

In the margins of Political Power: Rewriting women into history

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Abstract

History is biased towards men. The prevalence of history as gender biased is central to the marginalization of women in different folds. Although African women were an integral part of the liberation struggle, nationalist movements, women's movements, and development their contributions were omitted in historical narratives. Although women fought alongside men, they were later not accorded the same recognition. Women are also missing in monuments and symbolic artefacts, despite their contribution to national developments. Notwithstanding their omission in historical political narratives, women assumed leadership roles as healers, rainmakers, queens, chiefs and war veterans. Post-independence women are found in the margins of political leadership. The absence of women in public memorials and omission in history inadvertently validates the exclusion of women in political leadership and decision-making. An understanding of the historic positions of women in African societies is useful in determining the evolution of women into their current positions and roles in society. The invisibility of women remains a challenge and has been extended to modern day systems of governance. This paper contributes to writing women into history by recording historic contributions of women, and highlighting omissions of women and the implications of the omissions on governance.

Keywords: Women, political leadership, history representation, gender equality, exclusion, development

Introduction

Gender inequality remains prevalent in Africa. Women and girls endure poverty, gender-based violence, harmful practices and child

marriages, inequalities in access to education and economic opportunities among other challenges in most parts of the continent and elsewhere. Women are underrepresented in positions of political decision making and leadership. The gender inequality in decision making is detrimental as it marginalizes women's interests and opportunities for emancipation. The importance of equal representation in political decision-making cannot be over emphasized. Thus, the constant state of quest for strategies to improve representation and gender equality. Notwithstanding this, historically women were leaders, they were combatants in times of war, spiritual healers, rainmakers, and chiefs. Weir (2007) argues that women were central to politics in Southern Africa, demonstrating leadership in political, ritual, and military affairs. Parpart (1986) indicates that some women held high political office either through hereditary or election as queen mothers, queens, chiefs, or as village head women. Over time women failed to maintain this leadership status.

Historic omissions and contributions

History has proven unfavourable to women as historic records have erased women and nationalist discourses omitted women despite their roles, importance and contribution to the liberation struggle and development. Historiography tends to dismiss or downplay the involvement of women in political struggle (Suttner 2007). However, this dismissal does not mean lack of engagement. Carrier and Nyamweru (2016) argue that particular histories and figures are selected for memorialization, elevated to heroic status while others such as women are excluded from narratives of nation building. This is a common phenomenon across the African continent. Akuffo (2023) reflecting on the erasure of women in Ghanaian history indicates how state led commemorative acts and memorializing practices belie women's effort and historize men as founders of Ghana. While only six men are memorialized as Ghana's independence heroes, Akuffo (2023) argues that four women who led a petition drive for their release are equally deserving of memorialization.

Women in history have been identified as invisible, missing, voiceless, marginalized, absent, omitted, nameless, and other connotations that signify inferiority in representation. The same limited representation is found in political representation, where women are poorly represented in political leadership globally. The marginalization of women in history and political leadership is a cause for concern. While continuous efforts are made

to restore women to history and rewrite their narratives and enhance female representation there is no significant progress. This paper tracks the implications of the absence of women in historic narratives and symbolic representations on policy and development, the role and place of education in addressing the absence of women in historic narratives and determines likely policy interventions and recommendations. To improve the political, social, and economic participation of women and eradicate gender inequalities, a comprehensive appreciation of history and its influence on the current state of affairs is critical. An understanding of how and why discrimination takes place is useful in determining sustainable solutions.

From its inception, history as written by men, barely features women, rendering women invisible. According to Zeleza (2005), some histories ignore women while others mention them in passing. Hence the argument that women have been written out, ignored, and overlooked by history. The predominantly patriarchal power structures in society have made the absence of women in history possible, this however does not make women's stories less remarkable or less worthy, hence the need to restore women to history. The ultimate goals of women's history are to restore women to history and history to women (Burton, 1992; Kelly-Gadol, 1987). Barnes (2007) argues that despite having fought for independence, women were later isolated and disregarded; their stories were never told.

