

WOMEN'S WISDOM AND THEIR ROLE IN AFRICAN POLITICS: BETWEEN PAST AND PRESENT – SAMIA SULUHU AS A CASE STUDY

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Abstract:

African women have historically played a pivotal role in shaping African society, enjoying, for a long period, a distinctive status that often surpassed that of their counterparts elsewhere. They are widely credited with establishing agrarian systems, which provided the economic and social bedrock upon which broader societal structures were built and ultimately gave rise to civilizations. In early African communities, women were regarded as the cornerstone of both family formation and continuity. Nevertheless, the role of women across the continent has never been uniform; it has varied significantly across countries and regions, shaped by distinct local customs, traditions, historical experiences, cultural practices, and religious frameworks. Accordingly, the status and roles of women in North Africa differ markedly from those in East, West, Central, and Southern Africa, even though the essence of womanhood and its inherent identity remain constant across the continent. At the same time, many African states are experiencing profound political transitions that significantly impact stability at the local, regional, and international levels. These shifts underscore the need for comprehensive and multidimensional strategies to address instability and its wide-ranging consequences. Within this framework, the question of women's participation in political transitions has gained increasing prominence, particularly with regard to their integration into peace processes and the effective promotion of their involvement across all stages and at every level of decision-making.

Keywords: Africa- women's role- Samia Suluhu

Introduction:

One of the most critical challenges confronting women today lies in the risk of their efforts being fragmented or their participation channeled into directions that ultimately prove counterproductive both to themselves and to their societies. This underscores the importance of prioritizing not simply the quantity of participation, but the quality of engagement—ensuring that it is constructive, empowering, and conducive to genuine development. Such an approach must be grounded in sound principles and guided by clearly defined parameters. It also necessitates a careful examination of the underlying perspectives, evaluating the extent to which their conceptual frameworks align with universal human values, natural dispositions, psychological well-being, and a balanced understanding of individual roles and responsibilities.

It also entails consideration of the general characteristics shared by both genders, alongside the specific attributes and distinctions of each, which complement one another in sustaining human life and fulfilling its public and private functions. This perspective leads to assigning appropriate roles to both men and women, without negating or diminishing the principle of equality in their shared humanity.

These perspectives, in turn, constitute the parameters shaping the status of African women and their effectiveness in advancing the continent. Indeed, the effectiveness of women is contingent upon their social position, which is itself shaped by prevailing beliefs, cultural norms, traditions,

and external influences, as well as by the material conditions and surrounding circumstances to which they are subject, and the transformations and developments they undergo over time.

Women constitute half of the population and, accordingly, embody half of society's productive potential. It has therefore become imperative that they participate in national development on an equal footing with men. The status of women is now widely recognized as a key indicator of a society's level of progress and development. Since the early 1970s, international forums have placed growing emphasis on women's issues, highlighting the necessity of securing their central role in advancing social, economic, health, and political conditions. It is important to recognize, however, that women's participation in the development process is largely determined by a constellation of interrelated factors that influence their capacity and readiness to engage. Foremost among these are the prevailing social and cultural frameworks that shape women's roles, the level of economic development attained within society, and the orientation of state policies toward women. These factors interact in dynamic ways, collectively shaping women's status and exerting a direct impact on the extent and quality of their participation in development across multiple domains.

The role of women in Tanzania does not differ markedly from that of their counterparts elsewhere on the African continent, particularly concerning the obstacles and challenges they encounter in securing their legal and constitutional rights. Nonetheless, Tanzanian women have consistently sought to demonstrate their capacity to bring about meaningful change in the political, economic, and social spheres when afforded the opportunity to exercise and prove their competence in these domains. In this context, Samia Suluhu emerges as a prominent example of an African woman who has ascended to the highest levels of state leadership. Since assuming the presidency of Tanzania in 2021, she has left a distinctive imprint on the political landscape, with her influence reflected in the policies she has pursued both domestically and internationally.

Study Significance

This research highlights the role of women in African politics and their influence on shaping public policies. It selects Samia Suluhu as a case study, being the first woman to assume the presidency in East Africa and examines her impact on the political landscape.

Research Objectives:

1. To shed light on the political experience and role of Samia Suluhu.
2. To understand the factors that facilitated the rise of African women to leadership positions.
3. To assess the impact of women leaders on political and social development in Africa.

Research Problem:

How has Samia Suluhu contributed to reshaping perceptions of women's roles in African politics?

What challenges have African women faced in entering the political arena?

Hypotheses:

1. Samia Suluhu has contributed to women's empowerment and encouraged their active participation in political life.
2. Social and cultural challenges have significantly influenced women's presence in African politics.
3. Women's participation in political leadership positions enhances both political and social reform.

