Women's Movements and Developmental Change: The Politics of Grassroots Gender Activism in Africa

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Abstract

This study examined how grassroot women groups and movement shape developmental change within Africa's local socio-political systems. These movements are pivotal to achieving inclusive and sustainable development across Africa and the interconnection between women movements and developmental change have specific focus on the politics of grassroots activism across the globe especially in African societies. They operate as mediators between communities and state institutions, influencing legal reforms, civic participation, gender-responsive budgeting, and socio-economic empowerment. They aim at fostering women inclusivity in achieving developmental changes in African countries in particular and the world over. It adopted gender and development theory (GAD) by Moser Caroline, 1984 and applied the desktop method of data collection. The study found that countries such as Nigeria, Kenya, South Africa, and Ghana exhibited higher densities of organized grassroots activism due to their stronger civil society infrastructure and more liberal political environments with rural and urban women prioritizing different aspects of empowerments. The study recommended that governments and development agencies should strengthen institutional partnerships with grassroots women's organizations and integrate their perspectives into policy frameworks to ensure gender-responsive and community-driven development across Africa.

Introduction

Gender and political activism are a major concern globally with a focus on women, particularly at the grassroots to address governance, structural inequalities, drive developmental change and women's movement are key in the developmental process as they form a collective agency that demands for equity, inclusion and justice. (Tripp *et al*, 2008; Badri & Tripp, 2017; Okech, 2021). These movements do not only advocate for legal reform or increased representation, but also engage in the redistribution of social resources, influence cultural norms, contest patriarchal power structures, and reconfigure developmental priorities to reflect the lived realities of women and other marginalized groups (Berger, 2014; Gouws, 2019). Drawing from pre-colonial times and the colonial period, women's collective action emerged as resistance against oppressive policies, taxation, and land dispossession, as seen in movements like the 1929 Aba Women's Riot in Nigeria and other protests across East and Southern Africa. These early mobilizations not only challenged colonial rule but also questioned male-dominated leadership structures that excluded women from decision-making (Tripp et al., 2008; Berger, 2014).

Women's movement have moved beyond welfare focused roles to advocate for gender-responsive governance (UN Women, 2024; Gouws, 2019) because the late twentieth century marked a significant turning point with the emergence of what Tripp et al. (2008) termed new women's movements which was influenced by broader political liberalization processes across the continent, the spread of democratic governance, and the incorporation of international gender equality norms such as the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW, 1979) and the Beijing Platform for Action (1995). This has birthed groups like the Women's Manifesto Coalition in Ghana who produced sets of demands around political participation, reproductive health, and economic empowerment, (Badri & Tripp, 2017). In South Africa, feminist movements have been at the forefront of advocating for gender sensitive legislation, challenging gender-based violence, and improving public accountability on service delivery and reproductive rights (Aadan, 2024). Similarly, in Nigeria, organizations such as Women in Nigeria (WIN) and the Federation of Muslim Women's Associations of Nigeria (FOMWAN) have worked to promote women's education, civic participation, and health awareness while bridging religious and regional divides (Okech, 2021).

Despite these achievements, critical gaps remain in both scholarship and policy regarding the deeper political and developmental implications of grassroots gender activism. Much existing research has focused on elite women's organizations, national legislation, or formal representation, often neglecting how local women's collectives navigate everyday power relations with customary authorities, religious leaders, and community gatekeepers (Bouilly, 2016; Kearney, 2016). Ultimately, this research contributes to the broader discourse on gender and development by demonstrating that women's movements are vital engines of social transformation and that grassroots activism represents a critical site where development is not only implemented but actively reimagined. (Okech, 2021; UN Women, 2024).

Conceptual Review
Concept of Women's Movement and Developmental Change

The concept of women's movements and developmental change, particularly within the context of grassroots gender activism in Africa, represents an intricate and dynamic framework that captures the interconnection between gender relations, social transformation, and collective mobilization for equity and justice. Women's movements have been described as organized collective efforts led by women and for women, aimed at achieving gender justice, equality, and transformation of social structures that perpetuate discrimination and marginalization (Moghadam, 2020). These movements are not homogenous but reflect the intersection of multiple identities, ideologies, and sociopolitical realities. According to Mama (2018), women's movements in Africa are rooted in historical struggles against colonialism, patriarchy, and economic dependency, and they continue to manifest as dynamic expressions of agency and resistance in postcolonial societies.

