



## POLITICAL PARTICIPATION, FEMINIST ORGANISING AND THE CREATION OF INCLUSIVE DEMOCRATIC SPACES



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Women's political participation has long been a top priority on the agenda of Women's Movements. But the mainstream discourse on political participation and gender equality all too often focuses on getting women's bodies into political offices. It is anticipated that the formal participation in state institutions will automatically lead to substantive representation of interests. But this rather technical view on political participation misses, that political demands must be constructed collectively. This article provides a comprehensive view on women's political participation beyond formal representation, takes a critical look at how formal representation can affect gender equality outcomes, and discusses the obstacles for a substantive representation of women and feminist agendas in the political arena. It draws on the African Feminist Reflection and Action Group's discussions and highlights prerequisites for feminist organising and redefinition of how inclusive democratic spaces can be created.



## POLITICAL PARTICIPATION, FEMINIST ORGANISING AND THE CREATION OF INCLUSIVE DEMOCRATIC SPACES

The context of women's political participation in the recent past has been conceptualised as "women asking for seats at the table where public policy is discussed." Given the slow speed by which the number of women in politics is growing, quotas are in many countries the mechanism of choice to push for a larger gender balance in political institutions. According to the Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA) Database, more than half of the countries worldwide use electoral quota for their parliaments. (IDEA, 2020). While such quota systems represent a qualitative jump "into a policy of exact goals and means," the discussion on gender-balanced political processes and women inclusion must move beyond the numbers or bringing women into parliaments (Ballington et al., 2005). The assumption that the formal or numeric participation in state institutions will automatically lead to the representation of women's interests and the

deepening of democracy proved to fall short. By implication, quotas have failed to address the factors responsible for the closure of space against women in concrete terms.

The review of country experiences shows that there is an existence of a superstructure that determines women's opportunities in politics and the limits of their aspirations. Unfortunately, this structure cannot be dismantled by a mere quota. Having women around the table alone does not necessarily translate to effective representation and participation, contributing to gender equality or impacting many women. It takes more than the presence of women politicians for the complexities of gender inequalities to be fully addressed in policy terms. The policies and laws in most countries in Africa may appear supportive of women's participation. In reality, it is often cosmetic.



Feminist scholars ask the question around women's presence. As is the case with Cynthia Enloe in her book "Bananas, Beaches, and Bases" (Enloe, 2000), which digs into women's histories and uncovers their activities, actions, silences, and protests. Her analysis shows that women are visible if we choose to acknowledge their presence in a manner that concretely contributes to observable outcomes. Understanding the limitation of overdependence on the quota response to the marginalisation of women in the public domain, and particularly in the decision-making sphere, has also become urgent against the background of what Rottenberg identified as "Neoliberal Feminism" (Rottenberg, 2018). Beyond political spaces, women organise across other spheres. Therefore, to address the lopsidedness and marginalisation of women in society, it is crucial to appreciate participation

sites and the role women play and can play in organising voices through the sites. Visible presence should be matched with influence that can transform from mere formal representation to substantive presence. This shift is more sustainable and can make decision-making spaces more democratic, inclusive, and gender-fair.

## From formal to substantive representation

Paxton and Hughes (Paxton & Hughes, 2007) defined women's equal representation in three ways: formal, descriptive, and substantive representation.

**a) Formal representation:** The most common form of representation is formal equality, which is often established by law. It is assumed that people would elect representatives based on political views or based on their competencies. Apart from the fact that this has not translated to the realisation of that assumption in many developing democracies, globally, women are often shut out of elective positions because of issues unrelated to political views and individual competencies.

In the 80s and 90s, there were actions by the women's movement and activists towards redressing gender imbalances globally, with the Beijing Platform for Action ascribing 30% affirmative action for women's political participation. This period saw developments in constitutions in Africa, with most constitutions adopting affirmative actions as a temporary measure for addressing the gaps in women's political participation. In Uganda's 1995 constitution, for example, the gender quota was adopted to redress the historical imbalances women in that country suffered



over time, likewise in the constitutions of Eritrea and Rwanda. In several other countries, there are also clauses for the formal inclusion of women in the charter of political parties.

