

## Gender and empowerment: women political leaders in Africa

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The Prime Ministership of Julia Gillard raised important issues about the treatment of women political leaders in Australian society. Gillard's impassioned '[misogyny speech](#)' was a defining moment of her leadership. In her [resignation speech](#) Gillard said:

There's been a lot of analysis about the so-called gender wars . . . [The] reaction to being the first female Prime Minister does not explain everything about my Prime Ministership, nor does it explain nothing about my Prime Ministership... And it is for the nation to think in a sophisticated way about those shades of grey. What I am absolutely confident of is it will be easier for the next woman and the woman after that and the woman after that—and I'm proud of that.

Given the difficulties a woman faced in a developed country, it's interesting to consider the position of women political leaders in African states, amid the experiences of conflict and severe development challenges.

The first woman head of state in Africa was President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf of Liberia, who won elections in 2005 and was reelected in 2011. At the time she assumed leadership of Liberia it was emerging from a brutal 14 year civil war and a long history of corrupt governance. Two terms in office isn't long enough to address the deep development challenges and the high levels of extreme poverty affecting the population, but most importantly peace has been consolidated and progress is being made.

In Liberia there was an active women's peace movement and Johnson acknowledges that her election victory was enabled by the support of Liberian women voters and activists. [She believes](#) (video) that if more African women held positions of political leadership in African countries, 'we would have a politically stable Africa essentially free of conflict and with that we'd be able to achieve our development goals at a much faster pace'.

The challenge for African women to gain positions of political leadership is daunting when the political participation figures are examined, but progress is being made. There are now only two women leaders of African states, out of fifty-five—the other being President of Malawi Joyce Banda, who assumed the Presidency in 2012. But there are several African countries with at least 30% of Parliamentary seats being held by women. The country with the highest percentage of women in Parliament globally is Rwanda, with 56.3% of its Parliamentary seats being held by women. In the [world rankings](#), several African states rank highly, with Senegal in 6th place (42.7%), South Africa 8th (42.3%), Mozambique 12th (39.2%) and Tanzania 20th place (36%). By comparison, Australia is ranked 45th with 24.7%. Unfortunately there are several African countries with less than 10% of Parliamentary seats held by women, including the DR Congo, Chad, Niger, Nigeria and Ghana.

Of course, the percentage of women in Parliament, doesn't tell us everything about the status of women and women's rights, and a high ranking certainly doesn't indicate a democracy. But a

higher percentage of women in Parliament has the potential to raise the status of women and improve women's lives, through enacting more equitable laws, improving women's security, and enabling better access to education and health care.

The DR Congo is referred to 'as the worst place to be a woman' owing to the high level of rape occurring in the conflict-ridden East. Congolese law aimed to have 30-35% of national offices filled by women (rising to 47.5% by 2015). However, political parties have [reported](#) that it's difficult for them to recruit women, as a result of the militaristic nature of Congolese politics and the requirement that politicians hold a three-year degree.

In Somalia, a country emerging from years of conflict and the rise of Islamist militants, a [bill is being drafted to safeguard women's rights](#). This bill has been greeted with a mixture of skepticism and hope by women's rights activists. Many view the appointment of a woman, Fowsiyo Yusuf Haji Aadan, as Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs, as a sign of progress.

The African Union (AU) has women in high offices. The AU Commission is now led by South African Chairperson, Dr Nkosazana Dlamini-Zuma and the Commissioner for Political Affairs is Dr Aisha Abdullahi of Nigeria. Yet there remain huge obstacles to African women's participation in politics and thus their ability to attain leadership roles. These include a lack of resources, an absence of basic education, an often insecure and unstable environment to operate within and a dearth of inspiring role models to emulate in their countries. Real progress in development, governance and security can only occur in countries where women's rights are fully recognised, protected and actively implemented; this can only occur with women's full political participation.

President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, stated:

... people sometimes like to ask whether I believe I would have accomplished more or less as a man. I don't have to hesitate to answer that one—I would have accomplished far, far less. I would have been, really, just another man. I think that as a woman I was an exception, and being an exception gave me both the visibility and the drive to succeed. I was ahead of my time, but I am no longer alone. We are breaking barriers daily; in another decade there will be hundreds of women in real positions of leadership all over Africa and all over the world. I take pride in having helped trample down those barricades. I have been one of the lucky ones.

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