Notably, the Government of Zimbabwe indicated

Little has been documented about the role played by women in the course of the protracted struggle for independence. The fault lies at the feet of Zimbabwean women themselves. And yet the national liberation struggle marked a major breakthrough for the liberation of women in this country. Women fought side by side with men on equal footing, demonstrating that they were indeed a force to reckon with, and thus destroying the old age myth that a woman's place is in the kitchen (Barnes, 2007, p. 249).

The pictures of women in history textbooks show women in their domestic roles, caring for children, in the kitchen, in portraits with their husbands (Chiponda & Wassermann, 2011). The authors choose to confine women to private roles, however, it is apparent that women in history were engaged in other activities.

In the same vein, Van Heynengian (2007) decries the disregard for women's experiences in war and the lack of records, thus presenting incomplete studies on war. The lack of documentation is a constant feature in the literature on women and history. Suttner (2007) argues that without a record of contributions, many people may die without anyone knowing they were underground operatives. Scholars claim that such submissions are ignored because they present women in a way that is contrary to the norm, in a way that is not accepted as feminine. For instance, Chiponda and Wasserman (2011) argue that women in history textbooks are rarely presented with traditionally masculine roles.

Although women fought alongside men and received the same training, claims of gender equality are disputed. Barnes (2007) claims that the war perpetuated male-dominance and that women performed gendered roles as they cooked, washed clothes, and performed sexual services for the guerrillas. Women in war endured sexual abuse (Barnes, 2007; Suttner, 2007) and were generally excluded from positions of power and authority (Barnes, 2007). On the contrary, Suttner (2007) shows that women wielded a level of authority and responsibility as persons in command. Some positive benefits that women got from the war and liberation struggles were that they became politically concertized. Van Heynengian (2007) argues that through the war experience, women sharpened their political consciousness, their construction as belonging purely in the private sphere changed, and the women initiated a women's movement.

Memorialization has also proven to be an exercise biased towards men. However, both men and women are found to have contributed to nation building and are deserving of commemoration. The depiction below illustrates the gender bias in memorializing practices.

Walking into the headquarters of the African Union at Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, one is quickly confronted at the entrance by a display of about 50 Africans, all men, ascribed with the legacy of African nationalists. These men are noted to have worked towards attaining independence or rebuilding Africa. Sadly, not a single woman's image adorns this seeming 'historical wall'. Men, apparently, monopolize the nationalist narrative in Africa. Very few accounts or writings depict women conspicuously as political players or avid influencers of the anti-colonialism discourse. While Africa's anti-colonialism and

nationalism discourse hardly include the role that women played as nationalists, the fact remains that women distinguished themselves in the colonial and nationalist struggle as powerful, self-determining and yet matriarchal (Ifeanyi-Ajufo, 2021).

In addition to the recorded absence of women in political discourse on nationalism, the liberation struggle and statues, Chiponda and Wassermann (2011) also confirm that women are underrepresented, misrepresented, and marginalized in history textbooks. This creates and perpetuates a negative image of women. Students who read the textbooks are made to believe that women were absent in history and or incapable of leading. In fact, women tend to be portrayed in feminine and domestic roles in history textbooks (Chiponda & Wassermann, 2011).

Representation of women in history textbooks

Research shows that in two of the commonly used history textbooks in the United States women constituted less than three percent of the content and two percent of the content dealt with women and in one in South Africa women were absent in discursive content (Chiponda & Wassermann, 2011). Most studies conducted on the invisibility of women in historical narratives used content analysis. They analyze how men and women are represented and count their images. Several studies have been conducted in the developed and developing countries where textbooks have been reviewed for depictions of content related to women and men and comparisons raised. Most researches indicate common results showing omission of women in history, unfavourable representation of women, less mention and reference to women, fewer visuals of women and are generally male versions of history (Blumberg, 2015; Shrivastava, 2017; Zeleza, 2005; Zungu *et al.*, 2014). While more research has been done in the developed countries, the erasure of women's historical narratives is prevalent in both the developed and developing countries.