Kenya amended its constitution in 2010, with the constitution introducing a two-thirds gender rule to enhance parity at both lower and national legislative bodies. Article 81 of the nation's constitution states that either of the sexes should not be over two-thirds at both the national and local legislative assemblies. There are, however, concerns about the implication of this milestone for the representation of women. The 2013 general election report showed that only 20% of the candidates were women, meaning that women were still faced with several hurdles that barred them from gaining the constitutionally desired presence despite the formal equality provision. One of them is the violent character of intra-party politics, where women are under constant stress to prove their capability (Berry et al., 2020). Instead of arguing over political causes as their male comrades, they often have to put their energy into fighting back personal attacks. (Can a single mother be a candidate? Is a divorce affecting popularity? How can a woman without a husband represent the country? etc.). The environment and structures of political parties often disfavour the active participation of women. There is a "He for She" mentality within parties, where males feel entitled to speak in the place of the women about women and determine what happens to women. Safe spaces to develop the political struggle with other women are missing. The only agency within political parties is the women's wings, which often exclude women from power politics and side-line instead of representing them. Women's experience in politics clearly shows that equality is obstructed by the patriarchal manner in which power is organising the institutions of representative democracy (FES, 2019).

In Rwanda, women represent 68% of the parliamentarians. The constitution of the country guarantees affirmative action as a way of gender inclusion in politics. Though the country's political system encourages women to take part in parliamentary elections, women are still assigned to lower positions determined by the state's patriarchy. Often, including women depends on the "godfatherism" of benevolent men that are mentoring, supporting, and manipulating the "included" women (McCrummen, 2008). Quota women often fulfil symbolic functions. As the Rwandan electoral system is based on partisan vote rather than popular vote, many women are held hostage to the party's will. There is a missing link between women in politics and women in feminist movements. Thus, the critical question is, if affirmative action has increased women's representation in the parliament, in what ways has that translated to improvement in the status and lives of women? An insight into this is provided in McCrummen's argument that, despite women outnumbering men in the current Rwandan government, "they are in power but without power" (McCrummen, 2008), since the actual power in Rwanda is centralised around the presidency. To foster governance that actively promotes gender equality, women in the state must attempt to set the agenda (a feminist agenda), develop more robust accountability mechanisms and processes between state and women's organisations to take part in functional political decision-making sites. This link is undoubtedly missing (Delvin & Elgie, 2008).

**b) Descriptive representation:** The second form is descriptive representation, which creates a link between representation and constituency. In this form, the number of women is placed against the background of interests and constituency. Therefore, electoral systems favour the election of women with party lists, proportional representation (PR), and large district magnitudes. A system less

competitive than majority systems based on single-member districts. In a single-member system, a woman is placed in a category as the number one choice for her party to participate in the election. Furthermore, in a proportional representation system with large district magnitudes, a woman can be placed further down on the party list and still be elected (Matland & Brown, 1992). Arnesen and Peters (2017) elaborated on the advantage of the descriptive representation and the issues of legitimacy. However, this knowledge also maintains that proportional representation favours party systems with many parties and means greater possibilities for new parties to enter the parliamentary arena. Several analyses have shown that even in some instances where descriptive representation has taken root, this has not translated to improved livelihood and substantial dividends for the female populace (Lena Wangnerud, 2009).

