Women in Africa and Pan-Africanism

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African women were active in Pan-African organizations and as individuals advocating for Pan-Africanist ideals, though they were too seldom acknowledged and too often remained anonymous. In the early years of Pan-Africanism, the references to women are scarce. But by the end of the twentieth century and into the twenty-first, women-centered organizations and projects as well as women leaders have increased their activities and gained attention. This chapter will focus on women from the continent and their work in Africa, though recognizing that it is a somewhat artificial line to exclude diaspora women, especially those who moved to Africa to promote Pan-Africanism.

This chapter presents individual Africa-born women activists, their involvement in Pan-African organizations, the development of women-centered Pan-African organizations, and the ways they were involved in promoting connections between all women of African descent on the continent and around the world. As Carole Boyce Davies explains, “Because women have been consistently erased from the history of pan-Africanism, it is important to assert from the outset that there has been a presence of active women from the very start of pan-Africanism. Many of these women explicitly indicated women’s rights positions in their work and activism.”

African women and Pan-Africanism in the early twentieth century

Women who entered the record for their contributions to Pan-Africanism in the early twentieth century were active in male-dominated organizations and contributed as individual advocates for women and for Pan-Africanist ideals. Some of the best-known women who were born in Africa in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were able to travel internationally. That experience raised their awareness of racial oppression and politics and they brought those new ideas back to their African homes where they developed religious, political, and educational projects designed to improve African women’s living conditions and build networks among people of African descent. Their experiences also illuminate some of the class contradictions inherent in the Pan-African movement of that time, as the women who were able to travel and develop international networks were from relatively privileged backgrounds. They worked to end colonial oppression and gender inequality by
adopting aspects of western colonialism, and simultaneously advocated for maintaining African culture in the face of ongoing attacks on African social practices. Pan-African female leaders were known to draw on their experiences with women’s institutions to push for their inclusion in newly formed political organizations. While there was wide variation across the continent, in many areas women historically had wielded important political, religious, and economic roles as the primary agricultural providers, as renowned spiritual leaders, and as organizers of women’s societies.2

One of the earliest to enter the record was Adelaide Casely Hayford. Her story is known in part because she was the subject of a biography that promoted her political perspective and actions.3 Born in Sierra Leone in 1868 of mixed Fanti and English heritage, she worked to unite the Creole and African communities and played a prominent role in developing girls’ education. Raised in England and educated there and in Germany, she returned to Africa as an adult in 1897. She married a Ghanaian nationalist, Joseph Ephraim Casely Hayford, and they jointly worked to bring independence to West African British colonies until she left him in 1914 and returned to Sierra Leone.

She joined Marcus Garvey’s Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA), serving as president of the women’s branch of the Freetown UNIA chapter. Casely Hayford advocated schooling for girls that included African culture as well as literacy and vocational training, making a speech on this topic in 1915 to the Young Women’s Christian Association (YWCA). Her attempts to raise funds for a girls’ school met with male opposition within the Pan-Africanist movement, so she resigned from her UNIA position and traveled to the U.S. with her niece Kathleen Easmon (1891–1924) in the early 1920s to raise funds, using her connections with African-Americans, particularly activist women such as Eslanda Robeson and Jessie Fauset. Casely Hayford sought to overturn negative images of African women often held by Americans, arguing that African women had strong positions in their own women’s associations and as a result of their contributions to African societies.

She opened the Girls’ Vocational and Industrial Training School in Freetown in 1926. Her focus on opening a girls’ school drew from both her understanding of the parity found in many traditionally co-equal male and female associations in West Africa, and her appreciation of a nascent feminism or woman-centered perspective found in the western cultures in which she had grown up.4 She attended the 1927 Pan-African Congress in New York and remained connected to women in the international anti-colonial movement. The school faced ongoing budgetary problems and closed in 1940 when Casely Hayford’s age combined with other obstacles to make it impossible to continue. She was made a Member of the Order of the British Empire in 1949, and passed away in 1960.5

Missionary activity and the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church were important aspects of early Pan-African activity, though they focused on individual redemption rather than political change. In 1895, a Congress on Africa was held in Atlanta under missionary sponsorship. One of the speakers was Etna Holderness, who told her story as an orphan from Liberia who was taken in by missionaries, converted to Christianity, and eventually made her way to the U.S.6 She had hoped to return to Africa as a missionary, but little is known of her later life.

