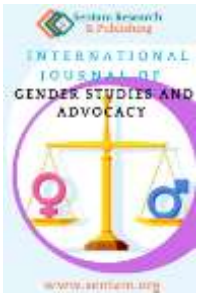
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Beyond Symbolism: A Critical Feminist Analysis of Female Presidential Leadership and Gender Policy Outcomes in Contemporary Africa

Dr. Nakato Sarah Kimbugwe[1], Dr. James Omondi Wesonga[2], Dr. Grace Atim Lamwaka[3] & David Mukasa Ssentongo[4]*

[1*] Department of Development Studies Faculty of Management Sciences Busitema University, Mbale, Uganda
[2] Department of Political Science and Public Administration Faculty of Management Sciences Busitema University, Mbale, Uganda
[3] Department of Educational Foundations and Psychology Faculty of Education Busitema University, Tororo, Uganda
[4] Department of Statistics and Actuarial Science Faculty of Science Busitema University, Mbale, Uganda

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ABSTRACT

This article critically discusses how symbolic representation and substantive gender policy outcomes diverged under three African female presidents: Ellen Johnson Sirleaf (Liberia, 2006-2018), Samia Suluhu Hassan (Tanzania, 2021-present), and Netumbo Nandi-Ndaitwah (Namibia, 2025-present). Leveraging feminist institutionalism as the analytical formulation, the paper shows that gender-transformative leadership is systematically limited by patriarchal institutional structures, despite personal presidential dedication. By conducting comparative documentary analysis of legislative archives, policy reports, and indicators of governance, the study discloses some enduring gaps between policy rhetoric and action on gender across all three cases. The results dispute the celebratory accounts of female leadership by suggesting that unless institutions are fundamentally restructured, the rise of women to executive power creates more symbolic than substantive representations. The analysis is relevant to feminist political theory by illustrating the functioning of gendered institutions as structural obstacles to policy change and has implications on gender advocacy strategies in the Global South.

INTRODUCTION

The election of women as Presidents of African nations has always been positioned as a landmark event in gender equality, but the academic examination of the real policy delivery results has shown a concerning trend: the symbolic influence of women representation often outweighs the reality on the ground (Bauer & Burnet, 2013; Tripp et al., 2008). In 2006, the world cheered as the first woman elected to the presidency of

[1] Corresponding Author: Department of Development Studies Faculty of Management Sciences Busitema University, Mbale, Uganda Email: s.nakato@busitema.ac.ug

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Liberia, Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, became a symbol of democratization and gender development in Africa (Peyton, 2020; Steady, 2011). Almost 20 years on, as Samia Suluhu Hassan leads Tanzania since 2021 and Netumbo Nandi-Ndaitwah becomes Namibia president in 2025, the question remains: does female presidential leadership lead to gender-transformative policy change?

This article contends that it does not-at least not automatically or substantially by comparing these three presidencies, illustrates that the presence of patriarchal institutional structures systematically restricts the implementation of gender policies despite the feminist commitments or rhetorical priorities of individual leaders. The ongoing disjunction between symbolic representation and substantive results is not a personal failure but structural constraints inherent in political institutions, economic dependencies, and socio-cultural formations that precede and outlive individual leaders (Goetz & Hassim, 2003; Waylen, 2013). The available research on women and political leadership in Africa has mainly concentrated on descriptive representation, or the number of women in political office, with little emphasis on substantive representation, which is the promotion of women interests in policy formulation (Celis et al., 2008; Dahlerup, 2006). Childs and Krook (2009) criticise this analytical gap by noting that feminist scholarship needs to ask not simply whether women are present in power but whether their presence can generate feminist policy results. This paper fills that gap by providing theoretically-informed comparative analysis.

The three cases provide analytical leverage by their contextual diversity. Sirleaf led post-conflict Liberia with heavy international supervision and weak institutions (2006-2018). Hassan became president of Tanzania via constitutional succession in a dominant-party system that entails institutional continuity (Adams, 2017; Charles, 2021; UNDP, 2010). Nandi-Ndaitwah gained electoral legitimacy in Namibia through her participation in the liberation movement within a comparatively stable democratic environment (Bauer, 2004; Chibelushi & Jensen, 2024; DW, 2024; Melber, 2007). Although these trajectories differed, all three leaders faced comparable institutional restrictions that curtailed their ability to enact gender-transformative agendas. The analysis was informed by parliamentary documents, presidential speeches, national gender policy reports, World Bank governance indicators, United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) gender reports, and academic literature. Due to the recent inauguration of Nandi-Ndaitwah, the presidency is being analysed considering early policy indicators and campaign promises, not results. The paper acknowledges methodological limitations inherent in desk research, particularly the inability to access unpublished documents or conduct elite interviews that might reveal informal power dynamics (Waylen, 2014).

Theoretical Framework: Feminist Institutionalism and Political Leadership

Feminist institutionalism offers the analytical framework that helps to comprehend the ways in which gendered power relations are institutionalized and embedded in political institutions to not only affect policy outcomes but also the possibility of transformative leadership itself (Mackay et al., 2010; Waylen, 2013). Contrary to liberal feminist approaches, which presume that female representation in political office is inherently progressive to the interests of women, feminist institutionalism acknowledges that institutions are gendered, organized by and reinforcing male dominance through formal rules, informal norms, and organizational cultures (Acker, 1990, 2006; Chappell, 2002). This analysis centres on the difference between symbolic and substantive representation, as first defined by Pitkin (1967) and developed by feminist critics. Descriptive representation is the presence of women in political office; symbolic representation is what that presence entails to political legitimacy and public consciousness; substantive representation is whether the policy interests of women are being pursued in practice (Celis et al., 2008). According to Childs and Krook (2009), the connection between descriptive

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and substantive representation is not a priori but depends on the institutional context, the political opportunity structure, and the individual commitments and capabilities of women representatives.

