Abstract

The centrality of gender equality and equitable participation in governance and development agendas of all countries, has been affirmed by numerous international instruments, including the conventions on: the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) the Political Rights of Women (1952); Economic, Social and Cultural rights (1966); Civic and Political Rights (1966); CEDAW (1976); Beijing Platform of Action(1995); Security Council Resolution 1325(2000) and Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa(2005). During the four decades since the declaration of the UN Decade for women(1975-1985), African governments have experimented with a variety of gender focused structures and institutions- machineries, commissions, gender ministries, departments and gender desks- all set up to promote women's rights empowerment and welfare, minimal progress has been made. Instead, it is becoming increasingly clear that democratic culture, values and norms that can advance gender equality and social justice are lacking, and that more transformational approaches are required to ensure political accountability and responsiveness to women and other disadvantaged groups. It is also becoming increasingly clear that women's mere presence in political institutions does not necessarily translate into power and influence in political governance. As the cases of Rwanda, South Africa, Mozambique, Uganda, Tanzania, and Burundi demonstrate, the emerging challenge in respect to women's participation in formal (State) political governance is being in power but without having and/or exercising power. On the other hand, as the Kenyan case demonstrates, women have learnt to utilize political spaces outside the State as alternative avenues of participating in governance. The failure of various national gender machineries and various "gender mainstreaming" experiments with women's needs over the last four decades, is an indication that there persists unresolved structural impediments in the governance system, that are impervious, unresponsive and tend to block gender equality and democratic justice initiatives. And yet, as Nerd (2011) cautions: Women's lack of decision-making power, in both public and private spheres, amounts to a violation of the globally recognized principles of justice, equality and freedom and raises questions about the validity of the African State's claim to democratic governance. Responsive and accountable forms of governance demand women's effective participation and representation.

This study seeks to examine and analyze the different ways in which African women leaders in their respective capacities in civil society, political parties and in government/ State institutions have experienced, participated and impacted on Political governance; as well as the various social-cultural, economic and political contexts and experiences that have informed and shaped that participation. Using a feminist a perspective, this paper underscores women's agency but also notes the persisting power of patriarchal values and norms that privilege the male gender on matters of governance in general and political governance in particular. Patriarchy remains embedded in most institutions, both private and public, and constitutes a major impediment to women's access and effective participation within formal political institutions (parliaments, the

executive and political parties) and without (for instance, in civic society groups). Using examples from selected African countries (but with a greater focus on Kenya), the paper makes the case that while historically women have engaged with governance, using different strategies and resulting in different types of impacts and specific outcomes, the overall capacity of women political leaders to access and influence political governance institutions remain circumscribed. In this connection, I argue that participation and impact largely depend on:

> the nature and pathway of access women have to formal political structures;
> the specific socio-cultural values that inform an individual's woman's perception of herself as a leader;
> the size of the numerical presence/physical numbers of women in political office; and
> the nature of the institutional norms and practices existing in governance institutions1