaza's three impeachment motions. The county assembly Members focused more on impeaching her than on development.

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***Women governors are formally included but substantively constrained***

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Also, it is worth noting that if women's leadership is persistently undermined, devolution risks reproducing inequality rather than correcting it. This is the case especially since Kenya has not passed a new Gender Bill<sup>26</sup> since 2010, when the new constitution was promulgated. Parliament has repeatedly failed to pass the necessary amendments to enforce the principle, notably in 2016, 2017, and 2019, often due to lack of quorum and political opposition. A new bill was introduced in 2025 aiming to resolve this. The fact that the bill has repeatedly failed due to a lack of quorum, in a National Assembly dominated by men, shows that there is a lack of political will among the male politicians to have this bill passed into a law. As such this would explain why women political leaders, especially those in executive powers, continue to face threats of impeachment, are subject to impeachment procedures, or retreat to silence and conformity to politically survive in spaces dominated by men and where gender can easily be used not only for impeachment but also for public backlash.

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**26.** The Gender Bill is meant to ensure gender equality in elective and appointive bodies, promote women's participation in leadership, and implement the constitutional two-thirds gender rule. It is supposed to be implemented through provisions in the Constitution of Kenya, 2010, especially Article 27(8) and related legislation.

## POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS FOR DEMOCRATIC AND GENDER-RESPONSIVE GOVERNANCE

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The Kenyan experience offers several policy-relevant lessons. Political parties must be central to reform. The parties need enforceable internal rules that protect elected women leaders and discourage gendered political attacks. Also, clearer impeachment standards are needed.

County assemblies and the Senate should apply consistent, transparent thresholds to prevent abuse of impeachment processes.

Support must extend beyond elections. Women's empowerment initiatives should focus not only on getting women elected but also on sustaining them in office. In the public discourse, media and civil society actors should also play a critical role in challenging gendered narratives that delegitimise women leaders. Generally, these findings highlight the importance of linking institutional reform with cultural change, and of supporting long-term democratic resilience rather than short-term inclusion metrics.

## CONCLUSION

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Kenya's devolved system has expanded opportunities for women's political participation, but it has not eliminated gendered resistance to women's authority. Impeachment, while constitutionally legitimate, has often functioned as a tool of political contestation that disproportionately constrains women governors. The experiences of Anne Waiguru, Charity Ngilu, and Kawira Mwangaza show that women leaders are frequently compelled to tone down their leadership style and political voice to survive. This reality exposes the limits of devolution as a vehicle for inclusive governance unless deeper reforms address informal power relations. For Kenya and for African democracies more broadly, strengthening democracy requires moving beyond representation toward genuine political equality, where women can lead, govern, and be held accountable on the same terms as men.



## **DR. CATHELINE N. BOSIBORI**

### **Kiriri Women's University of Science and Technology**

Dr. Catheline Bosibori is a distinguished lecturer, researcher, and consultant specializing in research and scholarships, with a strong commitment to advancing knowledge in African contexts. She holds a PhD in African History from the University of Bayreuth, Germany, where her research examined the intersection of terrorism and women. She also holds both a Bachelor's and a Master's degree in History from Kenyatta University, graduating as the valedictorian of the July 2014 class. She currently serves as a Lecturer at Kiriri Women's University of Science and Technology, actively contributing to teaching, mentorship, and academic development. Dr. Bosibori is a published scholar whose work engages critical debates in African history, gender studies, and conflict studies. She is an accredited member of FEMWISE-Africa and a member of the Women Educational Researchers of Kenya and an Alumni of the Adam Smith Fellowship (USA). She is also affiliated with Quote This Woman+ (South Africa), a platform that amplifies women experts in media and public discourse. Through her work, she remains dedicated to empowering scholars, advancing research excellence, and fostering inclusive knowledge production across Africa and beyond.

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# SOMATIC POLITICS: BEYOND CAPACITY BUILDING TRAPS

Lessons from the Gender Reversed  
Bootcamp in Madagascar



**Dr. Ludovic Garattini**

Le CNAM Paris / Green Forum Sweden

Women's political participation in Africa is widely recognized as constrained, yet this constraint is too often misattributed to deficits in *individual capacity*. This article argues instead that political exclusion is structurally produced through *gendered power relations* embedded in what feminist institutionalist literature defines as "informal institutions." Despite the evidence provided by a cohort of academic work, and since the UNDP Berg Report of 1993, one of the dominant streamlined logics of international assistance on matters of political participation and representation remains the "capacity building" workshop, which treats inequality as a *knowledge* gap rather than a *structural* lock. In my 6 years of work with political-party affiliated organizations, I have to conclude that this habit remains largely widespread and constitutes the norm, being quite oblivious of the work done in Political Sciences, and specifically of the paradigm shift provided by **Feminist Institutionalism, which has contributed to instate gender framing as a sophisticated political science tool for the study of (and as) political regimes** (Connell, 2002, 2006).

This article analyzes the Gender Reversed Bootcamp (GRBC), a procedural and experimental simulation I created and conducted in Madagascar (2022), which immersed members of a Green Party youth wing in a matriarchal dystopia. Drawing on design documents, national and international research and statistics (both from academia, INGOs, NGOs and CSOs), legal frameworks and constitutional work, political analysis, immediate participants' feedback, on-site audiovisual recordings and a 4-year longitudinal follow-up (2026), the article argues that simulation generates "somatic knowledge" – a visceral understanding of informal

realities such as time poverty, economic dependence, power subjugations, political influence and dominance, and homosocial exclusion.

The findings suggest that sustainable political reflexivity requires *interventions that replicate the stress* of inequality, moving beyond the “safe” logic of standard training to embrace “productive conflict” as a pedagogical tool.

## INTRODUCTION: THE ARCHIVES OF THE WORLD BEFORE

What if the collapse of the 21st century wasn't just an ecological failure, but a failure of patriarchal governance too? Imagine a 22nd century reality shaped by the “Great Tipping” of 2040 – a world where the catastrophic intersection of climate drifting and ecosystems collapse and male-led warmongering resulted in a total civilizational collapse leading to a complete systemic inversion (refer to the “*Gender Reversed Bootcamp*” video links provided at the end of this article). In this speculative timeline, patriarchal societies emerged from the ruins to dictate the rhythm of public life, relegating men to the “domestic sphere” and peripheral or immanent statures (De Beauvoir, 1949), based on the same pseudo-scientific justifications used against women for centuries.

This story was the ground of a fully immersive experiment, rich in yet unexploited harvests, that was conducted in Madagascar in August 2022, with a setup engineered to create a powerful pedagogical duality. Every day, 19 participants from a Malagasy Green Party acted as historians, re-opening the archives of the “World Before the Great Tipping” event, to study the strange, archaic violences of the 21st century – examining gender-based violence, wage gaps, the intersectionality of environmental and gender issues, and sociopolitical exclusion through workshops and activities. But while they studied inequality and injustice intellectually, they lived it *somatically*. The men had to wake-up at 5:00 AM to clean, cook, mind the camp life and reproductive work all throughout the day; they were fined for “somatic infractions” like manspreading, paid in a devalued currency (giving access to leisure and free time), and were dependent for their everyday life on the daily women conclave legal decisions; they were married or single, with dire consequences on their access to wealth. And they were policed, judged, evaluated every single day, recruited, dismissed, could be divorced or remarried by women, and women only. In short, as they were analyzing the “Archives” of patriarchy, they were suffocating under the rules of a matriarchy mirroring the world today.