Dahlerup (2006) operationalises this as the fast track versus incremental track model, in which symbolic gains tend to be fast, as seen with quota systems or high-profile appointments, whereas substantive policy change is agonisingly slow because of institutional resistance. This temporal disjuncture is specifically acute in executive leadership, where individual presidents can be rhetorically committed to gender issues, but face legislative resistance, bureaucratic inertia, and resource limitations that hinder policy implementation (Bauer & Burnet, 2013). Gendered institutions are not just about overt discrimination but include informal ways in which male dominance is reproduced: parliamentary processes that favour collaborative over confrontational styles, budgetary processes that underfund gender machineries systematically, and promotional practices that support masculine-coded behaviours (Acker, 1990; Krook & Mackay, 2011; Suchana, 2024). As Goetz and Hassim (2003, p. 4) note, institutions are not neutral spaces but arenas of power that organize political possibilities in systematically gendered ways. Women presidents, therefore, act within institutional frameworks that reinforce male dominance, producing what Jayal (2006) calls the feminist institutionalist paradox: women have to use patriarchal institutions to destroy patriarchy.

This model clarifies why female leadership does not necessarily lead to feminist results. Waylen (2013, p. 207) observes that even feminist-identified leaders are constrained by party structures, coalition partners, economic dependencies, and cultural formations that restrict their ability to transform. These limitations are exacerbated by the so-called double bind of female leadership: women executives must not only advocate the interests of all women but are also under more rigorous scrutiny regarding competence and leadership approach than their male colleagues (Bauer & Burnet, 2013). As an analytical tool, I operationalize gender-transformative leadership as having three quantifiable effects: (1) legislative changes that promote legal equality and bodily autonomy of women; (2) budgetary reallocations that redistribute resources in favour of women economic empowerment; and (3) institutionalized mechanisms that ensure the persistence of gender policies through changes in leadership (Goetz & Hassim, 2003). This operationalization allows comparative evaluation of substantive versus symbolic representation among the three cases.

CONTEXTUALIZING PRESIDENTIAL POWER: THREE LEADERSHIP TRAJECTORIES

Ellen Johnson Sirleaf: Post-Conflict Reconstruction and Constitutional Constraints (Liberia, 2006-2018)

The election of Sirleaf in 2005 came at a time when Liberia was in the process of transitioning out of a civil war (1989-2003) that had claimed the lives of about 250,000 individuals and displaced a third of the population (Steady, 2011). Her rise had deep symbolic significance as the first elected female president in Africa, but she was left to inherit a ruined state machine, a failed economy, and widespread institutional frailty (D. J. Harris, 2014). The Liberian Constitution gives the president a lot of executive power, such as authority to make appointments and set the legislative agenda, but the real power of Sirleaf was limited by three things (Adams, 2017; Sirleaf, 2009; Turner, 2020). First, widespread foreign intervention, including UN peacekeeping troops, bilateral donors, and international financial institutions, established de facto external governance that restricted policy discretion (D. J. Harris, 2014; Turner, 2020). In 2007, the debt relief in Liberia came with terms of the International Monetary Fund structural adjustment that focused on macroeconomic stability at the expense of social spending, which directly limited access to gender programming resources (Steady, 2011; Turner, 2020). Second,

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legislative fragmentation inhibited presidential dominance; Sirleaf did not control a legislative majority and had to manage coalitions all the time, which watered down policy agendas (D. J. Harris, 2014; Turner, 2020). Third, the traditional authority structures maintained parallel governance authority, especially in matters of customary law that had an impact on property rights of women and marriage practices (Adams, 2017; Fuest, 2008). Table 1 shows the institutional weakness of post-conflict Liberia under Sirleaf:

Table 1: Liberia Governance Indicators (2006-2018)

Indicator	2006	2012	2018	Source
Government Effectiveness (percentile rank)	5.3	11.5	15.4	(World Bank, 2025)
Rule of Law (percentile rank)	8.7	19.2	24.0	(World Bank, 2025)
Voice & Accountability (percentile rank)	41.8	46.2	47.6	(World Bank, 2025)
Women in Parliament (%)	12.5	11.0	9.9	(Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2019)
Gender Development Index	0.764	0.808	0.837	(UNDP, 2019)

The data reveal modest improvements in governance effectiveness but declining female parliamentary representation, suggesting that presidential symbolism did not translate into broader political empowerment for women (World Bank, 2019).

Samia Suluhu Hassan: Constitutional Succession and Party Continuity (Tanzania, 2021-present)

In March 2021, after the death of the then president John Magufuli, Hassan assumed the presidency of Tanzania, becoming the first woman to ascend to the presidency through constitutional succession and not electively (Al Jazeera, 2021; Collord, 2022; Kombe, 2021). This trajectory influenced greatly her political capital and institutional constraints. In contrast to the electoral mandate of Sirleaf, Hassan assumed leadership in the dominant-party system of the Chama Cha Mapinduzi (CCM) party, in which presidential authority was based on party hierarchy and not independent electoral legitimacy (Al Jazeera, 2021; Collord, 2022; Kombe, 2021). The constitution of Tanzania places much power in the presidency, through appointment of regional commissioners, strong legislative powers and command of security forces (Wambali, 2008). But informal restrictions on presidential autonomy are imposed by the institutionalized nature of CCM dominance since independence in 1961 (Morse, 2014; Tsubura, 2018) The transformative capacity of individual presidents is constrained by party elders, the Central Committee decision-making, and factionalism within the CCM, especially in matters such as gender equality that can threaten party patriarchy.

