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**#2019-044**

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**UNU-MERIT Working Papers**

**ISSN 1871-9872**

**Maastricht Economic and social Research Institute on Innovation and Technology**

**UNU-MERIT**

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## Women's Political and Reproductive Health Empowerment in Africa: A literature review\*

Maty Konte<sup>†</sup>, Victor Osei Kwadwo<sup>‡</sup> and Tatenda Zinyemba<sup>§</sup>

### **Abstract:**

This chapter reviews recent literature on the determinants of women's political and reproductive-health empowerment in Africa and tracks the progress that has been made during the Millennium Development Goals period and onwards. The chapter highlights important facts. First, in Africa, there is little to no gender gap in voting during elections, but there is a significant gender gap in inter-electoral participation, such as participation in political meetings, or any other relevant political actions that can influence policy and political outcomes. The literature on the determinants of the gender gap in political participation has shown that the well-established determinants thereof in Western countries, such as income, education, and employment, have very little relevance in explaining the gender gap in political participation in Africa. Factors such as intra-household bargaining power and discriminatory social norms play an important role in explaining the gender gap in inter-electoral participation in Africa. Second, while the number of women policy-makers has significantly increased, these women have little influence and control a small fraction of the budget. Third, the use of contraceptives in Africa has increased by approximately 6 percent between 2000 and 2014, but Africa still records among the lowest rates of contraceptive usage and highest unmet need for family planning in the world. Lastly, the literature review has shown that factors such as education, area of residence, religion, socioeconomic status, and funding of reproductive health services are key determinants of contraceptive use. This chapter has several implications for SDG 5 on gender equality and women's empowerment, more specifically targets 5.4 and 5.6.

**Key words:** Africa; Gender gap; Political Participation; Reproductive Health; Women's empowerment;

**JEL:** J13; J160; O550

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\* This chapter has been prepared for publication in Handbook of Labor, Human Resources and Population Economics

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## 1. Introduction

The implementation of the UN's Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) has brought about significant progress towards closing gender gaps in several sectors and empowering women in Africa. The 2016 Africa Human Development Report (UNDP, 2016) showed that, overall, African countries have responded positively to many MDG targets aimed at promoting gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls. An example of such success is the increase in the number of girls enrolled in primary education, which has equalized access to this level of education between girls and boys in many countries. Also, worth noting are efforts towards the inclusion of women in the political arena. Countries such as Rwanda, Seychelles and Senegal now record the highest representation of women in national legislative seats, surpassing many of the OECD countries. Consequently, through the inclusion of women legislative processes in Africa, laws and services that promote women's issues such as increased maternal and reproductive health services are being implemented (Konte, 2020). This is exemplified by a 49 percent decrease in maternal mortality and a doubling of the rate of contraceptive use (Way, 2015).

Empowering women inside and outside their households improves the well-being of household members and that of society at large. For instance, when women have more decision-making power over household expenses, they prioritise spending that promotes the well-being of children. This includes spending on health, education and food (Lépine & Strobl, 2013; Ashraf et al., 2010; Duflo & Udry, 2003). Also, when female policy makers are empowered, they are more likely to invest in local infrastructure, including ease of access to clean water (Beaman et al., 2006; Bhalotra & Clots-Figueras, 2014; Cai, 2010).

There are many instances that exhibit women's significant contributions to social change in Africa. For example, the 2006 bill against gender-based violence in Rwanda and the 2006 law regarding sexual offences in Kenya in 2006 were both introduced by female legislators. Another interesting example is the active participation of women during the Arab Spring protest in Egypt in 2011, which has since lead to an increase in women's intra-household bargaining power in parts of the country. Bargain et al. (2019) have shown that regions in Egypt that recorded high representation of women during the protests have seen a 12–18 percent increase in women's intra-household empowerment.

However, despite the benefits of empowering women in Africa, compared to their male counterparts, many women do not have equal access to resources, intra-household bargaining and political power. These inequalities notably stifle women's rights such as access to reproductive health services. It is therefore crucial to understand the factors that contribute to gender gaps in Africa, investigate the mechanisms that induce these gaps and understand the reasons why some countries and regions have made more progress in empowering women than others.

This chapter reviews literature that sheds light on the status of women empowerment and gender equality in Africa by focusing on two issues: women's political participation and access to reproductive health services. These topics are main targets of the Sustainable Development Goal 5 (SDG 5). Target 5.4 seeks women's full and effective participation in political, economic and public life as well as equal opportunities for leadership at all levels of decision-making. Target 5.6 aims to ensure universal access to sexual and reproductive health care. Progress in women's political empowerment and access to reproductive health services may be hindered by factors such as cultural, social and religious norms. A better understanding of how these factors contributes to gender gaps may help formulate effective policies that fully empower women in Africa.

Until recently, there were few empirical studies that examine determinants of women's political participation and usage of reproductive health services in Africa. A growing body of literature has emerged to fill a number of gaps in this research. This chapter documents lessons provided by these studies. We acknowledge that there are numerous topics related to women's empowerment that are equally important and deserved to be studied. However, as it is not possible to cover every topic at once, this chapter will focus on these two key issues and leave the rest for future research.

This chapter adopted a narrative literature review to synthesize and identify gaps in literature on studies that examine determinants of women's political and health empowerment in Africa. The databases consulted in the search were Web of Science and EBSCO. Google Scholar and the snowballing method of references were used to identify more papers. Combinations of key words related to women's political and health empowerment were used. The studies examined in this literature review were mostly peer-reviewed, written in English, and published between 1994 and 2020. The aim of this study is to strengthen existing knowledge by corroborating what prior studies have shown. We include a broad and reasonable range of studies with an overview of the current

state of scholarly knowledge on topics that are matters of discussion. Readers are encouraged further examine studies mentioned in this literature review if desired.

The rest of the chapter is structured as follows. Section 2 discusses the literature on the determinants of women's political participation in Africa. This is followed by the state and progress that has been made in increasing the representation and role of women in politics as the most important advocates for the rights of other women and nations at large. Section 3 highlights progress made in usage and access to reproductive health services for women and discusses the literature on the key determinants explaining usage and access to contraceptives. The last Section provides some concluding remarks and policy recommendations.

## **2. Women's Political Empowerment**

Women's empowerment may specifically have different connotations in the literature ([Maholtra et al., 2002](#)). However, there is a common consensus of viewing women's empowerment as a process of establishing an enabling environment where previously denied abilities of women to have control and to make and influence choices (personal and societal) are restored. This is done by enhancing women's assets and capabilities in order to enable them to engage, strategically make independent choices (personal or otherwise), influence and hold accountable the institutions that affect them ([Bennett, 2002](#)). The political empowerment of women in this regard, according to [Alexander et al \(2016\)](#) implies the following four key indicators:

1. Citizens who participate in their political systems formal channels of influence.
2. Elite actors who hold positions for exercising political authority.
3. Elites who do not just make up the numbers.
4. Civil society actors who challenge and engage the state informally.

This section will document the literature on the women's political empowerment in Africa using four key indicators adapted from [Alexander et al \(2016\)](#).

