



# Gender

## Political representation

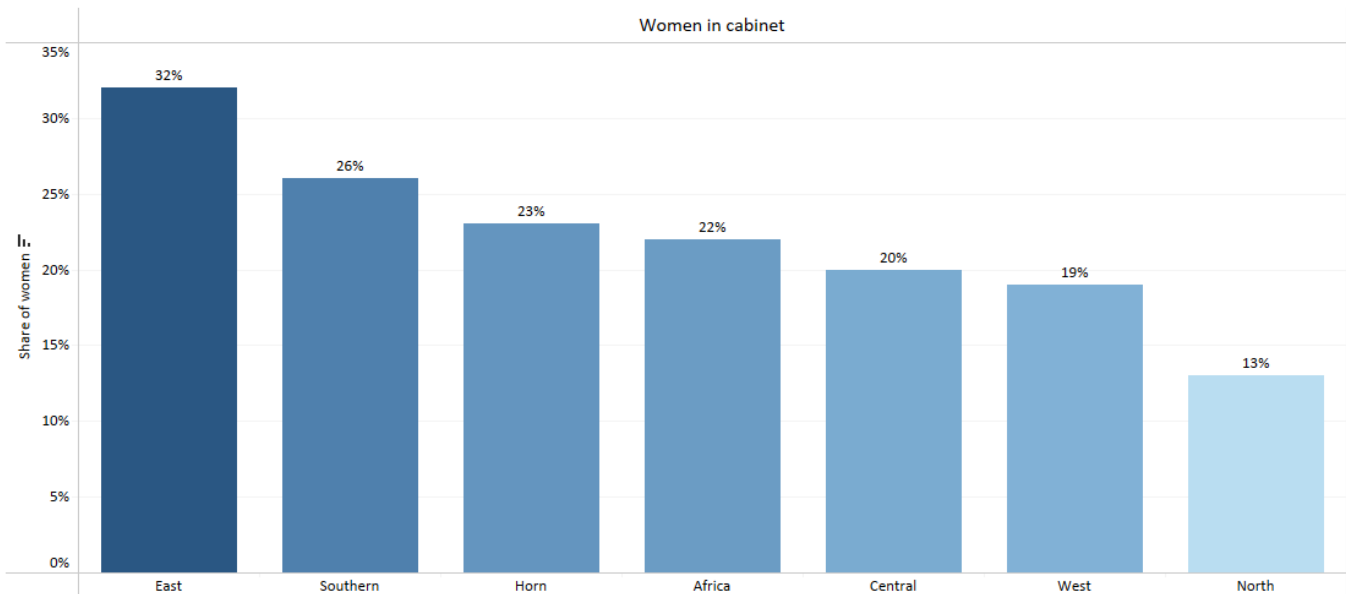
Kouassi Yeboua and Jakkie Cilliers

Last updated 15 April 2024 using IFs 7.96

## Political representation

Political representation is another area where women lag behind men. Although there has been an overall increase in women involved in politics, leadership and decision-making in Africa, gender inequality in political representation is still high on the continent. Shown in Chart 19, Africa is still far from achieving women's equal and effective participation in political decision-making. Women constitute only 24% of parliamentarians in Africa. Local governments are generally seen as a training ground for women in politics; however, women account for only 21% of African councillors. Also, African women account for a mere 7% of top executive positions.

Chart 19: Women's political participation in Africa, 2021



Source: Africa barometer 2021

The situation varies across Africa's subregions. The Horn of Africa has the highest share of women in parliament at 33%, followed closely by East Africa at 32%. West Africa has the lowest share at only 16%. In North Africa, there are no women in political party leadership or top executive positions and no women as speakers of parliament or mayors of a capital city, probably due to a deeply conservative culture.

At the country level, Rwanda has the highest representation of women in parliament in Africa at 53.6%. Rwanda, Namibia, South Africa and Senegal are among the top ten countries in the world with the highest level of women representation in their parliaments.[1] Others, such as Ethiopia and Tanzania, have appointed a female president for the first time, and Liberia was the first African country to elect a female head of state (Ellen Johnson Sirleaf). However, it is worth noting that their roles and political influence are vastly different. The position of president in Ethiopia is largely ceremonial, even though it carries important symbolic weight and social influence.

Generally, the performance of African countries in ensuring adequate women representation in the judiciary is encouraging compared to the other arms of government. The Ibrahim Index of African Governance (AIIG) sub-category on women's equality measures the extent to which women are represented in the highest branch of the judiciary. A country scores 100 if at least 33% of the senior positions in the judiciary are women. According to the 2022 AIIG report,[2] Africa scored 68.5 out of 100 regarding appointments of all appointments to the highest judiciary branch in Africa. This is boosted by the high female representation in the judiciary in Southern and East African countries, scoring 77.5 and 73.2, respectively. Even North Africa, which is noted for weak women's rights and representation, scored 62.3 in this regard.

Indeed, 21 African countries have attained the target of at least 33 women in the highest branch of the judiciary over the last decade. Countries such as Guinea Bissau, Egypt, Somalia, Sudan and South Sudan have performed poorly in ensuring women's representation in the highest branch of the judiciary.

The political representation and empowerment dimension in the Africa Gender Index measures how women and men participate in their country's decision-making processes and organs and whether women and men are represented equally in political institutions. According to the index, the average African gender gap score for managers, professionals and technicians is 41. The gender gap for parliamentary representation is about 25, and 23 for top managers in firms (where 100 is full parity).

