

Original Research

Female identity and integration to social changes in Africa: digital access, urban participation, and strategic actions for sustainable development

Gabriel Cyrille NGUIJOI¹, Victorine Ghislaine NZINO MUNONGO^{2,c}¹National Institute of Cartography, Ministry of Scientific Research and Innovation, Yaoundé, Cameroon²Ministry of Scientific Research and Innovation, Yaoundé, Cameroon^cCorresponding author: victorineghislaine.nzinomunong@gmail.com

Abstract

This study investigates the evolving role of female identity in Africa's urban social transformation from 2000 to 2024, focusing on how women navigate gendered norms while engaging with digital technologies and participating in socio-political and economic spheres in urban settings. Using a mixed-methods approach combining gender-disaggregated data on education, political participation, formal and informal economic activity, and digital access indicators with inter-views and discourse analysis, the study reveals that although female agency has expanded, structural patriarchy, digital divides, and cultural essentialism continue to constrain transformative change. The re-search identifies an "identity paradox" in which empowerment initiatives and digital inclusion policies often coexist with persistent gendered expectations and institutional inertia. This paper introduces the concept of "adaptive agency" to describe how African women assert influence both within traditional roles and through digitally mediated urban spaces, blending modern opportunities with indigenous values to navigate socio-economic constraints. The study offers policy guidance to foster inclusive digital governance, intersectional reforms, and culturally grounded gender equity strategies that support sustainable social transformation, equitable digital access, and strengthen the participation of women in urban economies and governance.

CONTACTS

V.G.N. MUNONGO victorineghislaine.nzinomunong@gmail.com

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Résumé

Pour se développer, offrir une qualité de vie élevée, résoudre les problèmes et se numériser de manière stratégique, les villes ont besoin de stratégies, de services publics et d'informations urbaines et spatiales (IUS). Ces éléments sont essentiels pour améliorer le travail des gestionnaires municipaux et l'efficacité des citoyens. Cette recherche visait à analyser les stratégies et les services publics de la ville de Lagos et à vérifier leur conformité avec le modèle de la DDC et la politique de gestion des informations urbaines et spatiales. Une étude de cas a été menée, et les données ont été analysées à l'aide de techniques qualitatives et quantitatives. Les résultats ont révélé que Lagos disposait de 3 stratégies et de 30 services publics. Parmi ces services, 36,7 % étaient conformes au modèle de la DDC, 10 % aux IUS et 53,3 % étaient encore en attente de mise en œuvre. En conclusion, il a été recommandé que les stratégies et les services publics de la ville de Lagos soient correctement gérés et intégrés au système de gestion de l'information urbaine et spatiale conformément au modèle SDC, qu'il soit amélioré en assurant une bonne information sur le logement et l'utilisation des sols, une politique spatiale et une information géographique, une information médicale et sanitaire pour faciliter l'accès aux installations et services médicaux, un système d'information sur les transports et la gestion du trafic, entre autres recommandations.

Mots-clés : Genre, Identité Féminine, Changement Social Urbain, Accès au Numérique, Capacité d'adaptation, Intersectionnalité, Afrique.

1. Introduction

Over the last 20 years, the idea of a '*feminine African identity*' has been profoundly transformed by the influence of globalisation, the process of democratisation, the rise of urbanisation, growing education levels and access to digital technologies, which have all impacted on the social, economic and political lives of women in Africa (Mama, 2001; Tamale S., 2020). Despite this progress, gender inequality remains entrenched across the continent. The vision of inclusive development and a gender-balanced society is articulated in Agenda 2063 by the African Union (Aspiration 6). For instance, in 2022, women held only 25.5 per cent of parliamentary seats, with considerable variation between countries: Rwanda recorded 61.3 per cent, while Nigeria had just 3.6 percent (IPU Parline, 2022). Similarly, the disparity in women's participation in the labour force is stark; women are disproportionately represented in informal employment and significantly underrepresented in influential roles despite constituting 50.1 per cent of the population (World Bank, 2024).

In addition to the traditional aspects of gender inequality, modern changes to gender identity are increasingly influenced by digital technologies and urbanisation processes. In Africa, access to information, education and financial services, and access to entrepreneurial networks is increasingly possible through the use of the internet, mobile technologies and digital platforms by women. Notwithstanding, significant gender disparities remain in access to and use of digital technologies, for many women from benefiting from the emerging digital economies (ITU, 2023). At the same time, urbanisation has turned urban areas into strategic spaces where women engage in urban governance, urban initiatives, economic innovation and civic engagement. The developments here imply the negotiation of female identity in a digital and urban context, where digital inclusion and participation in the urban context are key aspects of social transformation.