Women's movements are seen as both beneficiaries and drivers of developmental change, as their activism challenges institutionalized inequalities and introduces alternative models of social transformation grounded in local realities and lived experiences (Tamale, 2020). Therefore, developmental change denotes the progressive transformation of social, economic, political, and cultural structures aimed at improving human well-being and fostering equitable participation in societal growth (Sen, 1999; Escobar, 2018). Within contemporary development discourse, change is no longer seen as merely economic modernization but as a multidimensional process involving the enhancement of human capabilities, gender equity, and inclusive governance (Kabeer, 2020). The conceptualization of developmental change is one that recognizes the roles of non-state actors, including women's organizations and movements, as central agents in promoting sustainable and participatory development (Cornwall, Harrison & Whitehead, 2019).

The Concept of Grassroot Activism

Grassroots gender activism represents the localized and often community-based dimension of women's movements, focusing on immediate and context-specific struggles for justice, access, and recognition. Grassroot activism typically involves the mobilization of rural women, market women, community leaders, and informal sector workers who, despite their marginal positions in formal politics, assert their rights through collective voice and solidarity (Tsikata, 2019). It is within this grassroots framework that the politics of women's movements and developmental change become most visible, as activism from below often catalyzes broader shifts in governance, policy reform, and cultural perception (Tripp, 2020).

As Akin-Aina (2018) observes, grassroots women's movements in Africa have redefined the meaning of political participation by linking everyday struggles such as access to water, land, education, and health with broader questions of justice, autonomy, and citizenship. Hence, the women's movements and developmental change also involves an understanding of gender as a social construct that shapes power relations and access to resources within societies. Gender, according to Butler (2019), is not merely a biological or natural distinction but a socially produced and politically regulated identity that determines the distribution of opportunities and authority. Ampofo (2019) notes that African women's movements have

evolved from nationalist mobilizations during independence struggles to contemporary formations that address issues such as reproductive rights, environmental justice, political participation, and economic empowerment. Therefore, the politics of grassroots gender activism represents a democratization of the political space, where marginalized women redefine citizenship and participation beyond conventional state structures (Mama, 2018) and this aligns with the broader conceptualization of developmental change as participatory, inclusive, and locally driven (Sen, 1999; Tripp, 2020).

Theoretical Framework
Gender and Development Theory (GAD)

Gender and Development (GAD) Theory was introduced in 1984 through the work of Caroline Moser and further strengthened by the ideas of scholars such as Lourdes Benería. The theory emerged as a response to earlier development models that focused mainly on adding women into development processes without questioning the deeper sources of gender inequality. The theory distinguishes between practical gender needs, such as income, healthcare, and access to water, and strategic gender needs, which include legal rights, political participation, control over resources, and long-term empowerment. GAD argues that meaningful development can only take place when both levels of needs are addressed and when women's agency, collective action, and participation in decision-making are strengthened. It therefore views women not as passive beneficiaries but as active contributors to social and economic transformation. The relevance of Gender and Development Theory is strong and direct because the study examines how women mobilization at the grassroots challenges unequal power structures and promote development. GAD provides a useful framework for understanding how gender relations within African communities' influence women's ability to organize, participate, and influence policy or social change. The theory also aligns with the study because it emphasizes collective action as a pathway to challenging structural inequalities.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research design anchored on descriptive and analytical approaches. The choice of this design is premised on the nature of the study, which seeks to explore the complex interrelationships between women's movements, gender activism, and developmental change at the grassroots level in Africa. The study is grounded in secondary data collection and qualitative content analysis, drawing upon existing scholarly literature, reports, policy documents, institutional archives, and empirical studies that discuss women's movements, gender politics, and social change across the African continent. This approach enables a comprehensive interpretation of trends, patterns, and conceptual linkages rather than numerical generalizations (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The data sources for the study include peer-reviewed journal articles, published reports from international organizations such as UN Women, the African Union (AU), CODESRIA, and various national women's coalitions, as well as academic books and theses. Data collection was conducted through systematic review and textual analysis of secondary sources from 2018 to 2024. These materials were obtained through digital academic databases such as JSTOR, ResearchGate, Google Scholar, and Scopus. The

study employed thematic content analysis, in which the objectives were identified, and interpreted.

Results and Discussion

Across Africa, grassroots women's movements have emerged as pivotal agents of change, redefining the socio-political landscape through local mobilization and community-based activism. These movements are diverse in structure, ideology, and operational scope, but they share a common commitment to gender equality, social justice, and participatory development. They often emerge from lived realities such as poverty, violence, exclusion, and discrimination and translate everyday struggles into political consciousness and collective action (Ampofo, 2019; Mama, 2018).

