African Studies Review (2025), **68**: 2, 222–226
doi:10.1017/asr.2025.10060

EDITORS' INTRODUCTION

(Re)presenting Women's Political Participation on the Continent

On January 7, 2025, Ghanaian citizens witnessed a first in the country's history as a democratic state: the swearing-in of the first female vice-president, Naana Jane Opoku-Agyemang. The icing on the cake was that she was sworn in by a female Chief Justice, Gertrude Torkornoo—the third woman to have been appointed since 2007. The elation of Ghanaians was palpable, as evidenced on various social media platforms, and the historic significance of that occasion was marked as well by various media houses both national and international. York University, where the vice-president earned both her master's and doctoral degrees in English Literature, proudly celebrated the achievement in their communications that week. For Naana Jane Opoku-Agyemang, this was not the first time she was making the news for having broken the glass ceiling. Prior to her achievements in the world of politics, she had made history in 2008 when she became the first woman to serve as vice-chancellor of a public university in Ghana. She also served as the minister of education during President Mahama's first administration (2012–16).

Ghana is not the first country on the continent to have a female vice-president. In fact, despite its status as the first country south of the Sahara to have gained its independence almost 70 years ago, Ghana still trails behind several others on the continent when it comes to women's political participation. In the West African sub-region, Benin has had a democratically elected woman vice-president in the person of Mariam Chabi Talata, since 2021, and Jewel Taylor served as vice-president of Liberia alongside George Weah from 2018 to 2024.

Liberia notably made history by electing the continent's first female president, Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, who served two terms following her initial election in 2006. Since then, other women have occupied presidential seats through democratic processes, including Sahle-Work Zewde of Ethiopia, Ameenah Gurib-Fakim of Mauritius, and Joyce Hilda Banda of Malawi. Currently, Namibia, one of Africa's youngest nations, holds the distinction of having a woman both as president and vice-president: Netumbo Nandi-Ndaitwah and Lucia Witbooi, respectively. Namibia's feat is a first for the continent.

In other countries, women have acted as interim presidents during periods of political transition, with some later assuming these roles on a more permanent basis. These include Ivy Matsepe-Casaburri of South Africa, who served briefly for fourteen hours on September 25, 2008; Rose Francine Rogombé, who served in Gabon in 2009; Agnès Monique Ohsan Bellepeau of Mauritius, who served twice, in 2012 and 2015; as well as Catherine Samba-Panza of the Central African

Republic, who served from 2014 to 2016. The most recent example we have is that of Samia Suluhu Hassan, the current Tanzanian president who succeeded President John Magufuli following his death in office in 2021.

Women's political participation across the continent varies quite widely. This becomes even more pronounced when examining women's representation in Houses of Parliament across the continent. Rwanda is often held up as the gold standard in this regard. It is the first country in the world to have a female majority in parliament. However, statistics from the Inter-Parliamentary Union show that many African countries fall far below this standard. In all the years that Ghana has been governed democratically, no House of Parliament has featured more than 20 percent female representation—a pattern reflected in several other West African countries, including the region's most populous, Nigeria. In general, eastern and southern Africa fare comparatively better, with female parliamentary representation often ranging between 30 and 40 percent.

These low numbers sit ironically alongside a wealth of evidence from across the continent on the strong presence of women in other spaces—economic for example—in both historical and contemporary times. Scholars of African studies have documented the strong presence of women in the economic sphere in both the past (Achebe 2000) and present (Clark 1994; Darkwah 2021).

With specific reference to women in politics across the continent, much scholarly work has sought to understand the persistent underrepresentation in some countries (Madsen 2019; Osori 2017) and the factors driving notable improvements in others (Lihiru 2024; Vengroff and Ndiaye 1998). Indeed, African studies scholars working on the subject have demonstrated the unique perspectives that a focus on the happenings on the continent in this regard brings to the subject of women's political participation more generally (Bauer 2021). The most recent presidential lecture of the African Studies Association (ASA), which will appear in this journal, is yet another example.

Existing research on the subject also includes a focus on the impact that women's political representation makes both symbolically and substantively. Scholars such as Burnet (2011) and Tøraasen (2019), writing on Rwanda and Senegal respectively, have noted how the increase in women's representation in parliaments has led to a more positive belief in women's leadership abilities. Such changes in cultural attitudes augur well for the next generation of African girls. Beyond this evidence of symbolic representation, other studies document substantive representation. For example, Clayton, Josefsson, and Wang (2017) note that female Ugandan MPs raise women's issues on the floor of parliament more often than their male counterparts. Similarly, Olaitan (2024), writing about Botswana and South Africa, demonstrates that the increased presence of women in parliament had a marked impact on the legislation and policies passed on gender-based violence and femicide.

Furthermore, the lived experiences of women who hold political positions, particularly concerning violence, have also been documented. For example, the past president of ASA, Gretchen Bauer, and I, have documented the verbal abuse suffered by women contesting for political office in Ghana. Women's marital status, childlessness, hairstyles, and sartorial choices can all serve as fodder for verbal abuse (Bauer and Darkwah 2020). The social media landscape has not

https://doi.org/10.1017/asr.2025.10060 Published online by Cambridge University Press

helped in this respect. TikTok videos have already surfaced about the Ghanaian vice-president that are just awful to watch. I doubt that this is unique to the vice-president in Ghana.

Given that scholars of African studies approach these issues from diverse disciplinary perspectives, I believe we can contribute in multiple ways to expanding our understanding of women's political participation on the continent. As we go forward, and more and more women on the continent begin to assume the highest political positions in their countries, it will throw up all kinds of interesting questions for scholars in a range of fields. I can imagine that those traditionally concerned with such questions, like political scientists, will take up the mantle and explore the many ways in which this new development reconfigures our understanding of political processes and political participation on the continent.