Research Methodology:

This study employs two methodological approaches:

- **The Descriptive-Analytical Method**, to study and analyze the role of Samia Suluhu in Tanzanian politics.
- **The Historical Method**, to trace the evolution of African women's participation in political life.

Section One – Women in African Societies: Status and Political Role

The complexities multiply when addressing issues related to women in general, and African women in particular, as well as their role in life from a fair and objective perspective. These complexities are especially evident at the levels of understanding, analysis, and evaluation, given that facts related to women are often subject to distortions, contradictions, and limited interpretations. Moreover, the diversity of reference frameworks, the criteria against which women's status is measured, and the occasional lack of impartiality contribute further to this complexity. Added to this is the variation in realities from one environment to another, and from one historical period to the next, alongside the multiplicity of factors influencing women's position in society.

Consequently, the issue of women, their status, and their role in life has become one of the most prominent arenas of civilizational contestation and cultural interaction, where the distinctiveness of each nation in structuring its society and shaping its relations according to its beliefs, customs, and traditions is often obscured. In Africa, more than one perspective exists for representing women's lives: some are rooted locally, others are imported from external environments, while others are shared across civilizations and the histories of nations and peoples, the most significant of which is the dominance and authority of religion.

According to a World Bank report, women constituted 51.1% of Africa's total population in 2011. This demographic proportion presents both challenges and constraints for the continent's advancement, while at the same time offering women the potential to play a decisive role in the progress of African societies and the continent. This, however, depends on the degree of attention accorded to women and their developmental role, and on the prioritization of such concerns within planning and strategic agendas across diverse sectors. Population size, after all, is among the most important indicators of comprehensive and sustainable development, alongside efficiency, participation, and individual initiative. (Kamel, 2014, pp. 189–197).

The role of women in the development process is largely determined by the socio-cultural environment surrounding them, the level of economic development achieved within society, and state policies concerning women. These factors interact to shape the economic and political conditions of women, which in turn directly influence their participation in development. In Africa, women's economic conditions are generally lower than those in many other regions of the world, with considerable disparities and variations across the continent's regions and countries. This reality stems from structural imbalances within societal systems. It is therefore essential to emphasize raising public awareness of the importance of women's labor, while also providing them with adequate training and capacity-building opportunities that would enhance their competitiveness in the labor market. This includes directing women toward fields of study that align with labor market demands and encouraging the private sector to employ women. Equally important is the promotion of women's skills in political leadership, alongside addressing political violence, gender-role stereotypes, and discrimination rooted in social norms. These measures are

indispensable for empowering women politically and overcoming the challenges that continue to impede African women's participation in political life. (Dughaim, 2021, pp. 241–275).

First: Determinants of Women's Social Reality

1. Socialization: The tribe constitutes one of the most significant components of the social structure in Africa, and the socialization of women represents a crucial factor shaping their status. This socialization is essentially tribal and ethnic in nature, governed by customs and traditions that serve as general frameworks defining women's status, roles, functions, and social relations.

The family, likewise, stands as an important unit within the customs and traditions of every tribe, functioning as an institution of social solidarity. Its foundations are not limited to economic structures alone but also extend to moral values and social bonds. In this context, fieldwork emerges as one of the core elements of traditional social relations in Africa, directly reflected in women's participation in various roles, whether in agriculture, pastoral activities, or social support. Such contributions strengthen women's position and underscore their role in community building. Women's status and participation in the development of their communities and in advancing the continent cannot be understood apart from the broader social, cultural, economic, and political structures of African societies. These frameworks are inseparable from ethnicity, tribal affiliation, customs, and traditions, as well as from prevailing social systems, which often exhibit significant cultural similarities across regions. Consequently, many customary practices observed in one country may also be found in another with similar social conditions, though secondary differences undoubtedly exist.

Thus, the impact of the tribe and its role in the socialization of women varies across environments: in urban societies, the influence of tribal customs and traditions is relatively diminished compared to rural communities, where such factors remain more pronounced. As a result, women's participation in urban areas tends to shift toward other domains.

2. Infrastructure and Services: One of the key factors limiting the role and effectiveness of African women in advancing the continent is the weakness of basic infrastructure—particularly in energy, transportation, water, and sanitation—alongside pressing environmental challenges such as drought, desertification, epidemics, and disease. Added to these are the burdens of daily life, especially the time and effort consumed in mobility, which accounts for nearly 65% of household time.

For example, women spend an average of 700 hours per year fetching water in Ghana, 500 hours in Tanzania, and 200 hours in Zambia. Given that water constitutes a fundamental component in food preparation as well as in household and market-based economies in which women are primarily engaged, limited access to water not only exacerbates women's time poverty but also has profoundly negative impacts on their overall living conditions. (Al-Aqeed, 2013, p. 21)

4. Weak Business Organization

Women in Africa continue to constitute the majority of the poor and disadvantaged, often without access to land, while facing unemployment or being confined to the informal sector, all the while bearing the burden of caregiving responsibilities. Despite these challenges, African women have demonstrated remarkable resilience in managing their own small businesses.