Women are considered historically unimportant, incapable, and contributing very little to society outside the domestic sphere (Chiponda & Wassermann, 2011, p. 13). The history texts tend to report on gender stereotype roles. History text book reviews in the US, UK, South Africa referenced in Chiponda and Wasserman (2011) have shown that women were not discussed on political and economic decision making activities, and

were shown as observers in scientific discoveries. In addition, numerically men appear more both in text and pictures. UNESCO (2019) also reports that studies that have studied text books generally find fewer images of women and girls, women are portrayed in stereotypical roles and men as professionals, women and contributions of women tend to be ignored.

Women in historical leadership

Although conspicuously missing in history, women have historically assumed leadership roles. Zungu *et al.*, (2014) highlight the need to document historic tales of women in political affairs, they use an illustration of Mkabayi, a powerful female political figure in Zulu history who became a regent when her father died while her brother was too young to take the throne. In Botswana, reference is made to a time when Ntebogang ruled until her son was of age, and ultimately managed to get popular support (Nkomozana, 2008). Many other female figures assumed leadership roles in the continent.

In many African countries including South Africa, Zimbabwe, and Mozambique, women were part of the liberation struggle. They were war veterans, fighting alongside men in the mau mau conflict in Kenya (Thomas, 1996) and the Chimurenga war in Zimbabwe for instance, and were part of the African national journeys to independence. According to Akuffo (2023, p. 1013) women in Ghana were “deep in the trenches with the men, organizing mass demonstrations, convening, participating, leading petition, hiding from the police when prison was eminent, being loyal members and leaders of nationalist movements, risking their lives amidst bombings and assassinations, and financing campaigns”, however, they remained marginalized in political decision making. In South Africa women shaped history as they played a role in the relaxation of the pass laws, marched in protest, faced police batons, teargas and guns as they fought for freedom, equal rights and social justice (Zungu *et al.*, 2014). Notwithstanding this, records are economical in showing the roles played by women and in identifying heroines, but instead literature shows war as exclusively male.

The exclusion of women from political power

It is important to note that the erasure of women from historical narratives has implications on policy and governance. Policies are required to deal with resultant inequalities, to ensure inclusion and establish

possibilities for redress. As Shrivatsa (2017) notes, it is important to question the historical invisibility of women in mainstream historical narratives in examining causes and effects of economic development or political freedom. This implies a relationship between history and contemporary realities.

Despite being found in the margins of political discourse and historical narratives it is evident that women have been an important part of leadership in Africa. Highlighting their contributions is valuable as it demonstrates their capacity to lead, their contribution to the protection of women's rights and liberties and to development. The extent of their participation contradicts the rate at which their participation is understated in historical narratives. It is also not aligned to the perspective that confines women to domestic roles. The participation of women in the women's movements, war and the liberation struggles, and in the nationalist discourses qualifies women as candidates for public office. However, there has been limited to no transition into such political leadership. In some countries like Zimbabwe and Angola women remained underrepresented in decision making and leadership positions post the liberation struggle despite their contribution to independence and the liberation. The situation was however, better in South Africa where women became a part of the new political leadership and government.

Notwithstanding the blatant male dominance, women across African countries often mobilized against issues and policies that disadvantaged them and spoke together in one voice, advocating for their needs, sometimes militantly so (Thomas, 1996). Women organized around their rights and fought against governments and discriminatory laws. In South Africa, women marched against the apartheid regime against the use of passes. Several changes in governing laws can be traced to the effectiveness of women's movements. In Botswana, the women's movement influenced the government to review laws that were discriminatory against women. The women's movements across African countries have been noted to have contributed to democratisation. Despite the valuable contributions of women and the influence exerted through women's movements, women generally failed to sustain power in new structures of governance and remained marginalized from political authority and power. Women's movements made long-term gains, however their contributions towards nation-building were circumvented as governments responded to women's needs.