Another woman who made important contributions to Pan-Africanism was Charlotte Maxeke (1874–1939), a leading figure in South African struggles for justice. She had the opportunity as a young woman in the early 1890s to travel to England and the United States as part of a singing group, the African Native Choir. While in the U.S., Maxeke was offered entrance to Wilberforce University in Ohio, where she earned her B.Sc. degree in 1905. While at Wilberforce, which was under the auspices of the AME Church, she met and
married a fellow South African, Rev. Marshall Maxeke. The Maxekes returned to South Africa, where they helped establish the AME Church, an important Pan-African congregation, and developed the Wilberforce Institute as an organization of higher learning for Africans. She was later president of the Women’s Missionary Society of the AME Church. In 1913 Maxeke organized women’s demonstrations against the government’s plan to extend to women the requirement that Africans carry identity passes, and she went on to help found the Bantu Women’s League, later the African National Congress Women’s League. She was president of the National Council of African Women from 1937 to her death.

Mabel Dove Danquah (1905/1910–1984) was a writer and politician in Ghana, which was then called the Gold Coast. Her family came from Sierra Leone, and she attended primary and secondary school in Freetown. She went to England for further education but earned her father’s anger by taking a secretarial course, as he was educating her for status, not as preparation for a career. He sent her home to Freetown, Sierra Leone, and when she was 21 she moved to Accra, Ghana, where she found work as a typist. Dove Danquah wrote letters about current events to the newspaper, and in the early 1930s she was asked to write a regular column for women for the Times of West Africa, which she did under the byline “Marjorie Mensah.” She wrote short stories as well, publishing her first, “The Happenings of a Night,” in serial form in her column in 1931. She was married in 1933 to the prominent scholar and diplomat Joseph Boakye Danquah, though the marriage ended in divorce in the 1940s. Dove Danquah supported Kwame Nkrumah’s Convention People’s Party by writing articles in the party publication, the Accra Evening News. In 1951 she was appointed as editor of the newspaper, the first African woman to hold such a position, though she was dismissed after five months when she disagreed with Nkrumah over editorial methods. Dove Danquah was the first woman elected to the Ghanaian parliament in 1954, before independence, and possibly the first woman elected to an African legislature on the continent.7

Constance Agatha Cummings-John (1918–2000) was born into an elite Creole (Krio) family in Sierra Leone. She was a leader in the nationalist movement in West Africa, helping found or lead several organizations.8 She was educated at private schools in Freetown, and at age seventeen went to England where she trained as a teacher at the University of London. She was first involved in political organizations while in London, participating in the male-dominated West African Students’ Union and the League of Coloured Peoples (LCP), Pan-African groups whose members actively worked to end colonialism. LCP was known as a space where women from the African diaspora were found in leadership positions, and Cummings-John served on the executive in the early 1930s. Her experience of racism in the United States, where she attended a six-month course at Cornell University in 1936 and traveled throughout the southern states, focused her politics and expanded her links with Pan-Africanist ideas. After she returned to Sierra Leone in 1937, she worked with the radical nationalist I. T. A. Wallace-Johnson to found the West African Youth League (WAYL), which claimed over 42,000 members within a year. Cummings-John was the first woman elected to office in a colonial governing body when she was elected to the Freetown Municipal Council that same year at the age of 20, and where she served until 1945. She lived in the United States from 1945 to 1951, where she was active in two Pan-Africanist organizations, the American Council on African Affairs and the American Council on African Education. Back in Sierra Leone, Cummings-John was a teacher at the AME Girls’ Vocational School. She also worked closely with women market vendors, and with them founded the Sierra Leone Women’s Movement (SLWM) in 1951. Cummings-John was elected to the legislature in 1957 but did not take her seat due to internal conflicts. In 1966 she became
the mayor of Freetown, but she was forced to live in exile in England after a military coup in 1967. She briefly returned to Sierra Leone in 1974 to 1976 and worked for the SLWM but was forced to return to London to as political conditions worsened.