### **2.1 Determinants of the gender gap in political participation and preferences**

To guarantee that national and sub-national policies target the concerns of all segments of the population, it is important to ensure that political participation is inclusive. Policies should reflect people's priorities, which can be voiced through political choice. It has been shown that

policy priorities vary by gender. [Gottlieb et al. \(2018\)](#) showed that there is a gender gap in policy preferences and priorities between men and women in Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) and that women tend to prioritize more social issues that affect their daily lives. For example, women are likely to support issues related to access to water rather than road infrastructure. This is attributed to the fact that often at times, women are in charge of fetching water. Men, however, are likely to support issues related to road systems because men are more likely to travel to work, which makes issues related infrastructure of greater concern to them. Indeed, there is a higher policy priorities divergence between men and women in places where there is low representation of women in politics.

Of concern is the idea that if there is gender equality participation, policies related to women's issues will be equally prioritised and fairly included in budget allocations. Unfortunately, several studies have pointed out that there is a gender gap in political participation in Africa and that women tend to have lower political and civic participation than men ([Coffe & Bolzendahl, 2011](#); [Isakon et al., 2014](#)). It is then important to understand the factors explaining gender gaps in political participation if policy makers seek to achieve inclusive development that benefits the society.

Until recently, studies on the determinants of the gender gaps in political participation in Africa have been scarce, mainly because of the lack of reliable surveys. With the inception of the Afrobarometer surveys currently covering approximately 36 African countries, scholars have been interested in the determinants of political participation in African countries, raising questions about whether men and women deviate in terms of political and policy choices and preferences. The Afrobarometer data are a collection of nationally representative surveys across Africa and provide a wide range of information on public opinion and attitudes toward politics, governments, and many development indicators. Since its launch in 1999, the number of countries has significantly increased. Approximately 36 African countries have surveys in the Afrobarometer data.

Political participation can be measured using different indicators. In the literature, one of the most commonly used indicators of political participation is electoral participation measured by voting during elections. Yet, in contrast to what one would expect, there is little or no gender gap in terms of voting during elections in Africa. For instance, [Coffe and Bolzendahl \(2011\)](#) and [Isakon et al. \(2014\)](#) have confirmed that the gender gap in Africa as it relates to voting is the least significant one among the measures of gender gaps in political participation, including political discussions and community meetings.

It is worth noting that the high female turnout during elections does not necessarily indicate that women's concerns and policy needs are represented. This is especially true when patronage is used to buy people's votes, which is a common occurrence in many African countries. Hence, it is important that research on gender gaps in political participation takes into account women's political involvement on other important measures, such as attending and participating in political and community meetings where women may have the chance to voice their policy priorities and concerns.

Researchers have tested whether the determinants of the gender gap in political participation well established in Western countries can help explain the observed gender gaps in African countries. A main conclusion from this literature is that findings in Western and more advanced countries cannot be generalized to African countries. For example, it has been proven in Western countries that the gender gap in political participation decreases as there are increases in income, employment, education, and time (see Iversen and Rosenbluth (2006, 2008, 2010)). However, several studies have shown that the resources hypothesis explains little about the observed gender gap in political participation in Africa (Coffe & Bolzendahl, 2011; Gottlieb, 2016; Isakson, 2014; Isakson et al., 2014; Aalen et al, 2019, among others).

To test whether previous findings on the determinants of the gender gap in political participation can be replicated in Africa, Coffe and Bolzendahl (2011) used the Afrobarometer surveys with 18 African countries. The study found that the socioeconomic characteristics that explain the gender gap in political participation in Western countries do little to explain the gender gap in political participation across these African countries. Furthermore, because the level of the gender gap in political participation also varies across countries in SSA, Coffe and Bolzendahl (2011) emphasized the importance of looking at country's level variables variables that affect the political environment in which people live. Country-level variables help explain why some countries have a lower gender gap in political participation than others.

In a more recent empirical analysis, Isakson et al. (2014) analysed the determinants of gender gap in political participation in Africa. Political participation is measured using two different indicators: (1) participation during elections measured by voting during elections and (2) inter-

electoral participation measured by gathering to raise common concerns. Using the Afrobarometer surveys across 20 SSA countries, the authors found that structural differences in individual resource endowments, employment, and religious affiliations explain only a small share of the gender gap in political participation. They further showed that the gender gap is higher for the inter-electoral participation than electoral participation. This result highlights the importance of considering other measures of political participation that go beyond voting as these measures of political participation may better capture women's voices in politics. To dig deeper into the plausible causes of the gender gap, [Isakson et al. \(2014\)](#) indicated the important role that clientelism, restricted civil liberties, economic development, and gender norms may play. Using the case of Ethiopia, [Aalen et al \(2019\)](#) investigated the effect of employment on women's political participation. Ethiopia implemented a new family code that empowers women and provides equal rights across the two genders. The authors found that an effective implementation of this new family code has a significant and positive impact on women's employment. But employment has a negative impact on women's interest in political affairs.

[Hern \(2018\)](#) provided more insight about key country-level institutional and structural variables explaining the cross-country differences of the gender gaps in political participation in Africa. They used different indicators of political participation, including voting, partisanship, contacting political officials, and attending meetings. The study showed the control variables that best explain the gender gap in politics across African countries are the percentage of female legislative representatives, the colonial history, and the duration of democracy in the countries. More specifically, the findings showed that an increase in the representation of women in national assemblies tends to decrease the gender gap in political participation. The authors have also found a weak and negative relationship between the duration of democracy and gender gap in political participation. Interestingly, the author has emphasized that the gender gaps is higher in countries with French legal origin.

An important issue that has emerged in the literature is that the lack of political knowledge may have an important role in explaining why women have lower political participation and engagement than men. [Bleck et al. \(2018\)](#) emphasized that attention should be put on women's political knowledge when studying women's political participation to make sure that the political choices made by women also reflect their needs. However, results about the impact of increasing

women's political knowledge and awareness about political and civic matters are mixed and sometimes paradoxical in parts of Africa. Recent studies have failed to prove that more political knowledge for women translates into greater political and civic participation for women.

[Gottlieb \(2016\)](#) explored the determinants of civic participation in rural areas. Civic participation is citizen engagement in public affairs with the aim of improving public life or influencing government policies. The study involved an experiment in Mali where select villages received training aimed at increasing citizens' political knowledge that may affect their civic participation. For example, people were informed about political and institutional rules of the countries and the role that citizens may have. Surprisingly, the author found a resource paradox whereby an increase of resources, measured by accumulation of knowledge, did not reduce the gender gap in civic participation. Instead, the training had an adverse effect, thereby widening the gender gap in civic participation. More specifically, the men who received the training saw an increase in civic participation, while there was a decrease in civic participation by women.

[Friedman et al. \(2016\)](#) used a scholarship program intended to promote education for girls to determine a possible increase in girls' political participation. Although the program increased girls' education, political knowledge, and interest in public affairs, it did not increase the girls' political engagement participation in community meetings or voting intentions.

Studies continue to explore internal and external factors that explain why the accumulation of political knowledge decreases women's and increases men's political participation. One aspect that has been discussed in the literature is discriminatory social norms that affect other women's empowerment indicators. Discriminatory social norms limit women's autonomy and bargaining power inside their households as well as their access to resources and public spheres. Gender discrimination in social norms is rooted from traditions and cultures and can be long lasting and hard to remove. Several studies have provided evidence that gender discrimination in social norms tends to create gender discrimination in other aspects of the economy. [Cools and Kotsadam \(2017\)](#) studied the effects of social norms on domestic violence. [Branisa et al. \(2013\)](#) explored the role of social institutions on gendered development outcomes, and [Ferrant and Tuccio \(2015\)](#) analysed the relationship between gender discrimination in social institutions and south-south migration.