**c) Substantive representation:** According to Paxton and Hughes, the third form of representation is substantive, which underlines the need for women to act for themselves and not being represented by others. There cannot be equality if women are not speaking and acting for themselves and are not sitting at the decision-making tables (Paxton & Hughes, 2007). Apart from having higher legitimacy than formal and descriptive representations, it has yielded more positive results. Bratton and Ray (2002) show that the number of women in Norwegian municipal councils positively and progressively influenced childcare provision (a policy that was reported to be of more significant concern for women than men).

of women to realise their dignity and freedoms in the public space and to participate in the crafting of the political agenda essentially. Participation and representation have to reflect the interests not only of an elite of women but also of women defined by different identities and locations, by their belonging to various social classes and ethnic groups or other forms of intersecting identities. Such representation is only possible in an institutional context that respects and furthers inclusive democratic values.

However, an essential question for feminist groups that must be addressed in the quest for a more radical rethinking of democratic space and the state is how a different form of women's organisation could transform the male-dominated and patriarchy-inviting spaces for political decision-making. While women's quota regulations or provisions for gender equality in constitutions and national laws are of great importance to address the unjust imbalances of political representation, there is an even greater need for alternative mechanisms to push a feminist agenda in the political space, to challenge the current political system, to organise resistance and to craft new democratic spaces (McCrummen, 2008). This also is relevant against the background of the rise of neoliberal feminism, which is becoming prominent in public discourse and further distorting conversation on women's empowerment and threatens feminist agenda's traditional role as a movement for social justice. "Neoliberal feminists" are middle-class feminists linked often to capitalist ideals, with less concern for the needs of the mass of people or the women they claim to represent.

For the reflection on feminist organising and creating inclusive policies, the form of substantive representation is crucial. Women's representation must go beyond numbers if it is to promote "inclusion," to advance the possibilities



## Challenges of women in superficial political spaces

A quick look at the reality of women's representation in parliaments shows that political gender quotas do not automatically translate to any form of power transformation in favour of women. Women can still be excluded from politics in different ways, even when the state has adopted affirmative action. Therefore, it is necessary to devise political measures for women's inclusion, which takes women's differences into account and eradicates the structural patriarchal domination of political institutions. Below are examples of exclusionary methods affecting women in the so-called political spaces experienced in different African countries.

### a) Exclusionary tactics of the electoral system:

In Nigeria, for example, the male-dominated governance system in 2006 adopted the National Gender Policy of 2006, which stipulates 35% Affirmative Action for both appointive and elective positions Executive and Legislative arms of government. This happened despite some political parties adopting different measures to enhance women's participation. In the last three elections, they exempted female aspirants from paying the massive sum of money required to pick nomination forms. However, as noted by Iyare, the nomination fee is "a tiny drop in the ocean as huge resources are still required to transport and entertain supporters, hire thugs, bribe and do many things that are features of male politics" (Akiyode & Afolabi, 2003).

The Nigerian situation is complex. Feminist writers (Pereira, 2003) have documented women's marginalisation in politics. The frustration of women in politics led to several attempts to form a women's political party. The first attempt was 1960-1966, but forging ahead has been difficult in a patriarchal

society where gender norms and religion even excluded women from the northern part of Nigeria from franchise until 1979, about nineteen years after independence. In 2005, women organised around another political party controlled and formed by women - National Democratic Equality (NADEV). The bottleneck of the electoral laws and processes barred women from enjoying the opportunity to advance the agenda. Beyond organising, the challenge of root metaphor played a decisive role in this as well. Many females have grown up with the image in their head of women aspiring to the same leadership role as men being few and far between. The tendency, therefore, is when such women have space to contest power, they easily agree to male dominance as with the first republic in Nigeria who though had their party but decided on not challenging significant offices. Pereira (Pereira, 2003) alludes to the discriminatory nature of the Nigerian Constitution, as it portrays a masculine norm. The country's 1999 constitution that birth the fourth republic and end of military dictatorship is replete with male pronouns about strategic offices in the country with hardly any female pronouns.