Though some African-American women were prominent at the Pan-African Congresses, women from Africa were nearly absent from the membership and proceedings of the first five congresses, which met beginning in 1900 through 1945 and focused on gaining independence for the African colonies. They were certainly present, but both individual names and discussion of issues related to women were not part of the official records.

The Pan African Women’s Organisation and other mid-twentieth century activities

After World War II, as the movement for African independence gained momentum, Kwame Nkrumah worked to hold a Pan-African meeting on the continent. In 1953 he convened a meeting in Kumasi, Ghana. At least one African woman was present, Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti, a prominent leader from Nigeria who had organized women’s groups there. She was noted for speaking publicly while in Kumasi. She was a leader not only for women throughout Nigeria and an advocate of Nigerian culture, but she also had a high profile on the international scene during and after the colonial period, when she attended meetings of the Women’s International Democratic Federation and the Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom.

Organizations based on the continent and dedicated to African unity were evolving as more African nations gained independence and the political focus shifted from simply working to end colonialism. The All-African Peoples’ Conferences which met in the late 1950s and the early 1960s included provisions for women’s committees. Delegates and leaders wrote by-laws and passed declarations that encouraged the formation of women’s “coordinating committees” as subsidiary associations, along with other constituencies such as youth, trade unions, writers, and farmers. Resolutions also called for “An African Women’s Association Conference” to be organized “with a view to creating a unified organization of African women.”

By the 1960s women organized the All Africa Women’s Conference, also known as the Conference of African Women. This organization was first discussed in Bamako, Mali, and held its first full meeting in Tanzania in 1962, with the goal of bringing together women from the newly independent nations and the liberation movements. Jeanne Martin-Cissé was the secretary-general from its founding until 1972. Other groups that joined included the Conference of Women of Africa and of African Descent, formed in Ghana with Hannah Kudjo, and the Kenya Women’s Seminar, which included Tanzanian activist Bibi Titi Mohammed. Kudjo worked with Nkrumah organizing women in Ghana, while Bibi Titi was known for bringing women into the nationalist struggle in Tanzania.

The tenth anniversary meeting was a seminar held in Dar es Salaam. A small delegation from Mozambique, which was still fighting to end Portuguese colonial rule in their country, spoke about their struggle and the importance of international support. After 1974 the conference was called the Pan African Women’s Organisation (PAWO) and held observer status within the Organization of African Unity (OAU). PAWO continues to be active under the presidency of Assitou Koite, with their headquarters since 2008 in Pretoria, South Africa. African Women’s Day is celebrated on July 31 to commemorate the founding in 1962 of the All African Women’s Conference.
Jeanne Martin-Cissé (1926–2017) was another woman active on the international stage. Born in Kankan, Guinea, she attended school in Mali and Senegal. She settled in Senegal, where she became active with the Rassemblement Démocratique Africaine (RDA). She worked with the Union des Femmes du Senegal and was secretary general of the organization in the late 1950s. She also helped form the Union des Femmes de l’Ouest Africaine (Union of West African Women). She entered government work with the Ministry of Education and was Guinea’s representative to the United Nations Committee on the Status of Women from 1963 to 1969. She was Guinea’s ambassador to the U.N. from 1972 to 1976, at that time as the only woman member of the Guinean delegation. During her tenure she was elected to preside over the UN Security Council in 1972, the first African woman to serve in that position. She later moved to Dakar and then to the U.S., where she continued as an advocate for women’s issues and in 2004 was a member of L’Association Internationale des Femmes Francophones/International Association of Francophone Women.16

Another Francophone activist was Aoua Kéïta (1912–1980) from Mali. She was active in the Malian branch of the RDA. She was elected to the RDA Central Committee, and at independence she was the only woman in the party leadership. Kéïta co-founded and presided over an early women’s organization, the Union des Femmes Travailleuses/Union of Women Workers. She was the only woman elected to Mali’s National Assembly in 1960, and she was named secretary-general of the Commission Sociale des Femmes when it was formed in 1962.17