Table 1: The table below highlights some key grassroots women's movements across African countries:

Country	Grassroots Women's Movement
Nigeria	• Federation of Muslim Women's Associations in Nigeria (FOMWAN) • Women's Rights Advancement and Protection Alternative (WRAPA) • National Council of Women's Societies (NCWS) • Women in Nigeria (WIN) • Market Women's Association
Ghana	• Network for Women's Rights in Ghana (NETRIGHT) • Abantu for Development • 31st December Women's Movement
Kenya	• Maendeleo ya Wanawake Organization (MYWO) • Federation of Women Lawyers (FIDA-Kenya) • Rural Women Peace Link
South Africa	• Treatment Action Campaign (TAC) Women's Network • Black Women's Federation • Rural Women's Movement (RWM) • Sonke Gender Justice
Uganda	• Uganda Women's Network (UWONET) • Forum for Women in Democracy (FOWODE) • Action for Development (ACFODE)
Tanzania	• Tanzania Gender Networking Programme (TGNP) • Women's Legal Aid Centre (WLAC)
Zimbabwe	• Women's Coalition of Zimbabwe (WCoZ) • Musasa Project • Zimbabwe Women Lawyers Association
Cameroon	• Association des Femmes Juristes du Cameroun • Women in Alternative Action (WAA)

Country	Grassroots Women's Movement
Senegal	• Association of Senegalese Women Lawyers (AJS) • Réseau Siggil Jigéen (RSJ)

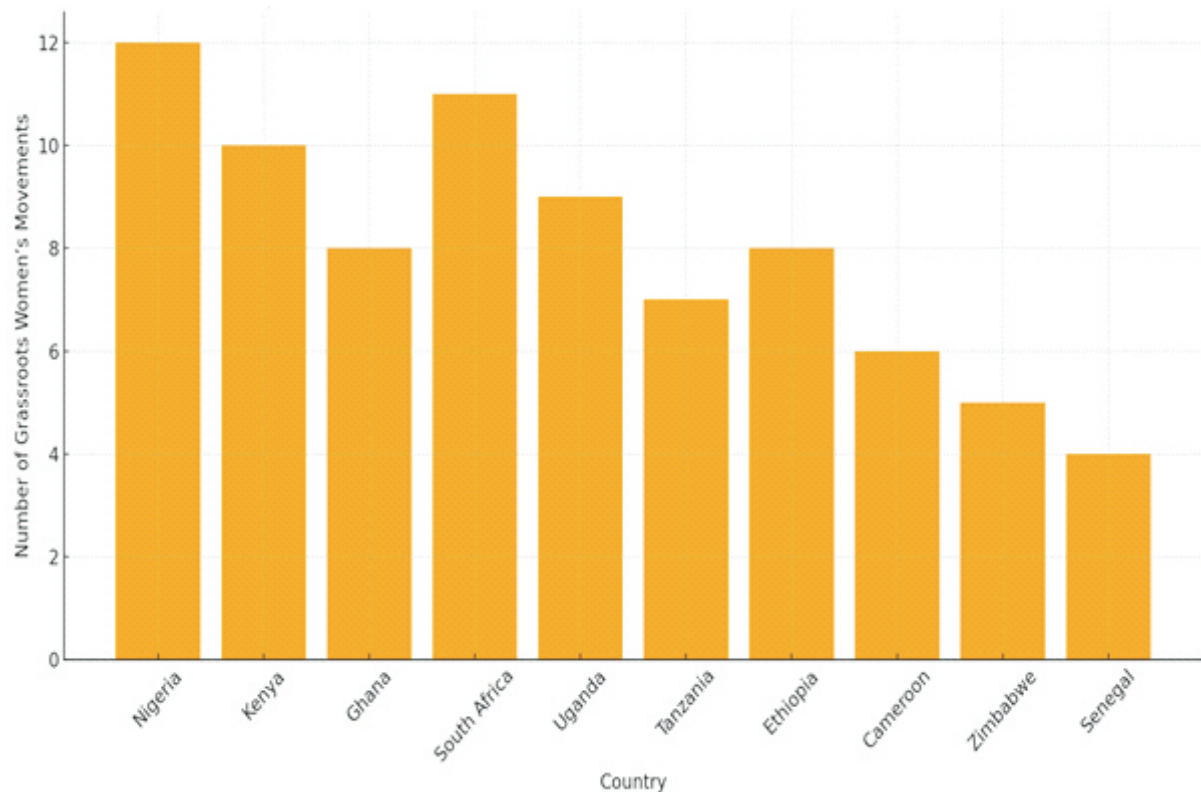**CODESRIA, African Women's Development Fund (AWDF), and UN Women (2019**

Fig. 1: Grassroots women's movements across selected African countries.

The graph below shows the distribution and intensity of women's grassroots activism across these countries, highlighting disparities in activity levels, institutional engagement, and thematic focus. The graph illustrates that Nigeria, South Africa, and Kenya exhibit the highest density of organized grassroots movements, followed by Ghana, Uganda, and Tanzania. These differences can be attributed to variations in political openness, civil society infrastructure, and historical legacies of women are organizing.

