

Chapter 10

The Paradox of Increasing Women's Space and Influence in Public Life in Africa: The First Lady Experience

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ABSTRACT

Although women in Africa have become socially and fairly economically visible of late, African women have not been as politically noticeable as their male counterpart. Yet knowledge of their interest and expectations has made them serve as appendages to men or become actors on the sidelines of public space. This chapter takes a look at the different ideological and political interest where women's involvement in politics is mostly dictated by men. It explores African women's emerging public space and influence in politics and political participation through the office of the first lady.

INTRODUCTION

In Africa, politics is heavily dominated by the male folks with strong economic interest and power. As a relatively weak player, women thus face particular challenges in influencing important policy decisions in the society. In spite of their number, women have neither the wealth nor the political clout to turn things around for their favour. There is therefore just a little officially sanctioned 'space' and opportunity for them to have an influence in the public arena (Jefferey, 2000). However, women in Africa have made their entrance into contemporary political pace as subordinates to men. This is because the public sector in Africa is symbolic of the effect of patriarchy on women's image in governance and decision making structures. This lends credence to the fact that in the last few decades of development initiatives on the continent, women's position and condition has not experienced dramatic improvement simply because of their dependent status (Allah-Mensah, 2005). Consequently, the deteriorating economic climate in

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Africa can best be described as 'adding more salt to injury' regarding the condition of women. In this regard, women resolved to align and count on patriarchal favours in order to be able to press forward their social status. This state of affairs indicates that women cannot freely access available social opportunities because of inbuilt limitations.

Against this backdrop, a good number of African women only uncover very persuasively the alternative of using their relationship with men to get better their life probability. The practice or application of this preference by women is what is popularly referred to as the 'bottom power'. In a common social life scenario in a given society, 'bottom power' is commonly perceived as a very special advantage that women could use to develop their lot in a system that not only treat the people unfavourably, but the people especially the women encounters harsher condition of living. However, the notion of 'bottom power' can therefore be operatively defined as any opportunity available to women for exerting their sexuality in order to gain favour from men both as individual and as authorities with access to social opportunities and privileges (Okeke, 1998). In Africa, like other places, bottom power attracts very tough disapproval from men and women identically, but oftentimes, it is associated with immoral tendencies in the moral fabric of the society. It is classified as a corrupt behaviour where women take an advantage of their sex to influence for their favour and achieve whatever they lack, want and desire. This attitude is however made possible by the acrimonious political culture engendered by men, the bitter rivalries of the ethnic-based personality dominated political parties, and the paternalistic nature of their groupings which are detrimental to women.

In the game of power acquisition, there are various strategies employed to contest power and authority in Africa. These range from education and knowledge acquisition, armed resistances and struggles, women organizations and communions, reforms and electoral process, to work and professions (Lennox, 2010). Each of these groups depicts a portrait of how positions and offices have been acquired by individuals in the African society as exemplified in military rule and civil government. Interestingly, it is in and through these strategies that women like its male counterpart seek to find spaces and voices necessary and capable of confronting the highly patriarchal African societies. However, the ideologies and virtues guiding the actions and engagement of women craving for leadership space stipulates a huge sense of commitment to serve others and not self-serving, and to also fight against injustice without perpetrating any. Conscious of the gap and the back seat status as well as the suffocating grip of masculinist political interest, women have devised various paradigms of liberation and strategies of extrication in the process of registering their active presence in the public space (Thelma, 2009). This study therefore, evaluates the 'first lady' experiences as a strategy of increasing space and influence in public sphere by women in contemporary Africa. This examination can provide a body of critical information that may be useful in understanding the notion of first lady, the strategies adopted by women to influence and increase their public space, as well as their implications for the goal of improving the women liberation reforms and the biased assumptions about male/masculine and female/feminine relationship.

CREATING SPACE AND INFLUENCE FOR WOMEN

The idea of creating space and influence for the women in contemporary society began 1997 when American Ambassador to Austria, Swanee Hunt gather together 400 women leaders from the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe and other part of the world to share ideas and best practices on how to develop democracy, encourage development and strength women's role in economic progress in their

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