It is my hope, however, that scholars in other disciplines, especially in the humanities, will be inspired to bring their perspectives to bear on the unfolding dynamics. For example, it will be interesting to see how those in literary and cultural studies will tackle the subject. As many more women present themselves for the highest office in different countries and win, it will be important for us to also consider the different ways in which we can present them anew in our scholarly endeavors. The ASR will be a perfect place to discuss and share these ideas.

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This issue of *ASR* is brimming with fresh ideas on topics such as press photography in colonial Nigeria, the right to water in Kenya, school architecture in Ghana, the maintenance of associational life among the Eastern Congolese in Cape Town, and sportswashing in Rwanda. In "'Is This Picture Not a Proof?': Photojournalism and Anti-Colonial Politics in Lagos, 1930s–1950s," Olubukola Gbadegesin explores the underexplored issue of press photography in colonial Nigeria. Centered on the work of Olalekan Onatade, the essay foregrounds three pivotal moments between the 1930s and 1950s, revealing the contention over the validation of photography as a journalistic medium, over the rightful ownership of photographic copyright, and over the right to cover official events. Gbadegesin's article is both a history of photojournalism and an account of the medium as a visual record of urban agency and anticolonialism in Nigeria.

If Gbadegesin's essay articulates the right to photography as a journalistic form in colonial Lagos, the next essay—by Maja Jeppesen—takes up the right to water in contemporary Nairobi. Arguing that the access to water in places such as Nairobi requires more than the normative claim to infrastructure, Jeppesen traces the material and practical steps taken by the residents of Langata and Canaan, neighborhoods in Nairobi, to access water. Grounded in long-term ethnography, Jeppesen's account illuminates a network of "socio-material relations" that entangle residents with government officials and employees of the water authorities.

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The real access to water, Jeppesen concludes in "Concretizing the Right to Water," results from "engaging with infrastructurally powerful actors" in Nairobi.

The issue's third article stays with infrastructure, this time through the architecture of secondary schools in Ghana. In "Building Classes: Secondary Schools and Sociopolitical Stratification in Ghana," Kuukuwa O. Manful proposes school architecture as a mechanism for the perception of social class in Africa. In the author's words, "secondary schools in Ghana serve as sites for the formation, inculcation, and reproduction of sociopolitical hierarchies." The article demonstrates how Ghanaians perceive their social class standing from their sense of school architecture and physical environment in relation to other schools. For the students of Kpando Secondary School—Manful's case study—their school buildings position them in the lower rung of Ghana's social order when compared to students in other institutions. Turning scholarly attention away from grand buildings and their designers, Manful foregrounds the experiences of ordinary people in how they use and make meaning of architecture as a tool of social stratification.

The ways that ordinary people inhabit space also underpins Rosette Sifa Vuninga and Susan Thomson's "Pro- and Anti-Combattants: The Trans-local Ties of Eastern Congolese Migrants in Cape Town, 2000–2019." Focusing on two groups, Amis BK and Chinyabuguma, the authors contend that membership is primarily driven by the need for community support amid the sociopolitical development at home in South Kivu in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and xenophobia in South Africa. In the authors' telling, Amis BK and Chinyabuguma may provide financial and psychological support to members; yet their dynamics, precluding forging bonds of solidarity with other African groups, limit inclusion and belonging in South Africa.

Itamar Dubinksy's essay, "(Don't) Visit Rwanda: Rwanda's Sportswashing and its Western Facilitators," shifts our attention to DRC's neighbor accused of funding rebels in the Kivu region. The article adds an African perspective to the practice of sportswashing, whereby authoritarian leaders sponsor major sporting events to launder their image and assert their developmental ambitions. Examining Rwanda's sponsorship deals with prominent European soccer clubs including Arsenal, Bayern Munich, and Paris Saint-Germain, and its hosting of the Basketball African League (BAL), Dubinsky includes sports among the technologies that the Rwandan Patriotic Front under Paul Kagame's leadership has employed to project Rwanda's developmental goals and perform the work of image management amid state repression. Ultimately, Dubinksy argues that the Visit Rwanda campaign and BAL sponsorship would be inconceivable without Western facilitators whose financial interests override concerns for human rights violations in Rwanda.

In addition to these articles, the June 2025 issue includes a Keyword essay, two scholarly review essays, and dozens of book and film reviews. In his Keyword essay, "Human," Jia Hui Lee explores the category of the human within African contexts. Historicizing the exclusion and demotion of Africans from the category during slavery and with colonialism, Lee underscores the conception of the human as a relational being in the work of African and African diasporic scholars. In Lee's account, African thinkers reject the universalist and racist notion of the human for "the human—as understood through abolitionist, anticolonial, and

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more-than-human thought in African and diasporic contexts." As the other essays in this volume do with their subject matter, Lee's work positions Africa as an important site for revaluating the category of the human and for crafting more humane futures for the planet. Following the Keyword essay are two scholarly review essays: on philosophy, human well-being, and development by Chika C. Mba, and Jeffrey W. Paller's on "building the city from below" across Africa.

In closing, we thank the authors featured in this issue for their brilliant contributions to African studies, the peer reviewers for their assistance in maintaining ASR's standard of rigorous scholarship, and the book and film reviewers whose works round out this issue.

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Cite this article: Darkwah, A., and C. Iheka. 2025. "(Re)presenting Women's Political Participation on the Continent." *African Studies Review* **68** (2): 222–226. https://doi.org/10.1017/asr.2025.10060