

## Abstract

This dissertation is a qualitative exploration of the norms, actors and the operational context of the African Union gender governance structures. It examines the kinds of international and regional gender norms the African Union produces, the actors that shape and advance this agenda, and regionally relevant drivers and constraints of a pan-African approach to international gender norms. At the heart of this dissertation is a paradox: why has the African Union adopted such an elaborate web of gender policies, laws, campaigns and institutions, when its member states are indifferent to it?

The methods used in this research draw from global political ethnography and involve 5 months of fieldwork in Addis Ababa where the African Union is located, as well as in depth interpretive document analysis, online observations and interviews. The interlocutors whose perspectives this analysis engages range from femocrats in state machineries to experts in donor agencies and activists in Addis Ababa. As such, the fieldwork was multi-layered: it took place online and offline and included actors within, outside and affiliated to the African Union system.

The study analyses the normative agreements, internal and external actors, and the regional context of the African Union gender governance. The African Union has an impressive portfolio of legal and policy frameworks which largely align with global gender equality agreements adopted at the United Nations. Some of the norms adopted by the African Union are even considered to exceed the aspirations of those of the United Nations and other regional intergovernmental organizations due to explicitly addressing issues like female genital mutilation, abortion and gender parity among the African Union commissioners. The dissertation analyses those normative frameworks in depth and demonstrates that with the exception of its legal framework, the Maputo Protocol, the African Union approach to eliminating violence and discrimination against women largely builds on the culture vs rights debate. In doing so, it reproduces the discourse of African cultures as incompatible with women's rights and in need of progress. The study then investigates why the African Union gender agenda finds little resonance in the member states. In my research I found that the institutionalization of a pan-African gender agenda at the African Union was the outcome of the efforts of a rather small network of femocrats, UN experts and civil organizations. Since the establishment of a 'women's desk' the emergence of femocrats created new opportunities for accessing regional governance structures. The dissertation demonstrates that femocrats became brokers of access, information and resources, which in turn led to the

institutionalization of the gender agenda. In this dissertation I operationalize aspirational politics in conjunction with political brokers to unpack the paradox of foot-dragging and contestation of this regional normative agenda. I argue that it is the aspirational politics of the femocrats and their allies that have led to an ambitious, but also unattainable and contested gender agenda.

Based on four publications, the dissertation makes several empirical contributions. Firstly, the study offers a uniquely detailed analysis of the development of the normative discourse on gender-based violence in Africa and situates it historically in political processes such as decolonization, ending Cold War and the subsequent waves of democratization, as well as the rise and homogenization of transnational feminist politics. Additionally, the study introduces details regarding the institutionalization of the gender agenda by focusing on the actors and dynamics that have enabled these processes. I conclude that there are factors, for example socio-cultural discrepancies, a degree of expert or elite bias, and financing mechanisms that delegitimize the pan-African gender governance and contribute to the aspirational fatigue of the member states. Consequently, the pan-African gender agenda is perceived to merely mimic global gender regimes and the African Union's gender specialists become yet a set of actors to negotiate with.

In light of these empirical discussions, the study contributes to the efforts to 'globalise' International Relations through focusing on non-Western regionalisms, and to the literatures on agency and translation in the global norms research. Theoretically, the dissertation contributes to the agential and practice turns in studying how gender norms are translated. Particularly, I conceptualize the role of institutional broker in facilitating structural and institutional change. This is a diversion from the focus on norm entrepreneurs, and a reorientation towards the 'middle level' of governance, examining the networked strategies and political work of bureaucrats with an agenda. Secondly, the dissertation develops the emerging understanding of aspirational politics as a dynamic that is produced by actors, practices and institutional elements. Aspirational politics help to nuance the dichotomy between success and failure in politics, and focus attention on intention, ambition and imagination.