This Gender Reversed Bootcamp (GRBC) was a radical experiment designed to answer a question that haunts international development: why does gender inequality persist in political organizations even after decades of “sensitization”

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**You cannot  
„PowerPoint“ your  
way out of inequality**

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workshops? The answer, we argue, is that you cannot “PowerPoint” your way out of inequality. Most donor-funded interventions operate on the “Capacity Building” model, which assumes that if we simply explain rights to people, equality will follow. This limitation can be understood through the classical distinction between **declarative** and **procedural** knowledge. Declarative knowledge refers to knowing **that** – for instance, knowing that gender equality is a legal or normative objective – while procedural knowledge refers to experiencing and knowing **how**, including how power operates informally, how exclusion is reproduced through routines, and how inequality is embodied and endured. Most capacity-building interventions overwhelmingly target declarative knowledge, leaving procedural and embodied dimensions of inequality relatively untouched. As feminist institutionalist scholars have long argued, inequality is not just an intellectual misunderstanding; it is a **structural and somatic experience** (Waylen, 2014; Mackay & al., 2010), as relevant knowledge is predominantly informal, procedural, and embodied rather than purely cognitive.

This speculative framing was not a literary device but a *methodological* one. Drawing on approaches from speculative design and critical futures, the fictional “Archives of the World Before” functioned as a cognitive distancing tool while the camp life was somatizing politics by design, allowing participants to analyze and experience contemporary gender regimes as historically contingent rather than unconsciously naturalized (which they usually are). In other words, by distancing *present* inequalities in a fictionalized *past*, while experiencing *actual* inequalities in a fictionalized *future*, the simulation aimed at creating analytical leverage over norms that are, otherwise, experienced as self-evident and immanent.

Finally, this experiment was more than a role-play; it was a psychological deconstruction of *power*. It forced a confrontation between the “barbaric” structures of our modern world and a future that views our current institutional logic – as defined by Waylen and MacKay’s critiques – as the ultimate cautionary tale.

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**Inequality is not  
just an intellectual  
misunderstanding; it is  
a structural and somatic  
experience**

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## THE TRAPS OF “CAPACITY BUILDING”

For decades, the standard response to the underrepresentation of women in African politics has been the “skills deficit” model. Donors fund workshops to train women in leadership, assuming that a lack of skills is the primary barrier. Yet, as Bauer (2012) and Tripp & al. (2009) have documented, while the descriptive representation of women in African parliaments has risen (often due to quotas), substantive representation – the ability to actually *wield* power – lags significantly behind. Women effectively have entered the room, yet they do not set the agenda. Why?

Feminist Institutionalism offers a quite eye-opening diagnosis: busy with studying Formal Institutions, we have not yet given enough attention to Informal Institutions. These are the unwritten rules, norms, and practices that coexist with *formal institutions*, mediating the relationship between everyday social life and political power *through* the translation devices or interfaces that political parties and organizations are. In political parties and in the polity, these can manifest as late-night meetings that effectively exclude mothers, “homo-social” bonding rituals among men (Bjarnegård,

2013), self, endogenous and external barriers at each stage of women’s political journey (Liedholm Ndoulou M. & Saxby V. for UN Women, financed by SIDA, 2019) or in the subtle policing of who is allowed to speak with authority, where and when.

A standard workshop can teach a woman the electoral code. But it cannot teach a man what it *feels* like to be interrupted five times in a row, to not possess resources to perform what was previously easier or just natural to acquire, attain, understand or access, nor can it teach a leader the crushing mental load of such things as “time poverty.” To make these invisible forces visible, the GRBC moved beyond training to a fully immersive variant of what we call *Experiential Political Pedagogy* (EPP), inspired by the work done by institutionalist scholars (RCI, HI, SI, DI and FI)<sup>1</sup>, a characteristic of New Institutionalists (NI) integrative approach.

## THE MACHINE: DESIGNING A MATRIARCHAL DYSTOPIA

The GRBC was designed as a “Total Institution” (Goffman, 1961)<sup>2</sup> – that is to say a closed system where the rules of the outside world were sus-

1. Rational Choice Institutionalism (RCI), Historical Institutionalism (HI), Sociological Institutionalism (SI), Discursive or Constructive Institutionalism (DI), Feminist Institutionalism (FI).

2. The GRBC does not constitute a total institution in the *strict Goffmanian sense*, as participation was voluntary and temporally bounded. Rather, it analytically approximated key structural features of total institutions – rule saturation, role fixation, and the collapse of public/private distinctions – in order to accelerate the internalization of asymmetrical power relations. Inspiration remains as participants were kept unaware of key features of the design, to allow space for somatic responses to be expressed genuinely.

pended and replaced by a reverse-engineered, normalized and naturalized oppression by design, integrated within a fully coherent cosmogony, which contained the objectivized rules of the ancient world (the Archives). The idea was to create like a politically reflexive Matryoshka with, on one side, a normative exogenous system providing formal aspects of the political life (the camp as an institution) through the arrangement of informal and internalized rules *not* subjected to formal contestation (the narrative part of the Matriarchal Society and its origins), *ante factum* (Levi, 1990: 409), while having a reflexive distance to the political gender oddities of the 21st century (the Archives). The potential to *individuate* homotheties between lived inequalities in the camp and actual inequalities in society was offered through the opening of the archives (the activities), allowing for each man and woman to *individuate* (i.e. creating through means of transductive relational process – Garattini, 2018) their own *meaning* (instead of teaching them). As an example, a man having worked 4 days straight in reproductive work would, by himself, individuate and comprehend far better the (previously unseen by him) subtle relation that exists between reproductive work and exhaustion, knowledge gaps, access to resources etc., of women depicted in different activities which were *not* necessarily related to reproductive work *per se*. Or men having been silenced throughout the experiment, relating much better to the “silence” of women during the participants’ visit to the fisherman’s association village (see section 4.4 below). A silence they would

have interpreted previously as a lack of pertinent things to say, an absence of personal point of view, a lack of knowledge or a gendered understanding of “shyness”. Sympathies (and antipathies) were not taught, explained or debunked: it was an expected outcome of the similarities and differences noted by the participants themselves during the life cycle of the experiment.

### Data-Driven Oppression

As dystopian as it may sound, the simulation did not rely, however, on caricatures. It was designed through a process of statistical translation rather than narrative or theatrical improvisation. In preparation of the experiment, quantitative indicators drawn from national and international datasets were systematically converted into experiential constraints, ensuring that each rule imposed within the simulation corresponded to a documented structural asymmetry affecting women in Madagascar. As such, most framing rules were *reverse engineered* directly from the UNICEF MICS 2018 (Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys) dataset for Madagascar. As organizers, we thence took the statistical reality of Malagasy women and simply mapped it onto male participants.

As a simple example of how we logically weaved metrics with experimental design, statistics show that in Madagascar, women perform 3 times more unpaid care work than men with time scarcity to engage in other activities, even when permitted

by law or customs. The rule was consequently crafted as follows: Male participants were required to wake up early, to clean common areas, and prepare meals. They were not permitted to attend the political strategy sessions until these tasks were validated by a female “supervisor” and were paid 3 times less than women.

Another example: statistics show high rates of economic dependence for women in Madagascar. Consequently, we created a fictitious currency system with ties to marital status and unequal gender distribution between high-paid and low-paid jobs (with a significant part of men’s actual work not being paid at all, as the previous rule commended). For instance, men started the experiment with 30% to 50% less financial resources than women. Strikingly, the women participants not only accepted this initial asymmetry but intensified it by instituting a new rule that completely deprived men of control over their own finances (see section 5.1 below). We used a “pearl currency system” on bracelets which would allow to barter or “purchase” access to free time, leisure or extra-training activities if the possessor had enough to engage into economic transactions (a status men rarely attained or at least, not without the extra-support of a woman), while men were also fined for “somatic infractions” and infringements to the rules set by the women conclave (we’ll come back to the surprising operability of this conclave).