In more recent times, the lack of a solid or unambiguous identity as a female politician, which manifests in most female politicians' tendency to assume the status of honorary men, has also robbed the female politicians of the unique identity required for meaningful affirmative action (Aremu, 2004). In Nigeria, the proportion of seats held by women in national parliaments is deficient, 3.38 %, mainly coming out from the 2019 elections.



**Societal norms and gender roles:** Women's exclusion in a leadership position is traced back to the pre-capitalist era, specifically as the stages of crop production became a norm. Settlements were formed, and, due to crop



production in settlements, as opposed to the preceding wandering practices among human beings, surplus emerged. Acknowledging that women had substantial work in reproduction, the emerging society instinctively excluded women from crop production and hunting. Over time this became the norm. In his book "The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State," Friedrich Engels explains the process in which women's biological roles in reproduction were recognised in the division of labour in earlier society (Engels, 1884). This over time was going to be reconstructed into a myth and claim of male superiority, which Eleanor Leacock, in her work, "Myths of Male Dominance: Collected Articles on Women Cross-Culturally," shows as lacking in factual historical or anthropological analysis.

The exclusion of women in Africa has been established by a long history and could also be traced to tradition, religion, and role conception. African women, more than others in comparable regions around the world,

have suffered repression. Yet, oral history provided evidence of women playing critical roles at different periods of history: politics, religion or nation-building, military or wars of liberation. In places where dual structures of governance were in place, women and men shared spaces of the administration of the lives of their people. The debasement of this role women played can be traced to the history of some kingdoms and religions of many societies. Even in religious spaces, the reduction of women to votary maidens is a recent occurrence, if judged by how women's roles are captured in the art and early literature of the people of Africa, the most reliable sources of African history.

It is as a result of this and other factors that male hegemony thrives in the political spheres. Gender culture is made of a web of societal ideals, meanings, and values with gender connotations (Pfau & Effinger, 1998). Without a gender-equality culture in the political and societal space, women won't have opportunities for upward mobility (Inglehart & Norris, 2003).



#### **b) Political economy of power and party politics:**

Political parties are widely perceived as a hermetic block that is not inclusive. The nature of most of the political parties in Africa is not programmatic. Parties are not connected to a specific ideological agenda of advancing human welfare and development. Party politics is rather about competition and access to benefits. Political parties are therefore not very attractive to potential female militants, who want to advance collective agendas. Most political parties glaringly have no agenda for gender equality. Women are not seen and not heard. Their participation is restricted to the women's wing, to play the cheerleader role in the party-political game to manipulate the political space. At times, men push forward some women who can serve their interests. Thus, as they are in most African countries, political parties lack the structure to enhance

women's political participation effectively. In Nigeria, the ruling political party, the All Progressives Congress (APC), at its national convention held in June 2018, elected only one woman into its 21-person national working committee, into the position of National Woman Leader. The People's Democratic Party (PDP), the major opposition party, at its national convention held December 2017, out of 18 persons elected into the party's national working committee had only one woman, also as National Woman Leader. The purpose of the creation of such roles is unambiguous and self-explanatory. It is not substantially for women's inclusion, rather more for mobilisation of women's votes. The character of the women who have held such positions in the major political parties in Nigeria also reflects the actual intention. Even in their most radical element, such women are best likened to the "maternal feminists" with the old-fashioned and moralistic notion of "The woman's outlook on life is to save, care for,

and help. Men make wounds, and women bind them up."

The building of critical consciousness in female parliamentarians through feminist campaigning and lobbying is urgently needed to challenge conservative, anti-women, hetero-normative attitudes and structures. Women-only spaces, which allow for the dialogue among female parliamentarians and women citizens, can be a valuable mechanism to eradicate the dominating patriarchal system in personal/political relationships and interactions (Tripp, 2003).

The increasing violence and monetisation of the political contest is a massive hurdle for women entering the political space. In Nigeria, like in other African countries, the quest for accumulation of wealth and the inherent survival and sustenance of the elite are tied to politics. So, politics can favour only those who can follow the rule of the game. As rightly put by a Nigerian activist, "party politics is a huge commercial investment in the country (...) only those who are ready to win at all cost get party tickets" (Akiyode & Afolabi, 2003).