According to the African Union, approximately 25% of the gross domestic product (GDP) of African countries is lost to corruption, a factor that undermines tax revenues and directly impacts the provision of social services, welfare, and social protection. Within this context, African women

entrepreneurs—particularly those operating small-scale enterprises—frequently report low demand for their products and limited access to markets due to poor roads and transportation systems. Moreover, they often lack essential market information on products and inputs, while also facing the absence of improved preservation technologies and storage facilities near markets, all of which create serious obstacles to increasing production.

Although African women participate in various forms of associations within both the formal and informal sectors, as well as within social organizations, their overall economic contribution remains weak. This is largely because these associations—where resources and labor are pooled to enhance production and foster social networking—tend to have limited capacities, with their primary focus directed more toward social interests than toward developing effective solutions to support women’s small-scale enterprises.

5. The Reality of Education

Women account for one-third of the illiterate population in Africa, despite the clear link between women’s economic empowerment and the alleviation of caregiving burdens. Early childhood development has received less than 0.1% of government budget allocations across Africa, according to the United Nations Development Programme’s *Human Development Report* (2016). While half of all African countries have achieved gender parity in primary school enrollment, concerns persist regarding high dropout rates among children, particularly in West Africa, where educational outcomes reveal a gender gap of nearly 50%. At the secondary level, enrollment rates tend to favor boys in most African states.

Although the gender gap in secondary and tertiary education has widened—largely due to social obligations, economic responsibilities of family support, and domestic caregiving, some countries have begun to introduce incentives to encourage girls to pursue education, particularly in applied sciences and engineering

5. Customs and Traditions: The roles of African women in society have historically been subordinate to those of men, despite their substantial economic and social responsibilities in traditional communities. From childhood, women were socialized to comply with the wishes of their fathers, brothers, husbands, and, at times, other male figures beyond these immediate circles. This process reinforced women’s dependency on men across most aspects of public life. At the same time, however, women bore primary responsibility for childcare and the cultivation of staple crops.

African women also face significant deficits in health services. In many communities and countries, the majority of women do not use any form of contraception. Furthermore, women are frequently subjected to sexual and physical abuse by their partners without legal or social protection, particularly in remote rural areas. In addition, women and girls—across various age groups, typically between 10 and 45 years, depending on the community—are exposed to female genital mutilation (FGM) practices.

Beyond this, a multitude of customs and traditions, unique to each community, continue to pose existential challenges for women, creating numerous barriers and hardships that hinder their ability to achieve self-realization, pursue their goals, and live a free and dignified life. (Mahmoud, 2021, p. 582).

Second – Women’s Active Political Role: Many African countries are undergoing rapid political transformations that directly affect stability at the local, regional, and international levels, necessitating the adoption of multiple approaches to address these volatile circumstances and their

repercussions. Within this context, the issue of women's participation throughout the stages of political transitions has gained increasing prominence, particularly in peace negotiations. Emphasis is consistently placed on the need to integrate women into peace processes and to ensure the activation of their participation at all stages and across all levels.

International charters and resolutions have supported the principles of including women in peace negotiations, stressing the necessity of preventing violations and acts of violence targeting them during and after periods of conflict, as well as affirming the importance of supporting their integration into peacebuilding efforts. Such integration is crucial to ensuring the success and inclusiveness of peace outcomes, as the consequences of wars and conflicts extend beyond the immediate parties to encompass entire societies, leaving victims and affected populations across all classes and age groups.

Conflicts have an especially profound impact on women's lives, socially and economically, as they are frequently subjected to widespread violations manifested in inhumane practices of persecution, violence, and degrading exploitation. Women's participation in peacebuilding processes therefore, strengthens the capacity of peacemakers, as women are often the most accurate representatives of the social reality during and after conflict, and the most aware of urgent needs arising under unstable living conditions imposed by war.

Hence, the inclusion of women in peacebuilding and negotiation processes is critical to advancing social justice and equality, and to achieving outcomes that genuinely address the pressing needs emerging from lived realities. (Nasraoui et al., 2018, pp. 2–16)

At the end of the Second World War in 1945, nearly all African countries were still under colonial rule or colonial administration. With the establishment of the United Nations in 1945 and its subsequent efforts, Africa gradually attained independence. Today, the African Union comprises 55 independent member states.

In 1985, the World Conference to Review and Appraise the Achievements of the United Nations Decade for Women was held in Nairobi under the theme "*Equality, Development, and Peace.*" The conference was convened at a time when the movement for gender equality had gained global recognition. Some 15,000 representatives of non-governmental organizations participated in a parallel forum, and the event was described by many as the "birth of the global women's movement."

