Political Power:
Women's Agency in Africa

The African Center for Gender (ACG) introduces the AGDI Policy Brief Series with an aim to take stock of gender equality in women's agency in Africa and highlight challenges lying ahead and where available offer prioritized policy recommendations to accelerate progress toward gender equality and women's empowerment, particularly in political sphere. The AGDI is based on two components. First, a quantitative snapshot of 44 indicators that capture gender disparities in social, economic and political arenas is captured by the Gender Status Index (GSI). Second, a qualitative self-evaluation of governments' performance in their implementation of more than 30 treaties, declarations, and resolutions affecting women's rights and women's empowerment in social, economic and political arenas is represented by the African Women's Progress Scoreboard (AWPS). This Policy Brief focuses on Political Power which spans over 30 per cent of the indicators in GSI and 4 out of 32 indicators in AWPS. All data[1] are provided by stakeholders in respective member States, including various Ministries and Civil Society Organizations. This Brief draws on the results from the AGDI Country Reports for the Phase 2 of the AGDI[2].

Key Messages

- Across the three components of the African Gender and Development Index (AGDI), gender gaps are widest in Political Power, both in terms of policy outcomes as captured by the Gender Status Index (GSI) and policy implementation, as captured by the African Women's Progress Scorecard (AWPS). In order for countries to improve their AGDI scores, they have to address gender disparities in the public sector as well as in civil society.

- Country reports repeatedly emphasize socio-cultural norms that limit women's human capital formation and engagement in economic activities. Breaking out from such constraints requires strong female leadership to challenge gender norms and inspire women to push harder against societal limits.

- Affirmative action through female quotas do work. There are a number of countries such as Burundi that have achieved tremendous progress in some public institutions. However, political will and commitment is key because there are countries with self-imposed targets that remain far from reality.

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1 All Country Reports are received by the ACG throughout 2012. While the ACG has made all the efforts to update various indicators using international databases, e.g. DHS and IPU, the majority of the indicators are nationally sourced and from 2012 or before.

2 Countries that were part of AGDI 2 are Botswana, Cabo Verde, Republic of Congo, Côte d'Ivoire, Djibouti, Democratic Republic of Congo, the Gambia, Kenya, Malawi, Mali, Senegal, and Togo. Burundi is also included in this Brief as data submission date was similar to Round 2 countries.

Figure 1 provides a comparative perspective for the Political Power component of the AGDI. Clearly, GSI scores for Political Power are pulling down progress in the Social Power and Economic Power components. No country in AGDI Round II scores higher in the Political Power component than in the other two components. Interestingly, AWPS scores are much more favourable than GSI scores. While countries barely make one-quarter of the way to the GSI parity benchmark, the average AWPS score suggests having reached halfway to successful policy implementation performance.

