



CLOSING THE GENDER GAP

Olufunke Baruwa discusses the pursuit of equal representation for good governance.

One of the most fascinating developments in African politics has been the increase in women’s political participation since the mid-1990s. Women are becoming more engaged in a variety of institutions, from local government to legislatures to even the executive. Today, African countries are leading the way in women’s parliamentary representation globally, and the region includes some of the world’s highest rates of equal gender representation.

Rwanda claimed the world’s highest ratio of women in parliament in 2003 – today, women hold 64% of the country’s legislative seats. In Senegal and South Africa, more than 40% of parliamentary seats are held by women, while in Angola, Mozambique, Tanzania, and Uganda, over 35% of seats are occupied by women. By contrast, in the USA, women hold only 18% of the seats in the House of Representatives (lower chamber) and 20% in the Senate (upper chamber).

including four chambers with no women at all. As of October 2017, only 11 women are serving as head of state and 12 as head of government.

In Nigeria, there are only five female ministers out of 36; seven of our 109 senators are women and only 23 out of 360 are members of the House of Representatives. Women occupy a meagre 6% of parliamentary seats.

There is established and growing evidence that women’s leadership improves political decision-making processes.

These changes in the African political terrain can be explained by three interrelated factors: the decline of conflict in Africa; the expansion of civil liberties, particularly in the context of shifts from authoritarian to more liberal hybrid regimes, along with the emergence of autonomous women’s movements; and pressures from international actors, including UN agencies, regional organisations, donors, and other external bodies that influence the state.

But there is more to be done. As of June 2016, only 22.8% of all national parliamentarians worldwide were women, a slow increase from 11.3% in 1995. There are 38 states in which women account for fewer than 10% of parliamentarians in single or lower chambers,

INVESTING IN WOMEN

The Nigerian Women Trust Fund (NWTF) is a technical and financial resource for women in governance, established in 2011 by an unusual coalition of civil society, government, and the private sector, to close the gender gap in governance in Nigeria. I first served on the Board of Directors, then was Chief Executive Officer from 2015-2018, and am now Co-Chair.

NWTF is the first fund of its kind, set up to invest in and support the political and leadership ambitions of women in Nigeria. Its goal is to improve women’s political participation and representation at all levels of governance through strategic advocacy, lobbying, capacity development, research, communications, and a wide range of collective actions of women’s groups and stakeholders.

NWTF works with a wide range of state and non-state actors to push for conversations and actions that will permeate the political landscape to inspire and build the capacity of women to participate in the democratic space.

There is established and growing evidence that women’s leadership improves political decision-making processes. Women demonstrate political leadership by working across party lines through parliamentary women’s meetings – even in the most politically combative environments – and by championing issues of gender equality, such as the elimination of gender-based violence, parental leave and childcare, pensions, gender equality laws, and electoral reform.

THE CHALLENGES

The key challenges faced by women in participating in politics and governance include overcoming sociocultural and religious perceptions of their role and the wider electorate who adhere to these. In Nigeria, women are faced with a shrinking democratic space as political stakes become higher. Marginalised and vulnerable groups, including women and young people, are the first hit. The financial capital needed to run for office in Nigeria has also led to the system being saturated by men who have access to large funds, which most women lack.

NWTF has supported the election campaigns of over 200 women and leads the She Impact movement in Nigeria – a coalition of women’s groups pushing for inclusion and equal gender representation. We have also carried out voter education for over 130,000 women across Nigeria, and built the capacity of over 1,200 women to sensitise other women in order to cause a ripple effect across states. We built the capacity of over 1,100 female politicians and mobilised more than 4,000 young men and women as active citizens. Our online advocacy reaches an average of 10 million users across our social media platforms.

FACING THE FUTURE

In 2017, we launched the Young Women in Politics Forum (with support from the US National Endowment for Democracy and UK Aid’s Voices for Change project) to organise young women in different political parties into a movement that can push for change and negotiate spaces for young women in the democratic space in Nigeria.