Acknowledging that the goals of the Mexico Conference had not been adequately achieved, 157 participating governments adopted the *Nairobi Forward-looking Strategies for the Advancement of Women to the Year 2000*. The conference thus laid the groundwork for the recognition of all relevant issues as women's issues.

On July 11, 2003, the Assembly of Heads of State and Government of the African Union, during its second ordinary summit held in Maputo, Mozambique, adopted the *Protocol on the Rights of Women in Africa*, annexed to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights. This protocol affirmed that states parties are to prohibit all forms of discrimination based on race, ethnicity, color, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, wealth, birth, or any other status.

Furthermore, Article 18 of the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights calls upon all member states to eliminate every form of discrimination against women and to ensure the protection of their rights as enshrined in international agreements. Women's rights are thus recognized and guaranteed by all major international human rights instruments, particularly the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, the *Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of*

Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) and its Optional Protocol, the *African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child*, along with all other international conventions and treaties relevant to women's rights as an inseparable, inalienable, and indivisible component of human rights. (Samina, 2015, p. 440)

In the same context, the past three decades have witnessed growing attention to the issue of gender equality in all fields by relevant international bodies, which have treated it as a fundamental pathway toward achieving just and inclusive development. This international concern has reverberated in the national agendas of many African states, leading to the issuance of strategies and national action plans to promote gender equality. However, the gap remains wide between the adoption of such strategies and their implementation on the ground. Women's political participation and representation in decision-making positions within executive and representative bodies—as well as in civil society—remain limited. This shortfall, in turn, hinders their effective contribution to shaping public policies and legislation, thereby undermining equal participation between men and women, a prerequisite for the realization of democracy.

Moreover, the unity of Africa, and the integration of its countries, peoples, and youth, are indispensable for progress. In January 2015, the Heads of State and Government of the African Union, meeting in Ethiopia, adopted *Agenda 2063: The Africa We Want*. This blueprint is designed to be translated into concrete goals, milestones, targets, actions, and measures, aimed at enabling Africa to maintain its focus and commitment to the ideals envisioned by the continent within the context of a rapidly changing world. The plan was prepared with the participation of 54 AU member states to build a prosperous and united Africa, founded on shared values and a collective future.

The vision of *Agenda 2063*, under the theme “*The Africa We Want*,” is premised on achieving African development across all levels and in all sectors, through complete regional integration and the creation of employment opportunities for all Africans. Its objectives include resolving conflicts and wars, eradicating poverty, and ensuring a better future for all. Within this framework, AU member states have sought to strengthen women's political participation and access to decision-making positions. The African strategy explicitly emphasizes the political empowerment of women and the enhancement of their leadership roles by encouraging their participation in politics in all its forms, including parliamentary representation at both national and local levels. It further calls for the elimination of discrimination against women in assuming leadership positions in executive and judicial institutions, as well as the preparation of women to succeed in these roles and the overall promotion of female leadership. (Report, 2014)

Since the beginning of the twenty-first century, numerous female leaders have emerged across Africa, aspiring to assume greater roles in governance and national leadership. These women have confronted gender-based discrimination and grounded their struggles in the principles of human rights, justice, freedom, and dignity—values enshrined in constitutions and safeguarded by both domestic and international legal frameworks. Indeed, thanks to persistent efforts by women, African states have begun to witness women ascending to the highest levels of political authority, accompanied by remarkable achievements in politics, economics, human rights, and other spheres. In this context, Ellen Johnson Sirleaf became the first democratically elected female president of both Liberia and Africa in 2006. A pioneer in the promotion of peace, justice, and democratic governance, Sirleaf dedicated formidable efforts to advancing women's empowerment across all spheres of life and expanding their representation in leadership roles throughout Africa. She achieved major milestones in post-conflict reconstruction and development in Liberia, including

the repayment of all national debt within five years—an accomplishment that contributed to her being awarded the Nobel Peace Prize.

Similarly, in 2012, Joyce Banda was elected as the first female president of Malawi and the second on the continent. Banda quickly emerged as one of Africa's most powerful women leaders and gained international recognition as a global figure of influence. She played a vital role in advancing development and promoting women's rights in Malawi and beyond, as well as in establishing key institutions to support this agenda, including the African Federation of Women Entrepreneurs—now operating in 41 African states—and the African Women's Economic Empowerment Council. That same year, Nkosazana Dlamini-Zuma assumed the presidency of the African Union, becoming the first woman to lead the organization. African women also played decisive roles in subsequent years, most notably with the election of Catherine Samba-Panza as transitional president of the Central African Republic in 2014. Samba-Panza emerged as a prominent female leader in conflict resolution and peace mediation at local, regional, and international levels. She successfully restored stability and peace in her country, revitalized the weakened civil administration, and organized free and fair elections. She has continued to play an active role in women's leadership, mediation, and conflict prevention, widely sharing her experiences to inspire others. (Alaa, 2021)

Following a distinguished career across local, regional, and international positions, **Sahle-Work Zewde** ascended to the presidency of Ethiopia in 2018, having been unanimously elected by members of parliament. She thus became the first woman in the country's history to hold this office. Her presidency has been marked by a strong commitment to peacebuilding and poverty eradication, with an emphasis on full participation of women.