The rise of Hassan as a leader came at a time of Tanzanian democratic recession under Magufuli (2015-2021), which was marked by restrictions on press freedom, suppressed civil society, and waning political freedom (M. Harris, 2022; Paget, 2025a). Her initial presidency aimed at reversing these authoritarian tendencies instead of pursuing transformative gender agenda, exposing the ways inherent political crises limit policy priorities despite the individual commitments of leaders.

Netumbo Nandi-Ndaitwah: Liberation Legacy and Democratic Transition (Namibia, 2025-present)

The third unique route to executive power is the March 2025 inauguration of Nandi-Ndaitwah as the first woman president of Namibia. Her election, with about 57 percent of the vote, gave her greater electoral legitimacy than the succession of Hassan, and her 45-year experience in the South West Africa People's Organisation (SWAPO) liberation movement positioned her within existing political networks (News Agencies, 2024; Tibinyane & Nakuta, 2025; Zane et al., 2024). Since independence in 1990, SWOPO has ruled Namibia, establishing an institutional continuity that is comparable to CCM dominance in Tanzania but in a more competitive multi-party context (Lindeke & Wanzala, 2017). The constitution of Namibia, which was adopted in 1990, has created one of the most progressive

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legal systems in Africa in terms of gender equality, with clear non-discrimination clauses and affirmative action requirements (Becker, 2006; Mapaure, 2010; Moodley, 2021). Nevertheless, Melber (2007) notes that constitutional progressivism has not yet been translated into practical transformation of patriarchal power relations in SWAPO or Namibian society in general. Namibia has voluntary party quotas of 46% of the National Assembly consisting of women, but female legislators have complained of systematic marginalization in party decision-making and policy formulation (Gender Links, 2020).

Nandi-Ndaitwah's limited tenure prevents comprehensive outcome analysis, yet her campaign rhetoric emphasized economic development and employment creation rather than explicit feminist agendas, suggesting strategic awareness that gender-specific platforms may alienate broader constituencies in competitive elections. This pattern where female presidential candidates downplay feminist commitments to secure electoral victory itself reflects institutional constraints on substantive representation.

Comparative Synthesis: Divergent Pathways, Convergent Constraints

Structural constraints are present in all three presidencies, even though they ascend under different circumstances: post-conflict election, constitutional succession, and liberation legacy. Both leaders work within institutional structures that were not developed to expect women at the executive level, resulting in what Krook & Mackay (2011) call gender regime persistence: cultural and informal norms that inhibit change even when formal regulations are modified. In all three nations, regardless of female presidents, legislative bodies are still male-dominated, which restricts the ability to implement substantive policy reform (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2019). Budgetary independence is limited by economic reliance on external funding sources (international financial institutions, donors, and commodity exports) to facilitate redistributive gender programming.

GENDER POLICY RHETORIC VS. IMPLEMENTATION: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

Legislative and Constitutional Reforms

Presidential rhetoric regarding gender equality diverged sharply from legislative outcomes across all three cases. Sirleaf's 2006 inaugural address pledged to "make Liberian women the foundation of our nation's rebirth," promising comprehensive legal reforms (Sirleaf, 2009, p. 243). The Rape Law of 2006 strengthened penalties and expanded definitions of sexual violence, representing genuine legislative achievement (Fuest, 2008). However, implementation failures plagued enforcement, and more significantly, Sirleaf failed to achieve constitutional reform on dual citizenship rights that disproportionately disadvantage women married to foreign nationals throughout her twelve-year tenure (D. J. Harris, 2014).

Hassan's early presidency saw reversal of Magufuli-era restrictions on pregnant girls' school attendance, framed as gender-progressive reform and celebrated internationally as evidence of feminist leadership (Manyukwe, 2025). Yet analysis reveals this policy change primarily restored Tanzania's pre-2017 status rather than advancing new protections. More critically, Hassan has not championed comprehensive gender-based violence legislation despite Tanzania's high prevalence rates (UN Women, 2024; UN Women Africa, 2024). The 2024 UN Women analysis of Tanzanian laws identified 76 legal reform recommendations for gender equality, including repealing discriminatory laws and addressing the Law of Marriage Act, yet presidential leadership has not prioritized these reforms (UN Women Africa, 2024). Hassan's approach to constitutional reform further illuminates the symbolic-substantive gap. Despite civil society demands for constitutional amendments eliminating gender-discriminatory provisions, Hassan declined to pursue reforms, citing economic constraints (Paget, 2025a). This

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strategic choice reveals how female presidents calculate that gender-specific agendas may threaten broader political objectives, prioritizing regime stability over feminist transformation.

