

The Status of African Women in Foreign Policy

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PRIMROSE Z.J BIMHA, MAY 6 2021

It is not helpful to have more female diplomats while contemporary International Relations (IR) theory and concepts continue to be dominated by male thought leaders. In the same vein, it is not enough to have a few distinct African female figures ascending to positions in international organisations such as the United Nations (UN), World Bank or World Trade Organisation (WTO), whilst men continue to make up the majority of key players in global politics. This article proposes that increased participation of women as diplomats, scholars of international relations and in leadership positions within institutions of global governance is a necessary three-pronged approach to the problem of underrepresentation. I conducted interviews with female diplomats and African female academics in order to gather their views on the status of African women in international relations. The study was guided by the question – What challenges do African women in Foreign policy experience? African women in Foreign Policy within the context of the paper refers to female diplomats, IR academics and heads of institutions of global governance. The question supports the researcher’s contention that the underrepresentation of women in international relations scholarship, diplomacy and leadership undermines prospects for gender parity.

The importance of filling the gender gap

Although the representation of women in political decision-making spaces at national and international levels seems to be on the rise, UN Women has already predicted that “gender equality will not be reached for another 130 years” (UN, 2021). Only 21% of government ministers are women, with only 14 out of 195 countries having achieved 50% or more women in cabinets (UN, 2021). Although more than two-thirds of countries have applied gender quotas to open space for women’s participation in parliaments, “only three countries globally have 50 per cent or more women in parliament, and the same amount have no women in parliament at all (UN, 2021).”

In order to end all forms of discrimination against women across the world, they need to be incorporated into key political institutions and their participation as leaders in global governance cannot be understated. Within states, equal participation in political decision-making enables a more accurate reflection of the composition of society thus enhancing the legitimacy of political processes by making them democratic and responsive (Mlambo, Kapingura and Meissner: 2019). It is important for women to participate in global governance as ministers of international relations, ambassadors, foreign service officials, members of committees in international organisations, board members in international institutions and multinational corporations (MNCs) and heads of institutions of global governance. Advancing the role of women in these areas is one way of promoting transformation in the policies and conduct of institutions. Furthermore, the role of women in diplomacy is key to reforming the male dominated nature of international relations (Towns, 2020). Women’s participation in peace and security structures is also necessary in order to deviate from the patriarchal norm of upholding men as decision makers and women as subjects of war related decisions. In terms of economics, it is important for women to play a role in International Financial Institutions’ (IFIs) and trade organisations’ decision making processes.

The appointment of African women to top positions in institutions of global governance in the 21st century signals commitment to inclusivity although parity is far from achievable. Three notable appointments include: South Africa’s Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka who has been serving as United Nations (UN) Undersecretary-General and Executive Director of UN Women since 2013; Uganda’s Winnie Byanyima who served as the Executive Director of Oxfam International from 2013 to 2019; and more recently; Nigeria’s Dr.Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala who made history by

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becoming the first woman and African to hold the office of Director-General of the World Trade Organisation (WTO). Diplomacy is the central institution of international relations (Towns, 2020: 573). Therefore, women's appointment to foreign policy roles in their home countries is a key strategy to ensure greater participation of black African women in international politics. Prior to leading international organisations, Dr Okonjo-Iweala, Engineer Byanyima and Dr Mlambo-Ngcuka held public policy and diplomatic positions which prepared them for international roles. Dr Okonjo-Iweala is a former Minister of Foreign Affairs, Engineer Byanyima was Uganda's ambassador to France from 1989 to 1994, and Dr. Mlambo-Ngcuka served as Deputy President under Thabo Mbeki between 2005 and 2008. The necessary first step of being recognised and allowed to lead at home facilitated their rise to senior positions at international level. However, black African women remain underrepresented.

The challenge of being black African and female

This section reviews the status of black African women in foreign policy by drawing on interview points relating to the roles allocated to women in diplomacy. It is worth noting that historically, women were not admitted into diplomatic or consular duty stations in appreciable numbers, until 1933, when at least 13 countries had women diplomats (Bloch, 2004). It used to be that the closest women could get to influencing foreign policy was if they married diplomats or consular officers ; running diplomatic households, presiding as hostesses and complementing the work of foreign missions through voluntary community work (Bloch, 2004).