Andrée Blouin (1921–1986) was a prominent activist who traveled to several different African nations to bring attention to women’s needs just as many countries were gaining independence. She was born in the Central African Republic, daughter of a French man and Banziri woman.18 She later lived in Guinea, where she was impressed by the efforts of the anti-colonial leader and first president, Sekou Touré. In 1960 she was recruited to work with women in Leopoldville, Belgian Congo (now Kinshasa, Democratic Republic of the Congo), during the independence movement led by Patrice Lumumba, whom she served briefly as chief of protocol. After a few months’ work she had brought 45,000 women into the Mouvement Féminin de la Solidarité Africaine (Women’s Movement for African Solidarity), which was affiliated with the Lumumba-aligned Parti Solidaire Africain (African Solidarity Party). She was expelled from the Congo just prior to Lumumba’s assassination, and settled in Paris where she continued working for social and economic justice in Africa.19 Her lasting impact is difficult to determine; she clearly encouraged political organizing and grassroots work with women whether in Guinea or Congo, but the actual organizations she helped initiate did not persist after her departure.

Although there were a few women who became well-known, many other women worked in organizational and governmental offices. Their efforts as secretaries, receptionists, and even book binders were essential to the smooth running of Pan-Africanist publications and outreach. As Jeffrey Ahlman suggests in his study of Kwame Nkrumah and Pan-Africanism, women were entering the clerical workforce where they made important contributions while facing gender-based discrimination. Women and men were expected to devote themselves to the cause of Nkrumahism without missing days of work due to their own or a child’s illness. Women were considered somewhat unruly workers who turned to gossip. They were viewed with suspicion if they remained single yet if they married there were concerns about their divided loyalties. Despite the difficulties, women working in the Bureau of African Affairs “served as the administrative lifeblood of the bureau’s institutional mission” to spread the word of Nkrumah’s Pan-Africanism.20
Smaller efforts also rose but rarely lasted, as they were often dependent on the efforts of one woman and could not be sustained over a long period. One example is Network: A Pan-African Women’s Forum, which was published by the International Resource Network of Women of African Descent (IRNWAD) in the 1980s. The focus of the journal was on women’s struggles, especially in southern Africa, and with an interest in improving connections internationally between women of African descent. The editor was American scholar Shelby Lewis, who worked in Tanzania, Uganda, and Zimbabwe in the 1980s. The articles covered topics about women in Africa and internationally, including the Caribbean and Latin America, and reported on Pan-African meetings such as the founding of IRNWAD. The journal was first published in 1988 in Harare, Zimbabwe, before moving to Clark Atlanta University in 1989; the last issue apparently appeared in 1990, and IRNWAD was likewise transitory.  

When the Pan African Congress was revived in the 1990s, women also formed new associations. The Pan-African Women’s Liberation Organization (PAWLO) was formed in 1993, motivated by the planned Seventh Pan African Congress, which was held in Kampala, Uganda. The women held a “Pre-Congress Meeting for Women,” that drew 300 participants, and whose speakers included Mozambican Graça Machel, who later worked with the UN, and who was a government minister and first lady in Mozambique, and later first lady of South Africa. Not to be confused with PAWO, PAWLO’s main aim was to ensure that women’s issues were integrated into the work of the Pan African movement. PAWLO welcomed Black women from all parts of the world who were concerned about gender oppression, “an acknowledgement that African women have a common struggle and that there is strength in unity.” The seventh Pan African Congress was marked by a presence of women that “far exceeded that of previous congresses.”

PAWLO initially established working groups on culture, environment, youth and children, law and human rights, political education and participation, research and documentation, education and training, health and welfare, agriculture, refugees and migrants, and science and technology. They also published a bulletin, Afrika Mama Yetu (Our Mother Africa). Joyce Kazembe and Zaline Makini Roy-Campbell were regional coordinators for southern Africa. Women attempted to organize national branches of PAWLO when they returned home after the congress, but it proved difficult to sustain communication among the various groups and there was little coordination at the international level. The secretariat for PAWLO continued to be based in Kampala as part of the Pan African secretariat originating from the 7th Pan African Congress, but further efforts to revitalize PAWLO were not successful.