Implications of the absence of historical narratives and political discourse

According to Ramtohul (2020) historical and socioeconomic trajectories of African nations have influenced the presence of women in parliaments. Women are just as underrepresented in parliament as they are in history in many African countries. However, in some cases such as South Africa, women who were an important part of the struggle were considered an important part of the new dispensation. The lack of representation of women in historical leadership and their representation as feminine and weak creates an impression where women are considered inexperienced, incapable or misplaced. This further marginalizes women and limits their opportunities to advance into leadership positions. If history records do not present women as the key and valuable actors that they are, their absence in modern day governance structures will appear conventional.

As long as women remain misrepresented our understanding of society, politics and the political economy remains flawed. According to Zeleza (2005) feminist historians have an urgent call to recover women's history, redress balances, and develop new theoretical frameworks that better explain the real world. The study of women's lived experiences, recording of women's narratives can be a meaningful way to add female perspectives and experiences to mainstream discourse. To close the knowledge gap created by the missing experiences of women, feminist researchers collect data that "exposes previously known and repressed experiences of women and disrupt traditional, essentialist beliefs pertaining to women's capacities and behaviours" (Brooks & Hesse-Biber, 2007). According to Zeleza (2005), history is undeniably androcentric and underestimates the contribution and role of women in African societies, this has unremitting consequences. It presents women as inferior to men and as victims of male oppression, and misses an opportunity to count the victories of women and present them equally as warriors and leaders in their own right. In fact, Blumberg (2015, p. 12) argues that lack of attention to the achievements of women in curriculum and textbooks as well as the invisibility of women may contribute to students' low self-esteem and lack of confidence.

Textbooks are an important part of history teaching. They are a means for transferring knowledge therefore their content and the way it is presented is critical. According to Chiponda and Wassermann (2011, p. 13) students are likely to consider the way men and women are portrayed in the

text books as unquestionable and historically truthful. Yet the reality is that women are underrepresented, misrepresented and marginalized. An opportunity for positive reinforcement for young girls is lost in the missing visuals and stories of female leaders in textbooks. History has an impact on the lives of women and their understanding of gender and politics. Gender bias in textbooks limits girls from reaching their full potential (Blumberg, 2015). The female identity and experiences are not captured, this limits validation for the girl child as they may not identify with male heroes. A predominantly male history perpetuates male superiority as it associates success and achievement with maleness. It is equally important that the stories, voices and achievements of women be on record. The history of women teaches us about women, culture and society.

The importance of capturing women's history cannot be overstated. The absence of women in history can be interpreted as implying lack of capacity and skills, which is not necessarily the case. Zeleza (2005) argues that poor coverage of women and the tendency to view women's lives as peripheral and unchanging reflect the absence of concepts about women's historical experiences. Women's experiences are useful for the theorisation of history. Scott (1996, p. 3) argues that "by recovering women's stories of women's activism, feminists provided not just new information about women's behaviour, but new knowledge – another way of understanding, of seeing, women, and another way of seeing and understanding what counted as history". The female perspective and insight is an important source of knowledge.

The role and place of education in dealing with the erasure of women

Education is an important tool for transformation, it can be used to change mindsets and help people embrace the need for and value of gender equality. Education can also perpetuate inequality if there is no proper consideration. With reference to textbooks, the education system can be viewed as perpetuating gender biases and silencing women. Schools can carefully consider gender sensitive teaching materials. Other aspects of teaching including teacher training, pedagogy and school culture may also contribute to gender inequality. Teachers require gender sensitive training to assist them to deal with biases. Gender transformation requires conscientious efforts as gender stereotypes are intrinsic and ingrained in different ways. For the attainment of gender equality, it is necessary to change some cultural

practices, beliefs, and traditions. Teaching and learning can be used to transmit knowledge and to create new cultures.