Similarly, gender discrimination in social norms may affect women's political participation in several ways. For instance, discriminatory social norms limit opportunities for women to deepen their political knowledge and opinions because it restricts women's access to public spheres. Also, discriminatory social norms restrict women's political involvement and translate their political knowledge into concrete political actions or choices.

Gottlieb (2016) and Bleck et al. (2018) studied the implications of gender discriminatory social norms for women's political participation in Mali, and Ichino and Nathan (2017) explored the same topic in Ghana. Gottlieb (2016) found that more political knowledge hinders women's political participation. To try to understand this controversial result, Gottlieb (2016) further implemented a quality approach and individual and group interviews. The author reported that when women received the proposed training to deepen their political knowledge, their male guardians or relatives are more likely to enforce the social norms that restrict women's political and civic participation after training. More surprisingly, women who received the training tend to experience setbacks by moving the social norms forward.

Furthermore, Bleck et al. (2018) investigated how socioeconomic characteristics affect the gender gaps in political knowledge and opinion in villages in Northern Mali. The measure of political knowledge is based on the extent to which an individual knows the term limit of the country's president and the name of the local mayor. Regarding the indicator of political opinion, people were asked about one of the most controversial debates in the country, the proposed policy to change the family code to provide more rights to women. Two important explanatory variables focused on explaining political knowledge and opinions are household agency (e.g., index of empowerment within the household or a say in decision-making) and degree of mobility.

The authors found that women's empowerment at the household level had a positive impact on political knowledge and opinions. In addition, more empowered women were more likely to support the proposed family code reform that increases their rights. This finding suggests that women who are empowered within their households also tend to be empowered outside their households and become more involved and interested in political matters.

Studies on the determinants of the gender gaps in support for democracy have emphasized that women's low support of democracy compared to their male counterparts can be explained by the existing gender discriminatory social norms and institutions (Konte & Klasen, 2016). In the analysis of the determinants of support for democracy in Africa, several studies have shown that there is a gender gap and that women are less likely than men to state that democracy is the best political regime over its alternatives (Bratton et al., 2005; Evans & Rose, 2007; Garcia-Penalosa & Konte, 2014). One may wonder why this gender gap exists despite the several desired features that are associated with democracy and the likelihood that a consolidated democracy may improve the rights of women. A possible response is simply that the gender gap in support for democracy exists because of the gender differences in relevant socioeconomic characteristics between men and women, such as the difference in terms of education. However, most of the previous studies on the determinants of support for democracy in Africa controlled for most of these individual socioeconomic characteristics.

Garcia-Penalosa and Konte (2014) highlighted that the gender gap in support for democracy was mainly determined by the country's contextual factors in which women live. Specifically, they found that the gap decreases in countries with high levels of human development and political rights. They linked their finding to the modernization hypothesis of Inglehart (1997), arguing that "a change in the economic and political environment reduces the differences in roles between males and females and increases women's interest in issues traditionally considered to be the domain of men, such as politics."

Konte and Klasen (2016) have added discriminatory social norms and institutions that have been shown to exacerbate gender gaps in several aspects. They found that once they controlled for the country's gender-discriminatory social institutions in the family code, civil liberties, and access to resources, the gender gap in support for democracy disappeared. Findings have supported that discriminatory social norms burden politics in general. As a policy message, the authors highlighted that women who live under autocracy at home are less likely to support democracy outside home.

It is important for countries and communities to implement policy interventions that remove forms of discriminatory social norms that hamper the political participation and empowerment of women. Recently, Ichino and Nathan (2017) conducted a randomized experiment in Ghana

intended to address norms that limit women's political and civic participation. The experiment consisted of having influential local political representatives, such as the traditional chiefs, lead community meetings to address norms against women's political participation and encourage women's political participation during the elections. The authors did not find any effects of such interventions on women's political participation.

## **2.2. The State of Women political Empowerment in Africa**

### **2.2.1 Elite actors who hold positions for exercising political authority**

Women's access to political power has been increasing. However, in Africa, the influence of women in political authority is at a distant as compared to men. On the average, women constitute not more than 25 percent in the lower house of parliament (IRI, 2016) Furthermore, less than 25 percent are committee chairpersons in single/lower house of parliament and not more than 25 percent hold ministerial positions when compared to men (IRI, 2016). Where women do climb the political empowerment ladder in Africa, they do not hold more than 19 percent of the national budget (IRI, 2016). Though women's representation is growing (Vetten, 2016), they remain underrepresented in the African political discourse and at best, their involvement in politics remains predominantly symbolic as it does not match the requisite financial trust and control.

For women to be able to impact policy decisions, it is best that they are represented in numbers large enough to have a collective (IRI (2016) citing Powley, 2006). Women represent 50.1 percent of the total population of SSA yet, they are the least represented as elites holding political positions to exercise authority. Data from The World Bank indicates that on the average there was an increase in women's representation in parliament from 8.8 percent in 1997 to 22.9 percent in 2018 (Figure 1). Rwanda, by far, stands out in terms of women representation in parliament with a rate of 61.3 percent (Figure 2).

The data corroborates with a study by IRI (2016) in 29 African countries from October 2014 to January 2015, which indicates that on average, women constitute 24 percent of single/lower house of national legislative bodies. In the executive arm of government, women on the average, form only 20.3 percent of cabinet (IRI 2016). South Africa has the highest percentage of ministers who are women (44.7 percent), while Sudan has no female executive ministers (Figure 3).

With the exception of South Africa, which has a high representation of women in all indicators of legislative and executive arms in the [IRI \(2016\)](#) study, countries like Rwanda had high representation in parliament (63.8 percent) but not so much in the executive arm (34.3 percent). In contrast, Liberia had a high representation of women in the executive arm of government (33.3 percent) but not in the legislature which stood at only 11 percent (see figure 4). Nigeria, the biggest economy in West Africa had a low representation of women (5.6 percent in the legislative bodies, 10 percent as heads of committees in the legislature and 15.4 percent in the executive arm of government).

### **2.2.2 Elites who do not just make up the numbers: Empowering female policy makers in Africa**

Evidence suggests that increasing numbers of women in executive and legislative arms of government have substantial impact on policy decisions and outcomes ([Liu and Banarzak 2016](#)). Because men and women have different policy priorities the policy priorities of women are more likely to be addressed by female policy makers who are in a better place to understand the importance of women's concerns. It has been well established in the literature that having more female policy makers would improve development indicators, especially those that increase women's and girls' wellbeing. For example, having more female policy makers may lead to an increase of government spending on education ([Li-Ju\(2008\)](#)); improve local infrastructure and the lives of women and girls ([Duflo et al., 2007](#)); improve quality of governance([Grown et al \(2005\)](#)); reduce corruption ([Dollar et al.,2001](#); [Brollo and Ugo, 2016](#)) and create more inclusive institutions ([Revenga and Shetty\(2012\)](#)). A recent study by [Aseidu et. al. \(2018\)](#) using data from 159 developing countries finds that having a higher share of women parliamentarians are more likely to pass comprehensive laws on sexual harassment, rape, divorce and domestic violence.