**c) Neoliberal politics fail the women agenda:** The neoliberal turn in African politics since the 1990s produced and reproduced a state that cannot protect women's and people's interests nor encourage meaningful political participation inclusion.

In the last decade, countries in Sub-Saharan Africa have seen GDP growth rates close to 6 per cent, some even above. These African growths and investment developments have taken place for various reasons, including improved economic conditions, liberalisation and improved business climates, political stability, greater regional and interregional





cooperation, and increasing demand because of a growing labour force and an expanding middle class. Yet, the continued focus on capitalist development has meant that these changes have not translated into meaningful and long-term impacts on the lives of the vast majority of Africans or their conditions of poverty and precarity (Dicks, 2019).

Gender policies are widely applied, but in superficial ways, challenging no status quo and the current distribution of power and access to resources. Women's participation and women's interest representation can only be improved when the capitalist accumulation logic of the neoliberal state is broken off. Decision-making has to be a negotiated exchange between state, market, and civil society. Some argue that the political landscape is replete with the history of male domination and the model of politics is masculine. Men define and run the game of politics. As noted by Okeke, "the existence of this male-dominated model results in either women rejecting politics altogether or rejecting male style politics" (Okeke, 2003).

It is, therefore, critical that, as part of the strategies for increased women's participation in politics, women should be mobilised to resist the feminisation of poverty and resist the induced policies imposed by the international finance agencies, such as World Bank and International Monetary Fund. It is critical to

make conscious efforts to establish a link in the women's struggle for participation and resistance to economic violence that most of the current economic policies portend. The prescribed mobilisation and alertness are also strategic in the face of the rise of the neoliberal feminist idea, which comes as exclusionary in its insistence on both balance and personal responsibility where it downplays structural barriers against women growth and development opportunities but trumps up the idea of personal improvement as the response to marginalisation. This sits in well with the basics of neoliberal ideology that emphasise the triumph of the individual over collective growth, the processes of selective inclusion and exclusion for the poor, and particularly for women (Miraftab, 2004). As highlighted by Lea Sitkin (Sitkin, 2017), "Neoliberal feminism promises freedom, but it just replaces one source of coercion (traditional, patriarchal authority) with another (the market)."

## A more holistic understanding of participation

Political participation is about including people in the essential decisions of society. If there is participation without the representation of every stratum of the society – including women in all their varieties (rich, poor, straight, queer, with children, without children, young, old, with academic background, without an academic background, with disabilities and without) – to get all the voices on the table and make decisions inclusive and fair. It is a revolutionary idea that the institutions of the democratic state should be guided by equality, equity, and justice, and that the people themselves can transform the political system in a way that can benefit everyone, but especially the less privileged.



Feminism in this broader context of participation and transformation can contribute in different ways. In the political arena, a feminist analysis helps to dismantle discrimination against women and broaden the political discourse. The struggle to increase women's participation and occupation of decision-making positions - not just numerically but to transform the nature of decision-making systems and make them more inclusive. Women's political participation and radical awareness can hold politics accountable and change the way decisions are made. Feminists talk about the actual issues and not in a "politically correct," bureaucratic, and inoffensive way.

In the arena of public policies, feminist analyses can help see the injustices of the current economic system and lead to alternative economic and social policies that have in mind the interests of women and working-class people. Policies must invest in women, their access to land, their opportunities, and their freedom. Feminist ideas can improve the quality of life and of living together, improve inequality, and the freedom to live a life in dignity and (economic) self-determination.

In the social arena, feminism tries to deconstruct gender roles and raise awareness of women's rights, interests, and needs. Feminism helps overcome the public image of (mainly African) women as powerless victims, always those placed at the receiving end. There are women in traditional communities that people recognise, who have convening power, some belonging to a market association, who positively influence the community. They are powerful opinion leaders. They might not be holding any position, but they are changing a lot of things.

