African Women’s Movements: Transforming Political Landscapes
By: Aili Mari Tripp, Isabel Casimiro, Joy Kwesiga, and Alice Mungwa
Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009

To accomplish their goal, the authors start the book by addressing the roots of current women’s activism, going as far back as pre-colonial times. At that time, motherhood provided African women with a framework with which to engage in political activity. However, this provoked a simplification of the definition of women’s issues and female interests as only being those related to family and reproduction. The book shows how little by little women’s associations expanded their roles to include a more developmental focus by founding credit associations, farming groups, dance groups, and mutual assistance associations. They discussed politics, farming techniques, economics, and lobbied for a greater public role. After independence, some African women joined governmental structures to push for gender reform. However, women’s organizations were often co-opted and
controlled by the single party in power. This resulted in a ferrous control by the government of which type of
women accessed to power and which kind of agenda these organizations would pursue. The challenge – the
consequences of which are still visible today – was to find independent leaders prioritizing women’s concerns
over the party.

The contextualization laid down in the first part of the book allows for a great analysis on chapter 4 of the current
challenges of new African women’s movements. After the 1990’s, political space opened up and women’s
groups began to organize themselves and earn independent resources to employ in development. However, the
authors pose fundamental questions as to how much autonomous and free these movements can be when
considering the past and the current dependence on international NGOs and foreign donors. Indeed, it is thanks
to the chronological way in which the book is written that the reader grasps easily the parallelism the authors try to
convey – few women’s organizations in Africa are autonomous. They depended on the party in power after
independence and now they need to be very attentive to donors’ activities and priorities if they are to survive
financially: “women activists … are often reluctant to talk about dilemmas that they confront with donors lest they
be perceived as biting the hand that feeds them” (p. 102).

The following three chapters expose the successes and challenges of new women’s movements when fighting
for constitutional and legislative changes, as well as for political representation and parity in governmental
policies. The excellent quality of the tables and figures from all Africa provided here shows impressive data
collection and data analysis skills. For all its documentary strengths, I confess to feeling a little let down by its
excessively positive tone and its mere provision of data. There is little detailed explanation of how this numerical
data is compared with the data provided by their interviewees and to which point the improvements in quotas and
legislation are perceived as positive change by the different actors.

On the same line, the book is explicit in accepting that there have been sustained improvements in women status
and in the spread of gender-related international norms without questioning the usefulness of said norms: “The
very fact that there is resistance to many efforts at legislative reform regarding women’s rights suggests that laws
matter and that laws are not merely passed to satisfy changing international norms, only to be filed away and
ignored” (p. 138). This would have been an interesting issue to unpack further in the latest section of the book.
What has been the impact of the internationalization of African women’s struggles? How have gender
mainstreaming policies affected the negotiation of new masculine and feminine roles? In addition, Tripp, Casimiro,
Kwesiga, and Mungwa talk mainly about women in legislative positions and leader women activists, but they do
not address how much women in the streets or in rural areas followed these movements or how the new
achievements were felt in socioeconomically deprived areas. These omissions show some hints as to where
future research should focus.

This book makes a valuable contribution to the seminal literature on gender and activism by unpacking how and
why women mobilized and the difficulties in enacting transformative change. In this respect, the authors’ decision
to focus on the case of Cameroon, Mozambique and Uganda is particularly significant. Although the countries
share a lot of characteristics, contrary to Uganda and Mozambique, Cameroon has not suffered the
consequences of war in the last decades and has struggled to transform its women’s activism into positive results
and governmental processes of change. This shows how much a post-conflict situation helps transform the
hegemonic masculinity and embedded gender dichotomies and provides a framework of action for already
empowered women who resist going back to their pre-conflict mothers and nurturers’ role. In so doing, the book
challenges the assumption that democratization processes, which concede a greater role to civil society and
pressure groups, are the most important condition for societal reforms. The authors also clearly identify why some
legislative and constitutional reforms are so difficult to achieve while others are not. This is because there is more
resistance to all measures challenging customary law, while changes relating to state and market-related
institutions are accepted and even encouraged.

In analyzing women’s mobilization throughout more than half a century, the book is able to explain continuous
and discontinuous incremental change, providing also a first opportunity to think about the international political
impact of implementation of global norms and how African women’s movements have influenced the latest global
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trends. The book is a must for scholars interested in social movements in the Global South, the linkages between local, national and transnational advocacy networks, as well as for policy-makers and professionals working with women and minorities in policy implementation in Africa.

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