More broadly, African women have assumed leadership roles in global institutions such as the United Nations, the World Trade Organization, the African Union Commission, and other regional and international bodies. Their contributions have been instrumental in addressing critical issues including peacebuilding, gender equality, food security, and climate change across the continent. The increasing participation of women in political life represents a pivotal factor in advancing gender equality and empowering women. Female political actors are often at the forefront of advocating for the rights of women, children, and families. (Ezzat et al., 2017, p. 18)

Third – Challenges and Success Factors for Women

Women continue to face numerous obstacles that constitute a fundamental barrier to their persistent efforts to fulfill their optimal societal role. These challenges hinder their participation across various social, economic, and political spheres. Overcoming such barriers requires a more comprehensive understanding of women's status and capabilities—resources through which they can play a central role in development and progress at all levels. However, these aspirations often encounter structural and societal impediments that prevent women from attaining positions that reflect the magnitude of their natural role and the social environment in which they operate.

A – Challenges

1. **External interventions in the African women's issue**, particularly the imposition of United Nations frameworks and legal standards based on its own policies and criteria, which may not always align with local contexts.
2. **Tribal customs and traditions** that contradict religious and legal principles often restrict women's potential and dissipate their capabilities.

3. **Low levels of awareness among women**, coupled with inadequate educational and healthcare services, as well as the hardships they face, in addition to **environmental risks** that adversely impact women's ability to play an active role in society.
4. **The persistence of a demeaning view of women** in some African societies, which reinforces gender gaps within the community and further weakens women's roles, making them more vulnerable to exploitation.
5. **Westernization**, which influences educated African women to adopt Western lifestyles, social norms, and legal models, often viewing them as the ideal for modernization and legislative development.
6. **Conflicts and wars**, which lead to the destruction of infrastructure, insecurity, and instability—factors that particularly affect women and families.
7. **Framing women's issues within a fabricated conflict** against religion and moral values, using women as instruments to undermine the foundations of family and society.
8. **The distortion of the family institution**, portraying it as an obstacle to women's human development and suggesting that motherhood, childbirth, and childcare are hindrances to women's effectiveness in community development. (Al-Bajouri, 2020, pp. 144–153)

B – Success Factors

1. **The need to design scalable and impactful programs** at both regional and national levels. These strategies should specifically address women's issues and ensure inclusive benefits—particularly through the implementation of major flagship projects.
2. **Accelerating funding and building institutional capacities**, including support for civil society organizations, is a core continental priority. This complements gender-related programs aimed at achieving gender equality, especially at a time when the role of such initiatives is more critical than ever. Continued commitment is needed to support efforts that strengthen these institutions.
3. **Identifying strategic partnerships and synergies**, including enhancing relationships with international development partners, the private sector, media, civil society, as well as religious and cultural organizations. There is also a need to leverage existing networks and programs to support the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).
4. **Conducting innovative campaigns and ongoing dialogues** to transform social norms. Given that patriarchal power structures lie at the heart of gender inequality, future efforts must focus on reshaping these societal norms.
5. **Eliminating inconsistencies between legal provisions and practices** that undermine institutional performance and restrict women's efforts within legal systems to occupy more prominent roles in public life.
6. **Mobilizing all members of society to promote political and social accountability**, which is a fundamental and central component of Africa's strategic framework, particularly as outlined in **Agenda 2063**.
7. **Creating equal opportunities across social, political, and economic spheres** to strengthen women's political participation. This represents the only viable path to altering the status quo and progressing into other domains, such as economic and social development.
8. **Documenting and disseminating successful experiences**, while developing innovative methods to measure progress and reinforce best practices. Programs must be continuously adapted to remain responsive to dynamic changes across all sectors. (Khasa, 2018, p. 15)

Section Two – The Role of Women in the Evolution of Tanzanian Politics

The United Republic of Tanzania is one of the African nations situated along the Indian Ocean. Geographically, it lies in the eastern-central part of the African continent, bordered to the north by Uganda and Kenya, to the west by the Democratic Republic of Congo, Burundi, and Rwanda, and to the south by Malawi, Mozambique, and Zambia. To the east, it opens onto the Indian Ocean.

As of 2022, Tanzania's population was estimated at more than 61.7 million people, with approximately 90% residing in rural areas and only about 10% living in urban centers. Linguistically, Tanzanians primarily speak Swahili, a language shaped by the fusion of Arabic and English with indigenous tongues. In addition, Arabic is spoken by some communities of Omani descent. English, however, serves as the official language in governmental institutions.