The understanding that the only way to take part in politics is the membership in a political party needs reconstruction. In the end, politics include all activities associated with making decisions in groups and other forms of relations between citizens, such as distributing resources or status. An apt example of this is the experience of women in politics in Hungary. The reality of neoliberal feminism and the multi-party arrangement not leading to assurance of adequate representation of women in government and the likelihood of women's concerns being prominent in political and economic discourse is exemplified in the Hungarian women's political participation experience. While there was a view that the emergence of "state feminism" around 1951 did not yield as much as would be expected in the transformation of political power in favour of women, the 1989 change to a multi-party system further reduced the possibility of the attainment of equality for women. Massive loss in social gains previously achieved for women was actually recorded. "They became the group that lost the most, achieving less in the realms of healthcare, education, employment, social security, and childcare, to name but a few." (Gurmai & Bonifert, 2004). So, while we're talking about the participation of women in politics, we cannot forget the many women



building the society, who are effectively taking part in different structures of society to hold it alive and running. This also includes recognising women's work, living wages, social security, improving women's reproductive health and living conditions, and access to quality public services.

## Negotiating and redefining the democratic space

The conceptual notion of space shows how space is gendered and highly politicised as a social resource in all societies. Specific spaces have been culturally, religiously, and politically marked as either "male" or "female" throughout the known human narrative. The spaces for the female were and are still primarily linked to women's breeding and feeding functions in all human societies (Geisler, 1995). The spaces referred to as public are assumed to be male. For centuries, men have excluded women from the public, where all the critical decisions relating to power are deliberated upon and implemented.

To challenge the hegemony of patriarchal structures in politics and life, public spaces of all kinds need to be occupied by women with the agenda of pushing for gender justice and transformative change. In this context, public spaces reach people's homes from political power positions, as the division between public and private spaces is artificial. Patriarchy needs to be pushed back in all spaces. The colonial legacy is still defining public spaces, and institutions in the African context should not be neglected. Thus, it is vital to tackle the liberal political practices of exclusion of women in which the political activities and agency of women in the grassroots neighbourhood and community-based groups, those most readily

available to them and where they are most effective, are ignored. Response to women's exclusion and aspiration for true political empowerment that is overarching, covering all relevant spaces required for women's true inclusion in the public, i.e., political and economic, sphere will require mobilisation at grassroots through the invented space, which challenges the status quo in the hope of larger societal change and resistance to the dominant power relation. While the embrace of the invited space, which relies on state legitimisation, may not be discouraged, true feminists need to emphasise, explore and promote the invented space, which derives its legitimacy from its invention and occupation by the grassroots. It is driven by their collective action, through which they can directly confront the status quo.

In the last decade, alternative forms of public protest and organising by enraged citizens emerged. Big marches, which mobilised much beyond the traditional activist coalitions, e.g., against violence against women (#TotalShutDown), for climate justice (#FridaysForFuture), and against the caprices of financialized capitalism (#Occupy Wall Street), (#metoo) influenced the political landscape. Also, the virtual spaces became more relevant. Their growing impact on public opinion-making puts them on the map for feminist organising strategies. They can be functional tools of mass organising, campaigning, and information sharing, but they can also be relatively shallow in content, so they have to be used politically.





