

Conclusion



Perhaps all groups of people throughout history have organized their societies in at least some way around sex, that is, the biological categories we label as “men” and “women” in the English-speaking world. (There have always been groups of people who overlapped, confounded, or transcended sexual categories, such as intersex or non-binary people, but rarely if ever have societies been organized around their experiences.) That being said, the social, cultural, political, and economic ideas we attach to sexual categories—what we call gender—vary from society to society. Expected or “proper” behavior for “women” and “men,” as well as what is considered “women’s work” and “men’s work,” has differed from place to place throughout time. These ideas are contextual rather than biological; they are social rather than sexual. They survive because people actively and continually choose to reproduce them. Such production can be done either consciously or unconsciously. People can embrace, conform, and acquiesce to ideas about gender. They can also reject, contest, and subvert them.

Conclusion



Empress of Ethiopia, Taytu Betul, photographed sometime before 1918.

When Europeans formally colonized most of Africa at the end of the 19th century, they exported to the continent their own ideas about gender. It is not that Europeans were patriarchal while Africans were matriarchal—in fact, most African societies were based in the notion that men held political power—but rather that patriarchy as a social system can look different all over the world. In an African context, it was more common for certain types of work, particularly agricultural and commercial work, to be viewed as “women’s work.” Other types of work, like participating in warfare, were not exclusively viewed as “men’s work.” This explains why women leaders in both the military and the market—for example, Lalla Fatma N’Soumer in Algeria, Taytu Betul in Ethiopia, the Mino in Da-

homey, or Madame Nwanyeruwa in Nigeria—have been more common in African societies than they have been in European ones.



The Dahomey Mino, c. 1891.

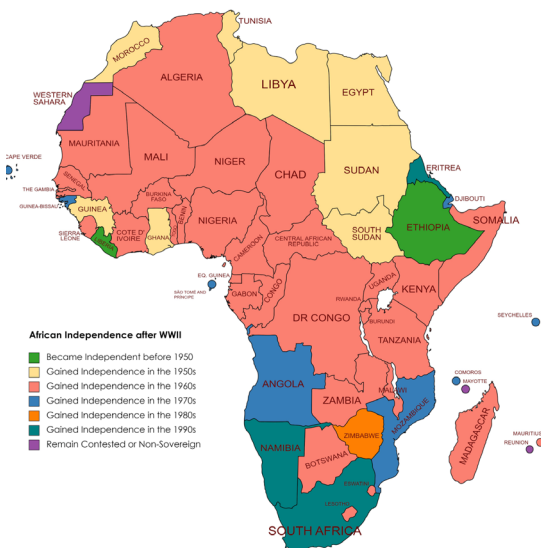
Ideas about gender were important to Europeans securing and maintaining their power in Africa. On the one hand, they reshaped political and commercial spaces as “men’s spaces” to the best of their ability. European colonists generally refused to engage with women in trade or negotiate with them in political treaties because they found doing so “unnatural” and “embarrassing.” For example, when British policymakers devised a plan to rule their colonies through African chiefs as intermedi-

aries, they allowed only men to serve in the office of “warrant chief.” On the other hand, Europeans understood that the coding of agricultural work as “feminine” in Africa was beneficial to achieving their economic objectives. As such, they kept women in the fields across their colonies, from cotton plantations in Malawi to palm oil plantations in Ghana. They did this while understanding they would have disapproved of encouraging white women to do the same work in Europe. Meanwhile, colonizers also assigned African men to their plantations in order to maximize their number of field laborers. This had the added effect of “feminizing” African men, who found themselves forced to perform work they viewed as “women’s work,” sometimes with the extra indignity of working under the supervision of white women as settlers.



Tea plantation in South Africa, c. 1890-1910.

Africans resisted Europeans' intervention in their societies from the very beginning, even in the early-modern period, a time when foreign intervention rarely amounted to formal colonialism. And yet, World War II marked a turning point in the histories of resistance to colonialism on the continent. Colonial powers were devastated by six years of intense fighting in Europe and backed into a corner by their own wartime promises of development and pronouncements of self-determination. Meanwhile, they found little support for continuing formal colonialism



Dates of independence in Africa after World War II, with modern national borders indicated.

from the world's new superpowers, and they faced a new set of pressures from the colonies themselves. Among these pressures was the prospect and, in certain cases, the reality of violent anti-colonial wars that threatened to stain their international reputations and destabilize their trading positions. Equally important was the emergence of a new generation of African leaders, educated mostly in the West, who made use of the latest technologies to organize political parties across ethnic lines. Weighing all of these challenges together, most European empires reluctantly decided to embrace the path of decolonization. In just a quarter of a century after World War II, from 1945 to 1970, 40 independent countries emerged in

Africa. In the final analysis, there were numerous factors that contributed to this rapid decolonization but, without a doubt, one of them was the organized resistance of Africans themselves, some of them veterans of World War II.