**Figure 1.** AGDI Snapshot for Political Power
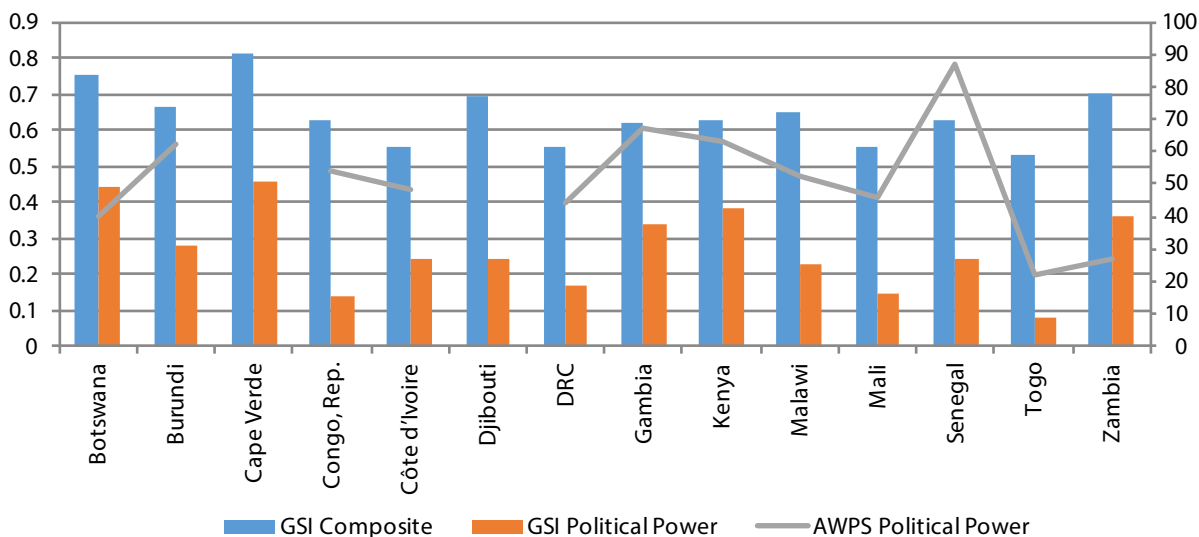
In the AWPS, countries evaluate their own policy implementation performance in terms of four indicators: (i) UN Security Council Resolutions 1325, 1820, 1888 and 1889; (ii) Participation of women in traditional governance; (iii) Gender mainstreaming in all departments; and (iv) Support for women's quotas and affirmative action. Unfortunately, Cape Verde and Djibouti do not have data on AWPS. Focusing on the remaining 12 countries, it becomes clear that governments have not come close to two-thirds of the way to successful implementation. However, variations exist across countries and indicators. For instance, regarding UN Security Council resolutions and gender mainstreaming, most countries have all clearly passed the halfway threshold while only two countries passed the same threshold for women in traditional governance. This is very discouraging given that women's presence in local decision making is the most limited within the public sector. Across countries, Senegal leads the way with an AWPS score of 87 while Togo and Zambia need to improve policy implementation right away.

On the GSI, the Political Power component is divided into two sub-components, Public Sector and Civil Society. In total there are nine indicators for the Public Sector component measuring gender parity in legislative bodies, the executive branch and judiciary as well as traditional governance structures. In the Civil Society sub-component, four indicators span the critical civic organizations where women's presence is crucial for women's economic and political empowerment. Missing data are definitely a concern but not as much as for the Economic Power component. Across 13 indicators for 14 countries, data are missing for only 15 per cent of the entries, with the majority from the Public Sector, specifically on traditional judges. On the Civil Society front, data are missing predominantly for NGO indicators.