A distinctive feature of the United Republic of Tanzania lies in its commitment to freedom of belief and the principle of equality in rights and responsibilities among all ethnic groups, as a means of ensuring political stability. The state prohibits religious groups from forming political parties or adopting sectarian or ethnic slogans. This framework guarantees that each ethnic and religious community can preserve its identity and pursue its objectives without marginalizing or excluding others (Talib, 2018, pp. 74–79).

As for the political history of the country, following Tanzania's declaration of political independence in 1961 and the ascension of Julius Nyerere as President of the Republic, a single-party system was formally established in 1962 by parliamentary amendment of the constitution. Although only one party held power, the electoral system was maintained, requiring candidates to secure popular support before entering parliament.

After the union of Tanganyika and Zanzibar in 1964, the constitution of Tanganyika became the provisional constitution of the United Republic of Tanzania, remaining in force until the promulgation of the 1977 Constitution. A defining feature of this early phase was the establishment of two governments and two political parties, one in Zanzibar and another in Tanganyika.

During the single-party era, Tanzania adopted a socialist economic policy grounded in the principle of *ujamaa* (self-reliance), which sought to eliminate marginalization and economic injustice, while promoting justice, equality in wealth distribution, and equal opportunities. The aim was to preserve harmonious relations among ethnic groups. This period was also marked by strong state control over politics and the media.

In 1995, Tanzania transitioned to a multiparty system, allowing the formation of political parties (around fourteen at the time) and opening the way for political pluralism. However, given Tanzania's—and Africa's more broadly—traditional political and economic structures, the political system continued to be dominated by a single party, while the opposition remained fragmented and weak. As a result, political pluralism largely took on a formal or symbolic character, since one party consistently won elections from the introduction of multiparty politics through the 2015 elections, which brought to power the ruling party's candidate, John Pombe Magufuli.

Since then, presidential elections have been conducted through competition among party candidates under the same *first-past-the-post* system established in the single-party era. At the legislative level, however, both national and local contests in Zanzibar have been conducted through a mixed electoral system known as the "linked mixed system," which has undergone several revisions regarding the number of seats and the proportion reserved for women's representation (Lafta, 2022, pp. 30–121).

First – President Samia Hassan Suluhu

Samia Hassan Suluhu is the first woman to assume the presidency of the United Republic of Tanzania and the sixth Prime Minister of the country. Born in 1960, she held numerous political positions before becoming Vice President in 2015. In 2020, she assumed the presidency, making her the first woman to hold this office in East Africa. She is widely recognized for her strong leadership qualities and her continuous encouragement of women to pursue their aspirations. Since taking office, she has faced significant challenges and worked to address them, beginning with her government's measures to contain the COVID-19 pandemic, which was then widespread in Tanzania, followed by her efforts to reverse repressive policies that had restricted public freedoms in general and political activity in particular.

1. Early Life and Family Background

Samia Hassan Suluhu was born on January 27, 1960, on a small island belonging to Zanzibar. She thus became the first Tanzanian president from this archipelago, located off the coast of Tanganyika. She attended local schools in Zanzibar and was among the few girls of her generation to receive an education, at a time when prevailing social expectations largely confined women to the roles of wives and homemakers.

In 1978, she married Hafidh Ameir, a retired agricultural officer. The couple has four children, including their daughter Mwanawanu, who serves as a member of the Zanzibar House of Representatives.

2. Education and Academic Formation

After completing her primary education in local schools in Zanzibar, Samia finished secondary school in 1977. In 1986, she enrolled at the Institute of Development Management, University of Mzumbe, where she pursued advanced studies in public administration. She subsequently undertook a range of academic programs both in Tanzania and abroad.

In 1991, she studied at the National Institute of Public Administration in Lahore, Pakistan, followed by training at the Institute of Management for Leaders in Hyderabad, India. In 1994, she obtained a postgraduate diploma in economics from the University of Manchester in the United Kingdom. Later, in 2005, she earned a Master's degree in Community and Economic Development through a joint program between the Open University of Tanzania and Southern New Hampshire University in the United States.

3. Awards and Recognitions

In 2022, President Samia Hassan Suluhu received the **Presidential Gold Award for the Sustainable Development Goals** in recognition of her role in promoting peace and political stability in Tanzania. On May 25, 2022, she was also granted the **Babacar Ndiaye Grand Prize**, awarded by the African Development Bank, for her efforts in developing Tanzania's transportation infrastructure, including railways, airports, and road networks.

That same year, she won the **Transformational Leadership Award** at the African *MUZIK* Awards (2022), honoring her contribution to advancing the arts and cultural industries in Tanzania. She thereby became the third African head of state—and the first African woman leader—to receive this distinction.