Nandi-Ndaitwah's limited tenure prevents comprehensive legislative assessment, though her administration references Namibia's National Gender Equality and Equity Policy 2025-2035 as guiding framework (Nandi-Ndaitwah, 2025). Namibia's existing legal framework including the Married Persons Equality Act (1996) and Combating of Rape Act (2000), provides relatively progressive protections, yet civil society activists emphasize that formal equality does not automatically translate into substantive participation (Manyukwe, 2025). Liz Frank, director of the Women's Leadership Centre Namibia, has criticized parliamentary female representation declining to 33%, calling for laws obliging political parties to promote equality (Manyukwe, 2025). Table 2 compares gender-related legislative outcomes:

Table 2: Gender legislative reforms under female presidential leadership

Country	Major Legislation	Year	Implementation Status	Citation
Liberia	Rape Law Amendment	2006	Weak enforcement; customary law circumvention	(Fuest, 2008; D. J. Harris, 2014)
Tanzania	Pregnant Students Policy Reversal	2021	Implemented; restoration of pre-2017 status	(Manyukwe, 2025)
Tanzania	Constitutional Gender Reforms	Declined	Not pursued despite civil society demands	(Paget, 2025a)
Namibia	National Gender Equality Policy 2025-2035	2025	Framework established; implementation pending	(Nandi-Ndaitwah, 2025)

This data reveals that legislative symbolism passing policies or establishing frameworks occurs more frequently than substantive enforcement mechanisms requiring bureaucratic transformation and resource allocation (Goetz & Hassim, 2003).

Economic Empowerment Initiatives

Presidential commitment to women's economic empowerment confronted implementation constraints due to resource scarcity and macroeconomic frameworks prioritizing debt servicing over social spending (Steady, 2011). Hassan launched the Tanzania Generation Equality Programme (TGEP) in 2021 as champion of the Generation Equality Forum, committing to economic justice and rights for women over a five-year implementation period (2021/22-2025/26) (GEF, 2025). The government appointed and trained 234 Focal Persons across ministries, regions, and local government authorities to oversee implementation (UN Women Africa, 2024). Despite this institutional infrastructure, budgetary allocations reveal minimal substantive commitment. Tanzania's Ministry of Community Development, Gender, Elderly and Children received TSh 76 billion (approximately USD 28.5 million) for 2025/26, increased from TSh 67.9 billion in 2024/25 but representing less than 0.14% of the total national budget of TSh 56.49 trillion (Maricha, 2025; TanzaniaInvest, 2024). This allocation contradicts Generation Equality rhetoric emphasizing transformative investment in women's economic empowerment.

According to Maricha (2025), Hassan's administration registered 54,999 new informal traders between July 2024 and May 2025, with 28,287 receiving digital identification cards enabling access to low-interest credit, and TSh 1.1 billion (approximately USD 413,000) issued to 601 traders. While symbolically significant, these figures represent minimal economic redistribution: 601 loan recipients constitute 0.76% of registered traders, and TSh 1.1 billion represents 0.0019% of Tanzania's national budget (TanzaniaInvest, 2024). Hassan's emphasis on microenterprise development rather than structural reforms such as equal pay legislation or land tenure reforms reflects neoliberal framing that individualizes poverty rather than addressing systemic inequality.

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Gender-responsive budgeting, identified by UN Women Africa (2023) as transformative enabler for development outcomes, remains unimplemented at national scale in Tanzania despite Hassan's Generation Equality championship. The African Women Leaders Network meeting in Dar es Salaam (July 2024) emphasized that only 1.9% of all funding for gender equality reaches women and girls, calling for increased financing and accountability (UN Women Africa, 2024). Hassan's government has not established transparent tracking systems for gender budget allocations across sectoral ministries.

Nandi-Ndaitwah's administration has emphasized employment creation as priority, with particular attention to youth unemployment affecting 44% of Namibian youth (Perry World House, 2025). Her inaugural address pledged "shared, balanced prosperity for all" and enhanced gender parity, framing economic empowerment as central to presidential mandate (Itai, 2025). SWAPO's program includes improving women's access to land, credit, markets, and jobs, fighting violence against women, and strengthening entrepreneurial skills (Manyukwe, 2025). However, Namibian civil society voices caution regarding implementation. Brigit May Loots, gender and social development consultant, stresses that many Namibian women experience minimal economic equality: unemployment, sexual violence, and limited reproductive healthcare access shape their reality, with one in four women affected by intimate partner violence and one in five women aged 15-19 already pregnant (Manyukwe, 2025). James Itana, director of Regain Trust, urges inclusion of boys and men in equality strategies, noting declining educational opportunities and mental health reflected in high male suicide rates (Manyukwe, 2025).

Institutional Mechanisms for Gender Mainstreaming

Cabinet composition provides critical metrics for assessing substantive representation. Hassan's initial cabinet upon assuming presidency in 2021 included approximately 35% women ministers, positioning Tanzania favourably in regional comparisons (Christopher, 2023). She appointed women to key portfolios including Health (Ummy Mwalimu), Land, Housing and Human Settlements (Angelina Mabula), and Industry and Trade (Ashatu Kijaji), moving beyond traditional concentration in "soft" social ministries (Christopher, 2023). However, Hassan's November 2025 cabinet reshuffle following her contested re-election revealed concerning patterns. Analysis indicates appointments of at least nine close family members to senior positions, including her daughter as Deputy Minister of Education and son-in-law as Minister of Health, raising serious questions about merit-based governance and nepotistic consolidation of power (Toviel, 2025). This represents fundamental contradiction between gender equality rhetoric and patrimonial governance practices.