The twenty-first century and the African Union

By the turn of the twenty-first century, women were organizing across the continent to share their ideas for improving women’s situation. Many focused on the newly established African Union (AU), which was founded in 2001 and launched in 2002. Initially the draft protocol stated that “each member state should be represented by five [5] members, one of whom must be a woman,” and several countries did send more than the minimum of one woman to the March 2004 inaugural meeting.

PAWO met in Kampala with the Global Pan African Movement in April 2003 for a conference focused on world peace. The AU established a department for Women, Gender and Development, and in 2017 they moved toward including PAWO as an official specialized AU Agency, with plans for a commemoration in Guinea that would include
special recognition of Jeanne Martin-Cissé, who had passed away that year.\textsuperscript{25} The organization continues to develop young women leaders and pushes for gender awareness and gender components in all development projects.\textsuperscript{26}

A key development was the passage of the Protocol on the Rights of Women in Africa in 2003. An important element was the pro-active role taken by a number of women’s organizations to ensure that the protocol would pass. Some of those involved were the African Gender Institute at the University of Cape Town, African Women’s Development and Communication Network (FEMNET), Femmes Africa Solidarité (FAS), and Women and Law in Southern Africa. The African Union meeting in Maputo, Mozambique, passed a new protocol on women’s rights as a supplement to the African Charter on Human and Peoples’ Rights. By 2013 36 of the 54 African countries had ratified the Protocol, known as the Maputo Protocol. Despite weaknesses, especially regarding enforcement, the document was recognized as providing a ground-breaking framework for improving women’s lives. The major provisions set precedent in international law regarding abortion and female genital cutting. Further sections condemned domestic violence, supported affirmative action in politics and employment, encouraged steps to reduce maternal mortality rates, and detailed measures to improve women’s legal access to land.

In addition, at the inaugural meeting of the Pan-African Parliament of the AU in March 2004, Gertrude Mongella (b.1945) was elected by an overwhelming majority of sitting legislators (166 out of 202) to serve a five-year term as president of the parliament. This action was considered an important commitment to women’s rights, following on the July 2003 approval of the Maputo Protocol. Mongella is a well-known Tanzanian politician who has participated in numerous international meetings concerning women’s rights, peace, and development. She served in the Tanzanian parliament from 1980 to 1993 and was a leader in the United Nations international women’s meetings in 1985 and 1995 (see following section).

Other women gained leadership positions in the AU on task-oriented commissions, following an official goal of having 50/50 gender-parity in the ten commissioners’ positions. One of the five women in the first Council cohort was Elizabeth Ntaenga Ngatchou Tankeu (1944–2011), a politician from Cameroon. She was educated in Cameroon before going to France where she completed a degree in econometrics at the University of Paris in 1971. She was minister of planning and regional development from 1988 until 1991 and was on the executive board of the African Capacity Building Foundation before being appointed in 2003 as an AU commissioner responsible for trade and industry.

In 2012 South African politician Nkosazana Dlamini-Zuma (b.1949) was the first woman elected as chair of the AU. Her election followed months of internal debate, as the AU normally elected representatives of minor countries as its leader, and there was resistance to choosing someone from one of Africa’s major nations. Before gaining that important continent-wide leadership position, she had trained as a pediatrician and was a long time African National Congress (ANC) organizer. Her activism in the South African Student Organisation (SASO) forced her exile to England, where she completed her medical degree. She headed the ANC Youth Section for Great Britain, and later chaired the ANC Regional Political Committee based in England. When she returned to South Africa in 1990, she became active in women’s political activities, arguing for the inclusion of women in every delegation and conference. Dlamini-Zuma was foreign minister from 1999 to 2009 and minister of home affairs 2009 to 2012.