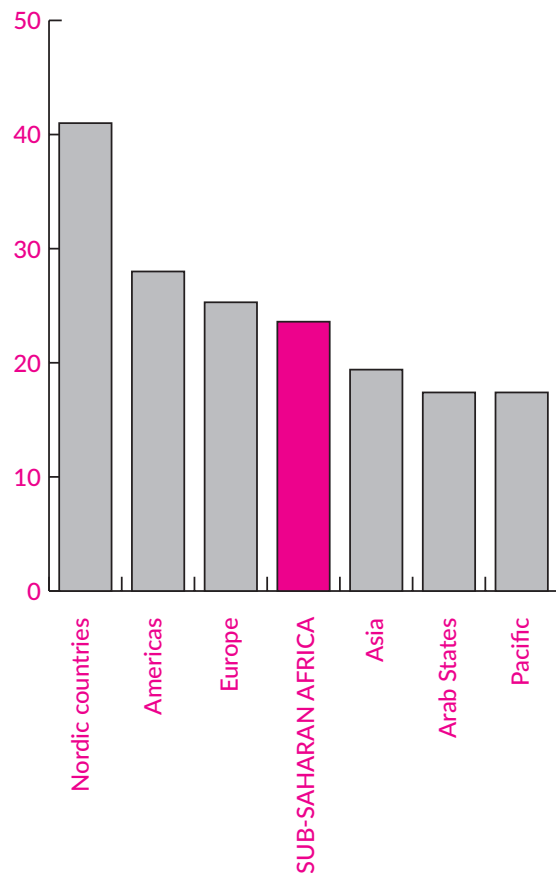
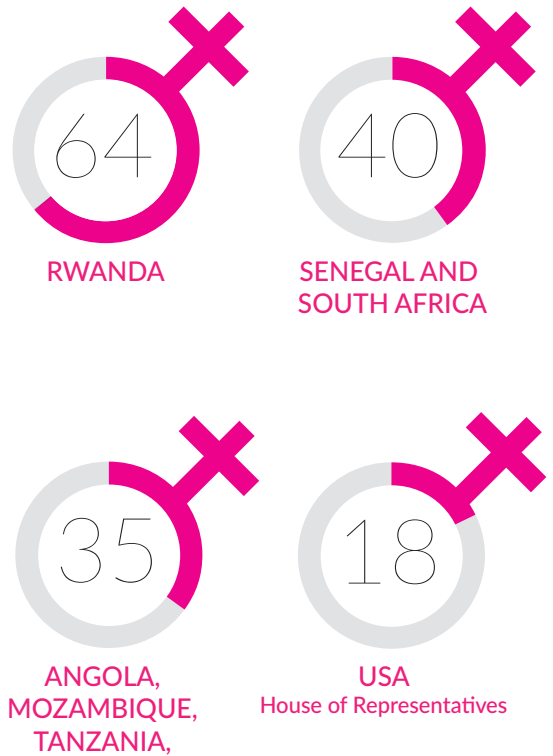
Women are largely short-changed in the political and democratic space in Nigeria. For young women, it is double jeopardy – they are young, and they are female in a patriarchal and largely age-defined space that leaves little or no room for marginalised groups to participate. Considering that the average age of the women currently in parliament is 50, young women have the short end of the stick in our current democratic dispensation and are clearly marginalised in decision-making processes.

The forum is working towards closing the intergenerational gap among women in politics by providing a platform for cross-learning, exchange of ideas, and mobilisation of supporters across political parties. The main aim of the forum is to maintain a continuous pool of women leaders in Nigeria who can fill elected and non-elected positions in the country.

My time at NWTF has focused on the big picture, developing networks and alliances with stakeholders that have led to an expansion of the space for dialogue and action. This has created an environment that supports and empowers women, providing ongoing resources for them to engage in the political space. My ultimate goal is to help create a movement for change in Nigeria, and I believe this can only be achieved by building supportive spaces for women to exercise their power.

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WHAT PERCENTAGE OF PARLIAMENTARIANS ARE WOMEN?



Olufunke Baruwa is a 2011 Commonwealth Distance Learning Scholar from Nigeria – she studied for a Postgraduate Certificate in Public Policy and Management at the University of York.