



## Re-centering Women's Political Agency and Leadership in Africa

"The future belongs to us, because we have taken charge of it".

Ellen Sirleaf Johnson

### 1. Introduction

Akina Mama wa Afrika, in partnership with the Gender is My Agenda Campaign Network (GIMAC), UN Women, the African Women's Development and Communication Network, (FEMNET), Futurelect, Make Every Woman Count (MEWC), International IDEA, Mzalendo Trust, and Tanzania Gender Network Program are collectively organizing the **Pan-Afrikan Leadership Sawubona** which will be held on **1st November 2024**, in **Addis Ababa, Ethiopia**.

*Sawubona means I see you. I see the whole of you—your experiences, your passions, your pain, your strengths and weaknesses, and your future.* It speaks to the spirit of Ubuntu - I am because we are. The November 2024 Pan-African Leadership Sawubona will be a groundbreaking summit to collectively reflect, rethink, reimagine and re-strategize how to advance women's political agency and leadership on the continent in the drive toward the Africa We Want. This will inform and shape pathways to building and strengthening transformative, just and inclusive leadership.

This will be a high-level hybrid convening of political leaders, Pan-African scholars, feminist leadership practitioners, theorists, philanthropists, policymakers, diplomats, global leaders, women human rights defenders, activists, young feminists, people with disability and other historically excluded persons. The Sawubona will equally seek to engage African women leading in the financial industry, health, academia, Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM).



## 2. Pivoting Against All Odds

Africa has a long history of powerful feminist leaders who have opposed colonialism, imperialism, capitalism, and authoritarianism, thus offering inspiration for a better future for the continent and its people. Fumnilayo Ransome Kuti, who led campaigns against unfair British taxes levied on small traders; Thomas Sankara, a revolutionary and Pan-Africanist who served as President of Burkina Faso and re-imagined women's leadership; Wangari Maathai, a social, environmental, and political activist and the very first African woman ever to win the Nobel Peace Prize; and Professor Thandika Mkandawire, who transformed economic and development scholarship on Africa. These illustrious trail blazers are a selection of the differential leadership and action that Africa needs to achieve Agenda 2063 against all odds.

Yet, according to the UN Women, it will take close to 300 years to achieve full gender equality, at the current rate of progress.<sup>1</sup> The backslide of democracy, increasing living costs, violent conflict, climate change, and the backlash against women's sexual and reproductive health and rights are further exacerbating gender disparities. These challenges disproportionately affect women and girls, limiting their access to education, healthcare, economic opportunities, and political participation. To overcome these obstacles and create the Africa we want, it is crucial to prioritize gender equality and embolden women to contribute to decision-making processes at all levels of society actively.

Five African countries are in the top twenty nations for women's parliamentary representation, and four African countries have 45 per cent women's representation in cabinets and are among the top twenty countries globally. Rwanda has the highest representation of women in parliament in the world. Women are least represented in the executive leadership as President, Vice President, Prime Minister, and Deputy Prime Minister. Of these positions, only eight (7%) are held by women across the continent. Only 29.2% of the 12,113 parliamentarians are women and young women's political participation further stands low at 1.8 % in sub-Saharan Africa.<sup>2</sup> Meaningful participation in public space and women's leadership is intrinsically linked to the



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<sup>1</sup> UN Women Press release: Achieving full gender equality is still centuries away, warns the United Nations in a new report. Retrieved on October 23, 2023 from <https://www.unwomen.org/en/news-stories/press-release/2022/09/press-release-achieving-full-gender-equality-is-still-centuries-away-warns-the-united-nations-in-a-new-report>

<sup>2</sup> International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA). (2021). *Women's Political Participation - Africa Barometer*. Retrieved on May 10, 2023, from <https://www.idea.int/sites/default/files/publications/womens-political-participation-africa-barometer-2021.pdf>



continued presence of women in political leadership and other sectors. Only 6% of CEOs and 25% of Board members on the continent are women and hold 28% of formal sector jobs. 2.5% of vice-chancellors are women yet they make up 43% of those who receive tertiary education.<sup>3</sup> The fact that women are appointed to leadership positions in national and federal statistical offices (NSOs) at a rate of approximately 16% is not due to technical or merit-based considerations, but rather to the fact that appointments of women in public leadership are frequently political.<sup>4</sup> What then can ensure women's substantive participation and representation in policy and decision-making spaces?

### 3. Making a Difference

African women's equal participation in political leadership and decision-making processes is enshrined in several constitutional, legislative, and institutional provisions. Article 9 of the Maputo Protocol states that member states shall take specific positive action to promote participative governance and women's equal participation in their countries' political life through affirmative action, enabling national legislation and other measures.

Aspirations 3 and 6 of the AU Agenda 2063 also aspire for a universal culture of good governance, inclusive democratic values, gender equality, respect for human rights, justice, and the rule of law. The African Charter on Democracy, Elections and Governance also recognizes the significance of women's meaningful representation in governance and how decisions are made; and that policies and laws that enable political, economic and social inequality, subversion of women and girls, intolerance and misogyny are redressed. Therefore the growing concentration of power, unconstitutionalism, authoritarianism, closing civic space and militarism calls for deliberate efforts to address the structural and systemic causes of the backslide of democracy and women's rights.

**4. Goal:** To foster inclusive, just, transformative African leadership to advance democratic governance and Africa's liberation.

#### 4.1 Specific Objectives

- To reflect on the current African leadership landscape, acknowledging the gains and persistent challenges
- To foster collective re-imagining of the kind of leadership that Africa needs to contribute to the Africa we want
- To centre specific strategies to advance African women's political agency and leadership
- To build transnational solidarity and African leadership movement towards inclusive democratic governance and a liberated Africa
- To set in motion a collective resolution and roadmap to revamp and advance Pan-African governance and leadership that is gender transformative, intersectional and democratic.

#### 4.3 Expected Outcomes

- Personal and collective pathways on what will inform and shape Pan-African Leadership Futures
- A connected and transnational movement to advance leadership for a democratic and liberated society
- An energised and re-committed cohort of actors with deepened consciousness of the task ahead

<sup>3</sup> ESSA, The Status of Women Leading Report. Retrieved on October 20, 2023 from <https://essa-africa.org/womenleadingreport>

<sup>4</sup> Paris 21 The leadership gap in statistics – where are the women Retrieved on October 20, 2023 from <https://paris21.org/news-center/news/leadership-gap-statistics-where-are-women>