African women have also gathered in transnational political organizations, working on continent-wide projects related to women and girls. First ladies assembled in 2002 with
a mission to focus on women and HIV/AIDS, establishing the Organization of African First Ladies against HIV/AIDS (OAFLA). They broadened their scope and their name to Organization of African First Ladies, later amending it to the Organization of African First Ladies for Development. They meet regularly to coordinate work on HIV/AIDS, maternal and child health, the situation of adolescent girls and young women, and related issues, while also investigating poverty and advocating for empowering women. They use their semi-official position to reach out to policy makers and improve conditions for young women.27

Women legislators have also met in international forums to coordinate their political work on women. The Network of Women Parliamentarians of Central Africa (Réseau de Femmes Parlementaires d’Afrique Centrale, RFPAC) includes representatives from Angola, Burundi, Cameroon, Gabon, Equatorial Guinea, Central African Republic, Democratic Republic of Congo, Republic of Congo, Rwanda, and Chad. They have met regularly since 2002 in order to discuss key issues and strategize about their legislative struggles. Once women gain legislative seats, they have used their positions to support laws on marriage and inheritance and to work for family laws and citizenship provisions that can benefit women.

The United Nations as a Pan-African feminist site

The United Nations has provided a site for international and Pan-African efforts related to African women. The UN Decade for Women was a series of international meetings on women’s issues that brought many African women together across national boundaries. The first was held in Mexico City in 1975; the second in Copenhagen in 1980; the third in Nairobi in 1985; and the fourth, a follow-up to the official decade, met in Beijing in 1995. During the first decade, Annie Jiagge from Ghana helped write the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW). At each of the international meetings African women participated as representatives of their governments and of non-governmental organizations and argued for the inclusion of African experiences. The 1985 meeting in Nairobi was marked by the attendance of 16,000 women, with a notable presence of African women. The meeting increased the ability of African women to network across the continent, and many returned home to form activist organizations, including Action for Development (ACFODE) in Uganda and the Tanzania Media Women’s Association. The platform of the “Forward Looking Strategies for the Advancement of Women” set forth at that meeting was used in many African nations to improve women’s conditions. Those strategies were reworked into a Platform for Action at the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing, which was chaired by Gertrude Mongella.

The African Training and Research Centre for Women (ATRCW), part of the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA), is headquartered in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. It was established in 1975 to coordinate UN projects that focused on women, including the UNECA Women’s Programme. The name was changed in 1995 to the African Centre for Women, and in 2001 to the African Centre for Gender and Development (ACGD). The center has sponsored publications, including country-specific bibliographies in the 1980s, reports on women and development, and the ATRCW Update (1978–1993).28 Conferences on women held under their auspices include annual meetings since 1979 of the Africa Regional Coordinating Committee for the Integration of Women in Development, which formulates specific policy recommendations. In 1995 in Dakar, Senegal, 3,000 women met and developed a Plan of Action addressing such crucial issues as the impact of structural adjustment programs on women, girls’ education, and maternal mortality. Further
meetings were held in 1999 and 2004 at Addis Ababa, Ethiopia; the ninth meeting convened in 2014 in Addis Ababa with a focus on agriculture and women.

One of the ACGD leaders was Josephine Ouédraogo (b.1949), a politician and activist from Burkina Faso. After her early education in Burkina Faso, she lived in Paris where her father was ambassador to France. She earned a degree in sociology in 1974 from the Université René-Descartes. She had returned to Burkina Faso but was forced into exile when President Thomas Sankara was assassinated in 1987. She was a project coordinator for the Pan-African Development Institute in Cameroon from 1989 to 1992. At ACGD, which she led beginning in 1997, Ouédraogo successfully pushed gender issues to the forefront of a variety of African governmental conferences and task forces, and introduced a new evaluation program, the African Gender Development Index.

The United Nations Development Fund for Women, commonly known as UNIFEM, was founded in 1976 following the first international meeting of the United Nations Decade for Women. They focused on economic development, human rights, and peace; specific UNIFEM projects included ending domestic violence, combatting HIV/AIDS, improving access to safe water, and numerous other endeavors. In 2010 UNIFEM became a section within a reorganized department on women, the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women, commonly known as UN Women. UN Women maintains regional and national offices in Africa. In 2013 South African political activist Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka was named as executive director.