Most recently, on October 10, 2023, she was conferred an **Honorary Doctorate** by *Jawaharlal Nehru University* in India, becoming the first Tanzanian president to receive such an honor. The recognition highlighted her pivotal role in strengthening Tanzanian–Indian relations in the

diplomatic and economic spheres, as well as her contribution to regional integration and success (Koch, 2023, pp. 5–11).

4. Political and Professional Career

Samia Hassan Suluhu began her political career in 2000, when she was appointed a member of the Zanzibar House of Representatives by the ruling party, *Chama Cha Mapinduzi* (CCM). She was later elected to the National Assembly of Tanzania. Between 2000 and 2010, she held ministerial posts, first as Minister of Women and Youth, and later as Minister of Tourism and Trade in 2010. In the same year, she was elected Member of Parliament for the Makunduchi constituency. During her tenure, she was appointed Minister of Union Affairs under President Jakaya Kikwete in 2014. That same year, she was also appointed Vice Chairperson of the Constituent Assembly, the body tasked with drafting the country's new constitution.

Suluhu's reputation grew significantly in Tanzanian politics, leading to her selection as the running mate of John Magufuli, the CCM's presidential candidate in the 2015 elections. Their ticket secured a decisive victory, making her the first woman to serve as Vice President of the Republic of Tanzania, a position she formally assumed on November 5, 2015. She and President Magufuli were re-elected for a second term in the October 2020 elections.

However, their second term began amid the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, during which President Magufuli faced strong criticism for downplaying the crisis and claiming that Tanzania was free of the virus without implementing adequate containment measures. On March 17, 2021, President Magufuli passed away, with rumors suggesting COVID-19 as the cause of death, although Suluhu officially announced that he had suffered a heart attack.

Two days later, on March 19, 2021, Samia Hassan Suluhu was sworn in before the State Council as President of the Republic, becoming the first woman to assume the presidency in Tanzania. She undertook the responsibility of completing Magufuli's remaining term, set to conclude in 2025 (Lafta, 2022, p. 151).

5. Issues Addressed by President Samia Suluhu

In addition to managing the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic, President Samia Suluhu has confronted several controversial issues inherited from the previous administration. Among them were President Magufuli's policies that barred pregnant schoolgirls from continuing their education and discouraged the use of contraceptives among women, along with broader concerns related to human rights.

President Suluhu, however, has consistently rejected being defined primarily through the lens of gender. Instead, she is recognized as a seasoned political leader with over two decades of experience, well established within Tanzanian political life—even if her reputation, until recently, had not extended significantly beyond national borders.

6. Social and Political Empowerment

Since assuming office, Suluhu has worked to reassess and amend several policies instituted by her predecessor, particularly those that curtailed personal freedoms and expanded digital surveillance. She has also undertaken measures to broaden the political space, granting opposition parties greater opportunities to engage openly in both political and media activities.

Regarding women's roles, Suluhu has endeavored to provide both political and economic support to strengthen women's empowerment in Tanzanian society. She has aimed to restore women's rightful place across all spheres—social, economic, and political—so that they may assume a larger role in development processes and in peacebuilding as drivers of progress and prosperity.

These efforts have been reinforced by state support and the active involvement of civil society organizations, both of which have played a crucial role in raising women's awareness of the importance of their effective participation in society (Koch, 2023, p. 17)

Second – Economic Reforms and Foreign Relations under President Samia Suluhu

A. The Economy

Poverty has remained one of the central issues on the agenda of Tanzania's new president. Although the country has not experienced the political upheavals that have affected many other African states, it nevertheless faces challenges similar to those across the continent, particularly widespread poverty, most acute in rural areas, where over 80% of the population resides. With a total population exceeding 64 million (2022 estimates), approximately 70% of Tanzanians live on less than two U.S. dollars a day, according to the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD). Agriculture contributes around one-quarter of the national GDP, while tourism serves as the leading source of foreign exchange.

In response, President Samia Hassan Suluhu's government has sought to implement a range of economic reforms aimed at revitalizing trade, investment, and infrastructure. Among these initiatives was the construction of a 268-cubic-meter water reservoir to irrigate 11,700 hectares of farmland, designed to improve agricultural productivity within five years of its completion. Parallel to this, her administration planned the construction of the Ngono River Dam in the Kagera region, intended to generate electricity, expand access to water, develop fisheries, mitigate floods, and secure self-sufficiency in key foodstuffs.

In May 2021, Suluhu reduced the national tax rate by one percentage point, lowering it to 8% for the 2021–2022 fiscal year. Her tenure has also coincided with renewed port activity and an increase in revenue flows; between February and July 2022, the volume of goods handled reached 8.87 million tons. Additionally, at her directive, the Tanzanian government resumed negotiations with European companies to revive the long-delayed liquefied natural gas (LNG) project, with an estimated investment of \$30 billion, which had been stalled for two years prior to her presidency (Thadeus, 2023, pp. 16–22).