In Africa there have been concrete actions showing how female policy makers have positively improved the rights of women, including women's friendly laws against domestic violence and sexual offense introduced by female legislators in Rwanda and Kenya. Unlike in other developing regions, there exist however little empirical evidence that investigated how African female policy makers have contributed to the development of their countries. Recently, [Konte](#)

(2020) looked at the effects of increasing the representation of women at national assemblies on 11 local development indicators across 50 African countries over the period 1997–2016. The study has showed that regions that are located in countries where women hold a higher percentage of seats in the national assembly record lower fertility rate, higher age at first birth, lower incidence of early marriage and lower age difference between husband and wife, higher access to electricity. A focus on women’s representativeness at all levels of government therefore does not only rest with empowerment but invariably leads to development.

There is a need for more empirical analyses on the economic implications of increasing the number of female policy makers. These studies will help assess increases (or lack thereof) in the representation of female legislators at the national and local levels. Following are some statistics on progress that has been made in empowering female policy makers in Africa.

### *Do numbers reflect female legislators influence?*

From 2000 to 2019, the proportion of women parliamentarians almost doubled to reach 21.9 percent and women’s representation in cabinet increased fivefold to 22 percent between 1980 and 2015 (Moodley et. al, 2016). In large, this growth can, be attributed to targets for women’s representation set by parliaments and political parties.

Numbers do not necessarily imply influence (Moodley et. al., 2016). Vetten (2016) puts this as descriptive rather than substantive representation. Looking beyond numbers, having women’s representation at the legislative and executive arms of government matter, but what matters the most is how these numbers are translated into improving policy content and direction (Para-Mallam and Oloketuyi, 2011).

Female ministers in Africa constitute half (6 percent against 12 percent) as much as their male peers to be appointed to influential portfolios such as Finance Minister or Prime Minister (Moodley et. al., 2016). In the last 50 years only 10 out of the 54 countries in Africa (Burundi, Liberia, Madagascar, Mali, Mozambique, Malawi, Namibia, Rwanda, Senegal, South Africa) have had a female president or Prime Minister (World Economic Forum 2018). Approximately 50 percent of women in cabinet mostly handle social welfare portfolios, while only 30 percent lead the Ministries

for Treasury, Infrastructure, Defence, and Foreign Affairs which are considered to have more political influence (Moodley et. al., 2016).

Assessing influence can be a difficult task. In developing the Woman Leadership Index, IRI (2016) introduces the percentage of executive's budget managed by ministers who are. This measure gives an indication of how women in cabinet access and have enough control over national resource to finance their vision, goals and objectives. Comparing women's cabinet appointment to percentage of budget managed (Figure 3), there is, on the average, a relatively low proportion (18.9 percent) of budgets managed by women with cabinet positions. There are, however, exceptional cases in Cape Verde, Burundi, Ghana, Liberia and South Africa, where women in cabinet control over 48 percent of the national budget.

The state of women's political empowerment is attributed to a systemic gender bias against leadership of women, entrenched in the socio-cultural and religious values. In the build-up to the 2016 Parliamentary Elections in Ghana, a key message of a male candidate who eventually unseated a female parliamentarian was "show us your husband" (Ghanaweb, 2016). Discrimination influenced by local cultures, religion, social norms and patriarchy permeates the very fabric of the African society and hinders women political participation amidst the common perception that politics is not for women (Para-Mallam and Oloketuyi, 2011). That notwithstanding Africa sits above the global average (21 percent) for representation of women in cabinet (22 percent) and is second only to the European Union in terms of its share of female parliamentarians (Moodley et. al., 2016).

### **2.2.3 Citizens who participate in grassroot political systems**

Reflecting on constitutions and manifestos of 214 political parties in 33 African countries, Kandawasvika-Nhundu (2013) finds that parties' commitments on gender tend to be more pronounced in election campaign manifestos (58 percent) than in party constitutions (27 per cent). De jure, there is a general awareness of the need for women participation in politics, yet there are no measures in place to ensure the transformation of honouring and executing commitments into effective actions and outcomes. From the study of Kandawasvika-Nhundu (2013), only 45 (21 per cent) of the 214 political parties specify means of actualising women's representation in internal party politics, decision-making structures and leadership.

There is no political party in Africa with an equal representation of women in relation to men, in terms of top leadership positions (Kandawasvika-Nhundu, 2013). Few exceptions can be made of the African National Congress (ANC) of South Africa close to achieving gender parity, as two of the top six party positions—Chairperson and Deputy Secretary General—are held by women, and the party has achieved equal representation on its National Executive Committee. Also, the South West Africa People’s Organisation (SWAPO) party of Namibia has one woman in the top four party positions (Kandawasvika-Nhundu 2013). Women’s participation in party politics has mainly been limited to the women’s organiser portfolio. Aside from being tokenistic, it is largely ineffective as it tends to be dominated in terms of numbers at the highest decision-making structure (the National Convention or General Congress) (Kandawasvika-Nhundu, 2013).

The [Global Gender Gap Report, 2018](#), (World Economic Forum 2018) affirms that a clear drawback in assessing the political empowerment of women is the absence of indicators capturing differences between the participation of women and men at local levels of government. [UNIFEM \(2008\)](#) highlights that female political participation must be grounded in community-based local government structures through to the national level for an effective and efficient communication of needs and interests. In addition, it is vital to move women beyond the ‘ghetto’ of women’s wings of political parties ([Para-Mallam and Oloketuyi \(2011\) citing Ibrahim, 2005](#)) to the more competitive and influential position in the structure of political parties.

#### **2.2.4 Civil society actors who challenge and engage the state informally**

An active civil society to spearhead bottom-up interventions that challenge and critically engage the state for the advancement of women is critical for the actualisation of women’s political empowerment. Women as civil society actors should be able to influence policy decisions in ways that effectively further and promote new national commitments to women’s political participation ([Apusigah, 2014](#)).

Over the years, there have been notable civil society organisations/movements such as the 50/50 Group, a global initiative (Liberia, Sierra Leone, Namibia and Nigeria) which has championed campaigns on promoting women’s leadership in both local and national level government structures. The Namibian 50/50 Campaign for Women’s Political Empowerment led by Sister Namibia resulted in putting lesbian rights onto the agenda in the build up to the 1999 National Assembly

elections which despite being massively opposed, gained support of many ruling party members at local, regional and national levels (Wilson, 2011). In Sierra Leone, the Group played a role in realising the promulgation of the Domestic Violence Act, the Registration of Customary Marriages and Divorces Act and the Devolution of Estates Act, in 2007 to redress violence against women and girls (Apusigah, 2014).

There is also the West Africa Office of Abantu for Development (Abantu) and Women in Law and Development in Africa (WILDAF), promoting women's leadership in politics and public life (Apusigah et al. 2011 citing Sam 2010, and Mensah-Kutin and Dzah 2010). Others include the Akina Mama wa Africa (AMWA) and the African Women's Development Fund (AWDF) which provide financial and technical support for building capacity of women in politics (Apusigah et al. 2011). In Ghana, the women's coalition on domestic violence transformed into a national network platform (made up of NGOs, individual, women's rights organisations, donor agencies among others) which started the Domestic Violence Bill (now Act 732 passed in 2007) and other legislative instruments to tackle human trafficking, child survival, reproductive rights and human rights (Apusigah, 2014). Also, Abantu for Development, developed a Women's Manifesto in 2004. The Women's Manifesto process brought together all the women from district assemblies and gave them the opportunity to strategize and identify a national advocacy platform. In Sudan, gender segregation is implemented even in all public spaces, women organised creatively and mobilised up to 2000 women enough to have common voice to push for representation in the legislature. With the numbers, they were able to trigger a direct campaign at the constitutional court and on July 7th, 2008, Sudan's legislature eventually passed a law to reserve 25 percent of seats for women (Wilson, 2011).