In 2019, 50 out of 193 Permanent Representatives to the UN (PRUNs) were women, compared with about 15 to 20 in the 1980s and 1990s, respectively (Deen, 2019). Even though there are more female diplomatic representatives today, women are generally posted to less significant posts, and contextual constraints linked to unequal access to opportunities and discriminatory norms and attitudes continue to undermine prospects for gender parity in the foreign policy realm. One female ambassador I spoke to indicated that she and other female colleagues from their country's ministry of foreign affairs had been posted to economically insignificant duty stations in south east Asia and parts of Africa. On the other hand, deployments to key capitals in the global political economy such as Beijing, New York, Addis Ababa, France, London, Brussels and Vienna, just to name a few, were reserved for male diplomats. Therefore, the female ambassadors felt under-appreciated and left out of key economic diplomacy activities. The respondents also noted that women were often appointed to deputise men in key duty stations so that they would do most of the administrative work which supported the male ambassadors' engagements with mostly male diplomats from other countries. In order to gain a better understanding of the status of black African female diplomats we need to conduct statistical research on the number of female ambassadors from every country on the continent over time, for example, since the formation of the Organisation of African Unity (OAU) in 1963. Cooperation by member states is key to ensuring that researchers ascertain the membership of national leadership structures.

The African Union (AU) which succeeded the OAU in 2002 is a key international relations institution due to its interlocutory role between Africa and the rest of the world. Therefore, the AU should spearhead the campaign for inclusion of more female leaders within the AU system and its Regional Economic Communities (RECs). Supporting recruitment data and indication of the types of posts women hold in African states is important information which should be incorporated into the AU's strategy on Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment (GEWE) 2018-2028. The plan already calls for participation of women in political affairs to amplify their voices and integrate gendered perspectives (AU, 2019: 12). However, commitment towards this goal remains low. The Covid-19 global pandemic presented the world with the opportunity to include women in critical decision making fora. However, the majority of national committees established to respond to the crisis do not have equal female representation. For example, 74% of 30 countries survey by Care International (2020: 3) had "fewer than one-third female membership. On average women made up 24% of these committees."

Diplomatic appointments are usually made by heads of state and are often based on perceptions on one's allegiance to the leader(s) in question. If the appointing head of state is not reform-oriented he is unlikely to choose female diplomats who are pro-transformation. Politics in post-colonial Africa exists within contexts of hypermasculinity whereby male leaders are considered to be more superior by virtue of their gender identities. This is linked to the supposition that traditional male authorities and elected male leaders are hegemonic masculinities at the top of the socio-political ladder within the contexts they inhabit (Morrell, Jewkes and Lindegger, 2012). The respect awarded to

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them and social perceptions of their capacity to lead often undermine the acceptance of, and trust in female leadership since women were historically associated with managing resources within the domestic sphere while men served in the public sphere. The transition from colonialism to contemporary African states did not automatically improve the status of African women who mostly remain(ed) relegated to traditional sociocultural gender roles that excluded them from heading political and economic institutions. Therefore, access to political power, more so, foreign policy decision making power remained limited. African patriarchal values continue to relegate African women to the domestic arena whilst males are perceived to be natural players in the game of politics (Tamale, 1999). Therefore, when women enter into political spaces they face challenges relating to the gender orientation of state institutions. One interview participant noted that she had to choose between being a present mother to her sons who were now under the care of their grandmother and being a good diplomat, whose whole time is at the disposal of the state, as required by the civil service. Therefore, sociocultural standards and expectations can deter women from playing diplomatic roles due to the incompatible demands of work and gender identity. Increased participation of women in political spaces can lead to gender-sensitive reforms as a response to a significant number of participants in these spaces.