Structural and cultural barriers, such as patriarchal norms, stereotypes, limited access to resources and networks, and gender-based violence, impede women's full participation in decision-making processes. According to a joint study by UN Women and UNDP, there is a growing trend of violence against women contesting elections for political positions in Africa. It reveals an increasing trend in attempts to shame and bully women running for politics in online spaces.[3] In addition to cyberbullying, the exorbitant 'cost of politics' and humiliating 'politics of insult' dissuade women from participating in politics.[4]

Gender equality in leadership roles can promote inclusive social and economic development. There is a growing consensus and a large body of empirical evidence that countries with more women involved in government or parliament are less prone to corruption because women are more altruistic and moral and more risk-averse than men.[5] Relative to men, women prefer that social spending be higher and more oriented toward the well-being of children. For instance, a study by Seipel[6] shows that countries with smaller gender inequality in politics and decision-making processes tend to have a higher ratio of domestic spending in health and education over military spending. It implies that resources are more likely to be used efficiently to provide services to the population and enhance growth and human development in countries with high women's political participation.

Some studies also find that companies perform better financially when they have a greater share of women on their boards.[7] Women leaders also provide role models and incentives for young girls to pursue their education, positively affecting overall human capital stock in a country. Moreover, women's participation in decision-making could contribute to better climate change mitigation. Countries with higher percentages of women in parliament tend to adopt stricter climate change policies, resulting in lower emissions.[8]

Numerous initiatives at international and national levels have already been taken to address the underrepresentation of women in politics and decision-making spaces. The Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (BPFA), adopted at the Fourth World Conference on Women in 1995, calls for governments to ensure women's equal access to and full participation in decision-making.[9] Also, Pillar 4 of the AU Strategy for Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment recognises the need for women to be equally represented in all areas of decision-making and be able to participate with impact through removing barriers.[10]

## Endnotes

1. African Union, *A new Decade of Women's Financial and Economic Inclusion; why scaling up actions is inevitable*, 15 June 2020.
2. Mo Ibrahim Foundation, *The Ibrahim Index of African Governance Report 2022*, January 2023.
3. J Ballington, G Bardall and G Borovsky, *Preventing violence against women in elections: A programming guide*, UNDP, 2017.
4. G Bauer and A K Darkwah, *We would rather be leaders than parliamentarians: Women and political office in Ghana*, *European Journal of Politics and Gender*, 3:1, 2019, 101–119.
5. D Dollar et al, *Are Women Really the Fairer Sex? Corruption and Women in Government*, World Bank Working Paper Series No. 4, 1999. J Michailova and I Melnykovska, *Gender, corruption and sustainable growth in transition countries*, Kiel Institute for the World Economy, 2009. D Dollar et al, *Women's Political Representation and Corruption: A Longitudinal Analysis*, International Monetary Fund (IMF), 2020.
6. MMO Seipel, *Gender empowerment measure and policy choice*, *Families in Society*, 91:4, 2018, 350–355.
7. African Development Bank Group, *Africa Gender Index Report 2019–Analytical Report*, 1 December 2020.
8. A Mavisakalyan and Y Tarverdi, *Gender and climate change: Do female parliamentarians make difference?*, *European Journal of Political Economy*, 56, 2019, 151–64.
9. UN, *Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action*.
10. African Union, *AU Strategy for Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment*, 11 October 2023.

## Donors and sponsors



HUMANITY  
UNITED



Sweden  
Sverige



Hanns  
Seidel  
Foundation



AUDA-NEPAD  
AFRICAN UNION DEVELOPMENT AGENCY

### Reuse our work

- All visualizations, data, and text produced by African Futures are completely open access under the [Creative Commons BY license](#). You have the permission to use, distribute, and reproduce these in any medium, provided the source and authors are credited.
- The data produced by third parties and made available by African Futures is subject to the license terms from the original third-party authors. We will always indicate the original source of the data in our documentation, so you should always check the license of any such third-party data before use and redistribution.
- All of our charts can be embedded in any site.

### Cite this research

Kouassi Yeboua and Jakkie Cilliers (2024) Gender. Published online at [futures.issafrica.org](https://futures.issafrica.org). Retrieved from <https://futures.issafrica.org/thematic/16-gender/> [Online Resource] Updated 15 April 2024.

## About the authors

**Dr Kouassi Yeboua** is a senior researcher in African Futures and Innovation programme in Pretoria. He recently served as lead author on ISS studies on the long-term development prospects of the DR Congo, the Horn of Africa, Nigeria and Malawi. Kouassi has published on various issues relating to foreign direct investment in Africa and is interested in development economics, macroeconomics, international economics, and economic modelling. He has a PhD in Economics.

**Dr Jakkie Cilliers** is the ISS's founder and former executive director of the ISS. He currently serves as chair of the ISS Board of Trustees and head of the African Futures and Innovation (AFI) programme at the Pretoria office of the ISS. His 2017 best-seller *Fate of the Nation* addresses South Africa's futures from political, economic and social perspectives. His three most recent books, *Africa First! Igniting a Growth Revolution* (March 2020), *The Future of Africa: Challenges and Opportunities* (April 2021), and *Africa Tomorrow: Pathways to Prosperity* (June 2022) take a rigorous look at the continent as a whole.

## About African Futures & Innovation

Scenarios and forecasting can help Africa identify and respond to opportunities and threats. The work of the African Futures & Innovation (AFI) program at the Institute for Security Studies aims to understand and address a widening gap between indices of wellbeing in Africa and elsewhere in the world. The AFI helps stakeholders understand likely future developments. Research findings and their policy implications are widely disseminated, often in collaboration with in-country partners. Forecasting tools inspire debate and provide insights into possible trajectories that inform planning, prioritisation and effective resource allocation. Africa's future depends on today's choices and actions by governments and their non-governmental and international partners. The AFI provides empirical data that informs short- and medium-term decisions with long-term implications. The AFI enhances Africa's capacity to prepare for and respond to future challenges. The program is headed by Dr Jakkie Cilliers.