## The Somatic Burden

Now comes the core of the experiment and the main reason behind changing completely the approach to capacity building when it comes to gender equality and gender-based violence in political parties and systems: the theory often ignores two dimensions, 1/ men as potential active actors for – and contributors of – positive change and, 2/ what the *body* actually carries (both as stigmas and traumas). In that sense, the GRBC made the body a central feature of political participation. Female participants were the “standard”; male participants were the “deviation”.

This created what Tamale (2020) might describe as a “decolonial inversion.” By establishing an entire “Matriarchal Universe” modelled after rather universal current patriarchal archetypes, using all tools available to us such as defaulting the French language to the feminine for neutral uses (using the feminine “elle(s)” instead of the masculine “il(s)”, the latter being still used as “neutral” in modern French), the simulation aimed at **shifting the cosmological baseline**. It forced the male participants to experience a constant peripheral, immanent and “minority status” – not as a mathematical concept, but as a continuous, low-level psychological stress.

## THE CRISIS, PART I: FATIGUE, ANGER, AND RESISTANCE

If a gender workshop like the GRBC unravels with everyone always smiling, it has likely failed. Real structural change *is* traumatic. The immediate internal reports from the GRBC made by the trainers, right after the bootcamp, reveal that the simulation successfully generated what we are calling “Productive Conflicts”.

### The Fatigue Factor

By Day 2, the male participants were not just annoyed; they were exhausted. On the second day, something we anticipated (and prepared for) happened: all males unanimously rebelled against the format and the camp life, judging them extremely unfair, one-sided (when not deemed blindsided) and exhausting. In interviews conducted during the camp, the word “fatigue” appears repeatedly. One male participant noted:

*“I’m dead. It’s been three days. I really thought I knew the causes of feminism... but it was on the surface. In reality, we don’t really realize what’s going on.”*

This physical and mental exhaustion was the primary learning objective. An exhaustion that many women have internalized as a normalized reality since childhood, making them much resilient but also making men unaware of the constraint women have themselves naturalized. Among many outcomes, the simulation successfully replicated, for instance and in this case, “Time Poverty.” The men could not compete in the evening “Political Council” because they were too tired from the day’s domestic labor and the accumulated psychological pressure. This validated the argument that barriers to women’s participation are often logistical and energetic, not just legal.

### Exposure of “Progressive” Biases

The participants were members of a Green Party youth wing, which is considered ostensibly progressive. However, the simulation stripped away their performative “wokeness.” During the “White Line” activity (a positioning game regarding stereotypes), many young men reverted to conservative baselines when pressed. Furthermore, reports noted tension and aggression directed at the female trainers. This friction is crucial evidence of a plethora of gendered dimensions within the polity. First, it shows that men engaged into forms of *institutional resistance*, as an attempt to reinstate the normalized (internalized) institutional regime they were familiar with (and grew up in). Second, it reveals that “Homosocial Capital” (Bjarnegård, 2013) – the bond between men that secures their

power – reacts violently when threatened. The simulation provoked the very resistance that women face in real parliaments, allowing the group to analyze it *consciously* in real-time and in real-life.

### The “Androgyne” Outcome

Perhaps one of the most telling outputs came from the men’s working group itself. Both female and male groups were tasked with proposing any work in any form they wanted at the end of the bootcamp. Surprisingly (or unsurprisingly some may argue), the men’s group created a script and an animated video presenting a political solution to *gendered oppression*. They did not ask for “quotas” or “better wages.” They presented a project called “L’Androgyne”, with a demand to ground a new law removing, *all together*, the attribution of gender *at birth*:

*“In order to advance this cause, and in support of Law No. 2019-008 on the fight against Gender-Based Violence, we propose a bill providing that, at birth, all persons shall be **registered as non-gendered** and shall remain free to choose their gender until reaching the age of legal majority.”*

Strikingly, and when subjected to the systemic violence of the “Matriarchy,” the men realized that “reform” was insufficient; they wanted to dismantle the category of gender entirely. This proves that experiencing oppression triggers a far more radical political imagination than merely studying it. This result exhibits, in real life, how men attempted to use their limited **agency** (constrained to endogenously driven change) to subvert a **structure** considered as oppressive (set as an exogenously driven normative system). This is consistent with Mahoney and Tehen’s findings (2009), breaking down institutional change into 4 types (displacement, layering, drift and conversion)<sup>3</sup>, where dynamics between *usurpers* (men in this case, with little leverage) and *defenders* (women in this case, with absolute veto power) resulted in men opting for strategic *layering* and *conversion* as tools for institutional change (consistent with women strategies in today’s polity).

### The Reality Check:

#### The Visit to the Fisherman’s Association

Midway through the simulation, the group conducted a field visit to a local Fisherman’s Association. This excursion provided a jarring “reality check” that validated the simulation’s grounding hypothesis. Participants had a meeting with ap-

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**3.** Displacement: the wholesale removal of existing rules and the introduction of entirely new ones (what the GRBC did instate in the first place). Drift: Institutional change that occurs when rules remain the same but their impact shifts due to changes in the external environment (the “reversed” aspect of the GRBC). Layering: the process of attaching new rules or amendments to existing institutions without completely discarding the original structure. Conversion: the strategic redirection of existing rules toward new goals or functions, often by those they were not originally intended to serve.

proximately ten women and with only two men present. Despite the women being the demographic majority and performing the bulk of the logistical labor (preparing fish, managing sales), they remained silent.

*“Right away, the man put himself in the position of leader... The women felt a little, ironically, in the minority, while they were more numerous... They didn’t speak at all; they waited for us to speak to them.”*  
(interview of a male participant)

For the male participants, who were currently experiencing “silence” and “exclusion” in the simulation, this was a moment of radical empathy. They realized that the women’s silence was not passivity, but structural exclusion – a mirror of their own frustration in the camp. One participant noted: “Women, they don’t even have a voice. It’s not that we don’t listen to them, they’re mute. In society, they’re just mute.” This observation transformed the simulation from a game into a direct analytical tool for understanding the real world.

## THE CRISIS, PART II: THE INTOXICATION OF POWER

While the men experienced the simulation as a crisis of fatigue, the women experienced it as a crisis of responsibility and intoxication. The transfer of power was absolute, and the speed with which the female participants adapted to the role of the oppressor provides a chilling data point on the fluidity of gendered power dynamics.

### The Bureaucracy of Domination

On the very first day, the newly elected all-female council drafted nearly 100 laws and regulations. This legislative frenzy was not merely administrative; it was an exercise in ‘institutional creativity’ designed to lock in their advantage and power (Levi, 1990). The laws included among other the legalization of *polyandry*, the imposition of a curfew for men, or a strict system of economic tutelage: men were deprived of the right to handle the camp’s currency and the product of labor. Any earnings made by men had to be handed directly to their ‘wives’ or female supervisors, replicating the exact economic dependence that traps millions of Malagasy women.

Furthermore, the value of male labor was not fixed but *contingent on female evaluation*. Men’s salaries were granted based on whether women supervisors were ‘satisfied’ or not. This subjec-

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***Experiencing oppression  
triggers a far more radical  
political imagination than  
merely studying it***

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tive valuation forced men to perform emotional labor – smiling, being pleasant, showing gratitude – alongside their physical tasks, simply to get paid and earn favors, engaging in practices of *conversions* to induce institutional change and behaviors among power holders (women).

### **The Theater of Humiliation**

Filmed activities reveal that recruiters exerted power through public humiliation. During simulated job interviews, female recruiters mimicked the paternalistic behavior of male bosses, a tactic encouraged by the supervising gender expert. Applicants were openly mocked. One man applying for a ‘Chief Cleaner’ role was ridiculed for arriving late while pretending to apply for a “chief position”; another saw his personal struggles dismissed with the comment that life ‘must be easy’ at home; others received criticism regarding their clothes or faced sexist assumptions that their wives held all decision-making power regarding finances and future childcare choices.