Nandi-Ndaitwah's March 2025 cabinet demonstrates unprecedented gender representation: 57% of ministerial positions held by women (8 of 14 ministers), including first female vice president (Lucia Witbooi) and female Speaker of Parliament (Saara Kuugongelwa-Amadhila) (Guchu, 2025; Perry World House, 2025). Women hold critical portfolios including foreign affairs, finance, health, and education, moving decisively beyond tokenistic representation. As Guchu (2025) observes, "Under Nandi-Ndaitwah, the vocabulary of politics has shifted from dominance to delivery; from who commands to who serves." Yet civil society analysis emphasizes that descriptive representation does not automatically produce substantive transformation. Despite women constituting majority of cabinet, Namibia's female parliamentary representation declined to 33% (Manyukwe, 2025). Nandi-Ndaitwah's first cabinet decisions included dismissing Mac-Albert Hengari as Minister of Agriculture following bribery charges after he attempted to silence an alleged rape victim, demonstrating willingness to enforce accountability on gender-based violence issues (Rukanga, 2025).

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Critics note contradictions in Nandi-Ndaitwah's feminist positioning. Political analyst Henning Melber stated in 2022 interview that she has not historically supported reproductive rights, and despite advocacy for gender equality, her beliefs reflect more traditional, conservative viewpoints (Shinana, 2022). Additionally, Nandi-Ndaitwah's presidency has faced criticism regarding LGBTQ rights, with her government maintaining criminalization policies despite equality rhetoric (Itai, 2025). Table 3 summarizes institutional gender mainstreaming indicators with updated data:

Table 3: Institutional gender mainstreaming under female presidents

Indicator	Liberia (Sirleaf)	Tanzania (Hassan)	Namibia (Nandi-Ndaitwah)	Source
Gender Ministry Budget (% of total)	0.50%	0.14%	Data unavailable	(D. J. Harris, 2014; TanzaniaInvest, 2024)
Female Cabinet Members (%)	20-25%	35% (2021); family appointments (2025)	57%	(Christopher, 2023; Guchu, 2025; Toviel, 2025)
Female Vice President	No	No	Yes (first)	(Perry World House, 2025)
Women in Parliament (%)	9.9% (2018)	37% (2023)	33% (2025)	(Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2019; Manyukwe, 2025; Mpapalika et al., 2023)

This comparative data demonstrates that while Nandi-Ndaitwah's administration achieves unprecedented descriptive representation in executive leadership, Hassan's tenure reveals deterioration from initial gender-inclusive appointments toward nepotistic consolidation. Neither presidency has fundamentally transformed institutional gender mainstreaming through resource allocation or enforcement mechanisms (Goetz & Hassim, 2003).

STRUCTURAL CONSTRAINTS ON GENDER-TRANSFORMATIVE LEADERSHIP

Political-Institutional Constraints

Legislative dynamics systematically constrained presidential gender agendas, though institutional contexts varied significantly. Sirleaf never commanded legislative majority, requiring coalition management with predominantly male legislators who actively opposed feminist reforms (D. J. Harris, 2014). Proposed constitutional amendments to eliminate gender-discriminatory citizenship provisions failed repeatedly due to legislative obstruction.

Hassan operates within CCM's dominant-party system where presidential power derives from party hierarchy rather than independent electoral legitimacy. However, Hassan's political trajectory from 2021-2025 reveals dramatic shift from initial reformist positioning toward authoritarian consolidation that fundamentally reshaped gender policy possibilities. Upon assuming presidency in March 2021, Hassan initiated task force on political reform and democracy, lifted six-year ban on political rallies, and released opposition leaders including Freeman Mbowe (Paget, 2025a). This "4Rs" strategy, reconciliation, resilience, reforms, and rebuilding, generated optimism regarding democratic opening.

By 2025, this democratic facade collapsed entirely. Hassan's government banned main opposition parties Chadema and Alliance for Change and Transparency (ACT-Wazalendo) from participating in October 2025 elections, arrested opposition leader Tundu Lissu on treason charges, and disqualified presidential candidates including Luhaga Mpina (Morse, 2014; Paget, 2025a). The October 29, 2025 election, which Hassan purportedly won with 97.66% of votes and 87% turnout, was characterized by African Union observers as not complying with regional or international standards, citing ballot stuffing, government-imposed internet shutdown, and

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politically motivated disqualifications (Kelliher, 2025).

Post-election violence reached unprecedented levels. From October 29 to early November 2025, Tanzanian security forces used live ammunition against peaceful protesters, with credible reports indicating hundreds to possibly over 1,000 individuals killed, many shot while fleeing or seeking refuge (Paget, 2025a; Toviel, 2025). Hassan's government imposed total internet shutdown from October 29 to November 3 to prevent documentation of abuses, with bodies reportedly removed to undisclosed locations, subjected to chemical dissolution, or buried in mass graves actions constituting possible crimes against humanity (Oakland Institute, 2025; Toviel, 2025).

Hassan's defence of lethal force as "proportional to the event" and declaration to "defend this country with all our strength" reveals fundamental incompatibility between authoritarian regime consolidation and gender-transformative leadership (Oakland Institute, 2025). As Paget (2025) argues, Hassan has "crossed autocratic thresholds that other leaders have not," creating "new era of authoritarianism" where electoral competition is absent at presidential level. Morse (2014) observes that Hassan's 98% vote share "is a reminder of sham results seen in places like Equatorial Guinea or Rwanda," representing "autocracies in transition" entering "new status quo that seems much more fragile."