This paper examines the transformation of female identity in various contexts across Africa, focusing on how women navigate traditional expectations while simultaneously asserting themselves within contemporary socio-political and economic spheres. The tension between cultural continuity and change manifests in conflicting discourses surrounding gender roles, inheritance rights, and control over procreation. Kenya provides a notable example: the 2010 constitution enshrined gender equality, yet traditional practices continue to deny many rural women the right to own land (Musangi, 2017). In Nigeria, a 2014 Supreme Court ruling affirmed daughters' inheritance rights within Igbo communities, marking significant legal progress; however, the enforcement of this ruling remains inconsistent (Nwogugu, 2014). Concurrently, African women are increasingly visible in leadership, activism, and entrepreneurship. The amplification of female voices has been facilitated by the proliferation of online platforms, as evidenced by campaigns such as Nigeria's Bring Back Our Girls and South Africa's Total Shutdown. These digital movements demonstrate how online spaces have become important arenas for civic engagement and urban mobilisation. Social media platforms increasingly facilitate women's participation in public debates, local governance processes, and collective action aimed at addressing social inequalities and promoting sustainable urban development. These

movements challenge patriarchal institutions and demand systemic change. Nevertheless, progress is often met with setbacks, including cyberstalking, political marginalisation, and gender-based violence. The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated gendered vulnerabilities, with domestic violence reaching unprecedented levels and access to reproductive health services deteriorating across the continent (UN Women, 2021).

Despite growing scholarship on gender equality in Africa, relatively limited attention has been devoted to understanding how female identity is simultaneously shaped by digital access, urban participation, and broader sustainable development agendas. Existing studies frequently examine these dimensions separately, leaving insufficient understanding of their combined influence on contemporary forms of female agency and social transformation. Based on feminist and postcolonial theories, this paper will explore how African women are portrayed as exhibiting what is termed adaptive agency, a deliberate negotiation of identity between traditional conventions and contemporary demands. The primary research question guiding this study is: *How is the female identity being reconstructed in modern Africa through digital inclusion and urban engagement?*

Are there institutional, technological and cultural obstacles to or facilitators of bringing this change? In other words, what strategic interventions and governance mechanisms are likely to increase the chances of inclusive and sustainable social development?

This study will employ a mixed-methods research approach, incorporating quantitative statistical analysis, comprehensive case studies, and discourse analysis to explore the interrelations between identity, agency, and social transformation. The resulting insights are intended to inform gender-sensitive policy formulation, facilitate inclusive governance, develop culturally grounded strategies to ensure sustainable growth, and thereby contribute to the realisation of the vision articulated in Agenda 2063 of an empowered African woman.

2. Literature review

Theoretical approaches to gender and identity in Africa have evolved from earlier feminist critiques of patriarchy to more sophisticated frameworks that incorporate post-colonial identity, intersectionality, and indigenous perspectives.

Early feminist texts, such as de Beauvoir's *"The Second Sex"* (1949), highlighted the social construction of femininity, whereas African scholars like Amadiume (1987) and Oyewumi (1997) challenged the gender binaries promoted by the West, arguing that African societies were characterised by more feminised and complementary gender systems even before colonisation. This perspective underscores the importance of context in studying female identity and its evolution. Crenshaw's (1989) intersectional theory has become central to examining how the interplay of race, class, ethnicity, and religion with gender shapes the experiences of African women. For example, Muslim women in northern Nigeria face different restrictions than Christian women in southern Africa because of differing religious and cultural laws (Para-Mallam, 2017). Similarly, rural women in Ethiopia or Mali often experience further marginalisation due to limited access to education, healthcare, or geographical isolation (World Bank, 2024).

