

BOOK REVIEW/COMPTE RENDU

Kathleen M. Fallon, *Democracy and the Rise of Women's Movements in Sub-Saharan Africa*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008, 184 pp. \$US 50.00 hardcover (978-0-8018-9008-6)

Women in sub-Saharan Africa have a long history of actively engaging the social, economic, and political concerns facing their communities. After diminishing during colonial and authoritarian rule, women's participation has resurged alongside recent democratic transitions. Drawing on the case study of Ghana, Kathleen Fallon examines the processes underlying the political mobilization of women in sub-Saharan Africa. In particular, she shows how democratization created new opportunities and constraints for women to engage formal political systems. She argues that women's political movements in sub-Saharan Africa differ from those found in the existing literature on the topic, which concentrates on Eastern Europe and Latin America. According to Fallon, in sub-Saharan Africa women's political movements are shaped by unique gendered and political structures, such as past experience participating in informal politics and women's groups, particularly prior to colonization, as well as contending with masculinist government structures and authoritarian regimes that emerged during colonization and early independence.

Fallon's study of Ghana demonstrates that preexisting gendered structures spurred women's political mobilization following transitions to democracy. Prior to colonization, women were engaged in local politics and community associations, which enabled them to challenge indigenous leaders and resist colonial domination — albeit with limited success. Queenmothers, for instance, exerted authority parallel to the male position of chief. In fact, queenmothers played a central role in appointing chiefs and representing the women's interests by holding courts that addressed matters concerning women and domestic affairs. British colonization undermined the social, economic, and political status of women by excluding them from formal political structures. Nonetheless, Fallon argues that women's precolonial political engagement provided a basis for women to mobilize during democratization and to formulate a cohesive identity around the idea that women themselves are best suited to represent their own interests.

In addition to precolonial participation and colonial exclusion in the political sphere, the experiences of Ghanaian women also parallel the general experience of sub-Saharan African women inasmuch as they have had to contend with authoritarian regimes and large state-run women's organizations that aimed to co-opt women's groups and prevent women from challenging state activities. Authoritarian regimes, such as the Provisional National Defense Council under Flight Lieutenant Jerry Rawlings in Ghana, were intolerant of dissenting voices and created a "state of fear" that suppressed women's (and men's) engagement with formal politics in the early postcolonial era. As a result, Fallon argues, women's groups in sub-Saharan Africa opted to disengage from formal political activities and instead focused their attention on community level concerns. At the same time, authoritarian regimes set up large state-run women's organizations, such as Ghana's 31st December Women's Movement, which prevented women from drawing on existing gendered networks to mobilize and challenge state structures. For Fallon, these experiences distinguish the patterns of mobilization of sub-Saharan African women, where expectations remained pessimistic during initial periods of democratization, from those of women in Eastern Europe and Latin America, who faced a different set of historical and political circumstances.

Despite these initial setbacks, transitions to democracy allowed sub-Saharan African women to draw on existing networks to mobilize to change (or reclaim) their social, economic, and political status. With democratization, members of women's organizations recognized they could confront the government without the fear of retribution that existed under authoritarian regimes. Although initially fragmented, Fallon describes how a combination of increased access to funding and, in the particular context of Ghana, the desire to resolve a case where women were being targeted by a serial killer, spurred a "new culture of politics" in which women mobilized, formed coalitions and developed a collective identity based on the idea that women are the best representatives of women's concerns. As a result, women's organizations stressed the importance of women's participation and representation in formal political processes.

Despite successes and increased participation in the political sphere, women in sub-Saharan Africa continually faced constraints placed on them by the new democratic state. As Fallon's analysis of women's experiences in Ghana demonstrates, the newly formed democratic structures remain masculinist in nature. Women's access to parliamentary seats is limited by majoritarian political systems and women's concerns are underrepresented. For example, women's movements in Ghana co-

alesced to pressure the government to pass a domestic violence bill, but the women's activities conflicted with the government's broader agenda and the activists were framed as attempting to import a foreign concept that devalued the family. Fallon argues that democratization has left women at a "crossroads" where they benefit from preexisting gendered structures, yet continue to be constrained by unfavourable political structures.

Fallon's case study of Ghana fills a major gap in the literature on women's mobilization and processes of democratization, providing a basis for understanding the unique experiences of sub-Saharan African women during transitions to democracy. Extensive fieldwork, including multiple trips to Ghana to conduct interviews and collect survey data, enabled her to observe firsthand the transformation of women's political engagement during transitions to democracy in the 1990s. Yet, despite her rich collection of data, Fallon does not go into much detail about her survey findings. In the end, this limits the scope of her arguments and leads her to uncritically focus on "women" as a homogenous identity. Although she draws heavily on interview data, her respondents are primarily "active professional women" who may not adequately represent the interests of women from different social and economic backgrounds. By elaborating her survey material, Fallon could potentially have addressed the areas where race, class, gender, and ethnicity intersect in the experiences of sub-Saharan African women. Nonetheless, Fallon makes an important contribution to understanding democratization and the experiences of sub-Saharan African women's movements. This work will undoubtedly spur discussion among scholars of women and democratization, and future comparative studies of women's mobilization in sub-Saharan Africa will build on this solid foundation.

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