Rapid strides are being made to give women leadership roles

Contributed by Brad Brown
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Yet much of the institutional limitations came with colonization and the spread of the traditional Abrahamic religions. (For a glimpse at women in earlier times, Google Queen Nzinga of Angola.) Today, however rapid strides are being made.

Liberia recently re-elected for a second term the first woman president in Africa, the Nobel Prize-winning, Harvard educated and former United Nations executive Ellen Johnson Shirleaf. She has now been joined by President Joyce Banda of Malawi, who ascended to presidency after the death of President Bingu wa Mutharika, and she is showing herself to be a strong leader.

In Nigeria, Ngozi Pkwonjo-Iweala is one of the strongest advocates for reform. Now finance minister, she is a former World Bank managing director.

Excitingly, in the hard-fought election of a new chairman of the African Union, Nkosazaba Diamine-Zuma emerged as the winner. She is no stranger to the AU, having served as oreign minister in South Africa under President Thabo Mbecki when he and President Olusegun Obasanjo of Nigeria and President Abdolaye Wade of Senegal moved the then Organization of African States (OAU) to a stronger body, the African Union.

Despite Diamine-Zuma's being the former wife of President Jacob Zuma, he appointed her first as Minister of Home Affairs and later to foreign minister. As she settles into the AU's offices in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, she will not be lonely for female company for the rules of the AU specify that half of the 10 AU commissioners must be women — something the European Union cannot match.

Women's organizations in Africa have been jubilant over Diamine-Zuma's election to head the AU, none more so than Benita Diop of Senegal, president of Femmes Africa Solidarite, who was quoted in Africa Report: "There was momentum in the transformation of the OAU into the AU because we had key leaders. Now we have a woman running the institution with the vision to transform it."

In her speech after her election, Diamine-Zuma quoted Marcus Garvey: “The history of a movement, of a nation, of a race is a guidepost of that movement’s destiny, that nation’s destiny that race’s destiny. What you do today that is worthwhile inspires others to act.”

These individual achievements are very important but the long-term advancement of women requires more situations like the 50 percent representation of the AU commissioners.

In Senegal, in 2010, President Abdolaye Wade moved through Parliament a law requiring all political parties to present slates that were 50 percent women and, as a result, there are now 64 women in the 150-member Parliament.

President Wade has received significant recognition for efforts toward gender equality such as appointing the first woman prime pinister and naming a woman ambassador to the U.S.

However, the change in Parliament has the potential to be his greatest legacy in gender equity for it gives women a power-base from which they can impact change directly and will encourage young women to seek greater opportunities.

Despite continuing opposition to this inclusion, women are the ones who suffer most from underdevelopment and poverty and they may well prove to be a significant force for directing attention to socio-economic policies designed to meet human needs.

The struggle for gender equity is a worldwide effort and African women are making their efforts count.

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