Empirical research has produced emerging evidence that, despite policy commitments to equality, its implementation is inconsistent. The African Gender Development Index (AGDI)

indicates that, although Nigeria scores highly on gender equality in education and political representation, alongside Namibia and South Africa, other countries in the region lag significantly behind, such as Chad and the Central African Republic (UNECA, 2025). Furthermore, the World Economic Forum ranks sub-Saharan Africa second globally for economic participation and opportunity, noting that women's incomes are, on average, 23 per cent lower than men's (World Economic Forum, 2023). Gender equity is further complicated by cultural norms and legal pluralism. Although statutory laws promoting gender balance exist in most African states, customary systems often deny women access to land, inheritance, and leadership positions. For example, Uganda's 1998 Land Act grants women co-ownership of land; however, only 16 per cent of women own land independently, due to the patriarchal system of land inheritance (FAO, 2022). This exemplifies what Tamale (2008) terms legal schizophrenia, where progressive laws are undermined by deeply entrenched social norms.

While some research has explored digital inequality, online gender gaps and the ongoing exclusion of women and men from digital spaces (van Dijk, 2020; UNESCO, 2023), most previous work has centered on gaps in access, skills, or usage. The Digital Identity Paradox contributes to this discussion by emphasising the creation of empowerment and vulnerability for digitally connected women. In so doing, it moves away from the focus on technological access to the social implications of digital participation.

3. Methods

This research paper employs a mixed-methods design to examine the evolving dynamics of female identity and its integration within the context of social change in Africa between 2000 and 2024. The approach combines quantitative methods, which address gender-disaggregated indicators, with qualitative methods based on discourse analysis and on-site interviews, following Creswell's (2014) model of transformative mixed-method inquiry. Purposive sampling was used to recruit participants, which is a standard sampling method in qualitative studies to identify information-rich cases that are relevant to the research questions. The purpose of the selection was to display different views on femininity, digital inclusion, governance and social change. The participants included academic institutions, civil society groups, government institutions, women's advocacy organisations, and community-based organisations in Yaoundé. The final sample included eight policy makers, seven scholars, seven feminist activists and seven women leaders working in community and entrepreneurship.

To be eligible for participation, individuals were required to possess demonstrable experience in gender-related policy, advocacy, urban governance, digital inclusion initiatives, or community development. Participants were also required to have at least three years of professional or practical experience in their respective fields and to be willing to participate voluntarily in the study.

Ethical approval was obtained in accordance with institutional research guidelines. All participants provided informed consent before the interviews. Participation was voluntary, confidentiality was maintained, and all data were anonymised for analysis.

The quantitative component utilises data generated by international and regional agencies, such as the World Bank Gender Data Portal, the African Gender Development Index (UNECA, 2025), and the Global Gender Gap Report (World Economic Forum, 2023). Key indicators examined include female participation in the labour force, enrolment in secondary and

higher education, political participation, land ownership, and gender-based violence. To facilitate comparative analysis and highlight regional disparities, these indicators are disaggregated by geographical regions: West, East, Central, and Southern Africa. Thematic analysis was used to analyse qualitative data as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). The transcripts of the interviews, policy documents and media materials were analysed systematically, and key thematic elements of female identity, agency, access to digital technologies, urban participation, and sustainable development were identified. Data from the different sources were then compared to ensure analytical consistency and to enable triangulation.

The policy and documentary sources used involved a structured review of official publications from the African Union, UNECA, ECOWAS, SADC, national governments, UN agencies and international development organisations from 2000 to 2024. Relevance to gender equality, digital inclusion, participation in cities and sustainable development were considered when selecting the topics. A thematic database of documentary materials was created, and content analysis was used to analyse them. Indicators were quantified from international databases and integrated using descriptive statistical analysis. The data produced were displayed through comparative tables and summary statistics to depict regional trends and patterns across Africa.

Additionally, the qualitative data were analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis framework. Interview transcripts were first read repeatedly to ensure familiarity with the data. Initial codes were then generated inductively from participants' narratives and subsequently grouped into broader analytical categories. A dynamic comparison and refinement process revealed three broad themes that surfaced across the data: digital empowerment and participation, enduring structural and cultural barriers, and adaptive agency. All coding was done by hand and was constantly checked with the conceptualisation that informed the study to ensure analogous integrity and internal validity.

The study also includes a cultural examination of media discourses, social movements, and digital activism, exemplified by hashtags such as *Total Shutdown* and *End FGM*. These examples illuminate the processes of constructing, challenging, and mobilising female identity in the public sphere. The interpretative paradigm draws on and is inspired by both intersectionality theory (Crenshaw, 1989) and African feminist thought (Nnaemeka, 1998), which focus on the intersections of gender, culture, digitalisation, and power. This approach facilitates a multifaceted understanding of agency sought by African women both within and beyond traditional roles by triangulating statistical trends, policy analysis, and lived experiences. It also identifies institutional and cultural resources that can drive inclusive, gender-sensitive social change, in alignment with the vision of Agenda 2063 for a strong and egalitarian Africa.