This authoritarian consolidation directly constrains gender policy implementation. Hassan's November 2025 cabinet featuring nine family members in senior positions demonstrates that patrimonial governance supersedes feminist commitments (Toviel, 2025). Bartlett (2025) reports that Hassan's son Abdul Halim Hafidh Ameir is widely believed to have overseen the post-election crackdown, illustrating how dynastic power consolidation instrumentalizes state violence. Many observers now assess Hassan as "worse than her predecessor" Magufuli, contradicting initial optimism regarding female leadership's transformative potential (Bartlett, 2025).

Nandi-Ndaitwah's SWAPO majority (57% parliamentary seats) provides legislative leverage, yet party discipline constrains deviation from established positions. However, Nandi-Ndaitwah's democratic credentials contrast sharply with Hassan's authoritarianism. Perry World House (2025) emphasizes Nandi-Ndaitwah's "commitment to democracy, gender equality, improved governance, and economic growth" amid global rollback of women's empowerment policies. At September 2025 address, Nandi-Ndaitwah affirmed that "gender equality and leadership excellence are not mutually exclusive; they are mutually reinforcing" and emphasized "strength of Namibia's democracy and commitment to principles of good governance, fair elections, and judicial and parliamentary independence" (Perry World House, 2025).

Economic Constraints and External Dependencies

Macroeconomic policy frameworks systematically constrain resources available for gender programming across all three contexts. Liberia's 2010 debt relief required maintaining public sector wage bills below 9% of GDP, limiting capacity to expand gender-focused civil service (Steady, 2011). Tanzania's economic structure generates insufficient domestic revenue for expansive social programming. Hassan's 2025/26 budget allocated 34% to debt servicing compared to combined health and education allocation, revealing fiscal constraints that prevent substantive gender investments (TanzaniaInvest, 2024). More fundamentally, Hassan's governance prioritizes macroeconomic growth over redistributive social policy. Tanzania's economy has continued steady growth under Hassan, yet 66% of Tanzanians remain poor and 72% work in informal sectors as street vendors and motorcycle taxi drivers (Paget, 2025a). Hassan's neo-liberal government systematically suppresses demands from these constituencies, particularly affecting youth who constitute over half Tanzania's

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population and have suffered from under-investment in education and health relative to regional neighbours (Paget, 2025a).

The Generation Equality Forum rhetoric emphasizing women's economic justice confronts stark budgetary realities. UN Women Africa (2024) reports that only 1.9% of all funding for gender equality reaches women and girls, requiring "change fast if we are to make any meaningful progress." Despite appointing 234 Gender Equality Focal Persons across government structures, Hassan's administration has not established transparent budget tracking systems or implemented gender-responsive budgeting at scale (UN Women Africa, 2023, 2024).

Namibia's resource wealth particularly diamond exports provides greater fiscal capacity, yet economic inequality remains extreme with Gini coefficient of 0.59 (World Bank, 2025a). Nandi-Ndaitwah identifies 44% youth unemployment as top economic priority, framing demographic composition as "generational opportunity" yielding "demographic dividend" through smart policies and investments (Perry World House, 2025). However, Manyukwe (2025) emphasizes that resource revenues have not translated into substantive gender programming, attributing this to elite capture dynamics within SWAPO where rents flow to politically connected actors.

Socio-Cultural Constraints

Religious institutions and traditional authority structures mobilized against gender reforms across all three contexts. In Liberia, Christian and Muslim religious leaders opposed marriage law reforms equalizing spousal authority, framing gender equality as Western cultural imperialism (Fuest, 2008). Tanzania's religious composition creates dynamics Hassan must navigate carefully. UN Women Africa (2024) documents that discriminatory social norms and attitudes restrict women's ability to access justice systems, with bride price remaining dominant practice and child marriage persisting as challenge. Traditional authority structures retain substantial informal power, particularly in rural areas where statutory law has limited reach. Customary practices regarding inheritance, polygamy, and property systematically disadvantage women yet remain protected as "cultural heritage" that presidential authority struggles to challenge (Bauer & Burnet, 2013). Hassan's decision not to prioritize comprehensive gender-based violence legislation reportedly reflected concerns about religious opposition to provisions addressing marital rape and forced marriage, demonstrating how socio-cultural formations constrain policy agendas (UN Women Africa, 2024).

Namibia confronts similar dynamics despite progressive constitutional framework. Manyukwe (2025) reports that one in four Namibian women experience intimate partner violence and one in five women aged 15-19 are already pregnant, revealing gaps between formal legal protections and lived realities. Nandi-Ndaitwah's traditional, conservative viewpoints on reproductive rights create tensions with feminist expectations, particularly regarding LGBTQ rights where her government maintains criminalization policies (Itai, 2025).

The Gendered Leadership Burden and Authoritarian Instrumentalization

Female presidents confront disproportionate expectations to champion women's issues while simultaneously being scrutinized more intensely than male counterparts (Bauer & Burnet, 2013). Hassan's case reveals particularly troubling dimension: instrumentalization of feminist rhetoric to legitimize authoritarian consolidation. Her early presidency strategically deployed gender-inclusive symbolism reversing pregnant student bans, appointing women ministers, championing Generation Equality Forum as "calculated performance of reform" aimed at Western donors, IMF, and EU whose financial support remains critical (Wandati, 2025).