Outside the school environment the public also requires sensitization and education on gender equality. Education presents a platform to educate the public on harmful practices that hinder gender equality, the need for adequate representation of women in textbooks and in political discourse.

Policy recommendations

Increased visibility of women

Improved visibility of women can improve their opportunities for recognition of their achievements and capabilities. The presence and visibility of women contributes to improved societal perceptions of women as leaders. Governments can adopt quotas to increase the number of women in parliament. While this may not guarantee substantive representation it would enhance the visibility of women. The visibility of women as leaders can affirm and encourage other women to pursue political leadership.

Rewriting women's histories

Discourse influences the conceptualization of gender and location of power in modern societies. Transformation of the rhetoric on dynamics of power calls for women's voices. The addition of female voices and perspectives contends with institutional biases, patriarchy, cultural norms and beliefs which perpetuate male bias and domination. Instead of repeating the old narratives which repeatedly categorize political leadership as male and advance reasons why women fail as political leaders, reciting stories of women as successful cases of political leadership presents a better alternative. Non-governmental organizations, Universities, and international organizations can collaborate to support and promote the creation of women's stories through the media, television documentaries, biographies and research. This is critical as it would create counter narratives, new narratives and recreate women's histories, building knowledge which can empower women.

Memorialization policies

Representation of women in public memorials is important as it gives women political legitimacy. Governments need policies to guide

memorialization activities, and to try to gender sensitize the process to reduce bias. Installation of female representative statues and other historic remembrances should be considered for an improved reflection of the history and contribution of women to nationalism and development. Female statues and artistic representations should be created to create an impression of women as the leaders they have been in the past and can be, role modelling for younger generations and reinstating women in history. More monuments and statues should be dedicated to heroic women as efforts to equalize visual representation of men and women, this is likely to have a positive effect on the representation of women in political leadership.

Education system reforms

Considering the biases of textbooks in the representation of men and women it would be helpful for governments to conduct curriculum audits and consequently curriculum reviews to address biases and promote gender equality. The curriculum and course content and pedagogical practices can perpetuate gender stereotypes. Curriculum can reinforce the status quo in terms of gender inequality or be used to support transformations in gender relations and promote gender equality (UNESCO, 2019). Curriculum can be used to enhance gender equality by ensuring that there is gender sensitiveness and consideration for both genders. A gender sensitive curriculum with teaching techniques and pedagogies that are gender sensitive can promote gender equality. Teacher training becomes a strategic priority for gender equality practices. Teachers should be encouraged to promote gender equality in their teaching practices. Similarly, a policy reform on the education system to ensure gender equality in the language, teaching materials and curriculum to avoid further perpetuation of gender inequalities and patriarchy would be helpful.

Conclusion

Women have held leadership roles in history, they are not new to leadership. However, they are conspicuously missing in history and documentation indicating what their role has been. Although women in history enjoyed reigning as queens, fought wars alongside men, led movements, and played other social roles their experiences were not recorded, they were erased, omitted, and misrepresented. Omitting women's historical contributions perpetuates gender inequality. The missing experiences and narratives of women indicate incomplete histories, biased

representation, incomplete perspectives and a need to rewrite history for comprehensive stories. There is thus an apparent need to give visibility to women's history and memory. To tell women's stories and demonstrate their legitimacy as political leaders. Women's experiences and stories are not only important historical sources, but also a missing puzzle piece in a holistic understanding of society and the political economy. The exclusion of women from history has negative implications on modern day governance such as marginalization of women in political leadership. As nations strive for gender equality and empowerment of women and girls, new strategies are required to reinvigorate prospects to attain equality and accelerate progress. A greater part of attaining the right strategy and building sustainable solutions lies in understanding the problem.

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