The qualitative part is to be understood as a Cameroon-based case study rather than a representative sample of African women. The interviews were not intended to provide general information on the continent, but to provide contextually rich information that could be interpreted in conjunction with continentally-based data, regional policy frameworks, and comparative African studies. This is because the findings are not just generalised to the continental level, but also to theory-building related to female identity transformation.

4. Results

The findings reveal a persistent paradox that has persisted over time: despite significant milestones achieved by African women in education, politics, and entrepreneurship, structural

and cultural limitations continue to suppress them as an egalitarian group in addressing the entire process of social change. This section outlines key findings related to the growth of female agency, the persistence of gendered barriers, and the emergence of adaptive strategies.

4.1. Expanding Female Agency and Representation in Africa

African women have become increasingly visible in social life over the past twenty years. As of 2022, women occupied 25.5 per cent of parliamentary seats across the continent, with the highest representation recorded in Rwanda (61.3 per cent), South Africa (46.5 per cent), and Senegal (43.0 per cent) (IPU, 2022). Gender quotas have played a central role; for example, the 1995 Constitution of the Republic of Uganda reserves seats in parliament for women, contributing to a representation of 34.94 per cent (IPU, 2022). In Ethiopia, in 2018, Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed established the inaugural gender-balanced cabinet and appointed Sahle-Work Zewde as the country's first female president.

In the education sector, the percentage of girls enrolled in secondary education increased to 51 per cent in 2020 (UNESCO, 2022), compared to 39 per cent in 2000 across sub-Saharan Africa. Countries such as Botswana and Ghana have achieved near gender parity in primary and secondary education. In higher education, women constitute 43 per cent of university students across the continent; however, disparities in STEM subjects remain pronounced (World Bank Group, 2025). Women account for 58.20 per cent of the self-employed population in Africa, particularly within the informal sector (ILO, 2018). In Nigeria, women dominate agricultural processing and petty trade, while 31 per cent of small and medium-sized enterprises in Kenya are owned by women (AfDB, 2025). Furthermore, digital platforms have fostered new forms of entrepreneurship, exemplified by mobile-based money transfer services such as M-Pesa, which have expanded women's financial access in East Africa. These developments reflect not only the impact of top-down policy interventions, including the Maputo Protocol and national gender strategies, but also the activism of grassroots movements. Nevertheless, progress has been uneven across geographical areas and socio-economic groups, with women living in rural, disabled, and minority communities facing compounded disadvantages.

4.2. The Adaptive Agency and Identity Paradox

Although progress has been made, many African women still find themselves in a paradoxical situation. On the one hand, they are encouraged to participate in social life; on the other, they are expected to adhere to conventional gender roles. This duality is evident even at the political level, where female leaders have frequently been subjected to gender-based scrutiny. For example, Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, the first female elected head of state in Africa and President of Liberia, was criticised more for her gender than for her policies (Roland, 2013). In many societies, women are tolerated only insofar as they do not challenge patriarchal authority. This constraint has given rise to what can be described as adaptive agency, a strategic negotiation whereby women exercise power within the culturally acceptable limits. An illustration of the fusion of tradition and reform is found in the case of female religious leaders in Senegal, known as Soxna, who employ Islamic discourse to promote girls' education and maternal health (Gueye & Selly, 2021).

“In my community, if you challenge traditions directly, people stop listening to you. I have learned to present new ideas in ways that respect cultural expectations while still encouraging girls to pursue education and leadership opportunities” (Women's Association Leader).

This statement is an example of agency as a negotiation, not a confrontation. Participants did not totally dismiss cultural norms, but often outlined strategies to work within current social norms and structures, and increase opportunities for women over time. This discovery is aligned with Mahmood's (2005) suggestion that agency doesn't always have to be expressed as a resistance, but can also be enacted by the strategic re-negotiation of existing norms.

Similarly, Ugandan women's rights groups have reframed land rights as an issue of family well-being rather than a feminist right, which has helped them gain broader community support (Tripp, 2015). These examples illustrate how women can adapt their strategies to local contexts by employing cultural legitimacy to promote gender equity.