This "charm offensive" generated international celebration of Hassan as progressive female leader while masking systematic dismantling of democratic institutions (Wandati, 2025). Hassan's governance model "built on controlled pluralism, managed legality, and appeals to sovereignty"

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represents "modernized form of autocracy" where feminist symbolism coexists with authoritarian repression (Wandati, 2025). Paget (2025) documents how Hassan's administration weaponized law against opponents through "lawfare" patterns seen in Rwanda and Uganda, using treason charges and procedural disqualifications to eliminate political competition.

The October 2025 election violence fundamentally exposes contradictions between female leadership symbolism and substantive gender justice. Hassan's defence of killing protesters as "proportional" and nationalist rhetoric dismissing international criticism "Those foreigners keep saying Tanzania should do one, two, three, who are you? Do they still think they're still our masters, our colonizers?" demonstrates how female presidents can deploy authoritarian nationalism as effectively as male predecessors (Oakland Institute, 2025). This pattern challenges celebratory narratives equating female leadership with progressive governance. As Britannica (2025) and Madowo (2025) notes, Hassan was "initially praised for improving the country's political climate but later drew criticism for operating with increasingly authoritarian tendencies." Her trajectory from reformer to authoritarian represents what Wandati (2025) terms "sobering study in how modern autocrats adapt," demonstrating that "soft authoritarianism" consolidating power under guise of democratic order transcends leader gender.

Nandi-Ndaitwah's governance thus far demonstrates contrasting approach, emphasizing democratic principles and institutional independence (Perry World House, 2025). However, her abbreviated tenure prevents comprehensive assessment of whether she can navigate gendered leadership burdens while maintaining democratic commitments under pressure. Guchu (2025) notes that "challenge that remains is to ensure that representation translates into reform from tackling gender-based violence and pay inequality to ensuring women's participation in green economy and resource governance."

CRITICAL REFLECTIONS: LESSONS FOR GENDER ADVOCACY AND POLITICAL STRATEGY

The comparative analysis reveals six critical insights for feminist political strategy, substantially revised based on Hassan's authoritarian turn. First, the "role model" narrative celebrating female leadership as inherently progressive must be fundamentally rejected, not merely reconsidered. Hassan's trajectory demonstrates that female presidents can consolidate authoritarian power, deploy state violence against civilians, and instrumentalize feminist rhetoric to legitimize repression as effectively as male predecessors (Oakland Institute, 2025; Paget, 2025b). The symbolic representation of having female president actively undermines substantive gender justice when that leadership perpetuates or intensifies patriarchal state violence.

Mpapalika et al. (2023) data reveal paradox: 70% of Tanzanians say women should have same chance as men of being elected to public office, yet Hassan's presidency has coincided with democratic collapse and mass killings. This suggests that public support for female political leadership does not automatically translate into feminist governance or gender-transformative policy outcomes. Advocacy resources invested in celebrating individual female leaders may actively harm women's movements if those leaders utilize power to repress civil society organizing essential for substantive change (Goetz & Hassim, 2003). Second, institutional reform remains essential but insufficient without democratic accountability mechanisms. Nandi-Ndaitwah's administration demonstrates that unprecedented descriptive representation 57% female cabinet, female vice president, female parliamentary speaker can coexist with critiques regarding substantive policy gaps (Guchu, 2025; Manyukwe, 2025). Gender-responsive budgeting, legislative reforms eliminating discriminatory laws, and judicial enforcement of women's rights

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require not merely political will but democratic institutions enabling civil society pressure and electoral accountability (UN Women Africa, 2023, 2024). Hassan's case illustrates how authoritarian consolidation fundamentally prevents institutional gender transformation. The appointment of 234 Gender Equality Focal Persons across government structures represents bureaucratic infrastructure for gender mainstreaming, yet operates within authoritarian context where civil society organizations face repression, independent media is restricted, and opposition political participation is criminalized (Paget, 2025b; UN Women Africa, 2023). Gender machineries cannot function as transformative institutions when embedded within repressive state apparatus.

Third, the findings challenge strategic assumptions about electoral politics as primary pathway to feminist transformation, but with crucial caveat regarding regime type. Hassan's authoritarian consolidation demonstrates that women's ascension to executive power within competitive authoritarian or fully authoritarian systems may actively harm rather than advance gender equality by providing feminist veneer to repressive governance (Wandati, 2025). Social movement organizing, civil society advocacy, and grassroots mobilization may not merely produce more sustainable gains than elite political representation they may be the only viable pathways when executive leadership deploys state violence against movements challenging patriarchal power structures (Bauer & Burnet, 2013). Paget (2025b) documents how unprecedented October-November 2025 protests following Hassan's fraudulent election "threw into doubt" Tanzania's authoritarian trajectory, with protesters creating "spaces in which they rather than the regime rule, at least temporarily." This grassroots mobilization against authoritarian female president reveals that feminist transformation requires challenging state power regardless of executive gender, prioritizing democratic accountability over symbolic representation.