On the individual level, Leymah Gbowee and Comfort Freeman initiated and led a peace movement (Women in Peace Building Network (WIPNET)), which together with Asatu Bah Kenneth's Liberia Muslim Women's Organization (LMWO), demanded accountability from peace negotiators to bring an end to the war and ensure women participation in elections (Wilson, 2011). In 2004, Wangari Maathai, an environmental and political activist, received the Noble Prize for standing up against the former oppressive regime in Kenya and being an inspiration in Africa fighting for sustainable development, democracy and peace (Tyley, 2004). Leymah Gbowee and Ellen Johnson Sirleaf also received the Noble Prize in 2011 "for their non-violent struggle for the

safety of women and for women's rights to full participation in peace-building work" ([The noble price for 2011](#)).

As civil society actors, women are widely represented and active throughout the continent. Their presence is, however, mostly recognised in the area of peace building, which is more reactionary. It is common that women are given access to power in times of crisis. Liberian President, Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, became the first female president in 2005, as the country emerged from 13 years of brutal civil war. Joyce Banda took over the Presidency in Malawi in 2012 after the sudden death of the president, and President Catherine Samba-Panza in the Central African Republic presides over a country torn apart by rebellion and sectarian violence ([Voice of America, 2014](#)).

To summarize, women's political empowerment and access to leadership positions at all levels are fundamental to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) 5 in Africa. Political empowerment entails the transformation of women into elite actors who hold positions for exercising political authority; elites who fully utilise their political authority, actively engage in their country's party politics and challenge and critically engage with the political system to promote gender issues.

To achieve the targets set for the SDG 5, women must be part of the policy and legislative circles to have a direct impact. In Africa, there has been an increase in women's representation in the legislature on the average from 8.8 percent in 1997 to 22.9 in 2018. Similarly, representation in the executive arm of government stands at 20.3 percent in 2016 from 4 percent in 1980. Though the percentages show a considerable improvement in women's representation in Africa, it is still far from parity and does not correspond with the control of resources, as women on the average only manage 18.9 percent of national budgets. Representation should move beyond just having numbers to having actual influence. This study, however, finds that increased representation of women leads to more control of resources by women as a measure of influence. It is hence prudent that efforts are sustained and improved to have more women represented at both the legislature and the executive arms of government.

A major shortfall in the political empowerment is the representation of women at lower levels of government and the political party structures. Women's participation in the political party

structures in Africa is mainly limited to their reserved women's wing position, which is tokenistic and ineffective at large, as they tend to be dominated in terms of numbers at the highest decision-making structure. As much as emphasis is laid on women's political empowerment through representation at the executive and legislative arms of government, it is also important that the efforts are geared towards taking up leadership positions at the echelons of political party structures.

Lastly, political representation of women from the lowest to the highest level should not be a reactionary measure. The Executive Director for the NGO Women Africa Solidarity, Oley Dibba-Wadda ironically commented that "...when everything gets messed up, the women are asked to come in and clean up" ([Voice of America, 2014](#)). As much as women are recognised in their extraordinary role in peace and nation building, their representation in government should be facilitated for sustainable development.

### **3. Women's Empowerment Through Reproductive Health Access in Africa**

The SDG target 5.4 precisely aims to "ensure women's full universal access to sexual and reproductive health and reproductive rights in accordance with the Programme of Action of the International Conference on Population and Development and the Beijing Platform for Action and the outcome documents of their review conferences". Both conferences have recognized sexual and reproductive health as "inalienable, integral and indivisible parts of universal human rights". However, many women in Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) do not have access to this human right. With access to safe and effective methods of contraception, women can determine the number and spacing of their pregnancies, thereby avoiding unintended pregnancies ([Gakidou and Vayen, 2007](#)). Unintended pregnancies can prevent women from fully participating in income generating activities ([Sedgh, Singh, & Hussain, 2014](#)). Therefore, ensuring that women have full access to reproductive health services will empower women and subsequently strengthen economies.

#### **3.1 Usage and Access to Reproductive Health Services for Women in Sub-Saharan Africa: A Literature Review**

Compared to most regions in the world, SSA has a low contraceptive usage rate and a high rate of unmet need for family planning. Over a fourteen-year period (from 2000 to 2014), the use of contraceptives in SSA increased from about 22 percent to about 28 percent (World Bank, 2019). This is a similar growth rate to that of South Asia (from 45 percent to about 52 percent) and more than that of the Middle East and North Africa which remained at 58 percent (World Bank, 2019).

Despite this growth, contraceptive use in SSA is the lowest in the world. Particularly in West and Middle Africa where the contraceptive use rates are 17 percent and 23 percent, respectively (UNDESA, 2015).

Figure 6 in the appendices section shows 2015 regional contraceptive prevalence rates and unmet needs for family planning rates for married or in-union women aged 15-49 years in SSA. The figure shows that compared to the global average of 64 percent, SSA's contraceptive use rate of 28 percent is significantly low. At the regional level, Southern Africa has an average usage rate of 64 percent which is significantly higher than that of Western Africa (17 percent). As shown in figure 6, contraceptive usage rates and needs for family planning in Africa vary by region and more likely by country.

Several studies have shown that the use of contraceptives is linked to increased female labor force participation (e.g. Goldin & Katz, 2002; Feyrer, Sacerdote, & Stern, 2008; Bailey, Hershbein, & Miller, 2012). Bloom et al. (2009) found that with each additional child, female labour force participation decreases by 10-15 percent among women aged 25-39 years. In addition, through modern contraceptive use, women have to been able to transition to more technical and professional positions (Pillsbury, Maynard-Tucker, & Nguyen, 2000). It is therefore important to review studies that have used regional and country level data to examine contraceptive usage in SSA.

Most studies that examine contraceptive use in Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) have focused on usage rates and/or profiles of women who use contraceptives. Nevertheless, there are few studies that have examined the relationship between contraceptive use and labour market participation in SSA. For example, Shapiro and Tambashe (1994) found that women's employment and education was linked to increased contraceptive use in The Democratic Republic of the Congo. Longwe, Smits, & de Jong (2013) used Demographic and Health Surveys (DHS) data, which contains nationally-representative surveys that use standardized questionnaires to ask women of child-bearing age in SSA about their reproductive behaviour, use of reproductive and sexual health services, and other sociodemographic factors. They examined over 200,000 women in 26 countries in SSA to analyse the causal effects of number of recent births and the spacing between the last two children on women's employment. They found that the number of recent births and short birth spacing have substantial negative effects on women's employment. In addition, an interaction analysis indicated that more highly educated women and urban women suffer most from these negative effects. Apart from the above-mentioned studies, most studies that examine contraceptive usage in SSA focus on

highlighting the degree of low contraceptive usage rates and profiles of women who use contraceptives in SSA. The lack of studies that go beyond this point signifies that SSA mainly faces challenges that are related to low contraceptive usage rates.