Table 1. Synthesis of the main emerging themes from interviews

Theme	Evidence	Representative finding
Digital empowerment	24	Mobile platforms increased civic participation
Persistent barriers	22	Cost, harassment and social norms remained obstacles
Adaptive agency	18	Women strategically negotiated traditional expectations

4.3. Empirical Aspects of the Digital Identity Paradox in Africa

The Digital Identity Paradox presented in this study is different from the traditional concept of the digital divide. The main concern of the digital divide is access to digital technology and Internet access (van Dijk, 2020). Conversely, the Digital Identity Paradox is the interplay of empowering and restricting aspects of digital participation. Digital platforms offer women new ways to be seen, to be an entrepreneur, to be civic, to be themselves, but they also make them vulnerable to new forms of exclusion, online harassment, misinformation, surveillance, and ever-present gender stereotypes. The paradox is not that one is unable to access technology, but that there are counterintuitive effects of digital inclusion.

This study's concept of a digital identity paradox is manifested in the empirical analysis through the process of triangulating the data from the statistical indicators, policy documents, and qualitative interviews, which all suggest that digital technologies are acting as both tools of empowerment and new sources of inequalities for African women. The digitalisation and urban transformation that have created opportunities to participate, become visible, and to make socio-economic gains have also imposed new limitations that persist in complex ways, impacting the identity of women. Interview respondents consistently emphasised how digital technologies can transform.

As one participant explained, *“before social media, it was difficult for me to promote my business beyond my neighbourhood. Today I can reach customers across the city and connect with other women entrepreneurs through online platforms like WhatsApp or Facebook”*.

Women are increasingly using mobile phones, social media and digital financial services to access information, build professional networks, market businesses, participate in public

debates and engage in civic projects. Digital platforms enable citizens to engage in community development initiatives, local governance and advocacy campaigns on issues such as gender-based violence, reproductive rights and economic inclusion in fast-changing urban contexts. Trends are also evident, with increased digital connectivity and women's involvement in education, entrepreneurship and public life in some African nations (ITU, 2023; World Bank, 2024).

Respondents, on the other hand, highlighted the fact that the use of digital opportunities is still very unequal.

Another respondent noted, *“having a smartphone does not mean having opportunities. Data costs are high, internet access is unstable, and many women are still discouraged from spending time online because of social expectations”*.

There are still huge challenges associated with affordability, digital literacy, internet access and socio-cultural norms on technology use among women. Some of the interviewees described how online environments can be similar to traditional environments in terms of gendered power dynamics. Cyber harassment, online intimidation, misinformation and digital exclusion were common factors that were identified as barriers to meaningful participation. Digital platforms afford women a new voice and visibility, but they also raise new vulnerabilities which can limit their involvement in public and political life (UN Women, 2021).

Especially in cities, this paradox becomes apparent. Cities are expanding digital infrastructure, education, and entrepreneurial ecosystems for women, as well as participatory governance mechanisms. These very same city environments, however, do tend to perpetuate inequalities relative to class, education, income, and gender. The interviews revealed that in certain contexts, women living in low-income and informal settlements, and in marginalised communities, are less digitally included than women living in more privileged urban areas. This means that the advantages of digital transformation do not accrue evenly.

Two interrelated dynamics were identified using thematic analysis. The first is a result of growing opportunities in the digital sphere, growing civic engagement and growing agency of women. The second is a continuation of the digital inequalities, online gender-based discrimination and structural barriers to access to resources and decision-making processes. This study has revealed the digital identity paradox, which is created by the combination of these dynamics. These processes do not take place in opposition to each other, but rather they show how African women continually engage in a process of both empowerment and exclusion in the context of increasingly digitalised and urban societies.

The findings collectively indicate that the understanding of the changing identity of women in Africa should be narrated in non-linear ways, rather than in terms of empowerment or exclusion. Rather, for women, there is an ongoing negotiation between opportunities and constraints in social, cultural, economic, and digital worlds. Both the ideas of adaptive agency and the Digital Identity Paradox offer complementary lenses for appreciating these dynamics and enrich an understanding of gender transformation in the African context.