Another project under UN auspices focused on migration and human trafficking, with a series of meetings held beginning in 2001 in Nigeria, and the 4th Pan African Forum on Migration in 2018 meeting under UN Migration sponsorship in Djibouti with attendees including Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, former Liberian president, and Vera Songwe, executive secretary of UNECA, and all women moderators of the discussions.

**Women’s studies as Pan-African outreach**

In addition to the overtly political work that promoted Africa-wide networking among women, African women have established independent research centers and university-based women’s studies programs. One of the earliest was the Association of African Women for Research and Development, (AAWORD)/Association des Femmes Africaines pour la Recherche sur le Développement (AFARD). Following a discussion among women scholars meeting in Lusaka, Zambia, in December 1976, AAWORD/AFARD was established in 1977 by African women researchers who wanted to advance their own ideas about development and gender issues. Based in Dakar, Senegal, and under the auspices of the Council for the Development of Economic and Social Research in Africa (CODESRIA), AAWORD sponsored a regular series of conferences and published bilingual occasional papers, bibliographic materials, and a quarterly newsletter, *Echo* (beginning in 1986). The monographs have investigated reproduction, mass media, youth leadership, feminism, and development. AAWORD’s written mission statement calls for building a women’s movement linking human rights and development while promoting African women’s contributions and developing the abilities and opportunities of African women scholars. It has also been concerned with extending networks across the continent and internationally among scholars interested in African women. It held general assemblies in 1977, 1983, and 1988 in Dakar and in 1995 in Pretoria, South Africa. Since 1990 it has maintained a documentation center that holds nearly 2,000 books and reports.
Senegalese sociologist Marie-ANGélique Savané (b. 1947) was president of AAWORD for many years and also worked at the UN Research Institute for Social Development, and other UN agencies related to refugees and demography. In 1998 she took a seat as a deputy in Senegal’s national assembly. She was named as chair of the African Union’s self-regulating board, the African Peer Review Mechanism, in 2006, part of a board of seven “eminent persons,” which also included Mozambican Graça Machel and Dorothy Njeuma of Cameroon.

Non-governmental organizations: peace-building and education

One of the main arenas for women’s Pan-African activities has been related to peace-building. African women have been active in negotiations for peace and have organized continent-wide groups to work to end conflict. One of the first declarations specifically focusing on peace issues came from the Kampala Action Plan on Women and Peace in 1993. Women within the UN and the AU also advocated for women’s inclusion in peace efforts. Many associations have been established, including African Women’s Anti-War Coalition, African Women’s Committee for Peace and Development, the Federation of African Women for Peace, and Femmes Afriques Solidarité. The African Women and Peace Support Group (AWPSG), an international organization, was formed in 1997 to document African women’s involvement in peace activities.

Local groups have also formed, focusing on persistent conflicts including in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, where Liberian leader Ruth Sando Perry and others formed a lobbying group, Women as Partners for Peace in Africa (WOPPA). WOPPA promoted a negotiated peace settlement among the warring groups, arguing that women’s voices should be included. Women in Rwanda, Sudan, and Sierra Leone formed local peace organizations; the Mano River Women Peace Network of Liberia was one of six organizations that was awarded the UN Human Rights Prize in 2003 for their efforts. That work was further recognized in 2011 when Leymah Gbowee and Ellen Johnson Sirleaf won the Nobel Prize for Peace (also shared with Tawakkol Karman of Yemen). Women’s efforts have had an important source of support with the UN Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security which was passed in 2000.

The Forum for African Women Educationalists (FAWE) was created in 1992 and registered in Kenya as a Pan-African non-governmental organization in 1993. Its slogan indicates its focus: “Supporting Women and Girls Acquire Education for Development.” The secretariat is in Nairobi, with 33 national chapters, and members are primarily women policymakers (male ministers of education were welcomed as associate members). FAWE sought to ensure that girls had access to school, performed well at all levels, and completed their studies. It introduced a program now functioning in several African countries, called “Speak Out,” that aimed at limiting the sexual harassment of female students by publicizing the names of teachers who violated their students’ rights and by educating male students about proper behavior.