[Creanga et al. \(2011\)](#) examined trends in contraceptive use in 13 countries in SSA for the period of mid-1990s to mid-2000s. They used DHS data and found that contraceptive prevalence rates ranged from 8.7 percent in Senegal (2005) to 46.6 percent in Namibia (2006/2007). The rates decreased in Senegal, Kenya, and Uganda (-2.1 percent, -1.5 percent, -0.5 percent, respectively) and increased in Mozambique, Namibia, Madagascar, Zambia, and Ethiopia (+19.6 percent, +8.8 percent, +5.6 percent, +5.4 percent, +4.4 percent, respectively). The rate remained the same in United Republic of Tanzania and increased by 1 or 2 percent in the remaining countries. The authors also found that poor women in SSA were less likely to use contraceptives compared to richer women.

[Elfstrom & Stephenson \(2012\)](#) used DHS data from 21 African countries between 2005 and 2009 to examine how community factors shape community use for women in SSA. The authors found that women with a higher ideal number of children were less likely to use contraceptives. They also found that the gender composition of children was likely to influence contraceptive use in two countries. That is, women in Guinea and Uganda who lived in communities with more boys than girls were likely to use contraceptives. The authors also found that women who lived in countries with more educated women were likely to use contraceptives. On the other hand, results for men's education were mixed. For example, in Mali and Zimbabwe, women were likely to use contraceptives due to a greater proportion of men that had at least primary education. However, although Egypt had a greater proportion of men who were educated, women were less likely to use contraceptives. Similarly, results of the relationship between employment and contraceptive use were mixed. In Egypt, Liberia, and Zambia where there was a greater ratio of men employed, women were likely to use a contraceptive. However, in Nigeria and Senegal where there was a greater ratio of men employed than women, women were less likely to use contraceptives.

[Tsui, Brown, & Li \(2017\)](#) also described past and present trends in contraceptive use in 38 SSA countries using 2008 to 2016 DHS data and Performance Monitoring and Accountability 2020 data. They found geographic variation in contraceptive use. The authors attribute this variation to regional and national diversity in terms of government commitment to family planning and strength of health systems to provide high-quality information, counselling and services. They also add that

SSA countries differ by language, religion, ethnicity, and levels of exposure to western ideologies that can have an influence on modernization. For example, French anti-contraception laws from the last century have reinforced pronatalist attitudes in Francophone Africa, while “liberated” thinking about women and girls’ may have had a stronger influence in former British colonies, such as Kenya, Ghana, or Zimbabwe.

### **3.2 Barriers to family planning and contraceptive use in Sub-Saharan Africa**

There are many reasons that may explain the observed low contraceptive usage rates in SSA. These include lack of access to reproductive services, restrictive laws, limited infrastructure to access care (e.g. roads and transportation), “brain drain” of health care providers, worries about fertility, religion, and the low status of women (Williamson et al., 2009; Chavkin, Leitman, & Polin, 2013; Gyimah, Adjei & Takyi, 2012). Haider and Sharma (2013) conducted a systematic literature review on barriers to family planning and contraceptive uptake in SSA. They found 11 studies that were performed in Ghana, Uganda, Ethiopia, Kenya, Malawi, Rwanda, Tanzania, and the Democratic Republic of Congo. The results of these studies largely showed that participants in the respective studies have high knowledge of contraceptives and family planning services. For example, Aryeetey, Kotoh, and Hindin (2010) found that 99.7 percent of female participants in Ghana were aware of at least one method of contraception and 55 percent had knowledge of more than three methods. However, despite high knowledge rates, the reviewed studies evidenced that there are barriers that prevent women and men in SSA from using reproductive health services. Haider and Sharma (2013) ‘s review found that due to cultural norms, parents in SSA are prevented from discussing sex and contraceptive use with their children, as a result, some of the youths will have such misconceptions about contraceptive use.

Haider and Sharma (2013) ‘s review also showed that societal pressures and norms faced by women prevent them from using contraceptives. For example, in some cultures, many people believe that that a woman’s main role is to bear children. Moreover, some women expressed verbal or physical abuse from their husband/family members and religion as barriers to contraceptive use. In some cases, area of residence was found to be an added barrier to contraceptive use. For instance, Mekonnen & Workus (2010)’s study in Ethiopia showed that 77 percent of women who resided in

urban areas used contraceptives compared to 40 percent -45 percent of women who resided in non-urban areas.

Some of the barriers associated with low contraceptive use in Africa result from fears and beliefs about contraceptives. [Nalwadda et al. \(2010\)](#) found that African youth aged 13-25 years reported fears of reproductive and fertility consequences that were associated with contraceptive use. The youths had the view that condoms were dangerous because they could get stuck in the uterus, leading to death. [Tavrow et al. \(2012\)](#) examined 310 male and female youth aged 13-19 years in Kenya and found that about half of the youths believed that their peers who were found with condoms were engaging in unacceptable and aberrant behavior. Moreover, a quarter believed that these youths should face some form of punishment. The youths also believed that access to condoms would lead to having multiple partners.

Typically, low contraceptive usage rates are associated with high fertility. For many women in SSA, high fertility helps ethnic groups, faith groups, and regions sustain their relevance in these societies ([Izugbara & Ezeh, 2010](#)). From 1960 to 2010, fertility in SSA only declined from 6.62 to 5.26 children per woman (UNDP, 2016). This is much lower than Latin America and Asia with a decline of 5.95 to 2.20 and 5.67 to 2.24, respectively. [Izugbara & Ezeh \(2010\)](#) conducted 71 in-depth interviews with women in Northern Nigeria. This region is characterized by low contraceptive usage and high fertility rates. Results from this qualitative study showed that women believed that large families symbolize wealth and guarantees survival of family names and immortality of lineages. Some women also believed that fertility is God's gift to human beings. Despite expressing these views, several women expressed to having more children than they intended. This may explain why some women reported that they took contraceptives without the knowledge of their husbands, which indicates a resistance of contraceptive use among men in this region.

Having a husband who wants more children presents itself as a barrier to contraceptive use. [Tirivai \(2020\)](#) used DHS data to examine barriers to contraceptive use among married adolescent girls aged 15-19 years in Burkina Faso, Guinea, Mali, Mozambique, Niger and Nigeria. The study found that having a partner or husband who wants more children is a barrier to contraceptive use. The study also found that factors such as household size, age and knowledge of ovulatory cycle were barriers and facilitators of contraceptive use. As in other student presented above, own and partner education, visits to health facilities, living in urban areas, and receiving family planning information

from the media were also found to be facilitators of contraceptive use among married adolescent girls.

Studies that examine barriers to access and usage in contraceptives in SSA succinctly show that the complex nature of family planning uptake and contraceptive use in SSA is centred around societal norms, socioeconomic background, government funding, religion, and area of residence. Qualitative studies on barriers to contraceptive use is scant. These studies provide complementary and contextual evidence on these barriers and helps pinpoint mechanisms that influence these barriers.

This section reviewed literature examined women's access to reproductive health services in SSA and usage of these services. Examining these issues is important because inadequate access to reproductive health services has demographic, economic, health, and human rights consequences. The literature review analysed trends in contraceptive use rates and literature that examined barriers to family planning uptake and contraceptive use. The literature has shown that women in sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) face a myriad of challenges in accessing and using reproductive healthcare services. As highlighted by studies in this review, factors such as education, area of residence, religion, socioeconomic status, and funding of reproductive health services were associated with contraceptive use.