B. Tanzanian Chinese Relations as a Model

Given the importance of Tanzanian Chinese bilateral relations and the extent of their development under President Samia Suluhu, the researcher has chosen this relationship as a model for examining the evolution of Tanzania's foreign policy. On January 2, 2022, President Suluhu paid an official three-day visit to China, during which she held multiple meetings with senior officials in Beijing, including President Xi Jinping. The visit was significant as it marked the first by an African leader to Beijing following the 20th Congress of the Chinese Communist Party, which confirmed Xi Jinping's third presidential term.

President Suluhu's visits, made at the official invitation of her Chinese counterpart, resulted in a series of important outcomes for Tanzanian diplomacy and external relations, including:

1. **Debt Relief and Concessional Financing:** China agreed to cancel approximately USD 13.5 million of Tanzanian debt, while also extending a new concessional loan of USD 56.7 million to complete the Zanzibar International Airport.
2. **Expanded Cooperation Agreements:** During the visit, around 15 agreements were signed, aimed at boosting bilateral trade, reducing tariffs, and facilitating market access. These agreements covered a broad range of sectors, including economy, energy, intra-African trade, and health. Both sides also reaffirmed their commitment to implementing the Memorandum of Understanding on the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which includes

upgrading and modernizing the TAZARA Railway, as well as developing Tanzania's roads, ports, railways, and wider infrastructure.

3. **Reviving the Belt and Road Initiative:** While several Western analyses had suggested a decline in momentum surrounding China's Belt and Road Initiative, Suluhu's visit raised considerable doubts about such assessments. The Chinese and Tanzanian presidents jointly underscored the importance of the "Global Development Initiative," while signing a renewed MoU on the BRI that reaffirmed mutual commitments. This step was especially significant given that Tanzania's former president had suspended many of the associated projects.
4. **Resumption of Chinese Projects in Tanzania:** The visit also led to the revival of several Chinese-backed projects, including the fifth phase of Tanzania's Standard Gauge Railway linking Mwanza to Isaka, as well as efforts to revive coal and iron ore projects previously signed with China's *Sichuan Hongda* a decade earlier. The Bagamoyo Port project, originally signed in 2013 but stalled under President Magufuli—who rejected China's demand for a 99-year lease—was also brought back into discussion (Thadeus, 2023, pp. 36–37).

Tanzanian–Chinese trade relations have experienced a marked upswing in recent years. In 2021, total bilateral trade reached approximately USD 6.74 billion—an increase of nearly 50% compared to 2020. Of this, Tanzanian exports to China accounted for around USD 600 million.

Following the expanded agreements signed during President Suluhu's visit to China, bilateral trade has continued to grow steadily. Tanzania represents not only a key market for China but also a strategic gateway to the African hinterland and the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA).

Accordingly, Tanzania has sought to reduce the prevailing trade imbalance with China. This objective is reflected in the new agreements signed during Suluhu's visit, which are expected to facilitate the export of Tanzanian goods and food products to China. The agreements also included tariff exemptions that could expand the range and volume of Tanzanian products entering the Chinese market. These developments align with Tanzania's current development vision, which aims to raise the contribution of the manufacturing sector to 40% of GDP by 2025 (Thadeus, 2023, p. 38).

Recommendations

1. Women in African societies continue to face numerous challenges that must be addressed to allow them to live normal and dignified lives.
2. It is essential to reduce the social and economic burdens borne disproportionately by African women.
3. Opportunities should be expanded for women to play an active role in political life, thereby contributing to the advancement and transformation of society.
4. Tanzanian politics has historically suffered from partisan pressures and ideological practices during previous eras.
5. President Samia Suluhu has had a significant impact on Tanzanian society at the economic level, particularly through the expansion of investment sectors, infrastructure development, and large-scale national projects.
6. Her policies have marked a turning point in promoting civil governance, domestic openness, and the strengthening of foreign relations with major powers.

7. Suluhu has embodied the role of Tanzanian and African women as fundamental actors in society and has actively supported women's causes in pursuit of social justice.
8. Her leadership experience demonstrates clearly the importance of women's capabilities in assuming political roles, underscoring the need to empower them to design effective policies and achieve transformative outcomes.
9. Women should also be integrated into political life in Iraq and the wider Arab world, at the highest levels, to provide opportunities for meaningful change and the advancement of political and social programs.
10. It is the responsibility of the Iraqi government and its constitutional institutions—particularly the Council of Representatives—to ensure that legislation safeguards human rights in general and women's rights in particular, with deeper attention to laws affecting social life, such as the Personal Status Law and other regulations that directly concern women's rights and their place in society.

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