The policing of outfits was an interesting aspect. Men were told they looked “too negligent” or “too provocative,” forcing them to experience the objectification that reduces professional competence to physical appearance (which was emphasized by the conversion strategies adopted by men to “charm” their way through benefits and power). The visuals, posters, ads, campaign material etc. created for the bootcamp emphasized both men responsibility for the “original sin” committed in the past (remembering how the 21st century collapse was the result of men war-mongering) as well as depicting them in position of caregivers and reproductive workers, even creating visual “warnings” on how they should dress properly and respect curfew if they ought to avoid harassment and sexual abuses. In interviews, female participants described a mix of pleasure, a new empowering feeling of freedom but also, of heavy responsibility in these roles. The novelty of being the one who validates, judges, and punishes was described as “intoxicating,” revealing how quickly the “habitus” of power (Bourdieu, 1980) can be adopted by those who have historically been excluded from it.

### **The Epistemic Shock and the Breaking Point**

However, the simulation can eventually also crack the armor of normalization. A turning point came during a training session on Gender-Based Violence (GBV), a moment when the “Archives of the World Before” (i.e. today’s Malagasy reality) were discussed. For one female

participant specifically, the session triggered a realization of how deeply she herself had normalized sexual abuses in her own life. The realization was so acute that it required intervention from the female trainers (member of GBV local CSOs) to handle the resurgence of the repressed trauma.

This moment rippled through the camp. The men, witnessing this breakdown, realized that this violence was happening to people they knew, peers they respected, without them ever being aware of it. For a time, the game stopped being a game. The structural violence they had been simulating suddenly connected with the real violence laid down in the “Archives.”

As women held absolute power, backed by the laws they had written, one could have expected to see it continued, crushing the male opposition and enjoying the reversal of history. But, to me, the most striking result was yet to come, because... women didn't.

### **A Different Approach to Power**

In the penultimate women's meeting on the penultimate day, the Council of Wise Women gathered. As much as possessing absolute power was thrilling, they brought up an interesting concern to the agenda: they were collectively starting to “feel sorry” for the fate men had encountered during the week. It was a truly transformative experience to witness how this would

unfold, because in a unanimous vote... they decided, without any external pressure or necessity, to break the injustice themselves and shift the entire narrative base. They *voluntarily* dismantled the supremacy they had partially inherited by design, built upon and reinforced, deciding in the end to **share power** in equality with men. I need to stress the fact that this decision was not forced or induced by the organizers and trainers, who were identified as ecofeminists and activists (and wrongfully assumed to be promoting matriarchal systems, an ubiquity we intentionally did not diffuse in order to see how the somatized power relation between donors and party members, or trainers and trainees will play out); it was an *organic outcome* of the simulation. Whether gendered or not, the intervention of *empathy* as a driver for institutional change revealed a striking transformative power: it rewrote the entire premise and cosmogony of the simulation, showing a self-imposed change by *displacement* coming from the *defenders* themselves. While the power of empathy or empathy itself as a framework for political change remains vastly understudied, this experiment advocates for more research, data and experiments going in this direction.

However, this outcome should not be read as evidence of an inherently more benevolent exercise of power by women. Rather, it reflects the persistence of gendered socialization within informal institutions, where empathy and responsibility for others are disproportionately cultivated among women (as the comment in section 6.3 shows below). The simulation thus revealed not a moral

superiority, but the durability of gendered norms even under conditions of reversed formal power, for both men *and* women.

At the very least and from this experimental point of view, it suggests that when women accessed power, even within a system designed to be oppressive and extremely beneficial to them, the ‘ethics of care’ (Gilligan, 1982) and a rejection of the violence they know too well **can override the temptation of total domination.**

## THE LEGACY: FOUR YEARS LATER

Critics of immersive simulations often argue that the effects are temporary – an emotional “sugar rush” that fades. However, longitudinal data collected in January 2026, almost four years post-intervention, suggests the “trauma” metabolized into durable political reflexivity and behavioral change. This longitudinal follow-up combined semi-structured interviews with written questionnaires distributed to former participants. While not exhaustive, the follow-up captured responses from a majority of the original cohort and focused on concrete behavioral and organizational changes rather than attitudinal self-reporting. The aim was not causal attribution in a strict sense, but the identification of *durable procedural shifts* plausibly linked to the simulation.

### The Organizational Interrupter (The Ambovombe Case)

The most significant behavioral shift occurred not in abstract ideology, but in local procedure and behaviors. One male participant from Ambovombe, a region in Southern Madagascar, noted for conservative gender norms, reported a specific change in his leadership style:

*“It was the first time, in my life, I was truly not like I was before... There is an Association of ours in Ambovombe, where I myself actively encourage friends to listen to the opinion of women when we have discussions. Since the bootcamp, I intervene when men interrupt other women.”* (Participant Response to the 4-years after follow-up, 2026)

This testifies to the breaking of the “homosocial loop.” The participant is no longer just “aware” of women’s rights; he has become an institutional interrupter, actively stopping the flow of male-dominated conversation to create space for women. This is the transition from attitude to procedure.

### The Strategic Tool (The Diplomat)

For female participants, the simulation provided a narrative asset. One participant, now working in diplomacy, reported utilizing her experience

during high-level negotiations in a foreign country. When faced with a male-dominated delegation, she used the “Matriarchal History” narrative developed during the bootcamp to reframe the discussion, asserting authority by rooting it in a rediscovered (this time authentic) Malagasy tradition of female rule.

This mirrors Tamale’s (2020) arguments on Afro-feminism. The simulation provided her with a “counter-mythology” – realizing the power of narratives to *speak about* but also *challenge* power, rooting it in reimagined history.

### **The Critical Insight: Beyond “Benevolence”**

Perhaps the most sophisticated insight came from a female participant reflecting on why the “ruling women” eventually decided to share power with the men. She refused the essentialist idea that women are naturally more democratic:

*“We educated Malagasy women to always think about others... sometimes too empathetically. I think that if we were that, it was more intuitive than anything else.”*

This observation highlights that even when women obtain power (formal institutions), the socialization of empathy (informal institutions) persists. The women shared power not because

it was politically optimal, but because they were conditioned to care for the “suffering” men. This confirms Waylen’s (2014) warning that informal norms are sticky but can at the same time advocate for a de-gendering of empathy, streamlining it into existing trainings on barriers, access and political participation through more *immersive* mechanisms (such as the GRBC).

## RECOMMENDATIONS

The Gender Reversed Bootcamp was a unique, never-seen-before mechanism introduced to political party development on gender and environmental issues. It demonstrated that we do not *only* need more women who know how to write a press release, or women trained in public speaking; we need political organizations that understand and make visible the *structural cost of inequality*.

This format is not presented as a universally scalable model, nor as a substitute for legal or institutional reform. Its value lies instead in demonstrating the limits of conventional training approaches and in testing how embodied, conflictual pedagogies can complement formal gender equality strategies within political organizations. For the donor community, we argue that at the very least, the following lessons are clear:

**1. Shift Funding from “Training” to “Simulation”:**

We should stop funding static workshops in hotels. Funding immersive simulations that force participants to inhabit the structural constraints they are trying to dismantle creates far more long-lasting results and awareness, for both men and women. Cognitive understanding is not enough; participants need *somatic knowledge* of inequality.