In order to achieve SDG 5 and ensure that women in SSA have access to the human right of reproductive health services, concerted multi-faceted interventions are needed to scale up usage rates. These efforts should include increased funding, education, and alleviating women of the societal and cultural pressures that hinder them from accessing and using contraceptives. Governments and policymakers that support the 2030 Agenda of the Sustainable Development goals should consider this holistic approach, particularly in countries and communities with low usage rates. Given that women constitute about half the population in SSA, their participation in the labour force is important to economic development. Hence, policymakers should invest in programs that target increasing reproductive health services and usage in SSA in order to increase labour force participation and foster economic development in the region.

#### **4. Summary**

Studies discussed in this literature review highlight the relationship between women's political empowerment and the prioritisation of other women's issues such as women's health. As shown in the reviewed studies, issues related women's health are typically addressed by female politicians. This is also true for issues such as domestic violence laws, divorce, etc. To ensure effective implementation of laws that empower women, more women should be included in legislative processes. The lack of women in the legislative process could be the reason why the MDG target of achieving universal access to reproductive rights was not met (Gertholtz et al., 2011). More studies that examine determinants that further examine factors that contribute to or hinder women's political participation are needed in order to gain further insights on how to remove barriers that hinder women from political participation in Africa. In particular, more qualitative studies are needed in order to obtain viewpoints of women and men in different countries, areas of residence, and communities. Researchers should also consider conducting causal studies that examine the relationship between women's political empowerment and improvements in women's health and other issues related to women's rights. These studies will help policy makers map out suitable strategies to ensure that women are well represented politically and ensure that their needs are met in the policy making process. Not only will this approach help the governments and international organisations such as the UN achieve the goal of empowering women in Africa, it will help develop economies in the long run.

The studies discussed in this literature review highlight the complementarities between women's political and health empowerment. As shown in studies on women's political empowerment, issues such as gender-based violence, women's health and divorce are typically addressed by female politicians. Hence, one starting point in the race to curb gender-gaps in Africa is women's political empowerment.

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Leadership and delegation of authority Behavioral Economics