## Conclusion

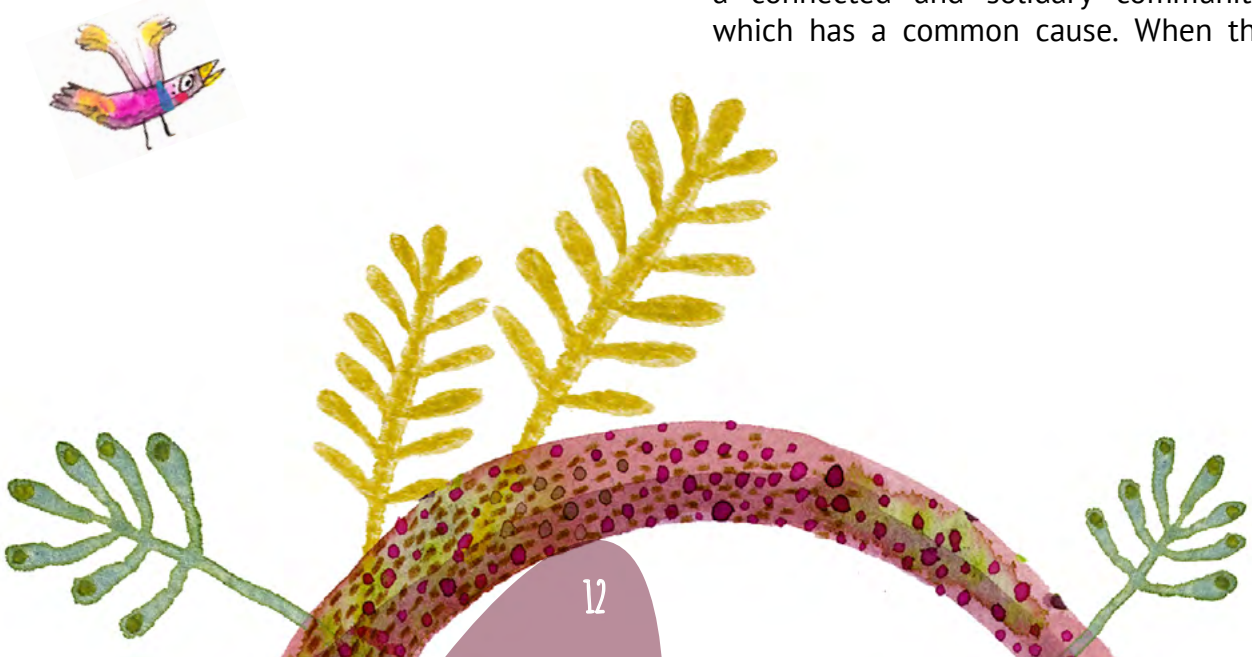
**W**hat can be done to advance a feminist Agenda for political participation? What lessons did we learn from the augmented formal involvement of women in politics? What hinders a substantial representation and feminist agendas in the political arena? And how can male-dominated and patriarchy-inviting spaces for political decision-making be transformed?

An essential lesson from various development approaches adopted by feminists is addressing structural obstacles inside the state to redistributive agendas. To develop good analysis and strategies of a joint struggle, “safe spaces” are critical. We need to rebuild feminist spaces within movements and political parties, where women can connect and collectively construct common interest agendas. So far, male politicians continue to dominate even the political spaces designed for women through structural and institutional policies. Women taking a feminist stance and negotiating patriarchal institutional changes may prove challenging and lead to political marginalisation or further create divisions across different groups of women because of political affiliations and alliances (Hassim, 2002).

Therefore, the feminist movement has a crucial role in developing a political agenda: that of emancipation of all women from patriarchal bondage and exploitation. Some strategies to be adopted include:

**Building interest communities:** feminist struggles have to be “rooted” (prepared from below). Experiments with feminist schools and feminist solidary exchange between movements have been good examples of creating the bonding and learning collectively from other women’s experiences. Such environments work like “incubators” for radical ideas and consciousness, which are the grounds for our struggles. Building such “incubators” in villages, schools/universities, trade unions, political parties, public institutions, etc., can be a potent seed for change.