**2. Target the “Informal Institution”:** Interventions must target the invisible rules, such as time usage and financial dependence, *as they are embodied*. The GRBC showed that “Time Poverty” is a physically experienced barrier to political activity. Future programs should include “time audits” and “care work simulations” as mandatory components for male political leaders.

**3. Accept “Conflict” as a Metric of Success:**

The reports, interviews and audiovisual data showed tension, anger, disappointments, dissatisfactions and fatigue. In a standard grant report, this looks like failure. In reality, this was the proof of *actual impact*. Donors must be willing to fund programs that are psychologically risky. If the participants are comfortable, they are not learning about power.

**4. Decolonize the Method:** The success of the “Matriarchal Narrative” proves the value of rooting gender equality in local mythologies (even invented ones) rather than UN conventions.

Tools should encourage youth to reimagine their own cultural histories to find indigenous roots for equity.

If we have been failing at PowerPointing our way out of patriarchy, maybe its simulation through the lens of a mirrored matriarchy should become a new ground for experimenting on political change. By designing devices making the invisible and informal injustices strikingly visible and experienced in the flesh, we may be able to offer new opportunities and room for innovation in ventures empowering both women and men.

## CONCLUSION

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To me, the most striking outcome of the Gender Reversed Bootcamp was not the revelation of domination, nor the speed with which power was internalized by those who had historically been excluded from it. It was the moment when absolute power was voluntarily dismantled. Women, placed in a position of total institutional supremacy, chose to displace the system itself – not out of strategic necessity, but through an empathic refusal to reproduce a violence they recognized all too well.

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*If the participants are comfortable, they are not learning about power*

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This outcome should not be read as moral benevolence. It points instead to **empathy** as an **informal political institution**: a relational capacity capable of interrupting domination even when formal rules, incentives, and procedures all favor its consolidation. When empathy is present, institutional change remains possible without annihilation. When it is absent, power tends toward closure, accumulation, and moral numbness.

This insight is particularly salient in a historical moment marked by the normalization of hardness, speed, and distrust as virtues of governance. We are witnessing an unprecedented concentration and vertical integration of political influence, mediatic power, digital infrastructures, satellite systems, energy networks, industrial production, algorithmic mediation, cognitive interfaces, and labor automation within single techno-political constellations. In this context, the declaration made in February 2025 by one of its most iconic examples – and incidentally the richest individual on the planet – that “the fundamental weakness of Western civilization is empathy”, should be read not as provocation, but as a programmatic statement about power liberated from relational constraint.

Gustave M. Gilbert reached the opposite conclusion under far darker circumstances. Reflecting on his work with the defendants of the Nuremberg Trials, he wrote:

*“In my work with the defendants [at the Nuremberg Trials 1945–1949] I was searching for the nature of evil and I now think I have come close to defining it. A lack of empathy. It’s the one characteristic that connects all the defendants, a genuine incapacity to feel with their fellow men. Evil, I think, is the absence of empathy.” (Gilbert, 1947)*

**The danger, then, is not that contemporary institutions rely too heavily on empathy, but that they are increasingly designed to function without it.** Systems governed exclusively through evaluation, metrics, compliance, and formalized procedure risk becoming affectively hollow – operationally correct, auditable, and profoundly *indifferent*. In such systems, suffering does not need to be denied; it only needs to be rendered irrelevant, unseen, not considered. And this, is affecting both women and men today.

Political parties and political organizations occupy a decisive position in this trajectory. As translation interfaces between lived experience and political power, they can either drain empathy from politics in the name of procedural rigor and control, or cultivate it as a shared relational infrastructure that makes democratic correction possible. What is ultimately at stake is the survival of our commons at their most fundamental level: the collective capacity to recognize one another as affected beings within a shared world. The erosion of empathy remains one of the earliest and most reliable indicators of a political order drifting toward barbarism.



## **DR. LUDOVIC GARATTINI**

**Dr. Ludovic Garattini is the Founding Research Director of Green Forum Sweden and an Associate Researcher at the HT2S Laboratory, Conservatoire National des Arts et Métiers (CNAM), Paris.**

He holds a PhD in Information and Communication Sciences from University of Paris. His research sits at the intersection of science and technology studies (STS), gender, techno-environmentalism, and the history of artificial beings. He develops the concept of inchoative design, exploring how technologies in their emergent stages are shaped by the competing logics of environmental politics and industrial imperatives — and how intervening at these formative thresholds can redirect technological trajectories toward more equitable and sustainable outcomes. Over a career spanning more than 20 years across academia, European governance, and international development, he has led initiatives including GREEN P.U.L.S.E., a 12-partner Horizon Europe consortium, the Gender Reversed Bootcamp, the Science Meets Politics conferences, and the LEX Robotica conference on robotics, AI and law. A publishing researcher, he has attended five consecutive UN Climate Conferences from COP26 in Glasgow to COP30 in Belém. He is based between Stockholm and Paris.

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#### **Videos:**

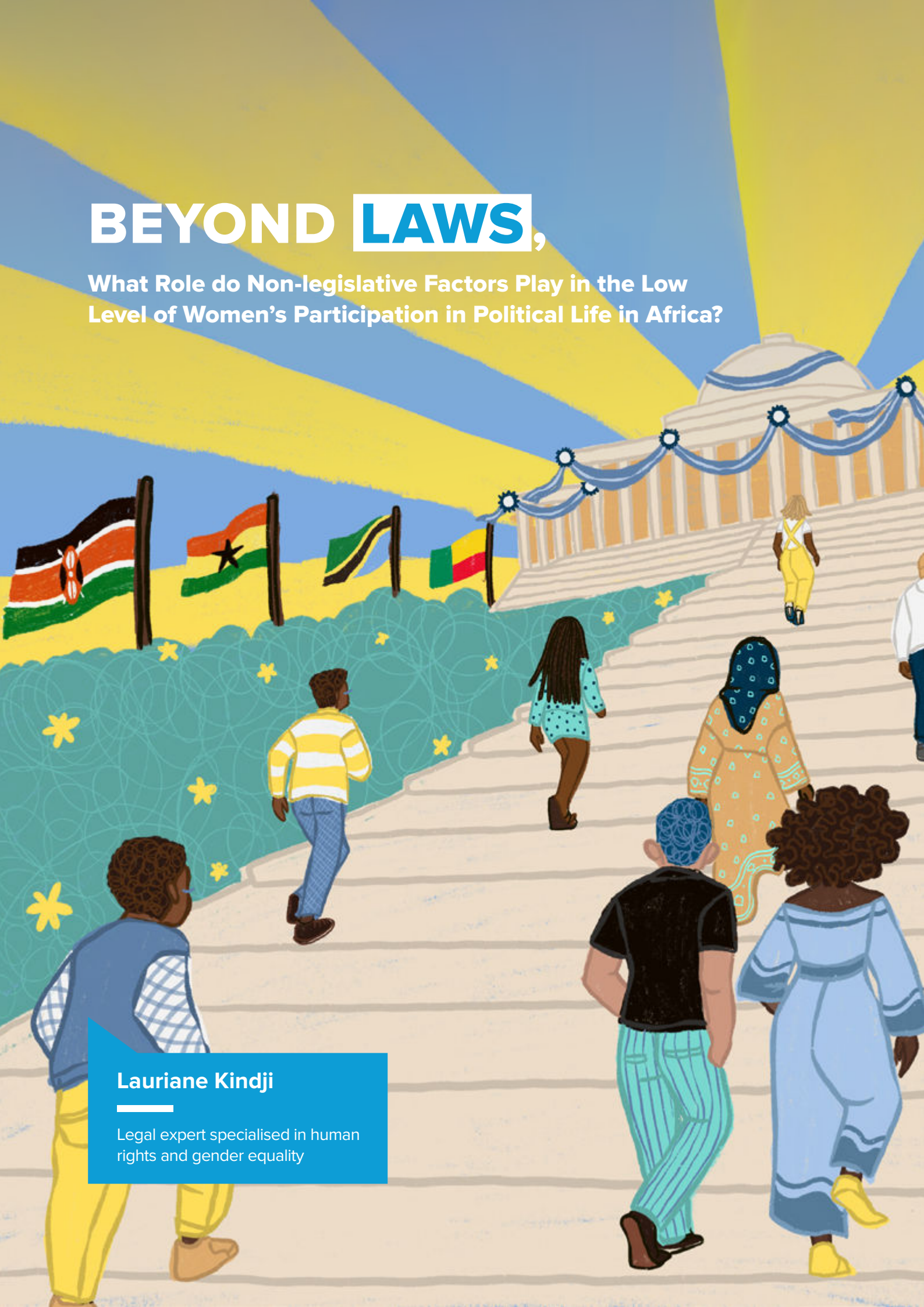
- Gender Reversed Bootcamp: Dystopia teaser  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9JgC-FIU-tQ>
- Gender Reversed Bootcamp: Camp teaser  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rWLbm6fn8MM>
- Gender Reversed Bootcamp: Interviews  
[https://youtu.be/nutxsPVAN4k?si=phlh8WS0FXB8eZ\\_c](https://youtu.be/nutxsPVAN4k?si=phlh8WS0FXB8eZ_c)