Gender on the labor market

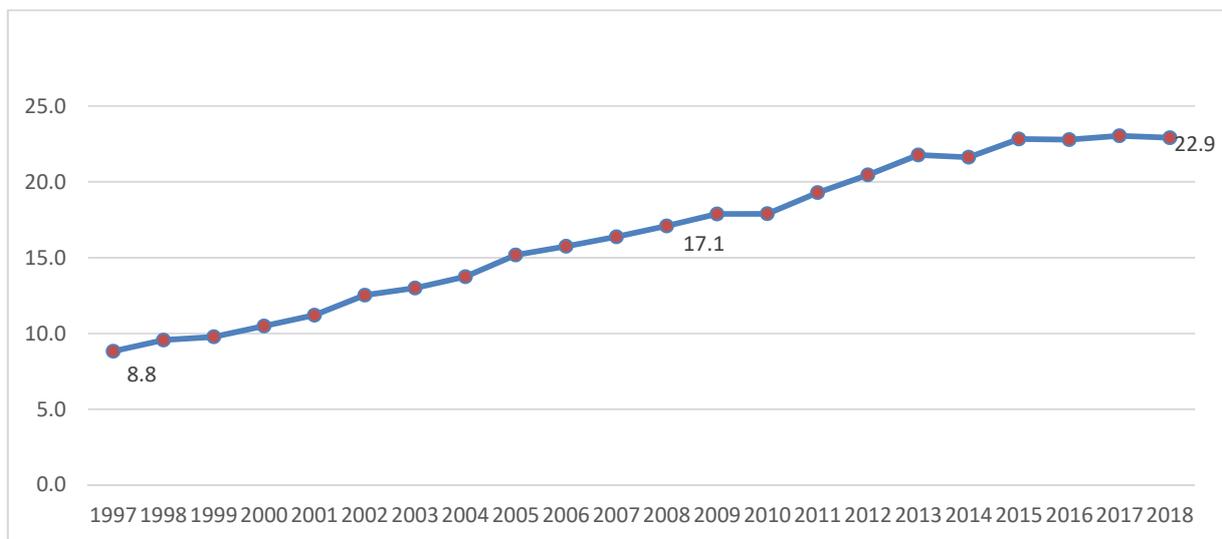
Gender and intra-household issues

Gender Roles and Families

Group identity, in-group favoritism, and discrimination

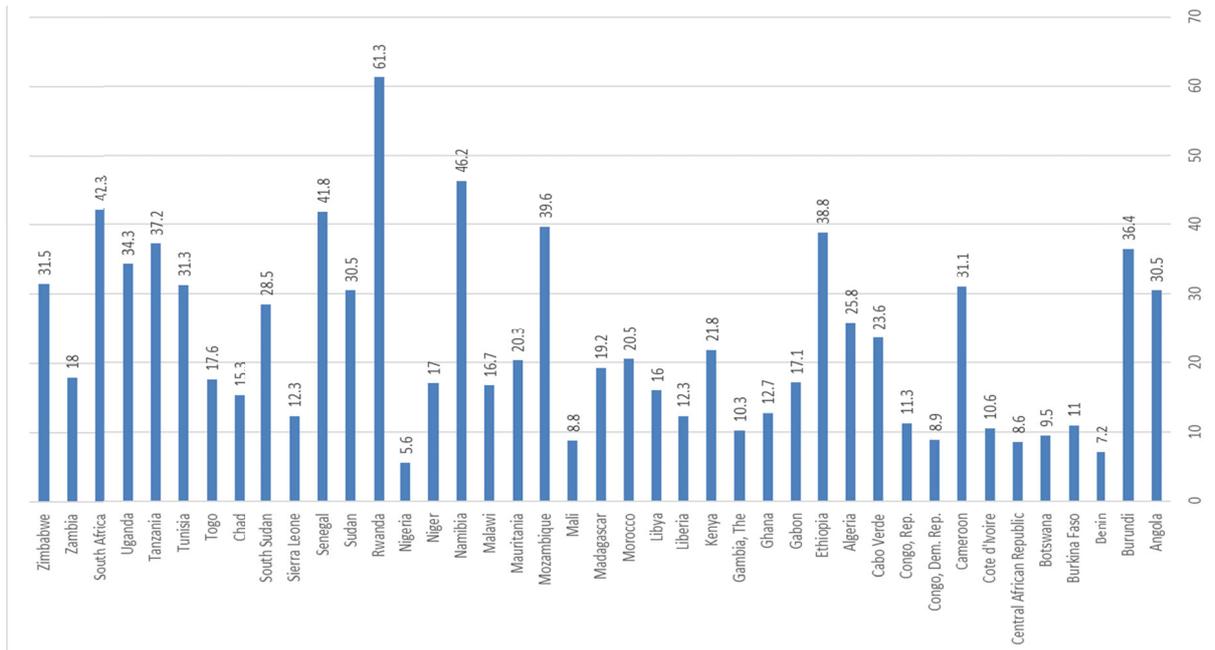
Team decision-making

Figure 1: Trend of women's representation in parliament in Africa



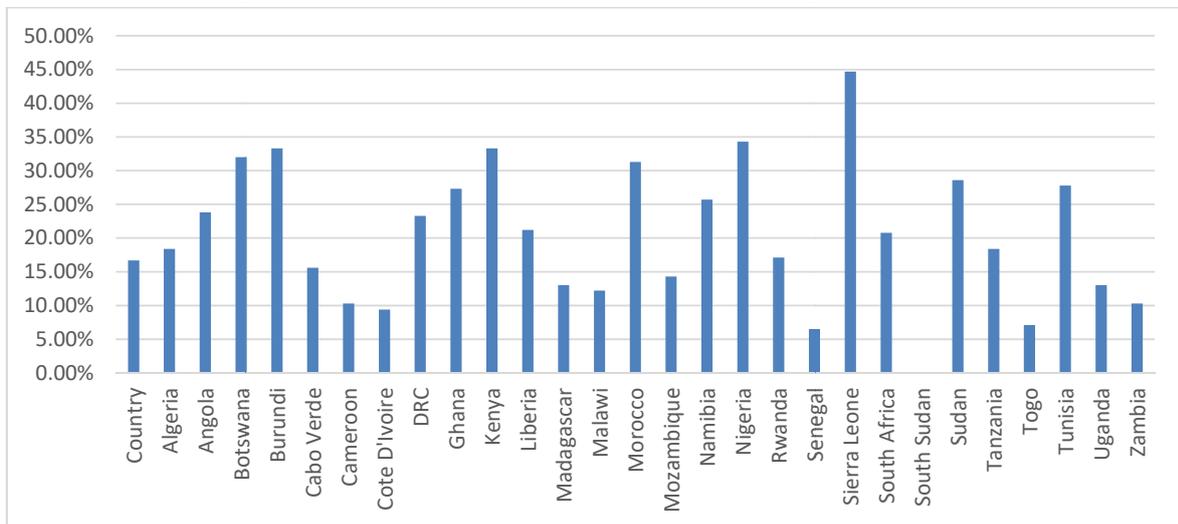
Source: World Bank Data (2019)

Figure 2: Women's representation in parliament in Africa by country



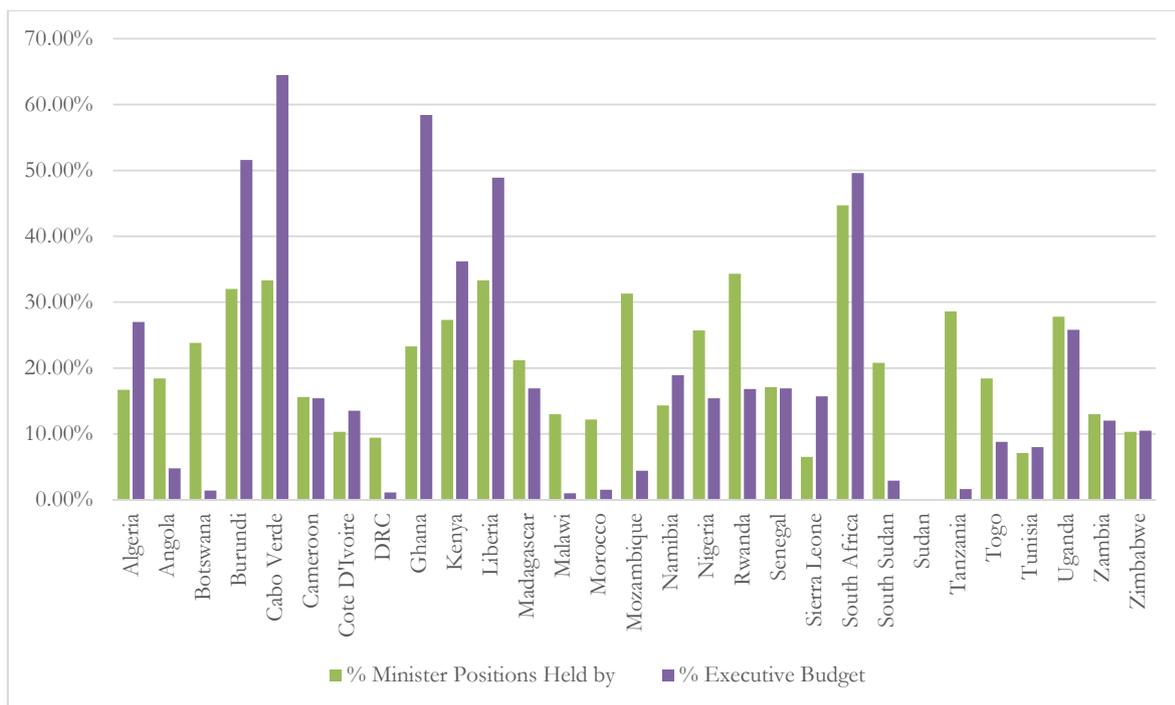
Source: World Bank Data (2019)

Figure 3: Percentage of women as cabinet ministers in Africa



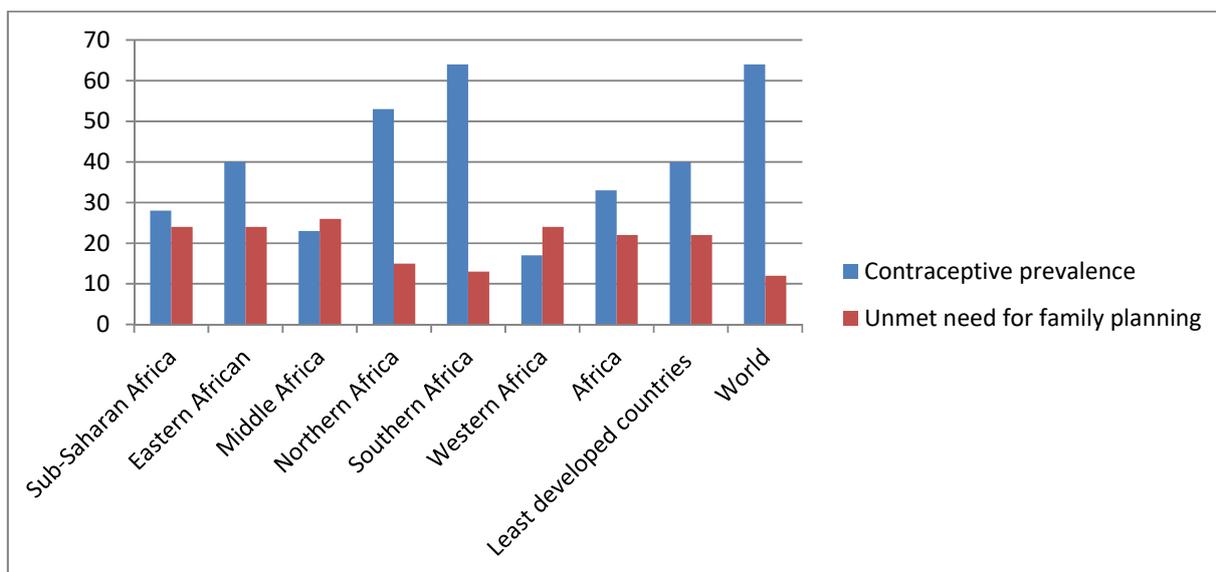
Source: IRI 2016

Figure 4: Comparing women's cabinet appointment to percentage of budget managed



Source: IRI, 2016

**Figure 5: Contraceptive use and unmet need for family planning for married or in-union women aged 15-49 years in Sub-Saharan Africa (2015)**



Source: United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division (2015)

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