Cultural work

Other women have been recognized for the Pan-African views found in their cultural work. Noémia de Sousa (1926–2002) was a Mozambican poet who was active as a journalist in the early years of the anti-colonial struggle from 1951 to 1964. The child of two mixed-race parents, her widely-anthologized poems celebrated Mozambican culture and history while emphasizing Black identity. She was born in Lourenço Marques (later Maputo), educated in
Brazil, and lived in Portugal for many years. Her most often cited poems address such topics as migrant workers in South Africa’s gold mines (“Magaiça”), a celebration of “my mother Africa” (“Black Blood”), and cries for liberation, as with these closing lines from “The Poem of João,” “who can take the multitude and lock it in a cage?”.34

Bessie Head (1937–1986), a novelist from South Africa who lived in Botswana, has also been noted for her Pan-African interests, based on long friendships and correspondence with Robert Sobukwe, the leader of South Africa’s Pan-African Congress, and with the African-American author, Alice Walker.35

One early dramatist who made major contributions to African theater was Ghanaian Efua Theodora Sutherland (1924–1996). After attending college in England where she earned a B.A. in education, she returned to her home in Ghana in 1951 and in 1958 established the Ghana Experimental Theater and formed the Ghana Society of Writers. She also initiated the Pan-African Historical Theater Festival, known as PANAFEST, as a space and event for Africans to use drama to grapple with ongoing trauma that stemmed from the impact of the slave trade on African societies. Her best-known plays are Edufa (1967) and Marriage of Anansewa (1975), in which she demonstrated her contention that African theater should make use of oral traditions, in this instance turning to the folk stories involving the trickster spider Ananse.36 Efua Sutherland was also connected to the Pan-African movement through her marriage to Bill Sutherland, a prominent African-American peace activist and Pan-African leader who was active in Africa and internationally.

Another Ghanaian writer who has expressed Pan-African feminist views is Ama Ata Aidoo (1942–), who has produced novels, short stories, poems, and plays.37 She attended the University of Ghana at Legon and earned a fellowship that allowed her to study creative writing at Stanford University in California, returning to Ghana in 1969. Her publications include a play, Dilemma of a Ghost, the story collection No Sweetness Here (1970), and the novels, Our Sister Killjoy (1977) and Changes (1991), which won the 1992 Commonwealth Writers Prize (Africa region). She has focused on issues of cultural change and women’s position in a modernizing society, presenting strong women characters in a deliberate counter-narrative to male-dominated stories. As Delia Kumavie suggests, “Aidoo expresses a vision of feminism for Africa that is both Pan-African and nationalist.”38

Conclusion

Others have noted the dearth of information on women, and particularly women based on the African continent, in Pan-African history. Hakim Adi and Marika Sherwood, regretting the near absence of women in their collection of biographies, suggested that it could “be argued that scholars have not sufficiently turned their attention to the lives and contributions of women.”39 By restricting Pan-Africanist women to those on the African continent, it might seem that finding information would be limited even further. However, there have been many women who were active internationally as individuals, who helped develop African and diasporic networks, who founded organizations with a multitude of connections, and who have left a record of those achievements. Their legacy is important for Pan-Africanists and for women.

Notes


21 *Network – Reseau – Redaction: A Pan-African Women’s Forum* 1, 1 (Winter 1988); 1, 2 (Fall 1988); 2, 1 (Spring 1989); 2, 2 (Fall 1989); and 2, 3 (1990); these five issues were consulted and are in the author’s possession. Information on Shelby Lewis, www.walterrodneyfoundation.org/dr-shelby-f-lewis-biography/.


23 The May 1994 issue seems to be the only number published.


26 Their current activities can be followed on their twitter feed, @Pawowomen, and at their website, https://pawowomen.org/.

27 Information on their history and activities is found at www.oafla.org/.


29 Further information can be found at their website, www.unwomen.org/en/.


33 See www.fawe.org for information about their projects.


