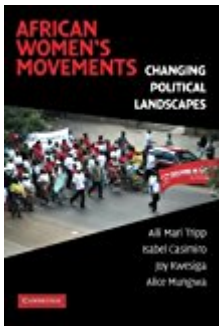
H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Aili Mari Tripp, Isabel Casimiro, Joy Kwesiga, Alice Mungwa. *African Women's Movements: Changing Political Landscapes.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009. xvi + 263 pp. $25.99, paper, ISBN 978-0-521-70490-8.

Reviewed by Dawne Y. Curry

Published on H-Women (June, 2009)

Commissioned by Holly S. Hurlburt (Southern Illinois University Carbondale)

African Women's Movements, which brings together the scholarly interests and efforts of four academicians (Aili Mari Tripp, Isabel Casimiro, Joy Kwesiga, and Alice Mungwa), examines the changing political landscape of females across the continent in the 1990s. It focuses on case studies in Cameroon, Mozambique, and Uganda. The authors chose these countries because of their similar historical pasts as former colonized states, and because they earn nearly equal Gross Domestic Products (GDP). Most important, these nations have thriving women's movements. Drawing from examples from Lusophone, British, and Francophone Africa, the work plumbs the depths of each country's respective histories and platforms on women's issues to highlight the sometimes invisible struggle that grips Africa today. Aided by participant observer accounts, in-depth interviews, and focus groups, plus African media reports and pamphlets, the work seeks to unravel the influences of African women's movements in their respective countries and the continent at large.

To accomplish their goal, the scholars address the roots of current women's activism, going as far back as precolonial times. During that period, women maintained and created secret cults. In Cameroon, for example, the Takemberg indigenous women's organization, according to folklore, possessed mystical powers, derived from women's "sacred productive organs" (p. 29). The focus on women's bodies indicates that women represented the source of life, and that empowerment resided with their physiognomy. Women also engaged in political motherhood. In advocating for causes that supported their interests as mothers, women altered the Victorian tradition when they highlighted female-centered interests in an arena traditionally slated for African men. While this provided African women with a framework from which to draw their strength, and to base their case, political motherhood tended to compartmentalize women as one-dimensional. To counteract that perception, African women expanded their roles by creating rotating credit associations, farming groups, dance groups, and mutual assis-

tance associations. By serving as financiers, farmers, and philanthropists, African women exhibited autonomy in alternate spaces that were similar to or differed from mainstream society. They discussed politics, farming techniques, economics, and their public role. Some African women joined governmental structures to push for gender reform.

Part of the problem in this silencing and the need for women to create alternate spaces was that politics often centered on nationalist concerns. During the liberation struggles in Algeria, Kenya, and Zimbabwe, for example, women fought alongside men. Yet despite their contribution, race, ethnicity, and patriarchy often trumped gender. Women's rights, therefore, were not addressed, were pushed to the side, or were placed under an umbrella group that was the catch-all for anything relating to gender. Some countries, like Guinea and Mozambique, addressed gender equity following liberation, and, by doing so, honored rhetoric propagandized during colonial rule. Leaders of these countries understood the connection between gender equity and a peaceful transition. The gains, however, were not always immediate.

Besides this strategy of mobilization, African women created coalition and advocacy networks to influence policies at the international, regional, and local levels of government. These networks allow African women to galvanize supporters at each governmental stage and, therefore, allow the everyday person to have a voice in determining policies. Communication includes not only door-to-door visits but also the Internet. The Internet has gained ground in African countries and has become a way for African women to reach thousands of people with one fell swoop. One group, the Association for Progressive Communication's APC-Africa-Women (AAW), helps women to learn about information and communication technologies. Formed in 1996, the AAW also maintains a newsletter, ***Pula***, and conducts research on gender and the relationship between information and communication technologies. The Internet also puts a face to the cause. Leaders and their platforms are visible to women. Policies become more transparent, and therefore less enigmatic.

Cell phones, possessed by an average of sixty-nine of one thousand people, also play a role in women's movements. One of the regional networks, the Solidarity for African Women's Rights (SOAWR), mobilized women using cell phones, after finding out that only one country, the Comoros, had ratified the African Union's Protocol to the African Charter on Human and People's Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa. The group used a text messaging campaign and created a petition that appeared as part of the online newsletter ***Fahamu***. By reaching out to people in this manner, SOAWR garnered 3,615 signatures, 468 of which represented SMS (Short Message Service) messages to ratify the protocol. By 2007, twenty-two countries had ratified it. This strategy crossed age lines. It also encouraged those who typically use their cell phones to participate in the electoral process without forcing them to engage in activity outside of their norm. Electronic communication can play a role in galvanizing the masses through grassroots measures, as shown by African women, like President Barack Obama, who mobilized the population to achieve change within their respective nations. President Obama used the Internet to speak to potential supporters and to raise money and awareness about the economy and global affairs, while activists from SOAWR, among other African women's advocacy groups, sought justice by appealing to their colleagues to adopt the protocol, which further protects women and enhances their rights.

In analyzing women's mobilization, Tripp et al. explain how and why women rebel. The authors use institutions to pinpoint their discussion and to create dialogue about global women's movements. African women stand at the forefront of change, and this book illustrates this change by

delineating the continuities and discontinuities of women's mobilization. Although women's voices appear muffled, aside from the institutions that represent them, the work is essential for showing Africa's changing political landscapes. It demonstrates how women navigated shared gender spaces to female-centered ones. Tripp, Casimiro, Kwesiga, and Mungwa highlight women in legislative positions, but not in the streets or in the places where a majority of economically deprived or affluent women live. This omission shows a distinction in class, and points to places where mobilization needs to occur, and where other research should focus. Because *African Women's Movements* examines the intersection between policy, gender, advocacy, and electronic communication, the work encourages future discussion on women's mobilization not only in Africa but also in other parts of the world.