How Grassroots Women's Movements engage with both formal and informal institutions to advance Developmental Change in Africa

Grassroots women's movements in Africa operate across multiple institutional spaces both formal (state institutions, policy frameworks, and legal structures) and informal (community associations, religious networks, and traditional governance systems). Their engagement reflects a hybrid strategy of negotiation, collaboration, and resistance aimed at transforming governance and development outcomes (Tripp, 2020). In Nigeria, the National Council of Women's Societies (NCWS) has historically collaborated with governmental bodies such as the

Ministry of Women Affairs to influence policy on education, maternal health, and political representation (FOMWAN, 2021). Similarly, WRAPA has worked through traditional rulers and religious leaders to challenge discriminatory customary practices, demonstrating how informal structures can be mobilized to advance gender equity. In Kenya, the Maendeleo ya Wanawake Organization has served as a conduit between local women's groups and formal political systems, securing resources for rural women through partnerships with governmental and international agencies (Tsikata, 2019).

In South Africa, the Rural Women's Movement (RWM) and Sonke Gender Justice have directly engaged with legislative institutions to ensure gender-sensitive policies in land reform, housing, and justice delivery. Meanwhile, informal women's collectives within the townships have continued to press for accountability and service delivery. In Uganda, FOWODE has institutionalized the practice of gender-responsive budgeting by training local government officials and ensuring women's priorities are reflected in national and district budgets (Ampofo, 2019). These examples illustrate how grassroots movements function as mediators between communities and the state, ensuring that development is inclusive and reflective of gendered realities.

How Internal Heterogeneity Shapes Priorities, Strategies, and Developmental Outcomes

Internal heterogeneity within women's movements comprising class, ethnicity, age, and political orientation plays a significant role in shaping movement priorities and outcomes. Africa women's movements are not monolithic; they are diverse spaces where intersecting social identities influence strategies, leadership, and representation (Mama, 2018; Crenshaw, 2020). For instance, in Nigeria, differences between urban professional women and rural market women often determine advocacy focus. While elite women may prioritize political representation and legal reforms, grassroots women emphasize livelihood empowerment and social services (Akin-Aina, 2018). In Ghana, ethnic diversity within NETRIGHT has necessitated inclusive strategies to ensure participation from both Akan-speaking and northern women. Similarly, in South Africa, the intersection of race and class remains central, with Black rural women often contesting the dominance of urban, educated elites in feminist spaces (Tamale, 2020).

Comparing Grassroots Gender Activism across selected African countries

In West Africa, movements in Nigeria and Ghana tend to focus on political empowerment and economic inclusion, often working within religious and ethnic frameworks to achieve legitimacy (Tsikata, 2019). In East Africa, movements in Kenya, Uganda, and Tanzania show strong institutional engagement through gender budgeting, reproductive rights advocacy, and civic participation (Tripp, 2020). Southern African movements in South Africa and Zimbabwe emphasize intersectionality, linking gender equality with anti-racism, labor rights, and post-apartheid reconstruction (Tamale, 2020) and the factors that enable or constrain these movements include political freedom, donor support, legal environments, and cultural norms. Countries with robust civil society laws and democratic institutions, such as South Africa and Ghana, have provided enabling environments for activism. Conversely, in contexts with authoritarian tendencies or religious conservatism, such as parts of northern Nigeria or Sudan,

women's activism often encounters repression, forcing movements to adopt informal, covert, or faith-based strategies (Mama, 2018; Ampofo, 2019). Despite these disparities, a unifying pattern emerges and grassroots women's movements across Africa remain vital to redefining development as a participatory and gender-inclusive process. They have transformed not only institutional structures but also consciousness and social values creating new frameworks for understanding justice, empowerment, and citizenship at the community level (Kabeer, 2020; Tripp, 2020).

Conclusion

This study concludes that grassroots women's movements are necessary for developmental change across Africa by functioning as bridges between marginalized communities and formal governance systems and ensuring that development reflects the real needs and experiences of women. The findings also show that internal diversity such as differences in class, ethnicity, and political orientation also made these movements more adaptive and inclusive, enabling them to represent a broad range of women's voices. However, their success depends largely on the socio-political environment, as movements in countries with more open and democratic systems, such as Ghana and South Africa, tend to achieve stronger policy impacts than those in more restrictive settings. Overall, grassroots women's movements have redefined development in Africa as a participatory and inclusive process rooted in gender justice and community empowerment.

Recommendations

From the findings of this study, the study recommends that; Governments across African countries should establish formal partnerships with grassroots women's movements by integrating their leadership into local governance councils, development planning boards, and policy implementation committees. Also, International organizations, donor agencies, and national institutions should provide targeted funding, training, and technical support to grassroots women's groups. Thirdly, policymakers should adopt gender-responsive and community-driven frameworks that recognize the role of informal institutions and cultural systems in shaping women's development.

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