# BEYOND LAWS,

What Role do Non-legislative Factors Play in the Low Level of Women's Participation in Political Life in Africa?

**Lauriane Kindji**

Legal expert specialised in human rights and gender equality



What if laws weren't the real obstacle to women's advancement in politics? The momentum of sustainable and inclusive development, alongside environmental, economic, social, cultural and security challenges, necessitates a restructuring of political leadership and a sustained, balanced and growing focus on the role and participation of African women in politics in general, and Beninese women in particular. In this regard, women hold one of the keys to more sustainable, inclusive and equitable development.

The political and legal environment, described as 'affirmative action' in support of women's rights and their full participation in decision-making, is expanding. Although this list is by no means exhaustive, West African countries – specifically Benin, Niger and Burkina Faso – have established laws on gender parity,<sup>1</sup> electoral quotas<sup>2</sup> and international legal commitments<sup>3</sup> that emphasise gender equality. For example, Sustainable Development Goal 5.5 calls for “*ensuring women's full and effective participation and equal access to decision-making at all levels of government, in political, economic and public life*”.

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1. Republic of Cape Verde, Law No. 68/IX/2019 of 28 November; Central African Republic, Law No. 16.004 of 24 March 2016 establishing gender equality in the Central African Republic

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## What if laws weren't the real obstacle to women's advancement in politics?

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Nevertheless, there appears to be a glass ceiling<sup>4</sup> deeply ingrained in attitudes and behaviour, which makes it difficult for women to achieve significant representation. Women remain under-represented in positions of political power, particularly at the highest levels of decision-making. According to the United Nations resolution on women's participation in political life (2011),<sup>5</sup> *'in every region of the world, women remain largely absent from the political sphere, often due to a lack of legislation, discriminatory practices, cultural attitudes and sexist stereotypes, and because they have a low level of education, lack access to healthcare and are much more affected by poverty than men'*.

This glaring paradox encourages us to think differently and in a holistic way. Beyond the legal framework, what non-legal measures could be taken to strengthen women's political leadership in the pursuit of sustainable and inclusive development?

This article presents an analysis based primarily on the situation in Benin, but also includes examples from other West African countries such as Niger and Burkina Faso. It examines certain non-legal determinants of women's political leadership, particularly socio-cultural and economic factors (I), as well as political and institutional factors (II).

## I - SOCIOCULTURAL AND ECONOMIC FACTORS

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Every woman in politics bears the silent burden of battling against prejudice against women, judgemental stares, invisible barriers, and so on. The socio-cultural and economic factors contributing to women's low levels of political participation in decision-making bodies are numerous and cannot be listed exhaustively. These factors relate, amongst other things, to the issue of harmful traditional prejudices and gender stereotypes (A), as well as to the limited access women and girls have to economic resources, including access to land (B).

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4. Marie Odile ATTANASSO, *Women's participation in the legislature: does the glass ceiling exist in Benin?* 2022, Cotonou, CHRISTON Éditions, p. 12

5. Dr Fatoumata Keita, 'Women's political participation in West Africa and the Sahel: between exclusion and new horizons', *Policy Brief No. 05-OIF22*, *Observatory on Geopolitical, Security and Socio-Political Issues in the Sahel*.

## A) The issue of traditional prejudices and gender stereotypes

The Charter of Kouroukan Fouga<sup>6</sup> – one of the world's oldest constitutions, regarded as a precursor to the Declaration of Human Rights – states in Article 5 that: *“Everyone has the right to life and to the preservation of their physical integrity. Consequently, any attempt to take the life of another person is punishable by death”*. Furthermore, Article 1 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) states that *“all human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights.”* and *“They are endowed with reason and conscience and ought to treat one another in a spirit of brotherhood.”* These legal texts establish the inherent equality of all individuals from birth, regardless of their origin, race or any other factor.

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***There appears to be a glass ceiling deeply ingrained in attitudes and behaviour***

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In some African cultures, girls seem to be less desired. Announcing, ‘It’s a boy’ is more celebrated than saying, ‘It’s a girl’, because of the different social value attributed to the sexes. One might be tempted to say that, from the moment of her conception and birth, the little girl carries within her a sense of misfortune, a feeling that she is less worthy, less valuable, and less indispensable to her family, community or country than the boy. Some men may publicly advocate for women’s participation in politics, but due to harmful prejudices and biased life coaching, deep down they do not really want this, and believe that women do not truly belong in politics.

Because of the way society is structured, the dominant role played by men in choosing where to live and in all major decisions concerning family life – including the upbringing and marriage of children – deprives women of their ability and capacity to make decisions for themselves and for others, to take responsibility for their decisions, to learn from their mistakes, and to build and enhance their self-confidence. Very often, women only decide to enter politics once they are certain that it will not harm their family life, their community life, or even the stability of their homes and marital harmony. Once they have entered politics, they receive no political guidance, let alone civic and political education. They are

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<sup>6</sup> The Kouroukan Fouga Charter (presented at the regional consultation workshop between Maninka communicators and traditionalists, Kankan, Republic of Guinea, 3–12 March 1998). The Kouroukan Fouga Charter, or Mandé Charter, is one of the oldest constitutions in the world; it was proclaimed in 1236 by Soundjata Keita, founder of the Mali Empire. It served as the fundamental law governing the social, political and economic life of the new empire. It regulates property, marriage and trade. It was inscribed on the UNESCO List of Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity in 2009 and is regarded as a precursor to declarations of human rights

'good' for mobilising political party activists and supporters, and for 'catering'.<sup>7</sup>

For many societies, the invisibility and silence of women are, in fact, simply the way things are. For example, passing on the family history is often the sole responsibility of the head of the family – that is, the man – which might lead one to believe that great acts of heroism come from the paternal side. And yet, this woman who brings life into the world undoubtedly has a history marked by civic and political commitment, by challenges and victories, but above all by heroism that should be passed on to children to show that women, just as much as men, are capable of heroism and of contributing to great revolutions, whatever the field.