There are at least two common misconceptions in the United States today about this revolutionary period of African history. The first misconception is that ending European colonial rule in Africa most commonly required warfare. This is not true. In fact, of the 54 nations that became independent across the continent from 1945 to 1994, only a handful of them did so by waging direct warfare against European colonizers. Warfare against European empires was the exception, not the rule, in the age of decolonization. It unfolded almost exclusively in what we call “settler societies,” places in Africa where Europeans had come not only to extract wealth, but also to make their permanent homes. In these cases, it was the white settler communities who compelled their respective imperial governments in their European metropolises to wage wars on their behalf, in defense of their racial powers and privileges, long after those governments might have otherwise decolonized. From Namibia to Zimbabwe to Mozambique, Africans fought direct wars against Europeans and their descendants in the colonies not only for political independence, but for access to land in the context of settler colonialism.

The second common misconception is that revolutionary activity in Africa was primarily or exclusively “men’s work.” Few people in the United States know much about African history in the second half of the 20th century. That is not their fault, of course, but rather a failure of the American education system, which typically marginalizes and stereotypes Africa as a region characterized by

disease, poverty, and instability. Those who do know something about this period of history most likely associate it with “great men” like Jomo Kenyatta of Kenya, Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana, Julius Nyerere of Tanzania and, most famously, Nelson Mandela of South Africa. Few people understand that women participated fully in all revolutionary movements for decolonization.

Crucially, this misconception that revolutionary activity was “men’s work” is reinforced by the fact that women were excluded from the highest offices of the new African nations. Of the 54 nations that were created in the second half of the 20th century (including Western Sahara, today claimed by Morocco), not one of them had a woman as head of state. An African country did not elect a woman to top leadership until 2006, when Ellen Johnson Sirleaf became the 24th president of Liberia following that country’s civil war. Sirleaf’s election represents a recent trend in Africa, in which electorates disillusioned by social violence attempt to chart a new path forward by embracing the idea of women’s political leadership. Rwanda is another example. Following the genocide of 1994, Rwandans elected a higher percentage of women to parliament than any other country of the world. Still, these cases are reactions against the norm. For all that Africa’s revolutionary generation rejected from their former colonizers at independence, they seem to have retained the colonial idea that politics is “men’s work.”

The misconception that revolutionary activity was “men’s work” in Africa is harmful for two reasons. First, it erases the contributions that revolutionary women like Zohra Drif, Wambui Otieno, and Miriam Makeba made to their nations’ respective independence movements. No less than the men whom they organized alongside, these women risked their lives to fight for their principles and their peoples’ freedom. It is disrespectful to forget that.

Perhaps less obvious, however, is the fact that coding revolutionary activity as “men’s work” will misrepresent the history of resistance itself. Although women did all kinds of work for independence, those like Drif, Otieno, and Makeba specifically performed work that only they could perform due to colonial ideas about sex and gender. Drif, Otieno, and Makeba understood how “men” and “women” were viewed by Westerners. They used these perceptions strategically to infiltrate spaces undetected. In doing so, they smuggled weapons and intelligence, orchestrated attacks, and influenced public opinion. If we make the same mistake that European colonizers made—of coding revolutionary activity as “men’s work”—



Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, 24th President of Liberia from 2006-2018.

then we risk missing out on one of the most important lessons these women have to teach us. For those in power, the people around you are not always who or what they seem. And for those in resistance, there is no greater advantage than understanding how your adversary sees you.

Image Citations

Page 1:

Women protest Apartheid in South Africa, 1956, Dutch National Archives, Public Domain, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Collectie_Fotocollectie_Afdrukken_ANEFO_Rousel_fotonummer_157-0188_Bestanddeelnr_157-0188.jpg

Page 2:

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Page 3:

Devin Leigh, Map Tracing Independence in Africa After World War II, made by author in MapChart, 2024.

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