**Building pressure for occupying public spaces:** To transform the patriarchal and neo-colonial state structures of political institutions, women have to be aware of them, be angry about them, and organise resistance. In many states, people are disillusioned by the dysfunctional state and accept the elite capture of it. Apart from seed communities and awareness rising, there has to be an emotional bonding that women believe in their power for change. No one beats a connected and solidary community, which has a common cause. When the



political system is not consulting the people on their interests and ideas for organising public goods, people have to impose their views on state structures by creating/inventing spaces. Affected women and their communities will know best what policies they wish for and need and how they can be organised. Feminist movements have to listen and craft solutions for joint problems jointly.

**Solidarity and feminist organizing:** To transform the political lives of women, feminists must unpack the conceptual foundations of solidarity and resistance. Re-evaluating the concept of solidarity as a contested and situated phenomenon is necessary. This will bring to the fore the importance of understanding the affective and embodied nature of solidarity, which will develop the ethical-political potential of solidarity as a means of resistance (Pullen & Vachnani, 2019). The biases present in formal institutions – towards particular values, actors, and processes – often entail that some groups and ideas are privileged over others, resulting in unequal access to resources (Lowndes, 2004). Pushing for a

feminist and solidary alternative is critical to effectively organise women's interests and build shared political agendas across parties and movements (Hassim, 2002).

**Intersectional activism** will increase the ideological depth of the movement and make it more convincing and inclusive. To recruit activists and contribute to a well-informed and critically thinking public, political and feminist education are crucial. To achieve effective organising around social justice, it is essential to understand the relations of power, oppression, and privilege. Only that way can resistance be organised, which can bring about structural change. Social justice is only achieved when all persons enjoy the same rights, freedoms, and opportunities across all sectors of society, including economic participation and decision-making. The exchange of knowledge, information, and strategies of engagement between movements increases the effectiveness of joint organising.

**Feminist economic alternatives:** One of the significant challenges confronting women in attaining equitable representation is their financial status. The systematic and socially engineered location of women in private and domestic engagements and rural areas, and the underdevelopment of infrastructure in these areas, have been directly responsible for the poor conditions under which most women across the continent live. The strategies of different feminist actors to fight these conditions might be different. But the political economy is a common denominator, which puts women's daily experiences with violence, economic exclusion, and privatisation in a common framework. This framework advocates solidarity in fighting inequality and exploitative tendencies of the modern patriarchy being perpetrated by global capitalism (Grewal & Kaplan, 1994).



**Commonly joining a party:** “Entryism” can be a political strategy for organising a feminist conscious effort at seeking power through a block alignment of women with a political party. However, such will only yield desired dividends, where there is the continued alignment with the broader constituency of women activists in society and a well-planned mobilisation and political education that ensures a shared consciousness and group discipline. While in many countries, especially in the south, the likelihood of an all-female party gaining traction may appear a remote aspiration, the option of entryism into mainstream party also needs to be a guided and conscious movement devoid of opportunism. Negotiation within the political party for space and power has to stay a collective and a blocked effort.

Women movements must take the challenges and possibilities of feminist solidarity seriously to permeate the closed, patriarchal political spaces. A global call for sisterhood – without an intersectional constructed a basis for trust and solidarity – is not enough. An isolationist approach will never deliver the desired goal of women’s empowerment and suffrage. Building solidarity collectively and linking up with progressive alliances and collaborators is thus essential. Apart from joining hands in the struggle of movements for common interests, the expansion of spaces for collaboration through the recognition of informal politics and informal action in the communities is essential to bring down the patriarchal status quo in politics and go beyond the often shallow and half-hearted affirmation policies. ■





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## About the “Feminist Reflections” Series

The “Feminist Reflections” Series share valuable discourse emerging from the collective work of the African Feminist Reflection and Action Group. The group comprises 40 feminist academics, social activists, and progressive women from trade unions and in the political arena from diverse regions of the African continent. Since November 2017, the group regularly met to engage in critical debates around the challenges derived from neoliberal development patterns and current political backlashes against women for contemporary African feminist activism. The Mozambique office of Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung has facilitated the meetings.

## About the Author

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