In the catalogue *Women of Distinction*, which traces the careers of renowned women from around the world, Claire Champenois writes in the foreword: "... even as young girls, they were already seeking recognition for their achievements and encouraging support from those around them." *Either they succeeded and found confidence in it, or they failed and their determination was only strengthened... We must push ourselves beyond our limits, transcend ourselves; that is why*

*the lives of these illustrious women seem so romantic to us... The portrait of each of these women shows that one does not become famous by chance. They are free-spirited, determined, daring, tenacious and, for the most part, have a strong mind. But that's not enough to achieve worldwide fame. 'Whether they were politicians, sportswomen, scientists, actresses or painters, these women needed passion, ambition (creative energy), talent and strength.'*<sup>8</sup> These excerpts show that it is not enough for a woman simply to have dreams; she must also prove her ability to face challenges and, above all, never give up in the face of obstacles.

In an explanatory article on gender equality in 2025, UN WOMEN stated that "*for far too many girls, education comes to an abrupt end: nearly one in five girls is married before the age of 18. Education can open doors, but child marriage, female genital mutilation, violence and discrimination slam them shut, preventing women from breaking through the glass ceiling and being appointed to leadership roles.*"<sup>9</sup> Along the same line of issues surrounding gender-based violence, according to UN WOMEN:<sup>10</sup> "*Every year, 4 million girls undergo female genital mutilation, more than 2 million of them be-*

7. Catering is an English term meaning 'provisioning' or 'food service', and has the same meaning in French. This term applies to a variety of contexts, such as event catering (weddings, festivals, etc.), air travel (in-flight service) and film or TV productions. The closest French equivalent is 'traiteur' or 'catering for events'.

8. CHAMPENOIS, Claire, *EXCEPTIONAL WOMEN FROM THE 20TH CENTURY TO THE PRESENT DAY*, published by LODI. This catalogue chronicles the lives of film stars, opera divas, top-level athletes and female writers. The 'Exceptional Women' catalogue traces the careers and early steps towards fame of some of the world's most celebrated women. These women come from a variety of fields: music, politics, film, sport, literature, the fine arts, and so on. This book seeks to demonstrate that any great achievement or fame attained by a woman inevitably involves passion, ambition, talent, strength, fears, anxieties, tears and doubts, but above all, unwavering determination and steadfast leadership.

9. UN Women, 'Gains, Gaps and Choices: A \$342 trillion opportunity', published on 15 September 2025.

10. UN WOMEN, *Gender Snapshot Report, 2025*.

fore the age of 5.” It follows that, in the long term, a huge number of women will have to devote their meagre financial resources to healthcare costs arising from the potential consequences of female genital mutilation (FGM), rather than investing in building their political leadership and presence in the highest echelons of decision-making. In addition to these gender stereotypes, the emergence of women in political leadership is hampered by their limited access to economic resources.

## **B) Women's limited access to economic resources**

Women's economic dependence can limit their decision-making autonomy and act as a barrier to their political ambitions. There are a number of challenges relating to access to economic resources: job insecurity, wage inequality, and unequal or difficult access to land ownership and credit, among others. To genuinely secure stability and a good reputation in politics in particular, and in elected positions of responsibility in general, sufficient financial resources are required.

According to UN Women, “In 2025, 9.2% of women and girls will be living in extreme poverty, compared with 8.6% of men. If current trends continue, 351 million women and girls could still be living in extreme poverty by 2030.”<sup>11</sup> Under

these circumstances, it would be difficult to maintain the consistency required to achieve a critical mass of women capable of holding decision-making positions.

Domestic work, however, remains undervalued and continues to resist progress towards equality. This further reduces women's chances of diversifying their sources of income in order to achieve economic empowerment or to support their entrepreneurial ventures. According to a study carried out by GIZ in 2020, women are more likely to be in vulnerable jobs, which account for 91.1% of the jobs held by women, 90.3% of which are in rural areas.<sup>12</sup> Women's financial independence remains a key factor and a guarantee of successful engagement in politics. The same study generally demonstrates that: poverty appears to be primarily a structural issue, exacerbated by the unequal distribution of wealth<sup>13</sup>, and that granting land to women for diversified farming helps to eradicate poverty in Africa. Women's access to land remains a major concern in Benin, for example, as women do not generally own land and have access only to small plots. Due to their vulnerable situation, these women do not have easy access to credit to buy land, as securing adequate financing often requires the provision of land collateral – that is, a plot of land backed by a land title. On the other hand, still in the context of Benin, the land entrusted to women for farming is

11. UN Women, *Progress on the Sustainable Development Goals, Gender Panorama 2025*, p. 6

12. Dr Agnès Badou Savi, *Implementation of the Poverty Analysis Tool in Benin (OPA)*, GIZ, August 2020, p. 13

13. 6. Ibid., p. 15.

most often depleted soil. These families invest resources in renovating them, but with no long-term security, as the risk of eviction is ever-present due to the lack of a lease or official documents of transfer or inheritance. Given all these constraints, it is difficult to eradicate poverty among women and to foster the kind of sustainable and inclusive development that empowers women to participate in decision-making.

The key factors in facilitating access to economic resources are: access to land and water, access to healthcare, the internet, civil registration, girls' education and the reduction of unpaid work. Increasing women's participation and representation in decision-making bodies, as well as strengthening women's leadership, also depend heavily on the political and institutional environment.

## II - POLITICAL AND INSTITUTIONAL DETERMINANTS

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Article 16 of the Kouroukan Fougá Charter states that *“women, in addition to their daily duties, must be involved in all our forms of government.”*

Of all the boundaries, the political one was, in every country, the hardest to cross. Because politics is the centre of decision-making and the heart of power, it was regarded as the preserve and domain of men.<sup>14</sup> Women enter politics later in life because they are busy fulfilling the primary caregiving role assigned to them (household chores, family responsibilities), but also because they fear being heavily criticised or seeing their private lives exposed or misrepresented. Preserving one's dignity seems to take precedence over political commitment, and the path to political glory is neither well-trodden nor easily accessible. Sometimes, looking beyond appearances, we have to face up to failures, anxieties, fears, suffering, loneliness and humiliation; but in this jungle too, it is vital to be surrounded by people who encourage and support women's daily efforts and sacrifices. Political parties show only a limited commitment to promoting women in political leadership (see point A below). However, this work towards acceptance and open-

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14. PERROT, Michelle, *\*My History of Women \**, Paris: Éditions du Seuil and France Culture, 2006, p. 198.

ness in politics – this struggle – must continue regardless, and with the support of men. There is a subtle interplay between a professed openness and structural inertia, as well as political and electoral violence, which exert a significant influence, hindering women's political leadership (see point B below).

### **A) Political parties: between professed openness and structural inertia**

Most political parties openly declare their support for women in leadership roles, but this commitment is not backed up by concrete and sustained action. Women are often appointed to peripheral roles (social, youth and family affairs committees), but rarely to key positions within strategic bodies (executive committees, nomination committees, campaign management). The situation is critical for illiterate women, who are almost always marginalised compared to men within the family, society and politics. They act more as agents of propaganda and mobilisation than as decision-makers. Women's individual financial capacity remains a critical issue because, beyond the deposit paid by political parties, the structure of election campaign funding means that they still have to contribute significantly to the costs.

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## ***Women are often appointed to peripheral roles, but rarely to key positions***

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Women have campaigned within political parties and trade union movements to gain visibility and make their voices heard in the running of public affairs.<sup>15</sup> However, women's activism remained largely overlooked for a long time, as history has largely recognised men as the main political actors, despite all the efforts made by women.

Furthermore, women often have to demonstrate greater loyalty or a higher level of competence in order to gain recognition in political circles where male legitimacy remains the unspoken norm. This requirement exacerbates existing inequalities and contributes to their under-representation in the decision-making bodies of political parties. Most political parties have included women on their lists, but in what positions? The issue of women's status may partly explain the low proportion of women in decision-making bodies, particularly in Benin's National Assembly.<sup>16</sup> Concrete action needs to be taken within political parties. Thus,

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<sup>15</sup> Examples of women leaders: Jeanne Martin Cissé (Guinea); Ellen Johnson Sirleaf (Liberia); Rafiatou Karimou (Benin); Élisabeth Pognon (Benin); Marie-Élise Gbèdo (Benin).