5. Discussion

One of the most important aspects of this study is that women rarely presented empowerment as an outright rejection of cultural norms. Rather, interviewees spoke of navigating the social norms in place and extending their engagement in economic, political, and digital

realms. This pattern supports Mahmood's (2005) argument that agency may operate through the negotiation and reinterpretation of social norms rather than through direct resistance alone. The findings, therefore, extend existing debates on African feminism by demonstrating how women combine cultural legitimacy and digital opportunities to advance social change.

5.1. Bargaining within Structural Contradictions

The result is in line with the understanding of agency that Mahmood (2005) defined as the ability to act within the confines of norms rather than in opposition to them. It also provides the theoretical underpinning for current African feminist work, which focuses on context-specific and culturally-situated routes of social change (Tamale, 2020; Mikell, 2010). The study highlights the various ways women strategically embody cultural legitimacy and transformative aspirations, thereby enriching the discussion on the agency of women in African societies.

The notion of adaptive agency emerges as a crucial analytical tool for understanding how African women navigate and adapt their positions within patriarchal societies. These results are in line with recent research that has found that African women are more likely to turn to digital platforms and urban networks to navigate social conditions and are not only expanding into economic and political participation, but are increasingly sharing the same space as men in those arenas. However, Mutsvairo and Ragnedda (2019) show how digital technologies can simultaneously reinforce and promote inequalities and women's agency. Likewise, UN Women (2024) indicates that digital inclusion is a key factor in the civic and economic participation of women in African cities.

Rather than following a gradual path towards emancipation, female identity is strategically integrated into social change to accommodate and resist simultaneously. This aligns with Mahmood's (2005) argument that agency should be understood not only as resistance to domination but also as the capacity to occupy and reshape normative forms. In contexts where explicit feminist discourse may provoke backlash, women have embraced cultural appeals that promote gender equity. The examples of Senegalese Soxna leaders and Ugandan land rights activists illustrate how women mobilise religious and familial narratives to legitimise their claims. Such practices embody a form of vernacular feminism (Mikell, 2010), grounded in local epistemologies and responsive to socio-cultural realities.

5.2. The Institutional Factor and Policy Structures

Institutional reforms have played a leading role in facilitating women's integration into public life. Formal avenues for women's participation have been established through gender quotas, constitutional requirements, and regional mechanisms such as the Maputo Protocol. Nonetheless, these mechanisms can be significantly enhanced through their effective implementation and a strong political commitment to challenging entrenched gender structures. Furthermore, intersecting identities-where gender intersects with class, ethnicity, disability, and geography-compound the challenges posed by such reforms. For example, rural women are often excluded from decision-making processes despite the existence of national gender policies. This highlights the necessity of adopting intersectional approaches that take into account the diverse experiences of women across different social strata (Crenshaw, 1991).

5.3. From Participation to Transformation

The digital identity paradox is not the same as the widely used concept of the digital divide. The digital divide is the lack of access to digital technologies, whereas the digital identity paradox is the experience of enablement and restriction that goes along with being digital. Online platforms can provide women with visibility, economic opportunities and political voice, without removing the harassment, exclusion, surveillance and gender norms they encounter online. Thus, it's not a matter of access but rather a paradox of the social effects of digital inclusion.

Although it is positive that more women are becoming engaged in education, politics, and the economy, this does not necessarily lead to transformative change. Participation can be instrumentalised, as Cornwall and Rivas (2015) observed, by facilitating the legitimisation of public power structures without altering them. The challenge, therefore, is how to move beyond tokenistic inclusion towards substantive empowerment. This requires redefining the concept of development by focusing on the lived experiences and knowledge systems of women. Communist scholars have consistently advocated a paradigm shift to radicalise gender agendas; an alternative approach that adds women and stirs the discourse, rather than treating men as the norm and unquestioningly accepting the construction of masculine domains (Mama, 2001). In the African context, this would mean acknowledging the plurality of feminist voices and embracing grassroots movements that seek to express contextually relevant justice and equity.