Figure 2. Women in Politics
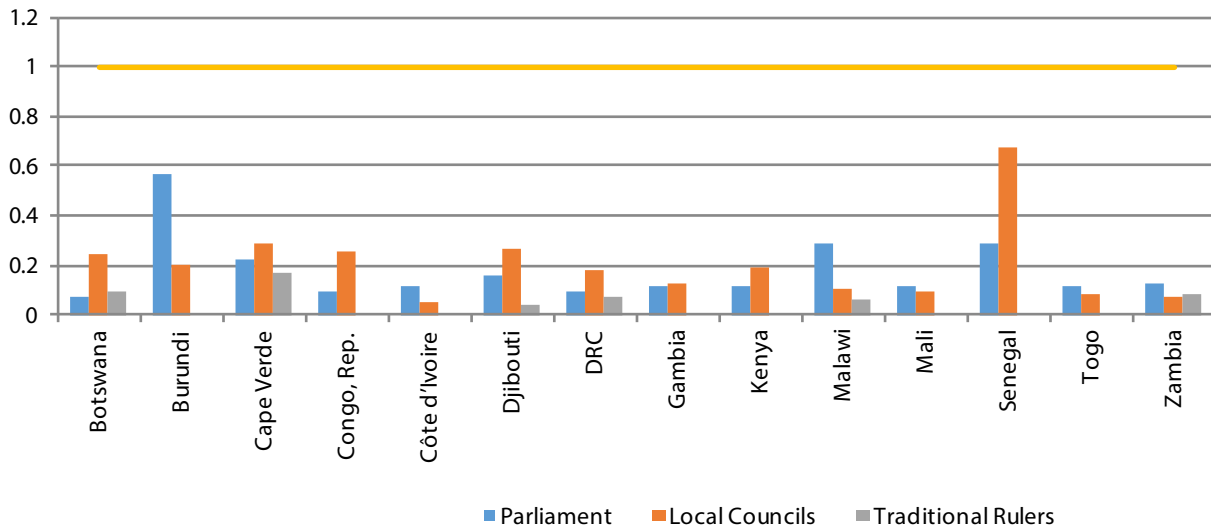
Figures 2-5 review progress over 14 indicators grouped by functional similarities, starting with the Public Sector sub-component and ending with Civil Society. Figure 2 above focuses on three indicators that measure women's involvement in politics. Women's share in parliament and local councils measure women's participation in contested modern posts. Burundi leads the way in women's share in parliament but there is a long way to the parity line (yellow line in the graph). Botswana, Republic of Congo and Democratic Republic of Congo are in need of strong affirmative action to increase women's share beyond 10 per cent. In over half the countries, women's participation in local politics is higher than their participation in national politics. AGDI Country Reports list a number of constraints women face in entering national and local politics, including lack of financial resources, inability to attract media attention, lack of commitment to gender equality among political parties as well as socio-cultural norms that denigrate women's decision-making capacity. Finally, traditional rulers are most often men who may take decisions that affect women on a daily basis. Consequently, there is a large mismatch between the female electorate and the proportion of women who occupy elected posts.
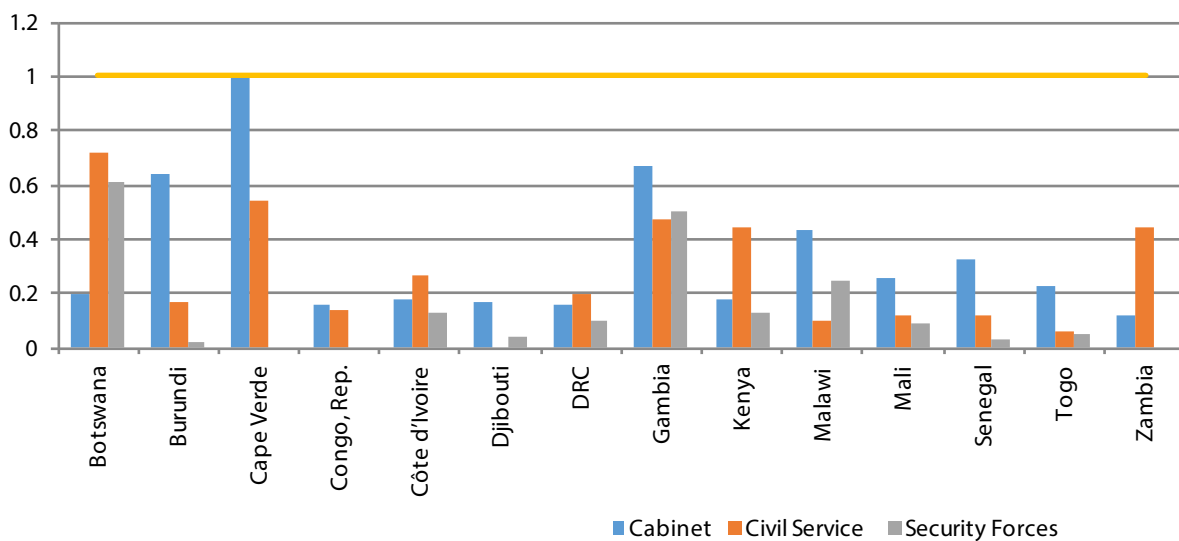
Figure 3. Women in Executive Bodies