Fourth, policy institutionalization matters more than individual presidential commitment, but institutionalization requires democratic oversight. Sirleaf's gender initiatives collapsed after her 2018 departure, revealing dependence on executive patronage (D. J. Harris, 2014). Hassan's Generation Equality Programme, despite five-year implementation framework and 234 Focal Persons, operates within authoritarian context enabling reversal without democratic consequence (UN Women Africa, 2024). Policies embedded in legislation, budgetary line items, and civil service structures represent substantive change only when protected by democratic institutions enabling civil society monitoring and electoral accountability (Dahlerup, 2006; Waylen, 2013). Fifth, intersectionality fundamentally shapes leadership possibilities, constraints, and implications for women's movements. Hassan's class position, CCM party embeddedness, and strategic deployment of nationalist anti-colonial rhetoric to dismiss international criticism illustrate how gender intersects with political ideology, party loyalty, and global power dynamics (Oakland Institute, 2025). Nandi-Ndaitwah's liberation movement credentials and conservative positioning on reproductive rights create different navigational challenges than Sirleaf's post-conflict reconstruction context (Guchu, 2025; Perry World House, 2025).

Critically, intersectional analysis must recognize that female leaders' identities do not determine governance outcomes but shape strategic calculations regarding which constituencies to prioritize and which policy compromises to accept. Hassan's willingness to deploy lethal force against predominantly young, male, informal sector workers protesting fraudulent elections reveals that female presidents can reproduce or intensify state violence against marginalized populations when regime survival is perceived as threatened (Paget, 2025b). Sixth and finally, the findings demonstrate necessity of distinguishing between democratic and authoritarian contexts when evaluating female leadership's potential for gender transformation. Nandi-Ndaitwah's democratic commitments, institutional

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transparency, and accountability to Namibian civil society organizations create fundamentally different possibilities than Hassan's authoritarian consolidation (Manyukwe, 2025; Perry World House, 2025). As Afrobarometer data show, two-thirds of Africans prefer democracy to any other system of government, and support for democracy remains strong despite authoritarian backsliding (Perry World House, 2025).

Feminist political strategy must therefore prioritize democratic consolidation as precondition for gender-transformative leadership, recognizing that female presidents operating within authoritarian systems may utilize gender equality rhetoric instrumentally while perpetuating or intensifying patriarchal state violence. The Oakland Institute (2025) concludes that "Hassan does not represent the Tanzanians who are demanding justice, dignity, and a voice in shaping their future. They deserve accountability and restoration of basic civil and political rights." This assertion applies equally to gender justice: female presidential leadership divorced from democratic accountability and responsive to women's movements cannot produce substantive gender transformation, regardless of symbolic representation or rhetorical commitments to equality.

CONCLUSION

This comparative analysis of three African female presidencies demonstrates that symbolic representation persistently exceeds substantive policy transformation due to structural constraints embedded in political institutions, economic dependencies, and socio-cultural formations. Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, Samia Suluhu Hassan, and Netumbo Nandi-Ndaitwah ascended to executive power through divergent pathways yet confronted fundamentally different outcomes regarding gender-transformative potential. Sirleaf's post-conflict presidency revealed how international dependencies, legislative fragmentation, and customary law systems systematically limited gender policy implementation despite rhetorical commitments. Hassan's trajectory from initial reformist positioning to authoritarian consolidation fundamentally challenges celebratory narratives of female leadership. Her administration's evolution from reversing discriminatory education policies and championing the Generation Equality Forum to orchestrating fraudulent elections and deploying lethal force against protesters demonstrates that female presidents can instrumentalize feminist rhetoric while perpetuating patriarchal state violence. The October 2025 election violence, resulting in hundreds to over one thousand deaths, reveals that executive gender provides no guarantee against authoritarian repression.

Nandi-Ndaitwah's presidency presents contrasting possibilities, demonstrating that unprecedented descriptive representation 57% female cabinet ministers, first female vice president can emerge within relatively democratic contexts. Her explicit commitments to democratic governance and gender equality as mutually reinforcing principles suggest that female leadership combined with democratic accountability structures creates different transformative potential than authoritarian contexts. However, civil society critiques regarding parliamentary representation decline and conservative positioning on reproductive rights indicate that even high descriptive representation does not automatically produce substantive gender transformation. The findings advance feminist institutionalist theory by demonstrating that regime type democratic versus authoritarian fundamentally shapes whether female presidential leadership can produce gender-transformative outcomes. Hassan's case illustrates that authoritarian female presidents may actively harm women's movements by providing feminist veneer to repressive governance while deploying state violence against civil society organizations essential for challenging patriarchal power structures.

Implications for gender advocacy strategy require substantial revision of conventional assumptions. Resources invested in celebrating individual female leaders must be redirected toward building feminist movements capable of pressuring governments for institutional reform regardless of

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executive gender. Policy institutionalization through legislation and budgetary allocations represents substantive change only when protected by democratic institutions enabling civil society oversight. Feminist political strategy must prioritize democratic consolidation as precondition for gender-transformative leadership, recognizing that female presidents operating within authoritarian systems utilize gender equality rhetoric instrumentally. Future research should expand comparative analysis to parliamentary contexts, conduct longitudinal studies tracking gender policy implementation across leadership transitions, and systematically examine relationships between regime type and gender-transformative leadership potential through primary research with elites and civil society activists. The central conclusion is unequivocal: female presidential leadership does not automatically advance gender equality and can actively harm women's movements when deployed within authoritarian contexts. Substantive gender transformation requires not merely women's presence in executive power but democratic institutions enabling civil society pressure, grassroots mobilization, and electoral accountability. Tanzania's October 2025 protests, where citizens risked lives demanding democracy from their female president, demonstrate that gender justice requires challenging state power regardless of executive gender. Female presidents can be democrats or autocrats, reformers or repressors. Their gender provides no immunity from critical assessment and no substitute for democratic accountability to women's movements demanding justice.

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