5.4. The Future of Female Identity in Social Change in Africa

The integration of female identity into social change should not be regarded as a distinct endpoint but rather as a continuous process shaped by historical legacies, contemporary challenges, and future aspirations. As Bourdieu (2001) asserts, symbolic violence, the internalisation of gendered norms, remains a significant obstacle to equality. Addressing this challenge requires not only legislative reforms but also cultural transformation, education, and sustained advocacy. Information technologies offer new opportunities for feminist activism and awareness. Social networks such as Twitter, TikTok, and WhatsApp have empowered women in Africa to share experiences, organise campaigns, and challenge prevailing discourses. However, these platforms are also sites of gender-based violence and surveillance, which must be addressed through robust protection mechanisms and an effective digital policy framework (Cummings and O'Neil, 2015). Ultimately, gender justice in Africa should be pursued as a collective endeavour that transcends sectoral and hierarchical boundaries. It demands solidarity among activist movements, institutional engagement, and a determined effort to restructure the social contract to reflect the desires and goals of all citizens, regardless of gender.

The results must be analysed within the context of the method's scope of the study. Qualitative interviews took place only in Cameroon, but the analysis builds on the insights from the interviews as well as continental data, regional policy frameworks and comparative data from across Africa. Therefore, the study is not meant to generalise to all African women. Instead, it captures broader patterns that emerge from the interplay between local experiences and continental dynamics. The Cameroon case is therefore a prism through which to analyse other processes of female identity transformation in the digital world and in urban participation.

6. Conclusion

The integration of female identity into the fabric of African social change is both indicative of historical discontinuity and a projection of future opportunities. As demonstrated in this paper, African women are not passive recipients of development but active participants in the developmental trajectory of their societies. Women are reshaping the parameters of participation and leadership at both grassroots and leadership levels, in political representation and educational attainment, as well as in economic innovation. However, this progress occurs within an environment characterised by structural imbalances and a troubled cultural context.

One of the principal conflicts in gendered relationships within African societies is the identity paradox, whereby women are expected to be both empowered and restricted simultaneously. The emergence of adaptive agency, manifested through localised approaches that blend tradition with transformation, highlights the ingenuity and pragmatism of African women navigating complex socio-political landscapes. The findings confirm that, despite new opportunities for participation created by institutional reforms, such as gender quotas and global conventions, these must be accompanied by profound cultural reorientations and cross-sectoral strategies. Addressing the intricate barriers that impede the full integration of women necessitates sustained efforts from governments, civil society, and international partners. Furthermore, it requires a redefinition of development paradigms to reflect better the realities and aspirations of women, particularly those who are marginalised.

Ultimately, the path to gender justice in Africa is not straightforward; rather, it is an endeavour characterised by dynamism and contestation. It is a long-distance journey that demands perseverance, unity, and clarity. As more African societies change, the recognition and empowerment of female identity will become essential to forging inclusive, equitable, and resilient futures. This struggle is not only a moral imperative but also a strategic necessity for sustainable development. Consequently, the dynamism of African women is not merely peripheral to social change; it is, in fact, its catalyst.

Use of generative AI

During the preparation of this manuscript, the authors used generative artificial intelligence (AI) tools solely for language enhancement, editing support, and improvement of textual clarity. The AI-assisted suggestions were critically reviewed, verified, and revised by the authors, who remain fully responsible for the content, accuracy, originality, and integrity of the manuscript.

Author contributions

- **G. C. NGUIJOI:** Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal Analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Visualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing
- **V. G. N. MUNONGO:** Conceptualization, Formal Analysis, Resources, Supervision, Validation, Writing – review & editing

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The data is available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

Biographies



Dr. **Gabriel C. NGUIJOI** is a political scientist specializing in security governance, intelligence cooperation, and international relations. He serves as Research Officer at Cameroon's National Institute of Cartography, Research Associate at the African Centre for the Study of the United States (University of the Witwatersrand), and Lecturer at ICEDIS. His research focuses on terrorism, regional security, governance, territorial resilience, and geopolitical transformations. Through interdisciplinary and policy-oriented research, he contributes to advancing cooperative security, peacebuilding, and evidence-based governance across the continent.



Victorine G. N. MUNONGO is a Senior Researcher (Maître de Recherche) at the Centre National d'Éducation (CNE), Ministry of Scientific Research and Innovation (MINRESI), Cameroon. She holds a PhD in Law from the Catholic University of Central Africa (UCAC), with research expertise in environmental and urban governance, environmental law, sustainable development, land governance, and climate-related issues. Her interdisciplinary work also addresses gender, security, and public policy, with a particular interest in the institutional and legal dimensions of sustainable development in Africa. She is President of the Académie de Recherche en Droit de l'Urbanisme et de l'Environnement (AREDUE) and is involved in several national and international research networks and initiatives on science, policy, governance, and sustainable development.

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