<sup>16</sup> ATTANASSO, Marie Odile, 'Women's participation in the legislature: does the glass ceiling exist in Benin?', p. 13

during the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) World Conference of Women Parliamentarians, held on 14 and 15 March 2025 in Mexico City (Mexico), IPU Secretary General Martin Chungong stated: “I have seen what inequality means in terms of lost opportunities: when a woman is denied access to education, when a female leader is silenced because of her gender, when entire communities live under the yoke of unspeakable realities that no one dares to denounce, let alone combat, such as violence and all the consequences it brings to a person’s life.” and “I call on every man in this room and elsewhere not to wait to be asked to fight for gender equality, but to throw themselves into the battle with determination.”<sup>17</sup>

Civic engagement and volunteering are also values that should be promoted both within political parties and in civil society organisations. The path to building women’s political leadership often begins with involvement in community organisations, and it is essential to learn at this stage the principles of good governance, transparency and rotation within management bodies, as well as ethics and integrity; but above all, the need to take the public interest into account in everything we do. Women, too, must learn to support one another and embrace a ‘**She for She**’ culture to shape female political leadership, because it is by working together that we can move forward and break through the glass ceiling.

It is becoming increasingly essential that political parties, as part of their commitment and to demonstrate their good faith, introduce a mentoring scheme, support networking and the ongoing civic and political education of female activists, and create safe spaces where women can be heard and where their mental health is protected. Women in political leadership will also need to build resilience against political and electoral violence.

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***Equality is not a cost to be borne, but a benefit that the world denies itself every day it delays its implementation***

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<sup>17</sup> Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU), ‘IPU World Conference of Women Parliamentarians calls for gender parity in parliament’, <https://www.ipu.org/fr/actualites/communiqués-de-presse/2025-03/la-conference-mondiale-des-femmes-parlementaires-de-lui-p-appelle-la-parite-hommes-femmes-au-parlement>.

## **B) The impact of political violence on women's participation in politics**

The specific recognition of violence against women in politics first appeared in the United Nations General Assembly Resolution 66/130.

According to UN Women: *“Violence against women in political life is defined as any act or threat of gender-based violence that results in physical, sexual or psychological harm to women, which prevents them from exercising and realising their political rights, in both the public and private spheres, including the right to vote and hold public office, to vote in secret and campaign freely, to associate and assemble, and to enjoy freedom of opinion and expression. Such violence may be perpetrated by a family member, a member of the community or by the state.”*<sup>18</sup>

In this world, which is clearly dominated by men, the challenges facing a woman who wants to make her mark in politics are very real and unforgiving.

In its guidance note, UN Women, which identifies the settings and perpetrators of violence against women in politics, states that *“Violence against women in politics can be perpetrated both offline and online, in public and in private, by other female or male politicians, family members and*

*strangers, voters, traditional or religious leaders, political opponents and members of political parties, the media and journalists, or state actors, amongst other communities and actors”.* *“Online, it can be perpetrated by these same people, by anonymous trolls and by bots.”*<sup>19</sup>

Documenting violence against women in politics through investigations can also help to counter the normalisation of violence, as this suggests that violence is simply an expected part of life, with no consequences, and that the blame lies with the victim rather than the perpetrator.<sup>20</sup>

In 2013, in its General Recommendation No. 30 on women in conflict prevention, conflicts and post-conflict situations, the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women stated that *“significant progress towards women's equal participation will only be possible if a number of appropriate measures are taken, including ensuring that female voters and women standing for political office are not subjected to violence by either the authorities or private actors”.* The Committee also recommended that *“States Parties adopt a zero-tolerance policy towards all forms of violence that hinder women's participation, in particular against women campaigning for public office or those exercising their right to vote.”*<sup>21</sup>

18. UN Women and UNDP, *Preventing Violence against Women in Elections: A Programming Guide*, 2017.

19. UN Women, *Guidance Notes: Preventing Violence against Women in Politics*, Leadership and Governance section, July 2011, p. 5.

20. *Ibid.*, p. 10.

21. Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women, General Recommendation No. 30 on women in conflict prevention, conflict and post-conflict situations, 2013, CEDAW/C/GC/30. Paragraphs 72 and 73

## CONCLUSION

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Keeping women in poverty, excluding them from leadership roles and exposing them to violence in order to prevent, reduce or undermine their political engagement amounts to sabotaging the economy. Inequality stifles growth, squanders potential and prevents entire societies from moving forward. Equality is not a cost to be borne, but a benefit that the world denies itself every day it delays its implementation<sup>22</sup>.

If men can overcome their fears of being challenged by women, and if women can overcome their fear of being in the spotlight and their lack of self-confidence, a significant step will have been taken towards the affirmation of women's political leadership. Such leadership should not be confined to the question of whether men or women hold power, but rather should focus on pooling our collective efforts to ensure that, in a spirit of equality and fairness, every individual, regardless of gender, participates in political, social and economic life.

The 2025 Gender Equality Spotlight, published by UN Women, highlights six transformative areas: *digital inclusion, poverty eradication, protection from violence, equality in decision-making, peace and security, and climate justice*. Each

actor or actress will therefore need to reflect on their personal commitment or role in promoting better female political leadership. The law provides a framework for reforms and gives them legal standing, but there is a need for systemic and cultural change (a shift in mindset) that goes beyond legislation. A call for a holistic approach to women's political participation, involving institutions, civil society, families and individuals. How can legal mechanisms be combined with other factors to strengthen women's political participation? A citadel that seems difficult to conquer, but certainly not impossible - let's conquer it together!

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22. UN Women, 'The Gains, the Gaps and the Choice: \$342 trillion', published on 15 September 2025



## LAURIANE KINDJI

**Lauriane Kindji is a Beninese legal expert, specializing in human rights and gender equality.**

Holding a Master's degree in Business Law and Judicial Careers from the University of Abomey-Calavi (Benin) and a Master's degree in Decentralization and Local Development from the African University of Cooperative Development (Benin), she is actively engaged within Beninese civil society in the promotion and protection of women's rights and gender equality. As a consultant and trainer, she works with a variety of organizations on topics such as international human rights law, gender equality, sexual and reproductive rights, gender-based violence and human rights advocacy.

A founding member of the *Creuset des Femmes Engagées pour des Nominations et Elections Paritaires au Bénin* (FENEP Bénin - Women Committed to Parity in Nominations and Elections in Benin), she took part in an exchange visit to Brussels and Munich under the Women's Empowerment in Benin and Togo program of the Hanns Seidel Foundation, an experience that led her to author an article on women's political leadership. She also serves as president of the *Association pour la Promotion du Genre, de l'Environnement et de la Citoyenneté* (PGEC - Association for the Promotion of Gender, Environment and Citizenship).

An alumna of the Young African Leaders Initiatives (YALI), Regional Leadership Program in Dakar, specializing in Public Management, and of the Young Leaders of Benin Program of the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, she has further shaped her vision of inclusive governance and democratic youth engagement. Lauriane Kindji embodies a deep and unwavering commitment to building a more just, equitable and inclusive society.

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### **About Hanns Seidel Stiftung**

Hanns Seidel Stiftung is a German political foundation committed to promoting democratic governance, political dialogue, civic education, and international cooperation. Through policy engagement, research, and partnerships across Europe and beyond, the foundation contributes to debates on democracy, security, sustainable development, and the future of Europe in a changing global context.

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Rue de l'Industrie 42  
1040 Bruxelles

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