The impact of sociohistorical factors can also be linked to how patriarchal dynamics persisted throughout the liberation struggle period in most African states. Even though in some cases women were required to participate in war activities alongside male combatants, they were always reminded of their gender by violent masculinities who subjected them to harassment, rape or undermined their capacity to lead because they were women (Curnow, 2000). Experiences of gender based violence within political spaces is still a cause for concern which causes many women to fear involvement in politics. The UN Women (2021) noted that female parliamentarians “reported in one survey that they experienced nearly twice as much exposure to torture, ill treatment and acts of violence compared to men.” Similarly, one of the interview participants noted that being a diplomat was not a safe position, especially for women who could be subjected to violent acts including rape or intimidation. For this reason, women are often deployed to duty stations in countries which are not at war or where relations with the home country are guaranteed to be cordial due to camaraderie ties amongst their leaders. Female political science and international relations experts are also not free from fear of intimidation so they also noted shying away from publicly scrutinising politicians or global leaders who have the power and influence to order them to be tortured or killed. This threat of violence existed even during the liberal struggle era whereby women were tortured, raped or killed due to their political affiliation. Although men are also subjected to similar forms of violence in politics and diplomacy, women’s gender identity increases the probability of such threats occurring.

One of the female diplomats I interviewed emphasised that in order to survive the system one ought to tolerate some pebbles in the shoe without caring about stopping to shake out the pebble so as to proceed on your career path with ease. In this regard, the pebbles referred to were decisions or policies which were promoted by male political leaders which the female diplomats did not support but had to subscribe to in order to make it to the list of potential ambassadors or consul generals. For instance, even though she is a strong human rights advocate, she focused on writing policy briefs aimed at advising the president on how best to engage with rebels and the government in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) for access to mineral rich war zones, as opposed to advocating for investigations and punitive measures towards those responsible for using gender as a weapon of war.

From my personal experience serving in a diplomacy setting, I observed that most of the top positions were occupied by men who often facilitated the promotion of men to senior positions and on rare occasions women were appointed for their exceptional administrative skills more than for their decision making value. It was not uncommon to be invited to a private meeting with senior male officials who would remind me that I should not subscribe to the illusion that my intellect and professional capacity could be matched against the right of old members of the service to serve on decision making panels and special envoy deployments. It became apparent to me that the diplomatic circle was still very much a preserve for men. Their style of engagement was hypermasculine and ageist. For instance, whereas they would address each other with their different titles and surnames, I was often referred to as “young lady” or “promising little girl”. I had to always remind them that I was Miss Bimha but the disregard persisted until I noted during a work place workshop that ageism and gender based discrimination in both subtle and apparent forms was a cause for concern.

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Such attitudes could influence senior officials' negative perception of one's capacity to conduct duties. For instance, even though I was experienced enough to prepare presentations for inter-ministerial dialogues, my supervisor noted that I needed to be accompanied to such events by a senior male officer even if he would not co-present with me. Apparently I had to be accompanied by such persons in order to command respect and attention from bullyish senior bureaucrats who did not value the input of young women. In essence, female participation in some public policy spaces is guarded. One of the female diplomats I interviewed noted that in her country and political party structures it was only the women that licked male authorities' boots who were likely to be appointed as ambassadors because serving abroad was mostly a matter of submitting to the male leaders' decisions more than your own. This is an indication of one of the shortcomings of female political representation. The addition of women into some political structures and institutions of governance in African states is therefore problematically biased.

Dr Okonjo-Iweala's appointment was met with racist and sexist comments by western media. The 9 February headline of Switzerland's Aargauer Zeitung print edition, also published online by Luzerner Zeitung and St Galler Tagblatt's translated to "*This grandmother will be the new chief of the WTO*" ("Swiss newspaper apologises...", 2021). Her qualifications and experience were therefore downplayed by highlighting her grandmother identity. The Director General's academic credentials and years of service at the World Bank were excluded from the headline. Jan Dirk Herbermann who authored the article claims to have entitled it, "*For the first time an African woman moves to the top of the WTO*" but editors did not use the suggested headline (Azeez, 2021). Aargauer Zeitung's Foreign-Editor, Samuel Schumacher, confirmed that the editorial team were responsible for the "inappropriate and unsuitable" headline (Azeez, 2021). Despite the reality that old white males are often appointed to hold such positions, they are never labelled as Grandfathers. The sexist reminder that at her age, she ought to be focusing on the social role of grandmother is dismissive of her experience and qualifications which make her eligible for the role. The recent example of the WTO leader goes to show that even though more black African women are making it to the global stage, their ascendancy to such positions is not comfortable and does not command the respect it deserves, even from the media. In addition to frustrations within the systems at home, black female leaders are not widely welcome. Bloch (2004) rightly noted that women continue to be marginalised in the arena of foreign policy because of the traditional view that "the state, like the household should be governed by men", hence the subordination of women to allow men to concentrate on leadership positions. It is noteworthy that UN Women and the 124 Ambassadors in Geneva signed a petition calling out the racist and sexist media remarks as a show of their disappointment and support for the WTO leader ("WTO Chief Okonjo-Iweala...", 2021).