Figure 3 above focuses on public sector institutions that can be consider of an executive nature. First, women are doing much better in terms of presence in Cabinets. This is often an affirmative action issue and the easiest tool governments have to support gender equality among top decision makers. Cape Verde is the only country that has reached gender parity in Cabinet while Burundi and the Gambia have promising scores. On average, women's presence in Cabinet is double their presence in national parliaments. This is a positive result, but it is important to note that ministerial portfolios should be assigned with a gender balance, as well. Countries with minimal female presence in the Cabinet often simply appoint a female minister for family or women's issues. Among High Civil Servants and Security Forces, there are larger gaps. The AWPS corroborates this weaker women's involvement in peace and security. Unfortunately, the link is not strong. For instance, while Burundi obtained the highest score in the AWPS for implementation of UN Security Council Resolutions, it registers the lowest female presence in the Security Forces.
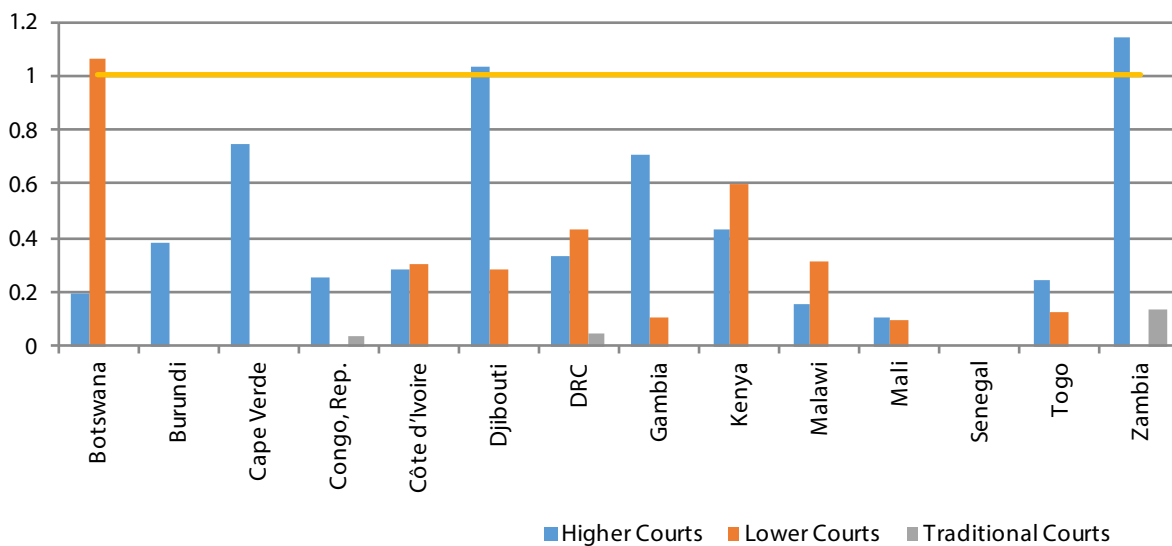
Figure 4. Women in the Judiciary

Figure 4 above focuses on the modern and traditional judiciary. Women face a variety of challenges in their daily lives that increase their need for justice on issues like violence against women or outright discrimination in the workplace. As such, women's presence in the judiciary is of utmost importance in terms of having a positive and direct impact on women's welfare on a day-to-day basis. While women are virtually absent among traditional judges – with the exception of Zambia where there are also more traditional rulers than in any other country included here – the modern judiciary is in fact a bright spot for women in the public sector, especially in the higher judiciary. For some countries, however, the proportion of women in law faculties and Bar Associations is on a declining trend, which brings the risk of regression from already attained levels.