In academia it is difficult to influence African feminist political thought due to the lack of buy-in. Dominant theories of international relations and the demands of foreign policy oriented careers which students of IR wish to pursue do not value such learnings. As a result, there is scant research and texts which promote gendered transformation in IR. The role of women in international relations remains unjustifiably understudied in the social sciences, yet institutions such as diplomacy, the military and government have a history of male domination. In most universities feminist political thought is introduced in elective courses at postgraduate level yet undergraduate courses which provide scholars with the foundations to their fields of study often exclude concepts and literature which takes gender and transformation in policy making seriously. Similarly, cognate fields such as history, sociology and religious studies in most African universities exclude feminist-oriented theories and readings. Considering that the requisite academic training for most people who want to pursue diplomatic careers is attained through studying degrees in political science, public administration and international relations, much needs to be done in terms of curriculum transformation.

One female academic I spoke to noted that academia requires one to either publish or perish and it does not stop there. She said one ought to publish works which complement the mainstream otherwise few to none would reference your work, thus discrediting your academic potential and global ranking. As a result, she focused on adding to existing knowledge by being inflexible, adding on to contemporary reflections on Sino-Africa relations and the trade war between China and the United States (US). She noted how in earlier times some male colleagues undermined the quality of her lecture and seminar content due to her focus on gender, peace and justice, which are necessary within conflict studies but were deemed as minor issues by male colleagues. Encouraging feminist international relations scholarship allows for gender-sensitive curriculum reforms and the adoption of intersectional approaches which deviate from dominant theories that turn a blind eye on gender inequality. Considering global

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political dynamics through an intersectional lens reveals the reality that African women still form a small percentage of key role players in international relations. They remain underrepresented at many negotiation tables although their representation in high positions has been noteworthy (Durant, 2020).

It should not be the sole responsibility of political studies and IR scholars to teach on gender and transformation thus knowledge on gender equality and the value of acknowledging women as equal partners in decision making should be taught from stages as early as primary school. In the same way that students acquire knowledge about their histories, they should receive training on the value of women in politics, the role of women in peace and security, the value of intersectional approaches to social studies. Hidden or unacknowledged truths about gender and politics should be discussed and problematised.

Conclusion

With regards to the appointment of female diplomatic representatives and heads of institutions of global governance, global leaders need to continue to make deliberate efforts to promote inclusion of women in parliament and cabinet spaces. They should also shift from biased deployments to diplomatic missions of less importance to their foreign policy mandates, in support of equal opportunity and qualification based appointments. With regards to age, according to the UN Women (2021) “women under 30 years make up less than one per cent of parliamentarians globally” and their participation as diplomats or senior officials in international institutions is minimal. Therefore, including women in leadership positions should also be informed by the need to include young women. Application of quotas to the selection of diplomats can encourage more women to aspire towards careers in diplomacy. So far efforts to include women in international relations spaces, whether in government, international organisations or academia remain dismal.

The interconnectedness of international relations as an academic discipline, diplomatic appointments, as well as attaining the experience required to ascend to the highest positions in global governance should lead gender-oriented reforms. The article noted how low levels of female participation in diplomacy, IR and international organisations requires a three-pronged approach to get rid of the problem of underrepresentation. It is not helpful to have more female diplomats while knowledge production spaces continue to be dominated by male thought leaders. In the same vein, it is not enough to have a few distinct African female figures ascending to positions in international organisations whilst men continue to make up the majority of key players in global politics. Africa’s slow pace at promoting gender parity is not an anomaly as the world over, states are failing to ensure equal participation of women in leadership spaces. The dominance of patriarchal sociocultural values continues to undermine prospects for women to aspire towards or thrive within foreign policy oriented spaces. Thus, in addition to the proposed three-pronged approach, further inquiry into how best to deal with traditional gender, racial and cultural stereotypes as well as overt discriminatory practices in the foreign policy realm.

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