Figure 5. Women in Civil Society
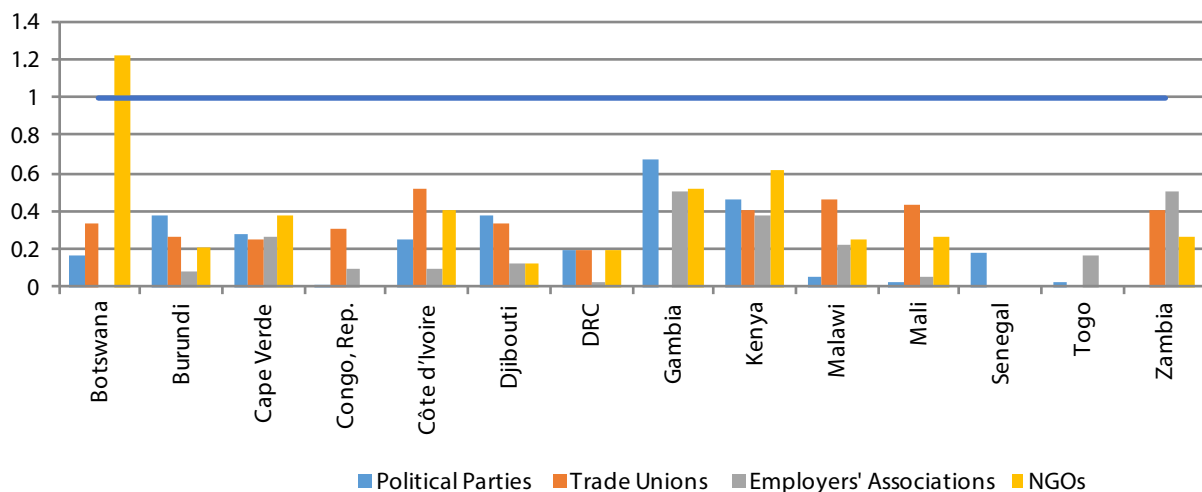
Civil society organizations play two crucial roles. First, they offer a platform for citizens to get together and screen the policy implementation performance of governments. Second, they help engage citizens with policy issues and inspire men and women to participate in politics at national or local level. As such, women's presence in these organizations is critical not only because they would not only do a better job of scrutinizing policy areas, especially regarding gender equality and women's empowerment, but they would also gain experience prior to joining politics in one form or another. Figure 5 above provides an overview for four indicators in this sub-component. First, on average, GSI scores are virtually equivalent in the public sector and in civil society organizations. Hence, there is a long way to go to attain gender parity.

Political parties offer the direct entry point for women who wish to participate in politics. Starting from the local level, women can theoretically climb up the ladder and occupy decision-making position within political parties and push for gender equality in nominations. The Gambia and Kenya are the top performers for this indicator but even they need to take significant further strides to achieve parity. Unfortunately, higher levels of women's participation in the other 12 countries will require strong political commitment along with incentives. The Policy Brief on Economic Power discusses a host of challenges women face. Trade Unions and Employers' Associations play critical roles in mediating these challenges for their members. Unfortunately, women's presence

in these organizations is dismal and therefore not encouraging for the fight against gender wage gaps (Figure 5). Finally, NGOs are considered to be a refuge for women just like the judiciary in the public sector. However, the evidence above suggests that women are not effectively engaged with NGOs at the executive level. Nevertheless, across Civil Society, the average GSI score for gender parity is highest for NGOs and lowest for Employers' Associations. In addition, occupational segregation is reflected in women's presence in professional syndicates where, for instance, women's presence is lowest among doctors, engineers and architects. Organizations for these occupations in many countries play a crucial role in scrutinizing government policies on a host of issues ranging from environment to health.

Policy Recommendations

- The level of women's participation in politics is so low that affirmative action becomes an absolutely necessary policy tool. Some countries target 30 per cent while others stipulate 50 per cent women's representation in parliament but it is not clear how sustainable outcomes can be achieved with women's dismal presence in political parties. Providing financial incentives to political parties could be one policy tool to increase female nominations. In addition, hidden restrictions on women's participation in elections must be addressed such as financial constraints, media access problems and the need to own land.

- While quotas in elected posts may take time to achieve, it is not clear why countries would not be able to achieve self-imposed targets for women's presence in the executive branch. Governments should be able to replicate among High Civil Servants and Security Forces the progress made in women's presence in Cabinet.

- Traditional governance structures pose a serious challenge to women's involvement. Many countries have failed to take any action in boosting women's participation in traditional governance, as AWPS data suggested earlier. While it is not clear which policy tools can directly help address this challenge, women's involvement in modern politics should have spillover effects on traditional structures.

- Gender mainstreaming requires more enthusiasm and policy commitment. The commitment and enthusiasm shared by gender focal points need to penetrate each department in the public sector. This is a critical issue for successful implementation of the gender-sensitive budgeting which many countries in our sample need in order to boost gender parity in the Social and Economic Power components.

- The Policy Brief on the Social Power component indicates that women are closing the gaps in education, albeit at a slower pace for higher education. However, more and more women are entering higher education in urban areas. Failing to tap into this growing pool of qualified women will have serious consequences for the health of civil society organizations that need a strong boost, especially for employers' associations and trade unions.

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